

## **‘JUST TELL THEM STORIES’**

### **The Liberation Spirituality of Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials***

*John Pridmore*

PHILIP PULLMAN INSISTS that his intention in writing *His Dark Materials* was simply to tell a story.<sup>1</sup> The critical consensus is that he has done so brilliantly. A vast body of readers—adults as well as the young people for whom the trilogy was written—agrees. So too did the full houses for the acclaimed stage production at London’s National Theatre. Here is a thrilling work of immense imaginative sweep and power. *His Dark Materials* is a story. This may be a special kind of story, but it is not something else masquerading as a story. Pullman’s trilogy is not a disguised tract.

This essay is about what might be called the ‘spiritual development’ of the trilogy’s main characters, the children—and the no-longer-children—Lyra and Will. I shall ask too how the story functions. I shall suggest that Pullman’s book is itself spiritually formative; like all good literature, it does us good to read it. But the obvious must be stressed. *His Dark Materials* was not created as a quarry for insights into children’s spirituality and how it may be shaped. Subscribers to this journal have their reasons for discussing the book in such terms, but these are not the reasons why young people read it. They do so because they are enthralled by it.

*His Dark Materials* is a story, a war story and a love story. Crucial to the outcome of the war are the courage and tenacity of Lyra and Will, two children who come from different worlds. According to

<sup>1</sup> The trilogy consists of *Northern Lights* (London: Scholastic, 1995), cited as NL; *The Subtle Knife* (London: Scholastic, 1997), cited as SK; and *The Amber Spyglass* (London: Scholastic, 2001), cited as AS.



Pullman's cosmology there exists a multiplicity of parallel universes between which it is possible to move. Pullman presupposes that such a cosmology is, in principle, possible and—a premise that has a great

bearing on what we make of the trilogy—that it accounts for all there is. His plurality of universes coexists within a single 'envelope' beyond which there is nothing and no one. Lyra's home is a college in the Oxford of another world, a world both like and unlike our own. Lyra is a resourceful and mendacious hoyden, running wild across the roofs and through the cellars of her college, driving the dons who are her guardians to distraction. Will is from our world, from somewhere suburban and faceless in the south of England. The children meet in a third universe to which they gain access, Lyra through a cosmic cataclysm which rips the fabric of the worlds apart, Will through a small window in the air beside the Oxford ring-road.

The war in which the children are caught up is the renewal of an ancient conflict. Before the worlds were formed there was rebellion in heaven, a revolt by the braver angels against one of their own who had conferred on himself the title of Almighty God. That rebellion was put down and 'the Authority', as he is called in Lyra's world, continues his malign and despotic reign. The instruments of his rule in that world are the Church, the Magisterium and the priesthood. These bodies are dedicated to the suppression of every natural impulse, watchful for the least deviation from the truth as they define it, fiercely opposed to all curiosity and free enquiry (AS 342-343). Battle is now once more joined as beings from all the worlds, including humans and angels, make common cause (AS 222) finally to overthrow this tyranny that has lasted since time immemorial.

Much of the narrative concerns a mysterious material which those in Lyra's world who are privy to the arcane speak of as 'Dust'. 'Dust' appears to gather about individuals as they become adults. This substance is feared by the Church, which sees it as sinful and seeks to destroy it. But the children come to recognise that what the Church wishes to master and abolish is in truth 'matter beginning to understand itself'. Far from being sinful, 'Dust' is what confers on us

our autonomy and our capacity for joy. And as the story unfolds we learn that what is known as 'Dust' in Lyra's world has been discovered in our world too. 'Dust' is the same as the 'shadow particles' of our universe. In time it becomes consciousness, capable of making free choices. Those in Lyra's world who dread 'Dust' are of the same spirit as those in our world—or in any world—who know that their hold on power will always be challenged by the unfettered mind.

Eventually the children prevail. The old enemy is overthrown. The remaking of all things—the building of the 'republic of heaven'—can begin.

### **'Spiritual Development' in His Dark Materials**

What understanding of the spirit of the child do we find in *His Dark Materials*? To gain a firmer purchase on this elusive question I shall comment on what I see as three of the trilogy's leading themes 'the self', 'innocence and experience', and 'spirituality and religion'.

