

Építész a kőfejtőben Architect in the Quarry



Tanulmányok
Dávidházi Péter
hatvanadik születésnapjára

Studies Presented to
Péter Dávidházi
On His Sixtieth Birthday

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A borító Adam Friedrich Oeser *Sokrates meißelt die drei Grazien*
(Szókratész kőbe faragja a három gráciát) című metszete alapján készült.
A metszet Johann Joachim Winckelmann *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der
griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* című értekezésének első,
1755-ös kiadásában jelent meg először.

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GYÖRGY E. SZÖNYI

The “Dark Materials” of Milton And Philip Pullman

I dedicate this paper to Péter Dávidházi, “a man of many colors”, commemorating his 60th birthday.

Recently I have become interested in the mythical character of Enoch and the complex textual lore of apocalyptic literature associated with his name. I have discovered that “the Enoch phenomenon” has been intriguing Western culture – within the Judeo as well as the Christian traditions alike – since the forging of the various versions of the *Book of Enoch* in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, through the Church fathers, the medieval alchemists, the Renaissance neoplatonist magi, the representatives of 18th and 19th-century radical counterculture, the modern occultists such as Madame Blavatsky, Aleister Crowley and Béla Hamvas, up to the present. Enough to google on Enoch and dozens of mysticism- or magic-oriented websites crop up, even on a Hip Hop page we read: “The lost prophet of the Bible, Enoch the Ethiopian, Greater than Abraham, holier than Moses.”¹

In the course of my search for the modern cultural representations of Enoch I have discovered Philip Pullman’s award winning and absolutely fascinating trilogy, *The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber*

¹ See <http://www.zulunation.com/enoch.htm>. Access: 2006-05-04.

Spyglass (1995–2000) in which Enoch appears in a surprising, even shockingly subversive mythical sujet. The general title of the trilogy – *His Dark Materials* – lead me to Milton, since this is a quotation from *Paradise Lost*. My long term project is to compile a cultural history of “the Enoch complex” throughout the centuries, however in the present draft I shall only concentrate on Milton’s problem and Philip Pullman’s answer to it.

Creation stories and apocalyptic visions, such as *The Book of Enoch* or St. John’s *Revelations* invariably speak about rebel angels, colossal struggles between God’s angelic armies and the dark forces which conclude in world-shattering cataclysms, always leaving behind one overwhelming question: why all this has or might have happened if the creator was all good and omnipotent? Where has the creation gone wrong?

Humankind for centuries has been trying to give various answers to this ultimate question: from theology through heretical esoterism to science and literature. One footnote among the many answers and explanations is made up of a few enigmatic lines in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Towards the end of Book II Satan sets out on a great journey aiming at a revenge upon the Creator and on his way he crosses the space filled with unformed particles, kept together by Chaos and governed by Chance. The description of this ur-material runs as follows:

Into this wilde 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 mixt
Confus’dly, and which thus must ever fight,
Unless th’ Almighty Maker them ordain
His dark materials to create more Worlds,
Into this wilde Abyss the warie fiend
Stood on the brink of Hell and look’d a while,
Pondering his Voyage...

(PL 2.910-18)²

² John MILTON, *Paradise Lost*. Book II, lines 910–918. Quoted from: MILTON, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. HUGHES, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1957, 253.

The phrase, "His dark materials" is embedded in a Baroque allegory (the personified Chaos and Chance determine the fate of the cosmos, they seem to be responsible about what will come to life), but if we brush that away, some unnerving questions emerge: why does the Almighty Maker have "dark materials"? What and where is their origin? In God? Has Satan been also made of this "dark materials"? As if a Manichean dualism is hinted here. Another interesting point is the reference to the possibility of God creating "more worlds." What does that mean? More planetary systems, more galaxies, let alone more parallel worlds as today's theoretical physics suggest?

