



Article

Philip Pullman and Spiritual Quest

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Abstract: The polarized initial reception of Philip Pullman as a “new atheist” has gradually yielded to more nuanced scholarly positionings of his work as inspired by a heterodox, even “heretical,” Christianity. But in his new series, Pullman responds decisively to both “new atheist” and “heterodox Christian” interpretations, while widening the scope of his critical representations beyond Christian—indeed, beyond Abrahamic—religion. What emerges in the completed books of the incomplete new series, *The Book of Dust*, is a “secret commonwealth” of supernatural beings inhabiting multiple universes. These are all manifestations of Dust, the spiritual sentience of matter itself, which provides the basis for mystical visions and shamanistic beliefs, as well as religious orthodoxies. Rejecting the latter for the former, the second book in particular, *The Secret Commonwealth*, suggests an endorsement of spiritual quest. To motivate acceptance of this interpretation, we begin by reviewing the critical reception of *His Dark Materials*, especially in relation to its theological implications. After that, we turn to the representation of reductionist positions in *The Book of Dust*, especially the authors presented in *The Secret Commonwealth*, Gottfried Brande and Simon Talbot. Then, we investigate the representation of the Abrahamic religions in that work, intrigued less by the obvious parallels between Pullman’s imaginary religions and Christianity and Islam, than by his positive representation of mysticism. Finally, we examine his representations of shamanism and animism, soul belief and hermetic doctrines, and his allusions to Zoroastrianism, before summing up. Pullman is an a-theist in the sense of being without a god, not in the post-Enlightenment sense of a rejection of the supernatural/spiritual. His imaginary universe celebrates spiritual quest and ontological multiplicity, against all forms of speculative closure.

Keywords: Philip Pullman; religion in literature; spirituality in literature; atheism in literature; fantasy literature; young adult literature



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1. Introduction

Knighthood for his services to literature in 2019, Sir Philip Pullman is one of the most influential cultural figures in the English-speaking world. His novels regularly appear in “top ten” bestseller lists and adaptations of his works have become blockbusters. At the same time, Pullman is one of the most controversial authors in the world, at one stage ranked second on the US banned books list (Pilkington 2009). Without question, this mixture of recognition and controversy springs from the fact that his books combine literary excellence with a challenge to conventional religion. His series are often described as an “anti-Narnia,” because, as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* notes, “while CS Lewis portrayed religion in a positive light, Pullman, who was a vocal atheist, wrote of the abuses of organized religion and instead embraced a humanistic morality” (Dowd 2021). Pullman’s reputation for atheism inflects the interpretation of his fantasy works, which are popularly regarded as literary representations of a materialist philosophy. Peter Hitchens once wrote that Pullman was the “most dangerous author in Britain” whose books would result in children obtaining “an atheistical state of mind” (Hitchens 2014).

In this article, we challenge the consensus reading of Pullman’s fantasy works, in light of the relationship between his first series, *His Dark Materials* (hereafter, *HDM*) and his new

(incomplete) series, *The Book of Dust* (hereafter, *TBoD*). Both series concern the adventures of Lyra Belacqua, who begins the first novel aged 11 but ends *HDM* aged 13, and her magical companion, Pantalaimon. Pan, as he is known, can shape shift, but eventually opts for the form of a pine marten, for he is Lyra's spirit animal or "daemon," a kind of material soul that is in all respects the complement to every individual's personality. Pullman's world is manifestly a fantasy universe, where Lyra, for instance, can be given a device by her uncle Asriel, called the Alethiometer, which truthfully answers questions, and even hints towards the future. The novels of the first series—*Northern Lights* (Pullman 1995), *The Subtle Knife* (Pullman 1997), and *The Amber Spyglass* (Pullman 2000)—involve marvellous encounters, mysterious artefacts, flying witches and talking bears, but also serious theological themes. Lyra and Pan, together with various travelling companions, discover that their world is actually part of a multiverse, whose central mechanisms spring from the existence of a mysterious "Rusakov particle," or Dust. It turns out that Dust is sentient matter with magical properties and theological implications, for it is the reason behind not only the existence of daemons, but also the existence of angels. One of these, a kind of pretender, has falsely represented himself as the Creator and appointed himself the Authority, setting up a church, the Magisterium, based in Lyra's world. Although the Authority is now senescent, another angel, Metatron, has set himself up as Regent, and is intent on expanding the hold of the Church over creation. By the end of the first series, Metatron is cast into the abyss and the Authority withers away, as the result of a war in heaven by rebel angels and other created beings, in which Lyra is involved. Lyra's role, meanwhile, is to discover that Dust, as spiritual substance, is related to experience, not innocence, so that her romantic kiss with her friend Will reverses a problem with Dust introduced, in a complicated way, by the war in heaven, and restores a kind of universal harmony.

As many commentators have observed, *HDM*, whose title cites Milton, is in adversarial dialogue with *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, but also with the Christian fantasy of CS Lewis's *Narnia* series. As we show in this article, the second series expands the range of references beyond Christian theology and literature, to allude to Islamic culture, ancient Zoroastrianism and the alchemical movements of the Renaissance period. The first book, *La Belle Sauvage* (2017) is a sort of prequel to Lyra's studies at Oxford University. Lyra, now university-aged by the time of the second book, *The Secret Commonwealth* (Pullman 2019), again goes off on adventures, but this time, it is to search for her daemon, who has, in a violation of metaphysical order, become separated from her. Lyra, you see, has her head full of hair-raising philosophical speculations of the undergraduate variety, and has decided that daemons are either just mental projections or do not actually exist; appalled, Pan has run away to look for Lyra's imagination. Her journey following Pan's trail takes her into the heart of religious conflict between the Magisterium and the Men from the Mountains, and into fresh mysteries concerning the relation between Dust and existence. Although *TBoD* is incomplete at this stage, it is evident that her quest again marks out an intellectual agenda that has to do with religion and spirituality. The vast theological implications opened by *HDM* evidently remain concerns of the *TBoD*, but this time, the dialogical interlocutor singled out by the work is less obvious.