#### *The Self*

Each character in *His Dark Materials* is a threefold being. Mrs Coulter, Lyra's mother, all shelter and deceit stripped away, stands naked 'body and ghost and daemon together' before the ferocious gaze of Metatron, prince of the angels (AS 418). Each of us is 'body and ghost and daemon' (AS 176). Here, as so often in the trilogy, Pullman draws on the concepts and the imagery of the Christian Bible, even as he rejects the traditional Christian account of our nature and destiny.

Mary Malone, who was once a nun in our world but who has now renounced both the religious life and the Christian faith, reminds Will and Lyra that St Paul spoke about 'spirit and soul and body' (AS 462-463). There are three parts to human nature. Each of us has a *body*—'the best part', comments Will, as his friendship with Lyra takes on a new and strangely disturbing quality. And each of us has a *ghost*, a pale, hapless shadow of the self, which at death descends to the realm of the dead. Here Pullman draws on both the Hebrew Bible's idea of Sheol and the classical notion of Hades, the underworld. The ghost of the individual is the forlorn shade of the one who once was. In the story's most audacious sequence, the children descend to the realm of the dead to set free the departed ghosts. The ghosts of the dead are released, but not to some celestial paradise. Their destiny in death is

oblivion. Yet the sting of death is drawn, and the ghosts cry before they are gone:

We'll be alive again in a thousand blades of grass, and a million leaves, we'll be falling in the raindrops and blowing in the fresh breeze, we'll be glittering in the dew under the stars and the moon out there in the physical world which is our true home and always was. (AS 336)

Hell has been harrowed.

Lastly, and most significantly, each of us has a *daemon*. A child's daemon, which is with him or her all the time, now as one creature, now as another, can be seen as representing the developing 'spirit' of the child, as we would call it in our world. To be parted from one's daemon is to die—a separation which, if she is to fulfil her high destiny, Lyra must herself suffer (AS chapter 18 onwards). Lyra cries out in agony when she realises that she must enter the realm of the dead, and that to do so she must part from her daemon, Pantalaimon. 'But he is me!' she cries (AS 295). Deliberately to abandon one's daemon is the final betrayal (AS 299).

The image of the daemon, in some ways recalling the 'totem animal' of the North American 'first nation' peoples, can be seen as outwardly manifesting who a person essentially is, and who they are becoming. In two ways at least, this bold, delightful and ingenious image illuminates the spiritual development of the growing child.

First, there is a significant difference between a child's daemon and that of an adult. Exploring the vaults beneath Jordan College, where generations of masters are buried, Lyra and her friend Roger notice that each tomb bears not only the name of the one who rests there but also a brass plaque with a picture of an animal or some other being on it. These, Lyra realises, are images of the dead men's daemons. 'As people became adult their daemons lost their power to change and assumed one shape, keeping it permanently.' (NL 49) Lyra hates to think that her beloved daemon will one day 'settle'. But she has to learn that this is an inevitable part of growing up for, as she is told, it is only 'when your daemon settles [that] you'll know what sort of person you are' (NL 167).

The mutating forms of Lyra's daemon—now a moth, now a lion, now a goldfinch—say something essential about the spirit of the child: that he or she is *always becoming*. The spirit of a child is a river,

and we cannot tell it to be still. The literature about children's spirituality and the successive official guidelines about 'the promotion of spiritual development' (mandatory requirement in English and Welsh schools) abound with clumsy attempts to arrest the child's evolving spirit for long enough to take its description. With the image of the child's ever-changing daemon, Pullman has succeeded where definitions fail in conveying the fluid and dynamic character of spiritual growth. The spirit of the child cannot be pinned to a board.



As grown-ups, we may well resent the suggestion that our daemon no longer changes, and that we're saddled with the one we've got. (It is a salutary spiritual exercise for the adult reader of Pullman to reflect on what creature might be his or her daemon.) Yet we are bound to concede, however reluctantly, that children possess 'a freedom to become', a suppleness of the spirit, as of the body, which can no longer be ours as adults. We say to an adult whom we have not seen for years, 'You haven't changed at all!' But to a child we say, 'My! How you've grown!' Behind these commonplace expressions, as behind the image of the daemon that must eventually settle as one creature and not another, is the acknowledgement that there is a lissomness of the spirit in the young which is lost in later life, however strongly we insist that the spiritual journey is never done. (Can what is lost in some measure be recovered? If indeed we must become like children, if indeed we must aspire to the condition of childhood, we must at least hope that it may be so.)