As John Rumrich has observed, "remarkably little has been written on Chaos in *Paradise Lost*," and of the enigmatic reference about the dark materials.³ While most of traditional Milton criticism regarded chaos and matter in *Paradise Lost* as hostile to God and creation, Rumrich takes a postmodernist stance and claims, Milton in fact "anticipates the postmodern endorsement of chaos in his theology of matter and in the symbolic reflections and allegorical representations of chaos. Appreciation of chaotic disorder and of indeterminacy and disapproval of the tyrannical suppression of these qualities distinguish Milton's idiosyncratic theology, political theory, and aesthetics."⁴ All this leads on the one hand to the question of knowledge, that is whether God's purpose with the creation can be revealed and comprehended,⁵ and on the other to the debate about the nature of God which in *Paradise Lost* is far from unambiguous. Within this framework one faces Milton's admitted attempt to carry out theodicy, a defence of God's justice.⁶

In opposition to both traditional criticism and to Rumrich I have a feeling that the dark materials, which are not out of the control of God, represent a subversive and unsolvable obstacle in the way toward a full realization of theodicy and the justification of "the ways of God to men"

³ John RUMRICH, "Milton's God and the Matter of Chaos," *PMLA* 110.5 (1995): 1035-1046.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, 1035.

⁵ See John LEONARD, "Language and Knowledge in *Paradise Lost*," = Dennis DANIELSON (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 130-44.

⁶ See Dennis DANIELSON, "The Fall and Milton's Theodicy," = DANIELSON (ed.) 1999, 144-160.

(PL 1.26). What Milton could only hint, since his theologically framed mind simply could not question either the existence or the ultimately good nature of God, has gained a bold and provocative exposition in Philip Pullman's Milton-inspired fiction.

It is practically impossible to summarize this very complex trilogy that have a really magnificent design. His *Dark Materials* is not only a masterly plotted narrative with unforgettable characters, it is also an intriguing philosophical system embedded into a created possible world of multiple uto- and dystopias. In the core there is an apocalyptic vision involving Metatron, the great angel into which Enoch had been transformed.

As we know from the Bible, Enoch "walked with God: and he was not; for God took him" (Gen. 5:24). The circumstances are told in great details by the apocryphal Books of Enoch which has two main versions: first is the Christianized Ethiopic 1Enoch⁷ the origins of which can be found among the Qumran Scrolls (200 BC–200 AD).⁸ The second is the much later Hebrew Apocalypse of Enoch,⁹ a product of Merkabah mysticism (5th to 10th centuries AD). In this version Rabbi Ishmael reports about his journey to heaven where he saw God's Throne and Chariot and received revelations from the archangel Metatron who is the translated Enoch. The narrative involves the ascension of Ishmael into the seventh heaven where he is escorted by Metatron. The powerful archangel tells about his origin as Enoch who had been translated and became the angels' vice-regent. We get here an elaborate description of the angelic hierarchies as well as various heavenly marvels: the cosmic letters with which the world was created, the cosmic opposites (fire and water) held in balance by the divine names, the curtain that hangs before God's face on which the whole history of mankind is represented, etc.

In Pullman's vision a rather different Enoch-Metatron appears. Although the trilogy is disguised as "young adults' literature," it has a difficult and complex theology, and speaks a provocative, harshly an-

⁷ See James H. CHARLESWORTH, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. Volume 1: *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, New York: Doubleday, 1983, 5–89.

⁸ See Géza VERMES (ed.) *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, London: Penguin Classics, 2004, 545–549.

⁹ See the introduction of P. Alexander in the critical edition: CHARLESWORTH 1999, 223–253.

tical language. Although it cannot be called atheistic since it is full of supernatural characters, it is boldly heretical if this word still means anything today. According to Tamás Bényei, Pullman in this work set out to rewrite Milton's epic in the framework of fantasy-fiction, or, at least, to revisit Milton's fundamental inquiries about the sense of life, the existence of supernatural power(s), the characteristics of human nature, and the like.¹⁰

What is His dark Materials about? It starts indeed as a children's fiction. Let us imagine an Oxford some time in the 20th century in which a lot of things are similar to what we commonly know about the famous university town. Nevertheless, already after the first few pages we feel stranger and stranger. There are the colleges and among them the great Bodleian Library, but the largest and most powerful college, Jordan, is unknown to us. We are also surprised to find out that the scientists are working on "philosophical instruments" and they call this activity "theology". No wonder then, that the altar in the chapel prides with a holographic picture. There is oil, but it is called coal spirit, there is electricity, but it is called anbaric current. There are rifles and telephones, but there are no airplanes only balloons and "zeppelins".