Against this background, we show that the second series clarifies the theological implications of the first series, by directly thematizing atheistic reductions of the spiritual world as false and empty. At the same time, elements of *TBoD* also challenge another kind of reading of Pullman's *HDM*, as a heterodox Christianity. By contrast, we propose, the new series endorses mystical forms of spiritual quest that transcend doctrinal boundaries, that is, a spirituality without God, which we describe as an a-theism. To present this interpretation, we begin by examining the initial reading of Pullman's *HDM* as a work of militant atheism, in light of the representation of atheist writers in *TBoD*. Then, we turn to scholarly readings of Pullman as a heterodox Christian, demonstrating that while these are plausible readings of the first series, the second series widens the theological context in ways that show the limitations of thinking about Pullman as restricted to a theistic framework. Finally, we look at the representations of mysticism and animism in Pullman's work, especially in the most

recent book of *TBoD*, *The Secret Commonwealth*, to evidence the argument that Pullman's new work clarifies a theme of spiritual quest that has been present in his fantasy all along.

2. The New Atheism

The popular reception of Philip Pullman's first fantasy series, *HDM*, might be characterized as involving howls of anguish or shouts of glee (depending on perspective), about what was initially perceived as an entry into the debate on religion by an author perceived popularly as a militant atheist. Probably the most representative scholarly presentation of this position is articulated by Michael DeLashmutt, who positions the work as a direct contribution to the New Atheism, "as reflected in the recent popular academic work of Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Christopher Hitchens and the adolescent fiction of Philip Pullman" (DeLashmutt 2009, p. 586). In their book on contemporary literature and the New Atheism, *The New Atheist Novel*, Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate document a highly polarized set of popular evaluations of Pullman's "hybrid of . . . Darwinian science and Miltonic cosmology" (Bradley and Tate 2010, p. 58). These ranged from calls for the banning or burning of the book, to its celebration as a literary bonfire of religious superstitions, framed in terms of responses to Pullman's negation of the Christian literature of John Milton, CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien (Bradley and Tate 2010, pp. 54–81). For DeLashmutt, meanwhile, Pullman's fictions "inform us that when we are young, our belief in God is comforting, acceptable, and perhaps a necessity, but as we come to adulthood we must put away such childish things, literally dissecting the divine with our scientific instruments (the 'subtle knife') and exposing this myth to the winds of critique" (DeLashmutt 2009, p. 588). DeLashmutt concludes:

For Pullman, . . . God is a weak, feeble, outmoded human concept which has been protected by a 'crystal litter' of irrational superstition, guarding God from the destructive critique of modern life. Destroying God, both is the liberation of God from this manmade conceptual framework and the liberation of humanity from an oppressive and tyrannical system which has been built up around this ideal. The end of God is the beginning of human freedom. Pullman seems to be echoing . . . a postreligious utopia where . . . future humanity will enjoy . . . being 'religiously unmusical'. (DeLashmutt 2009, p. 588)

From a somewhat more balanced perspective, other scholarly commentaries, such as those *Dark Matter* (Watkins 2004), *Readers' Guide* (Squires 2003) and *Darkness Visible* (Tucker 2003), tell a similar story. This early positioning of Pullman as belonging to the New Atheists is not entirely surprising. Pullman once published an essay in support of Richard Dawkins, something which these commentators see as evidence for his militant atheism (Pullman 2006, pp. 270–76). Rather more substantially, Pullman has stated that the intention of his fiction is to undermine belief in Christianity (Pullman 2017, p. 440). In *The Amber Spyglass*, he has the character Mary Malone announce that "the Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake" (Pullman 2000, p. 464). As mentioned above, in the culminating action of *HDM*, his God (Yahweh) figure, The Authority, is thrown into the abyss and destroyed. This is the antithesis of *Paradise Lost*, manifestly ironizing the series' relation to Miltonic cosmology. The oft repeated claim that Pullman too is "of the Devil's party" would, therefore, seem to be solidly grounded (Scherer 2010, pp. 139–49). Moreover, Pullman's hostility to the Christian proselytism of CS Lewis's *Narnia* books is something that he has himself commented on. Lyra "Silvertongue" Belacqua, the heroine of both of Pullman's series, is curious, cunning and sexual, intentionally the opposite of Lewis's Susan Pevensie (Pullman 2017, p. 441).

Pullman's non-fictional entries into the New Atheism debate are sometimes cited as evidence for the interpretation of *HDM* as militantly atheistic, but the essays themselves should be more attentively read. Before going any further, therefore, it is worth briefly noticing something about their author's position. As Pullman has stated in interviews, "[where] I differ from Richard Dawkins, for example [is that] his argument with religion is that it isn't true, and therefore it's wrong. That's not my argument with it at all. My

argument with religion is that it gets ahold of power and uses power for the wrong purpose” ([Geek’s Guide 2013](#)). Pullman’s essay on Richard Dawkins is a defense of free speech and open-mindedness, not an endorsement of Dawkins’ scientific-cognitive reductionism. Meanwhile, “Imaginary Friends,” a response to Dawkins’ rejection of fairy tales, defends the imagination from the scientist’s positivistic hostility to invented creatures and the metaphors of poetry ([Pullman 2017](#), pp. 305–12).

Now, in this article, we will be referring to spirituality and religion according to the following definitions. Spirituality is the belief in a transmundane or supernatural dimension to existence, including soul belief, belief in the afterlife, and belief that the universe as a whole is divine. By contrast, religion is an institutionalized expression of spiritual belief, through ritual observances and theological dogma, which includes the existence of ecclesiastical hierarchies and a formalized cosmology. We are going to summarize this by describing religion as a deistic mythology represented through a combination of orthopraxis and orthodoxy. What we should notice about this, then, is that it is certainly possible to oppose organized religion—as monological and authoritarian—while holding spiritual beliefs. It is also possible to endorse the entities proposed by spiritual beliefs—as imaginative placemarkers for fundamental questions—without subscribing to their literal reality. To foreshadow our argument for a moment, if you happen to hold both attitudes simultaneously, then you have an equivocal but certainly not hostile relation to spirituality. Literature—a domain of uncertainty that is notoriously expressive of ambivalent feelings—is a perfect place to express this ambiguity.