Secondly, this extraordinarily clever image is effective in that it enables Pullman to make the dynamic process of a child's spiritual growth transparent. In our world we can neither see nor hear the restless river of the child's flowing spirit. But in picturing his children accompanied by their ever-present daemons Pullman can bring this process to light. As we hear the dialogue between child and daemon—they are always chatting to each other—it is as if we are listening to that inner river, the hidden stream of the child's spirit, with all its eddies and unpredictable

currents. In the relationship of child and daemon we witness what is unfolding as the child becomes who he or she is to be.

Lyra steals into the dark and empty hall of Jordan College. Hardly visible in the gloom, Pantalaimon, in the form of a moth, hovers at her shoulder. With her finger-nail the mischievous child flicks one of the crystal glasses on the high table and the sound rings round the hall. 'You're not taking this seriously', whispers her daemon. 'Behave yourself.' (NL 3) The reprimand opens the first conversation we overhear between child and daemon. Eventually Lyra, like every child, will discover that growing up is indeed a serious business and later exchanges will be weightier.

In our own world that dialogue of the spirit in the growing child may be less audible to us, but that does not mean that it is altogether silent. For our children too talk to their 'daemons'. Sometimes we overhear these conversations, the child talking to an imaginary friend, as we suppose. But these spiritual exchanges go on all the time.

#### *Innocence and Experience*

It becomes clear, as the story unfolds, that Lyra has a unique role and destiny. The witches have long known of a child who is to come, and who will have 'the power to make a fateful choice on which the future of all the worlds (will) depend' (AS 69). Lyra's mother, the seductive and sinister Mrs Coulter, for whom nothing can be too cruel that serves the purpose of the Magisterium, extracts from one of the witches Lyra's true name. Lyra, according to the great bear Iorek

Byrnison, is 'Lyra Silvertongue', but she is also Eve, and 'the fateful choice' that she must make is the same as that made by the other Eve.

'Lyra is Eve.' (SK 329) The Church of Lyra's world teaches that the consequence of the choice made by the first Eve is that sin and shame and death entered the world. Now the Church is seeking to contain, and even to reverse, the consequence of that first fall from grace by a kind of 'final solution'. By means of 'intercision' children are to be separated from their daemons, and thereby kept in perpetual subjection, safe from the possibility of developing the power to choose, and the ability to defy the Church's authority. So there must be no further Fall. 'This Eve', the President of the Consistorial Court of Discipline announces, 'this Eve, who is going to be tempted ... if precedent is any guide, will fall and (her) fall will involve us all in ruin'. 'If this temptation does take place and the child gives in, then Dust and sin will triumph.' So the Magisterium determines that such a possibility must be averted, and that Lyra must be killed before she can be tempted (AS 71-75).

But Lyra survives, and there follows what the Church fears. 'Then Lyra took one of those little red fruits.' No temptation is involved, for what the children experience is natural and good, beautiful and joyful. 'With a fast-beating heart, she turned to him and said, "Will ...". And she lifted the fruit gently to his mouth.' (AS 491-492) Lyra's 'Fall' is accompanied by a surge of sexual awareness, and soon Lyra and Will are clinging together in each other's arms. Mary Malone, who 'plays the serpent' (SK 261) and feeds the children with these fruits, does not need her amber spyglass:

She knew what she would see; they would seem to be made of living gold. They would seem the true image of what human beings always could be, once they had come into their inheritance. (AS 497)