If we turn from appearances to the essentials of life, it seems that every aspect of private and social existence is strongly under the influence of the Church, established by Jean Calvin in the 16th century, who became pope and moved the holy seat to Geneva. In this respect this epic has curious reminiscences of the now so fashionable counterfactual history writing. Most curious in that world is that people have daemons in the form of animals from which they cannot be separated until they die. A daemon is like a soul which lives outside the body but in perfect harmony and cooperation with it. Children's daemons can change their shape, while a sure sign of growing up is that the daemon becomes fixed in form. Where are we, after all, and what is going on?

The main heroine of the trilogy is twelve year old Lyra Belacqua, offspring of a strange union. Her mother is Mrs. Coulter, who deceived her husband when fell in love with the most powerful and ingenious

¹⁰ Tamás BÉNYEI, "Boldog bűnbeesés [Happy Fall]," *Élet és Irodalom* 48.39 (2004); <http://www.es.hu/pd/display.asp?channel=KRITIKA0439&article=2004-0927-0959-45JBHH,07-11-25>; access: 2007-12-28.

man of England, Lord Asriel. When Mr. Coulter soon found out about the relationship – what is more, about the illegitimate child –, tried to kill Lord Asriel, however the outcome was the opposite: Lyra’s father killed the jealous attacker. All this led to the breaking up of the couple-in-love, the exile of Asriel to the North, while Lyra was placed in the custody of Jordan College to be brought up.

While in exile, Lord Asriel discovers a strange phenomenon in the North, that is Dust. It consists of elementary particles which fall from space and stick to grownups but not to children. The phenomenon deeply worries the Church, the theologians think that Dust is the punishment of God which will destroy humankind burdened by the original sin, only children are exempt until they reach puberty and their daemons get fixed. The Magisterium – which is the supranational cult of authority and dogma that dominates the politics and society of Lyra’s world –, establishes the General Oblation Board entrusted to study dust. The Board is led by Mrs. Coulter who organizes children to be kidnapped, transported to the North and being experimented with. Their theory is that if they sever children from their daemon, they will be safe from the effects of Dust. This is a horrible practice, though, since it is unbearably painful for humans to be cut off from their souls and the children die one after the other.

Pullman develops several amazing concepts which are unfolded before the reader step by step. First of all, as if fulfilling Milton’s conditional – “Unless th’ Almighty Maker create more Worlds” –, it turns out that there are thousands and thousands of worlds which exist parallel with each other, one not knowing about the others. In the North, however, there are occasional openings between them, witness to this is the Aurora in which you can recognize the shape of cities from other worlds. Lord Asriel comes to a daring idea: he wants to build a bridge between worlds and establish communication connecting them. Ultimately, he wants to find the source of Dust and perhaps destroy it.

The Magisterium also wants to eliminate Dust, because of its theological implications. There is an intriguing apocryphal myth of the Fall in volume one. According to this, the Serpent tempts Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge as follows:

For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and your daemons shall assume their true forms, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.¹¹

And after having eaten from the forbidden fruit:

The eyes of them were opened, and they saw the true form of their daemons, and spoke with them. But when the man and woman knew their own daemons, they knew that a great change had come upon them [...], and they saw the difference, and they knew good and evil; and they were ashamed, and they sewed fig leaves together to cover their nakedness... (ibid.).

So this is how evil, shame and death came into the world and now Dust is the physical proof that grownups with fixed daemons are under the fate of the original sin. So from every angle it seems that Dust is harmful but Lyra is struck by a radical intuition: what if all grownups are mistaken and Dust is really good, it should be cherished?

By the second volume (*The Subtle Knife*) Lord Asriel figures out the origin of Dust and through volume three (*The Amber Spyglass*) another extraordinary apocryphal myth unfolds. These elementary particles were nothing else but the essence of consciousness which stick to developed human subjects and all other forms of intelligence. These particles had existed since the beginning of time and out of their density the first intelligent beings, the angels came to life. The first angel assumed power and called himself Authority. From volume two more and more angels appear in the novel so we get first hand information about the beginnings of time:

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 the 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 the name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself. Matter loves matter. It seeks more and more to know about itself, and Dust is formed. The first angels condensed out of Dust, and the Authority was the first of all. He told those who came after him that he had created them, but it was a lie...¹²

¹¹ Philip PULLMAN, *The Golden Compass*, New York: Random House, 2001, 372.