Pullman sums up a thought that is very similar to this one, by proposing that his fiction aims at a “republic of heaven,” a revolutionary democratization of the spiritual realm ([Pullman 2017](#), pp. 434–55). If we define “religion” in terms of a deistic mythology that is represented through an institutionalized combination of orthopraxis with orthodoxy, then Pullman’s radical-democratic anti-religious stance is anti-theistic, anti-clerical and anti-dogmatic. It is opposed to the institutionally sanctioned representatives of religion (the “clergy”) and to the practices and doctrines that are clerically superintended within the religious institution (the “dogma”). But it is also opposed to the population of the spiritual realm by intrinsically superior spirits—or a Supreme Being—and therefore hostile to every conventional deistic mythology, whether monotheistic or polytheistic. Pullman’s idea of a radically democratized republic of heaven involves a sort of deliberative community of the spiritual realm ([Pullman 2017](#), p. 441). This idea evidently resonates with the notion of a “secret commonwealth” of supernatural entities, where elves, fauns and pixies are no lesser beings than bodhisattvas, demons and angels—or daemons—all of whom are owed “proper respect and courtesy” ([Pullman 2019](#), p. 260).

We think that these considerations rule out including Pullman’s fiction in the New Atheism. To describe Pullman’s republic of heaven as a “new atheism,” meaning the positivist idea that statements referring to spiritual claims are strictly speaking nonsense because they are scientifically unverifiable, is to maintain that the proposed radical-democratic revolution empties the skies. That claim would mean that Pullman is not just anti-religious, in the sense defined above, but also, additionally, that his books represent a world in which spiritual claims are false claims, because *only* scientific claims are true claims. Such a claim would have to be true of the new *Book of Dust* as well as of *HDM*. One way to frame such a claim would be to maintain that *Dust*, the “dark matter” of both trilogies, is really the “dark matter” of contemporary physics. This rather brave claim is, in fact, made, by Mary and John Gribbin. The problem with it is that the “Rusakov particle” of *HDM* and *TBoD* does not in fact resemble a speculative, non-baryonic Cold Dark Matter, conjectured to interact with ordinary matter only through gravitation ([Gribbin and Gribbin 2007](#), p. 25). Really, their notion of tracing “the science in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*” is based on a category mistake. As Pullman flatly declares in his introduction to their book, “I wasn’t writing a book about science” ([Gribbin and Gribbin 2007](#), p. ii). Indeed, after exploring Pullman’s fiction for a while, the Gribbins shift their stance to the claim that “Dust is like Jung’s collective unconscious. It knows what is going on everywhere, and it can make

people aware of this, but only indirectly, through dreams . . . or the alethiometer" (Gribbin and Gribbin 2007, p. 71). With all due respect to psychoanalysis, the only thing that it has in common with modern physics is the letter "p". From the positivist perspective, psychoanalysis is a non-starter—a pseudo-science (Popper 1972). The argument that Pullman's republic of heaven evacuates the celestial realm by reducing spiritual intuitions to string theory, based on the evidence that Dust resembles the collective unconscious rather than the Higgs Boson, is completely implausible, because utterly incoherent. The claim folds.

3. Heterodox Christianity?

It is against the background of these considerations that the distance between the scholarly and the popular reception of Pullman becomes intelligible. Alone of the popular commentators, Christopher Hitchens had misgivings that Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010), which opposes spiritual wisdom to religious institutionalization, represented "a Protestant atheism", rather than the New Atheism (Hitchens 2010). Meanwhile, scholarly researchers who were not entirely theologically tone-deaf had already realized that Pullman's death of God scenario was aimed at religion rather than spirituality. But we think that their interpretations of Pullman as a heretical Christian make the mistake of reducing the polyvocal deliberations of the republic of heaven to a dialogue, within a single Abrahamic faith, between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Nonetheless, since these positions represent the most developed, theologically literate views on Pullman's fictions, it is important to review the various arguments of David Gooderham, Anne-Marie Bird, Hugh Rayment-Pickard and Naomi Wood.

Gooderham's interpretation is a theologically literate version of the "New Atheism" reading, one which proposes that *HDM* is an effort to "radically reinterpret, or demythologize—if not exorcize—[. . .] religion," in order to effect "the banishing of an oppressive supernaturalism" (Gooderham 2003, pp. 67, 156). Where Gooderham parts company with the popular interpretation of Pullman as a New Atheist is in his insistence that the stakes are not the cognitive demystification of religious myth as false science, but the construction of a humanist counter-myth capable of sustaining a secular naturalism. He subtly argues that Pullman collapses the imaginary world of the novels onto the real world of alienation through his close identification of the Magisterium, the Authority and the world of the dead, with the Christian church, the historical god Yahweh and the biblical narrative of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. This happens through the unmasking of the falsehoods of Metatron, the destruction of the Authority, and the final narratives of sexual discovery as secular liberation, and the release of the dead from the nightmare of the afterlife. As Gooderham summarizes his argument:

Rebellious and intellectually charismatic Lord Asriel, proud in the imagination of his heart, belongs to the outdated world of theological argument and conflict, just as surely as does Mrs. Coulter to that of the outdated and fanatical church, and Metatron to the bizarre fantasies of outdated apocalyptic imaginings. So, as in the end they clash spectacularly, the whole religious job-lot collapses down into the abyss, pit, final black hole, and the world is cleared, secularized, ready for its new human-scale regeneration. (Gooderham 2003, pp. 163–64)

According to Gooderham, the result is a new mythology of secular humanism, completely opposed to religious supernaturalism. But, he adds, it is one which systematically negates or inverts its Abrahamic prototypes in a way that risks the charge of being both doctrinaire and alienated (Gooderham 2003, p. 166). In particular, Gooderham detects ideological resignation at the heart of this secular humanist project. The eternal separation of Lyra and Will, followed by their conventional destinies in school and university, smacks of suburban disillusionment rather than eschatological utopianism. "We've got to study and think and work hard" (Pullman 2000, p. 548), Lyra says, prompting Gooderham's wry remark: "no libidinous civilization here" (Gooderham 2003, p. 172). Biblical myth might involve religious supernaturalism, but its utopian dimension also resonated with

“the longing and anguish of alienated relationships” (Gooderham 2003, p. 173), something that Pullman surrenders to, rather than defiantly rejects.