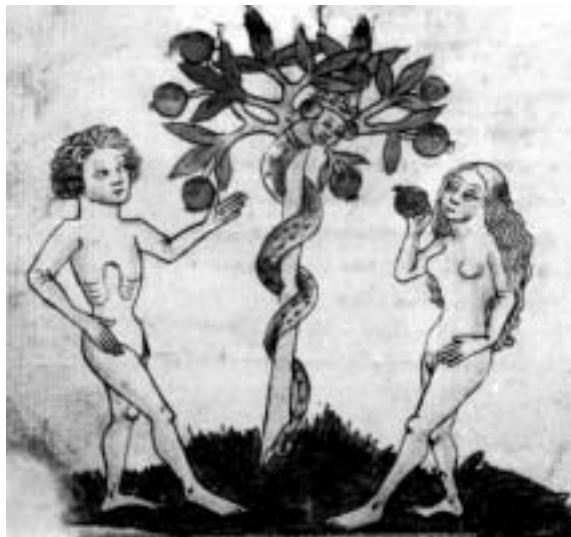
So, as Pullman retells the story, 'the Fall' is not a fall *from* grace. Were we were still to speak of what has happened as a 'Fall', we could only speak of it, paradoxically, as 'a fall *into* grace'.

The Dust pouring down from the stars had found a living home again and these children-no-longer-children, saturated with love, were the cause of it all. (AS 497)

*His Dark Materials* is a radical reinterpretation of the myth of the Fall. It challenges the understanding of the story dominant both in Western theology and in the popular imagination. On that traditional view Adam and Eve disobey, and they and all humankind are punished with toil and pain. From generation to generation the guilty state of our first parents is perpetuated. According to Augustine, to whom we owe the melancholy notion of 'original sin', our corrupted condition is a kind of sexually transmitted disease, for it is the 'concupiscence' that goes with the begetting of children that perpetuates our fallen state.

Pullman will have none of this. He rejects the understanding of the Fall which won the day in the West. For Pullman, the story of the Fall is not about a primal sin and its calamitous consequences. It is, rather, all about growing up. (In this respect his reading of the story is much closer to how it is understood in the Jewish tradition or by Irenaeus and the Greek fathers.) The children come into their inheritance. Knowledge, the 'knowledge of good and evil', is not forbidden; on the contrary it is necessary and indeed a blessing, for only with that knowledge comes our capacity to choose. To be sure, that choice may be for good or ill. But good is only truly good when it is chosen. Innocence may have its charm, but something more than innocence is needed for our flourishing.

Mary Malone was once a nun, and has become a research scientist. She sees the significance of the 'Shadow-particles' on her computer screen. In the relatively recent evolutionary past—a mere thirty-three



thousand years ago—these particles (the 'Dust' of Lyra's world) became concentrated in the human brain and consciousness was born. That moment, Mary realises, marked 'the great change in human history symbolized in the story of Adam and Eve; with the Temptation, the Fall, Original Sin' (AS 235).



Here then is Pullman's rereading of the ancient myth. The story of the Garden of Eden is a mythological account of the decisive stage in the evolution of human consciousness, the emergence of our capacity to reason and freedom to choose. So far from being a primal catastrophe, this moment is a coming-of-age to be celebrated.

The Lyra of *His Dark Materials* is Eve and, like that other Eve, she has her unique and inalienable role in the scheme of things. But—again as in that earlier story—Lyra and Will are also each of us and all of us. Every Lyra and every Will, every child, must grow up. Spiritual nurture must welcome this process. The spiritual life of the child is not a secret garden from which all that is adult must be excluded, nor some delicate plant which will wither outside its hothouse. Spiritual nurture is not barrier nursing, conducted in a hermetically sealed environment from which all potentially infectious influences must at all costs be kept out.

There is much talk today of 'the death of childhood', and many are concerned to keep at bay those influences which are perceived as destructive of childhood innocence. Philip Pullman himself has deplored much of what happens to children in contemporary culture, but *His Dark Materials* is not a celebration of childhood as a golden age. His trilogy gives little encouragement to those who would idealize the spirituality of childhood, and who see the onset of adulthood as a threat to it. There is little in *His Dark Materials*—for all the bewildering capacity of the child's daemon/spirit to change its form—to suggest that the spiritual nature of the child is a capacity for discerning the transcendent, for perceiving things which are closed to the clouded spiritual vision of the grown-up. One suspects that Pullman would distance himself from those who celebrate the spiritual insight of children and contrast it with a lack of such insight in adults. Such a view of children's spirituality does not empower the child. Rather, it can easily serve regimes—including parental regimes—which prefer to prolong the dependence of childhood as much as possible. Spiritual nurture, according to *His Dark Materials*, is a matter of enabling children to grow up.