¹² *The Amber Spyglass*, New York: Random House, 2001, 32.

Soon an unsuccessful rebellion broke out against him (and here Pullman agrees with William Blake, who, with other readers of the Romantic period, asserted that Milton – at least unconsciously – sided with Satan by making him the real hero of *Paradise Lost*¹³) but the outcome of this rebellion was most surprising: not long after the Authority had won, his appointed deputy, Metatron (alias Enoch) assumed power step by step, gradually reducing the Authority into a weakling figurehead, or even less.

Metatron is proud and his ambition is limitless. The Authority chose him four thousand years ago to be his Regent, and they laid their plans together. The Authority considers that conscious beings of every kind have become dangerously independent, so Metatron is going to intervene much more actively in human affairs. [...] Imagine that, a permanent Inquisition, worse than anything the Consistorial Court of Discipline could dream up. [...] The old Authority at least had the grace to withdraw; the dirty work of burning heretics and hanging witches was left to his priests. This new one will be far, far worse.¹⁴

In the third volume, indeed, we see the Authority dragged on by the troops of Metatron, the tyrant, being totally helpless and senile.

Anyway, Lord Asriel, learning about the state of affairs in Heaven, forges a cosmic alliance between humans, angels (who are also called “the Watchers,” just like in the apocryphal Book of Enoch), and various sycreetic beings from various worlds (such as witches, armored bears, even the dead from the underworld) in order to wage war against the usurper Metatron. His aim is to bring about total freedom to all creatures of all worlds. He does not know, however, about the ancient prophecy of the Lapland witches according to which a child

is destined to bring about the end of destiny. But she must do so without knowing what she is doing, as if it were her nature and not destiny to do it. If she’s told what she must do, it will fail; death will sweep through all the worlds; it will be the triumph of despair, for ever. [It is also said that this child’s destiny] can only be fulfilled elsewhere, not in this world, but far beyond. Without this child we shall all die.¹⁵

¹³ On “Satanists” and “anti-Satanists” see John CAREY, ‘Milton’s Satan,’ = DANIELSON (ed.) 1999, 160–175.

¹⁴ *The Amber Spyglass*, 61, 374.

¹⁵ *The Golden Compass*, 310, 176.

No need to say, this child is Lyra, and from volume two there begins a great trafficking among various worlds (including our own) while Lyra – accompanied by his “Adam,” Will Parry – is working for noble, but smaller goals not realizing that she is destined to be the new Eve, the new mother and savior of Humankind. Her mission even involves a journey to the world of the dead – a must in any archetypal epic story of universal significance – which gives Pullman a chance to integrate his very deep philosophical thoughts about life and death into the texture of the narrative.

All in all, Pullman suggests that the Fall, that is the appearance of consciousness and independence in the world, was the best thing that could happen to humankind.¹⁶ But to live with those necessitates to go through apocalyptic experiences, facing sin, evil, destruction and death.

While Lord Asriel is preparing for the greatest war ever waged on earth, the children come to an understanding that his “Republic of Heaven” cannot be realized, it is doomed to failure because of the laws of nature and Dust.

We can travel, if there are openings into other worlds, but we can only live in our own. Lord Asriel’s great enterprise will fail in the end for the same reason: we have to build the Republic of Heaven where we are, because for us there is no elsewhere.¹⁷

This cruel law not only dooms Lord Asriel (whose farewell from the novel at least brings about the destruction of Metatron), but also the freshly blossomed love of Lyra and Will. Since they are from different worlds, they cannot live together, each of them has to return home and fulfill their life mission separated from each other for good. The ending of the trilogy is just as virtuoso as the whole emplotting. After the great apocalyptic war, the opening up of the worlds, the escape of the dead from the underworld and the destruction of the Authority and his regent, Metatron, the novel ends with a tone of mildly painful melancholy, similarly to that of *The Lord of the Rings*.