Naomi Wood sharpens the focus on Pullman’s inversion of the Fall narrative. She proposes that his treatment of the myth belongs to gnostic heterodoxy rather than anti-Christian secularism (Wood 2001, p. 239). According to Wood, Pullman’s combination of Lyra’s initiation into sexuality, with the theme of gaining wisdom, which represents a *felix culpa*, or fortunate fall, is a characteristically gnostic motif, which meshes with the valorization of disobedience to a false Authority. By reading Pullman against Lewis, Wood effectively argues that *HDM* is a gnostic *Narnia*: the key to the narrative moves that Pullman makes is that they represent the systematic inversion, through the technique of thematic reversal, of Lewis’s Christian story. The ultimate stakes in this interpretation become manifest when Wood proposes that the gnostic valorization of Eve really represents “a Christianity without Christ” (Wood 2001, p. 239). Her conclusion is strikingly similar to that of Hugh Rayment-Pickard, whose theological rejoinder to Pullman also describes his systematic inversion of Christian theology as gnostic heresy rather than atheist materialism. Rayment-Pickard’s own conclusion is worth citing in this connection, particularly its first sentence:

Pullman’s atheism is a “theological atheism,” which denies the reality of God at the same time as validating the “theological quest” to resolve questions of “ultimate concern” . . . [H]e lacks the anti-theological virulence of, say, Nietzsche . . . [Pullman] has not broken free from either the romance of theology or the theological presupposition that life does have a final meaning, purpose or reality. What is more, everything in Pullman’s counter-Christian myth has been framed by the Christian paradigm . . . The dilemma of atheism is that it must always be dependent upon theism. (Rayment-Pickard 2004, pp. 87–88)

Anne-Marie Bird’s discussion of Pullman’s debt to Blake represents a further contribution to the reading of his work as a form of Christian Gnosticism, or heterodox Christianity, rather than a materialist atheism. For her, the key is the idea of dialectical, as opposed to abstract, negation: Pullman is proposing a new myth which includes what it negates, as the “contrary” pole of a system of binary oppositions. Accordingly, Pullman’s effort to systematically invert Christian doctrine and narrative, through the Blakean technique of contradiction, belongs to the history of theological heterodoxy, rather than to a scientific framework that aims at the demystification of supernaturalism. “Pullman attempts to synthesize the opposing principles that lie at the core of the [Edenic] myth while leaving the innocence-experience dichotomy firmly in place,” she argues. “The effect of this is to transpose what is, in traditional Christian readings, a paradigm of disobedience and divine punishment, into a scheme of self-development” (Bird 2001, p. 112). On this reading, Dust provides the medium for the tension between contraries, especially spirit and matter, innocence and experience, within which their orthodox evaluation can be inverted. Her Blakean conclusion is as follows:

In order to undermine the rigid theological hierarchy of spirit and matter (or good and evil), Pullman emphasizes that human and daemon share a common boundary, which he calls Dust. The word boundary is significant here, since collapsing hierarchies do not break down distinctions. The complex paradox of simultaneous unity and difference, evident in the depiction of the mind-body binary, and in Dust itself, is significant in that it emphasizes that what makes two concepts polar opposites is what actually unites them and creates a powerful psychic force. (Bird 2001, p. 118)

According to Bird, when daemon and human, spirit and matter, are separated, the result is Dust, a merely potential medium “lacking in [active, developed] contraries” (Bird 2001, p. 119). Again, the central idea here is that Pullman’s counter-myth must function diacritically within the field of Christian mythology, so that negation through inversion results in an expanded Christianity, one that includes its own (heretical) contrary.

4. Empty Reductionism

Pullman's new trilogy, especially its second book, *The Secret Commonwealth*, presents a set of narrative developments that can be read as rejoinders to both the popular and the scholarly interpretations of his relationship to atheism and to Christianity. We will discuss Pullman's implied response to the reading of him as a New Atheist in this section. In the next section, we will discuss the new trilogy's representation of monotheism.

Pointedly, in relation to the popular interpretations of Pullman as a New Atheist, the new book represents two authors whose works strongly resonate with scientific positivism, and with Nietzschean anti-Christianity, in the figures of Gottfried Brande and Simon Talbot (respectively). These authors are critically represented as living empty lives and writing works based, not on truth, but on shallow denials of human realities and on a facile relativism with questionable implications. It is as if Pullman went out of his way in *TBoD* to correct misreadings of *HDM*. In *The Secret Commonwealth*, he presents authors whose lifestyles follow through the implications of the views popularly attributed to Pullman himself, in ways that make their falsehood palpable.

Gottfried Brande's *The Hyperchorasmians* is represented in Lyra's reports of her reading as a "death of God" materialism that concludes anticlimactically with the sentence, "It was nothing more than what it was" (Pullman 2019, pp. 147–48). Simon Talbot's *The Constant Deceiver*, meanwhile, calls into question not only theology and philosophy, but reality itself—claiming that "there is no truth at all" (Pullman 2019, p. 72), and that daemons are figments of the human imagination. Lyra's daemon, Pantalaimon, perceiving the thematic similarities in their respective fictional texts, is incensed, accusing her of "believing things that will kill us!" (Pullman 2019, p. 74). Eventually, Lyra's undergraduate fascination with the reductionist ideas of Brande and Talbot leads to Pan's disappearance. Pan's departure in search of Lyra's imagination involves exploring these figures, which presents the narrator with the opportunity to elaborate on the way of life implied by Brande's and Talbot's beliefs.