Two principles control Pullman's account of the flourishing and fulfilment of the child's spiritual nature: the principles of liberation and of love. Where Lyra recognises and accepts her destiny to release the ghosts from the land of the dead, the epigraph to the chapter is the New Testament text: 'You shall know the truth and the truth shall set

you free' (John 8:32). In the later twentieth century those who read the words of Jesus through their awareness or experience of poverty and oppression developed what came to be known as 'liberation theology'. For all its teeming Biblical and religious imagery, *His Dark Materials* cannot be forced into a Christian theological framework, or indeed into any other. But what we do have in the trilogy is an essay in what could be called 'liberation spirituality'. Spiritual fulfilment becomes possible when 'the Authority', and all the despotisms and tyrannies it symbolizes, are overthrown. Here is a spirituality which is essentially social and emancipatory.

**Liberation  
comes  
through  
love** This liberation comes about through love. In the end, love prevails even within the cold and scheming Mrs Coulter; her reawakened love for Lyra proves stronger than her loyalty to the Church. 'I love Lyra. Where did this love come from?' she asks. 'I don't know; it came to me like a thief in the night, and now I love her so much that my heart is bursting with it.' (AS 426-427) Our last picture of Lyra and Will is of children-no-longer-children who are 'saturated with love'. What order of love is this? There are echoes of the conclusion of another epic here, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and of 'the love that moves the sun and the other stars'. Lyra and Will are steeped in a love which is more than the attraction between them; their love draws on the love which has settled on them as Dust (Lyra's 'shining hair [is] all set about with golden Dust' [AS 427]). Here I make the connection which Pullman stops short of making, though I think he implies it, that 'Dust', matter become conscious of itself, is matter that has become love. Not 'God is love'—but 'Dust is love'. Their love draws on that love, but it does not stop with them. It not exhausted in their delight in each other, but energizes their commitment to building 'the republic of heaven'.

#### *Spirituality and Religion*

The fiercest discussion prompted by *His Dark Materials* has centred on Pullman's apparently hostile stance towards the Church, towards religion generally, and towards Christianity in particular.<sup>2</sup> Mary Malone

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Anthony Woolard, 'Philip Pullman and the Republic of Heaven', *Modern Believing*, 45/2 (2004), 47-56.

says, 'The Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake, that's all' (AS 464).

Pullman cleverly locates the Magisterium of the Church of Lyra's world in Geneva. This enables him to depict his Church as exhibiting at once all that is most deplorable both in popery and in puritanism. Pullman draws on the familiar stereotypes of the Church as oppressive, cruel, obsessed by sin—especially by the sins of the flesh—and ever the enemy of free enquiry. The word of a witch, Ruta Skadi, suffices to express the estimate of the Church which goes unchallenged and unqualified throughout the trilogy:

For all its history ... the church has tried to suppress and control every natural impulse .... That is what the church does and every church is the same: control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling .... (SK 52)

None of this is very subtle, a fact which should give us pause. The description of the Church in Lyra's world is not a balanced representation of an institution in our world which, notwithstanding its often shameful history, has nevertheless here and there done a little good, and which has included, along with the rest of us, some quite nice people. But this description was not intended as such. Those who see this book as an attack on the Christian Church have not read it attentively. Pullman is looking for a little more sophistication from his readers.

Pullman's aim is not to pillory the Church—though he himself has little taste or time for institutional religion. Rather, he is encouraging us to think about whatever it is that impedes human growth, human flourishing. In Pullman's story, these forces have found a willing agent in the Church; and the Church of Lyra's



*Detail from The Simoniac Pope  
by William Blake*

world serves in Pullman's mythology as a symbol for all that is destructive and infantilising. It symbolizes whatever opposes 'the republic of heaven', which Lyra and Will and all of us are summoned to build. But 'church' here is a symbol, and what the symbol conveys is not any single institution, not the Church of our world—though where caps fit, they must be worn. The enemy of human flourishing is whoever or whatever seeks to suppress the free spirit, and to stop children and those no longer children from falling and staying in love. It is noteworthy that Philip Pullman himself has had much more to say about the damage done to children by an oppressive and prescriptive educational system than about the harm done to them by religion.