What remains with the reader for a long time is not only a tender sympathy for the unforgettable characters, but also a set of intriguing

¹⁶ I am borrowing this observation from BÉNYEI, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ *The Amber Spyglass*, 363.

philosophical, theological and ethical questions displayed so provocatively, still with great humanism by Pullman. It is difficult to tell, whether the superb storytelling (a recurrent phrase in volume three is “*tell them stories!*”), or Pullman’s ideas about God, nature, religion, death, mythology, and anthropology (often inspired by Milton and Blake) have won more readers to *His Dark Materials*. No wonder it has also stirred fierce debates between “defenders of the faith” and freethinking liberals.¹⁸ Even less wonder is that by now there is also a growing body of scholarly literature devoted to this “young adults’ fiction” which scrutinize Pullman’s literary craft (his multiple allegories) as well as his ideology (his relation to Christianity, his recycling the Miltonic theology, etc.).¹⁹

The internationally acclaimed scholar of Western esoterism, Joscelyn Godwin has pointed out, that

While [Pullman’s] cosmogony is atheist, in the sense that the universe is uncreated, and its cosmology materialist, *His Dark Materials* lacks for nothing in wonder and magic. Spurning the drab, denatured universe of the existentialist novelists, Pullman has drawn on another current that has often run in opposition to the churches: the esoteric tradition. Magpie-like, he has picked up fragments from Hermeticism, from Kabbalah and Jewish legend, from Gnosticism, theosophy, and the occult sciences, and interwoven them with current notions of physics. His worlds proliferate with angels, witches, shamans, specters, talking beasts, and especially with daemons.²⁰

¹⁸ L. CALDECOTT, “The Stuff of Nightmares,” *The Catholic Herald*, October 29, 1999. <http://www.christendom—awake.org/pages/misc/reflections.htm>; “The Dark Materials debate: life, God, the universe...,” chaired by Robert Butler, *Arts Telegraph*, March 17, 2004 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2004/03/17/bodark17.xml>; access: 2007-12-30.

¹⁹ See for example, Donna FREITAS, *Killing the Imposter God: Philip Pullman’s Spiritual Imagination in “His Dark Materials”*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.; Millicent LENZ – Carole SCOTT (eds.) *His Dark Materials Illuminated: Critical Essays on Philip Pullman’s Trilogy*, Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2005.; Hugh RAYMENT-PICKARD, *The Devil’s Account: Philip Pullman and Christianity*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004.

²⁰ Joscelyn GODWIN, “Esotericism without Religion: Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*,” MS, 3. I am quoting from the forthcoming paper, the original

Godwin's main argument is that while Pullman's trilogy is anticlerical and maybe even anti-Christian, it has taken strong inspiration from various trends of Western esoterism, such as the daimon-lore of Socrates, the late-Hellenic Corpus hermeticum, the Nag-hammadi Gnosticism, Renaissance magic and the art of memory, just to mention a few. I fully agree with this interpretation and in a later study I am going to scrutinize these aspects in detail.

For the time being I would only point out the fact, that in spite of the collapse of the organic-analogical-magical world picture in the late 17th century,²¹ the above mentioned trends survived and even proliferated first as a hermetic counter-culture (think of Blake, Madame Blavatsky, Rudolf Steiner, Julius Évola), but at the same time and increasingly as popular culture, reaching its zenith with New Age mysticism. Consequently, when Pullman recycles the problematic of Gnosticism or the *philosophia perennis*, he resonates on extremely contemporary chords, too. This is obviously one of his "secrets". But even more important is the coherence and strength of his poetic vision. The harpies in the underworld demand stories, they feed on them. But the stories have to be true, otherwise they do not accept them and they torture the liar. Lyra, who boasts to be the greatest liar at least in Oxford, finds the way to tame them with her true story.

Why would the readers be different from the harpies? And Pullman boldly faces them – us. Although he constructs a fictitious world, this will become "a possible world", forged from the dark materials of language, and rings true.

of which was read at the conference of the Association for the Study of Esotericism at Michigan State University, East Lansing, in June 2004.

²¹ See Keith Thomas' monumental monograph entitled *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1972., which tried to capture this paradigm shift in Western intellectual history.