Brande's anti-metaphysical philosophy does not allow for myth, spirituality, or anything outside of scientific rationality. It does not allow for the influence of an "emotional spasm," only "reason, rationality, and logic" (Pullman 2019, p. 71). The figure of Brande resembles the positivist worldview and overt anti-theological ideals of the New Atheists. Furthermore, *The Hyperchorasmians* is represented in *TBoD* as a text that strongly resembles the reading of *HDM* as a scientific positivist and militant atheist work, implying that Brande is a caricature of Pullman-as-New-Atheist. But although the core narrative of *The Hyperchorasmians*, the murder of God, mimics that of *His Dark Materials*, its grounds are different. The main character's rationale for his celestial murder is that "it was irrational that such a being should exist, and rational to do away with him" (Pullman 2019, p. 70). The corporeality of God in *The Hyperchorasmians* results in the contradictory demand that scientific rationality replace theological speculation—contradictory because its impetus is provided by the corporeal existence of the very God that Brande's work claims is a non-existent fiction. The downbeat flatness of the ending of *The Hyperchorasmians*, combined with the view that meaningfulness and imagination should be reduced to materiality and logic, position its author as a positivist in the mould of A.J. Ayer ([1936] 1952). In other words, the presentation of *The Hyperchorasmians* in *TBoD* represents a satire on the reductionist reading of *HDM*.

The logical contradiction of disposing of theology by literally murdering God, however, is less important to Pullman's critical representation of Brande, than is the emptiness of the life that is lived according to scientific cognition alone. *The Hyperchorasmians* values only cold logic and presents its characters without any semblance of daemons at all. But the positive view of separation between human and daemon that is promoted by Brande's novel is ironically represented in *The Secret Commonwealth* through the fate of Brande himself. The implications of accepting Brande's advocacy of a body-soul separation creates a strain between Lyra and Pan. Brande's ideas recall not only their traumatic separation on the shores of a lake in the land of the dead, but the totalitarian theology initially presented in *Northern Lights* (Pullman 1995). There, Mrs. Coulter, the Oblation Board,

and the Magisterium's initiative to separate children from their daemons, led to a kind of psychic death and to a subhuman existence. Lyra's satirically presented positive reception of these ideas in *The Secret Commonwealth*, placed in contrast to her previous opposition to them, speaks to a thematic shift between series, from the problems of institutionalized religion to the limitations of a rationalist outlook. When Pan visits Brande in Wittenberg, he discovers a furtive and lonely figure, who has separated from his daemon. Brande is suffering the consequences of living a lie with an illegally purchased daemon, thus exemplifying the negative connotations of living a reductively anti-metaphysical life. It is evident that Gottfried Brande's separation from his daemon inspires the cold and critical text that depicts humans as "totally alone" (Pullman 2019, p. 70).

Meanwhile, Simon Talbot is a relativist, epistemologically and normatively, but also, radically, ontologically: *The Constant Deceiver* is represented in *TBoD* as proposing that knowledge is simply a perspective, morality only a viewpoint and reality something that we invent through ideas. Talbot is the fictional author "to whom truth and even reality were rainbow-like epiphenomena with no ultimate meaning" (Pullman 2019, p. 70), and, of course, this absence of universal truth subverts the major teaching of institutionalized monotheistic religions. This is extremely popular in university English departments, it turns out, for Talbot's text is "a favorite among literary experts, who praised its elegance of style and playful wit" (Pullman 2019, p. 72), while implicitly agreeing with its deconstruction of the notion of truth. The target here is partly what has been described as the "fashionable nonsense" of the post-structuralist vulgate, but it is also, and more substantially, Nietzsche's reading of the implications of positivism in terms of moral relativism. The moment that everything, including meaning and morality, is simply a question of ideological perspective, reality becomes the result of the will-to-power, while the products of the imagination and the beliefs of spirituality become, at best, necessary illusions providing consolation, rather than openings towards truth. Celebrations (or denunciations) of *His Dark Materials*, for supposedly striking a Nietzschean blow against ideological concepts such as the soul, effectively read Pullman as Talbot (Wheat 2008). The reading in question is one which interprets daemons in Pullman's diegetic universe as having a merely metaphorical status, as representations of character psychology, rather than being literal entities that are intimately linked to their human. This is, of course, exactly the philosophy advocated by Talbot in *The Secret Commonwealth*, and opposed by Pan as imaginatively vacuous.

Where Brande's character highlights the potentially destructive implications of positivism for meaning, validity and imagination, Talbot's character foregrounds the corrosive implications of relativism. It is amusing that Pullman flips the geographical location of the two thinkers who are the most obvious precedents for the figures of Brande and Talbot: Brande, the German, resembles an English positivist such as AJ Ayer; Talbot, the Englishman, resembles a German philosopher such as Nietzsche. Each author denies some aspect of the existence of daemons in relation to the diegetic world of both *HDM* and *TBoD*, something which must strike the reader as inherently untrue. Although for Talbot, daemons are "psychological projections with no independent reality" (Pullman 2019, p. 72), for the reader, Pan, as an independent focalizing character, is evidently more than just a projection of Lyra's mind. In summary, the inclusion Gottfried Brande and Simon Talbot allows Pullman to create a contrast within his fictional world between anti-spiritual doctrines and that world's supernatural reality. This contrast resembles the extra-diegetic contrast between the constructed figure of Pullman as New Atheist, and the implied true stance of the author in relation to spirituality and the imagination. The contrast is starkly presented through the emptiness of both Talbot and Brande, the logical contradiction at the heart of their doctrines, and the dissonance between their ideas and the reality of daemons in the narrated world.

5. Beyond Abrahamic Faith

We now turn from the implications of *The Secret Commonwealth* for popular misreadings of Pullman as a New Atheist, to its implications for the interpretation of him as a

gnostic heretic. Readings of Pullman as a heterodox Christian, based on an exclusive focus on *HDM*, must now, in light of *TBoD*, confront the new trilogy's critique of monotheism as a whole, and the Abrahamic faiths in particular. In the first series, as we have already seen, the Magisterium strongly resembles Christianity; this complements the reference to Metatron—a figure drawn from Judaism. It should be noted, however, that the relation between The Authority and Metatron actually suggests that Metatron is Milton's "Messiah". At any rate, in *The Secret Commonwealth*, Pullman widens the scope of his texts' references to the Abrahamic faiths, by including the unnamed religion of the "Men from the Mountains," a religion which strongly resembles Islam. As with the Magisterium, however, the religion of the Men from the Mountains is depicted as authoritarian and the actions of its representatives are destructive. Interestingly, both *HDM* and *TBoD* incorporate surprisingly positive allusions to Sufism, especially Farid Ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* (1177), which would count as a heterodox Islam. However, rather than this implying that the reader might now position Pullman in terms of "heterodox monotheism," or perhaps "mystical Abrahamism," we suggest that the reader should attend to what was there all along, namely, a representation of monotheism as false.

The resemblance between the religion of the Men from the Mountains and Islam is insisted on in *The Secret Commonwealth* through external details such as its geographical location and modesty regulations. Lyra's journey in search of Pan takes her from Aleppo, in Syria, towards the Blue Hotel, in "Karamakan," somewhere near Tibet, which strongly resembles Taklamakan in northwest China. As this whole trip traverses the span of Islam and of the religion of the Men from the Mountains, the two may be said to be coextensive. Building on this resemblance, the narrative also insists that the modesty regulations of this unnamed religion centre on the veil, and that there is considerable asymmetry between how it regards men and women. However, the narrative also sympathetically presents everyday believers, such as the night workers with whom Lyra stays (Pullman 2019, pp. 416–30) as egalitarian and empathetic.

Perhaps more significantly, there is a doctrinal difference (with attendant religious iconography) between Christianity and Islam that is shared by the Magisterium and the Men from the Mountains. The religion of the Men from the Mountains accepts the divinity of The Authority but explicitly rejects the ascension narrative, which in the diegetic universe of *HDM* and *TBoD* involves the godhood of Metatron. Their religion militantly demands that believers renounce the "myth" of the incarnation, under the threat of being "put to the sword" (Pullman 2019, p. 420). This doctrinal difference is reflected in the hostility of the Men from the Mountain to roses, which, although roses have an as-yet not-fully clarified narrative role in the new series, have a clear iconographical significance in relation to Christianity. The Men from the Mountains display a pious hatred towards roses, both the flower, and the water/scent that is created by them, to the point that they destroy the rose gardens, upending entire economies in the East, with implications that are felt in Oxford. The reason behind this hatred for roses is not explicitly articulated, however, in Christian semiotics, the rose is used to symbolize purity, and love, and most importantly, the spirit of the Mother Mary. The Islamic perspective is articulated by, for instance, Attar. When the Nightingale is enamored of the Rose, it is reprimanded by the Hoopoe, who says: "The love of the Rose has many thorns; it has disturbed and dominated you. . . . One who seeks self-perfection should not become the slave of a love so passing" (Attar 1971, p. 15). The connotations of this group of people sharing a common hatred for the symbol of the incarnation narrative allows for the implication of a war between the religions, strongly resembling current theological and ideological polemics between Christianity and Islam.

Just as in *HDM*, where dialogue with the most significant episodes in Milton's *Paradise Lost* shapes Lyra's and Will's narrative trajectory, so too, in *TBoD*, the story journey undertaken by Lyra and Pan emerges through implicit dialogue with a religiously inspired text. But this time, the text belongs to Islam, rather than Christianity, and it is a representation of the heterodox Islam of Sufism, rather than the orthodox Christianity of Milton's Calvinism. Unlike the Miltonic text, however, which the narrative of *HDM* subjects to a

series of negations and inversions, in *TBoD*, Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* forms an entirely positive intertext in *The Secret Commonwealth*. The Simurgh, bird of wisdom, which is the object of the Hoopoe's quest, is mentioned in *The Secret Commonwealth* as having interceded to prevent the destruction of the roses at the experimental station and as having caused mirages in the desert (Pullman 2019, p. 67). In the (imaginary) poem, *Jahan and Rukhsana*, which is intensely scrutinized by characters in *TBoD*, the Simurgh, as king of the birds, leads the two lovers into the rose garden—something that Malcolm Polstead sees as somehow prefiguring Lyra's fate (Pullman 2019, p. 67). Indeed, it is not impossible that the quest for the Simurgh in Attar's work acts a positive template for Lyra's and Pan's journey of self-discovery. There are resonances with the Valley of Death episode in their journey into the Land of the Dead in *HDM*, and with the Valley of Understanding episode in their journey to the Blue Hotel in China in *TBoD*. At a minimum, the idea that Lyra's destiny is a repetition of the spiritual quest represented in a celebrated text of Sufi mysticism implies that *TBoD* responds to readings of *HDM* as heterodox Christianity by significantly broadening the scope of religious references.

These considerations should suffice to call interpretations of Pullman as a heterodox Christian into serious question. But the sudden discovery that Pullman is solely a secret Sufi mystic would be no more plausible, if Sufism is interpreted as a transcendent mysticism arising from the monotheistic tradition. Rather than winding the interpretation into conjectures about Pullman's reading of the mystical traditions that emerge from the Abrahamic faiths, though, it is simpler to straightforwardly notice that his invocation of non-Christian traditions performs a negative function. It points away from Christianity as a single source of inspiration and therefore defuses efforts to read his work as an inverted theology or a heterodox deviation.

In this connection, it is worth also considering that Pullman also references Zoroastrianism, the historical origin of the Axial forms of the Abrahamic religions. Mentioned as a "heresy" (Pullman 1995, p. 71), Zoroastrianism turns out to be "true," just as Asriel suspects, as this doctrine is represented in the religion of the Mulefa. For the Mulefa, the Seed Tree—reminiscent of the *Avestan Hoama*, the Tree of Life—is the wellspring of the universe, which leads Mary Malone to co-discover the truth that "The Authority is not the creator" (Pullman 2000, pp. 28, 188). Is Pullman therefore now to be considered a closet Zoroastrian?

Rather than an endless theistic regression, perhaps it would be better to conclude that both *HDM* and *TBoD* are narratives of the emergence of pseudo-divinities from a cosmic medium that links wisdom with souls/daemons. False religions—false because monotheistic—institutionalize worship of a single such rebel angels, but a multiplication of divinities would not help the situation. This is a position that is neither monotheistic, nor polytheistic—orthodox *or* heterodox. But this is not to say that Pullman's books lack a spiritual dimension. As Christopher Hartney, one of the few critics who we think fully recognizes Pullman's spiritual ambiguities, says: "In real time Pullman has become an outstanding spokesman for the atheist cause: in his novels, a pure mechanical universe is jettisoned for a Gnostic mysticism and the open possibility of God's deferral" (Hartney 2005, p. 258). Attention to the non-religious, anti-institutional spirituality of the witches and the alchemists, in both series, and to the spiritual implications of the existence of daemons, shows that anti-theism and atheism are worlds apart. It is to this that we now turn.

6. Alchemy and Animism

Both series include representations of non-religious, anti-institutional spiritualities, lying outside the framework of Pullman's imaginary monotheistic faiths—these include alchemy, the nature religion of the witches, the beliefs of the Gyptians and the cosmology of the Mulefa. We want to focus on a comparison between the instrumental spirituality of the alchemist, Johannes Agrippa, and the non-instrumental spirituality of the Witches led by Serafina Pekkala and Ruta Skadi. Both alchemy and witchcraft are non-religious and anti-institutional forms of spirituality. But the contrast between the inhumanity of

Agrippa's experiment and the solidarity shown by the Witches strongly implies the valorization of their non-instrumental, as against alchemy's instrumental, relation to the "secret commonwealth".

Hermetic spiritual doctrines which seek to manipulate fate and control matter are introduced in *TBoD* through a powerful alchemist who manipulates his son, Cornelis, and his son's daemon, Dinessa. This character is inspired by 16th century German scientist, occultist, and theologian, Cornelius Agrippa. Agrippa (senior) uses the power harnessed by his spirits to perform mundane tasks, as well as to (re)animate the creatures that he keeps prisoner, but his main aim is to create an engine which can communicate with the supernatural substrate of the universe, the "secret commonwealth" (Pullman 2019, p. 380). To this end, Cornelis and his daemon Dinessa, have been imbued with the essences of fire and water, respectively. The two beings meet their destiny through a destructive reunion, after their orchestrated and excruciating separation. Abominably, this spontaneous mutual annihilation of Cornelius and Dinessa is the energy which powers Agrippa's machine.

Although the result of Agrippa's experiment remains unknown at this point in the series, the viability of alchemy throws new light on an earlier comment about hermetic knowledge, and also hints at the nature of the secret commonwealth. When the character Kubicek is asked "do people still believe in alchemy?", Kubicek responds "No, educated people do not. So they think alchemists are fools for pursuing a goal that does not exist, and they take no notice of them, and fail to see what they are really doing" (Pullman 2019, p. 372). What they are really doing, in the secret studies of the alchemists, is exploring the relation between the soul and fate. Agrippa comments that Cornelis and Dinessa are "fulfilling the destiny that they were created for" (Pullman 2019, p. 372), implying that their souls have been constructed (or altered) to realize a purpose. Now, in Pullman's imaginary universe, the soul can fulfil external and internal purposes. The internal purpose of the soul is the expression of the fundamental aspects of a person, as exemplified through the character's relationship with their daemon. The external purpose of the soul is the reciprocal influence between person and environment. This might be considered their destiny, developed as a narrative trajectory.

Alchemy seems to be an effort to manipulate fate by altering the external relation between the soul and the world, in which case the secret commonwealth is the totality of supernatural entities capable of intervening in this process. Lyra herself may turn out to be influenced by the secret commonwealth, for the narrator notices that "she felt as if she had been used by some hidden power, as if all the events on her journey, and for long before, had been arranged with meticulous care with only one purpose: and it was a purpose that had nothing to do with her, and one that she'd never understand, even if she knew what it was" (Pullman 2019, p. 414). In the present context, the metafictional aspects of this passage are not as important as its implication that alchemy makes certain things come true about the relation between the person and the world, thus altering the external purpose of the soul by making it the dupe for another's designs. In this connection, Agrippa's machine should be contrasted with the Alethiometer, which alerts the soul to truthful relations between persons and the world, without seeking to deform the self or manipulate the spiritual kingdom.

By contrast with the sinister manipulation conducted by Agrippa, the animistic spirituality of those Witches who ally with Lyra (led by Pekkala and Skadi) involves communication with the spiritual world, not its domination or exploitation. The Witches are represented as quasi-ethereal humanoid beings who are more than human, but less than angelic, capable of flying on cloud pines, becoming invisible to humans, communicating with the spiritual world, exhibiting immunity to the cold, and fighting angels by setting them alight. It is assumed that the Witches are entities whose supernatural powers are the result of a special concentration of Dust, something that they augment with a connection to Dust which is communicative rather than manipulative. Nonetheless, they are also capable of destructive action within the secret commonwealth, as evidenced by their participation in the war against heaven represented in the final chapters of *The Amber Spyglass*.

The Witches invoke Yambe-Akka, the goddess of death, which seems like a terrifying inversion of the worship of the Authority by the Magisterium, a sort of death cult that might deserve the description “demonic”. And this is an appearance which the absolute hostility between the Magisterium and the Witches reinforces. But the symmetry between the Magisterium and the Witches is illusory. The Authority is a rheumy-eyed usurping angel who has simply lived too long. His promises of life eternal after death turn out to be a nightmarish half-life in the Land of the Dead. In return for this delusive salvation, the Authority demands unconditional obedience. His angelic followers are prepared to wage spiritual warfare against nonconformists, while his acolytes in the Magisterium calculatingly torture children with intercession, separation from their daemons, in the hope of retarding their spiritual development by controlling their souls. Everything about the spirituality of the Witches is in deliberate and pointed contrast to this authoritarian religion.

Just as sex, in this universe, is an ascent and not a fall, death in this context is a spiritual blessing and not a catastrophe. Yambe-Akka is described as “merry and light-hearted, and her visits were gifts of joy,” because she is called upon to release the dying from suffering (Pullman 2019, p. 41). No worship is due to her; nor does she ask any; and, indeed, it would seem that she is akin to the rebel angels, such as Bathalmos, who do not regard themselves as divinities, but as members of the secret commonwealth.

7. The Secret Commonwealth

When Lyra denies the reality of daemons and regards them as mere psychological projections of an individual’s personality onto an invented companion, Pan declares that this is a fatally flawed doctrine and goes off in search of her imagination (Pullman 2019, p. 194). Given that in the narrated universe, Pan is real, not imaginary, this is a surprising announcement, and it is tempting to interpret it as a kind of metafictional prompt for the reader. The problem is that it is difficult to see, at first, what the difference would be between psychological projection and having an imaginary friend, or how this would be distinguished from the reductionist idea that supernatural beings are mere figments of the imagination. In his essay on the topic, “Imaginary Friends,” Pullman responds to Dawkins by proposing the familiar theory that make-believe involves a willed suspension of disbelief and that his childhood adventures with the Moomins posed no risk of creating mythological illusions. “I was pretending they were real in order to enjoy being with them in imagination,” he writes: “I wasn’t in the slightest danger of confusing them with real life” (Pullman 2017, p. 314). In light of the resemblances between the view of Brande and Dawkins, already explored, and in the context of this essay, it is likely that Pan’s position expresses Pullman’s own view. But how would the idea of making believe *differ* from the notion that imaginary representations are ultimately illusory?

In “Daemon Voices,” an essay we have cited a few times in this article, Pullman poses this question directly. “After the death of God,” he asks, “what happens when we realize that there is nothing to believe in?” (Pullman 2017, p. 435). The answer is that “we need a sense that we are connected to the universe—this connectedness is what we mean by meaning[fulness],” and its loss is what is known as “alienation and meaninglessness” (Pullman 2017, p. 437). The imaginary representations that are created through imaginative play, such as make believe, do not provide illusions, then, but *meaningfulness*, a “reclamation of the vision of heaven from the wreck of religion” (Pullman 2017, p. 439). He concludes:

[O]ur human nature demands meaning[fulness] and joy [but] to accept this meaning and joy will involve a passionate love of the physical world, . . . and not a suspicion and hatred of it. . . . Finally, we must accept that we are not subservient creatures dependent on the whim of some celestial monarch, but free citizens of the Republic of Heaven. (Pullman 2017, p. 440)

The effect of locating human beings and other natural beings in the web of meaningfulness involves, not an alchemical transmutation, for that might imply an instrumental manipulation of symbols to deify creatures, but transfiguration, a shift in perspective that sacralizes the mundane. Another way of saying this is that heaven, in Pullman’s

republican vision, is not depopulated, but is rather brought down to earth, and what happens is something “rich and strange,” namely, the erasure of the frontier between the natural and the supernatural. Pullman reports being captivated by the imagery of a magical commons in the anthropology of folk superstitions by Robert Kirk, now reprinted as *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* (Pullman 2019, p. 689). Kirk’s enchanted garden is coextensive with the English commonwealth, of course, and the point of his discussion is to propose that superstition is the natural theology of existence of the soul (Kirk 2019). Pullman literalizes this in the second novel, when Lyra, “becoming sensitive to these half-whispered promptings,” senses a revelation about this supernatural community happening all around her:

[Lyra] wondered: did the harpies belong to the secret commonwealth? Was the world of the dead, the world they dwelt in, part of that? . . . Or had she imagined it, and was her imagination just a spindrift of falsity? Well, she thought, what was the secret commonwealth anyway? It was a state of being that had no place in the world of Simon Talbot, or the different world of Gottfried Brande. It was quite invisible to everyday vision. It included ghosts, fairies, devils, jacky lanterns, and other such entities. They were neither well, nor ill, disposed to human beings by nature, but sometimes their purposes intersected or coincided with human ones. If it existed at all, it was seen by the imagination, whatever that was, and not by logic. (Pullman 2019, p. 480)

The advice Lyra gets about this from Master Brabandt is that “you got to look at it sideways, out of the corner of your eye,” or, alternatively, “to think about it out of the corner of your mind,” for it is liminal (Pullman 2019, p. 312). The secret commonwealth turns out to be omnipresent, but accessible only to imagination, not to rationality, and it can only be navigated through stories (Pullman 2019, p. 313). Subsequently, she believes that it is somehow concentrated in Karamakan, and, motivated by the desire to find Pan, she sets off on her quest for it. Before she has reached this destination, though, she has already “decided to believe in it,” for this affirmation is linked to what is, for her, a redemptive possibility connected to the loss of her imagination. “She was profoundly ashamed,” the narrator reports. “She *had* done something wrong, and her wrongdoing was bound up, somehow, with a vision of the world from which the secret commonwealth was excluded” (Pullman 2019, p. 479). It is hard not to think that this allegorizes the author’s own position.

In Attar’s *Conference*, the Simurgh, object of the quest of the Hoopoe and the other twenty-nine birds, turns out to be the thirty birds themselves—*sī murğ*, thirty birds—effectively symbolizing the self-reflexive mystical proposition that spiritual wisdom is inherent in its own quest. It is always risky to speculate about a series that is incomplete, but Pullman’s *Book of Dust* would seem to be engaged in a similar reflexive turn. The spiritual doctrine that this best resembles is pantheism, the notion that the divinity is nature, but this is potentially misleading, because as a “theism,” it implies a search for God. Pullman’s new series is better positioned as a spiritual a-theism, a spirituality without God, in which the spiritual quest for the secret commonwealth is its own realization or achievement. This quest, at once imaginative and physical, connects the things in the world in a hidden set of meaningful relationships, because it links everything narratively.

The subtleties of Pullman’s position on religion and spirituality indicate that this influential figure cannot be readily recruited into the sorts of polemical context, such as the New Atheism debate, that typically polarize the public sphere. The death of God, the inversion of the Fall, the abolition of Narnia and a new writer of the Devil’s party . . . these make splendid newspaper headlines, but little literary sense. Pullman is engaged in something that literature, we think, typically does, but which slogans do not, namely, a complex and ambivalent meditation on human existence that opens out onto the ultimate concerns of an era. The deeply insightful and theologically literate scholarship of critics such as Bird, Gooderham, Hartney and Wood, detailed in this article, have demonstrated that this involves religiously unorthodox reflection. What we have added to this is argument and

evidence for the claim that Pullman's mystical affinities are for a non-religious spirituality. This is a far cry from atheism, as it is commonly understood.

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