### ***How His Dark Materials Functions Formatively***

How are we to classify *His Dark Materials*—if classify it we must? What is its literary genre? If we describe the trilogy as a work of 'fantasy' we must do so with some caution, for this is fantasy of a different order from some more familiar examples of the genre. And if it is fantasy, what manner of fantasy is it? Fantasy will of course always escape any attempt to define or categorize it. Having said that, I find the broad classification proposed by Sheila Egoff helpful.<sup>3</sup>

Egoff draws attention to the deep roots of fantasy in myth, legend and folklore, in material retold for generations by word of mouth before ever being put in writing. Egoff reserves the term 'fantasy' for written fantasy. 'Fantasists shape their stories through artifice.' The matter of written fantasy may have elements in common with what is handed down by oral tradition, but it is the narrator's private vision that we are now invited to share, not 'the public dream'. Egoff distinguishes a series of sub-genres of fantasy, including the



<sup>3</sup> *Worlds Within: Children's Fantasy from the Middle Ages to Today* (Chicago and London: American Library Association, 1988), see especially 4.

literary fairy tale and epic fantasy. The literary fairy tale imitates the traditional form, but it is imbued with the author's individuality. The epic fantasy, conceived on a grander scale, is closely related to legend, and its great theme is the unending conflict between good and evil. Pullman would not, I hope, quarrel with our describing his work as an example of 'epic fantasy'.

I have suggested that *His Dark Materials* is potentially a spiritually formative work. If so, how does it function? Fantasy can work in different ways. Some fantasy, for example, is essentially didactic. Other fantasy can be seen as 'therapeutic'. My contention is that *His Dark Materials* is neither of these. Rather, it exemplifies what has been described as 'utopian fantasy'.

#### *Didactic Fantasy*

What is taught by 'didactic fantasy' is an improving message that the author intends. The function of didactic fantasy is to teach a lesson. We think of the sententious and moralising approach of much Victorian children's literature. Is *His Dark Materials* didactic fantasy? Certainly critics of Pullman have accused him of preaching, of propagating a secular gospel. We have noted one point at which the authorial voice is too loud—Mary Malone's remark that Christianity is simply a mistake. There are such occasional didactic moments in the trilogy, false notes in the narrative. But the work as a whole cannot be classified as didactic fantasy. It is a tale of tremendous moral and spiritual power but its morality and spirituality are generally inherent in the story, not imposed on it.

#### *Therapeutic Fantasy*

'Therapeutic fantasy' is fantasy understood as promoting psychological well-being. Bruno Bettelheim argued in his famous study of fairy tales, *The Uses of Enchantment*,<sup>4</sup> that such tales must be interpreted in Freudian terms. Fairy tales, he claimed, acknowledge the shadow side of existence, the dark within. They enable children to address the turmoil of menacing and potentially destructive subconscious pressures by inviting them to identify imaginatively with the protagonists of a narrative in their struggle to overcome evil. Fantasy, interpreted in this

<sup>4</sup> (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976).

way, allows the reader to enter another, imaginary world where they can work through and resolve their inner conflicts, and then return to the 'real world' properly adjusted to take on its challenges.

However, Pullman does not, quite clearly, accept the distinction between the real world and 'somewhere else'. As John Parry, Will's father, says, 'There is nowhere else' (AS 382). The function of Pullman's fantasy is not to transport us readers to an unreal never-never-land, such as Narnia or Middle-earth, from which we can return better equipped to cope with our own real world. Fantasy, as Pullman recasts it, is not an alternative to realism but a dimension of it. The imagined worlds of his trilogy are fictional worlds, to be sure, but they are all possible worlds, made of the same stuff as the world in which these words are being written and read. The worlds we enter in reading Pullman are not fictional sanatoria where we get our heads straight before re-entering everyday life in sound mental health. *His Dark Materials* cannot be forced into the interpretative framework that Bettelheim has constructed.

#### *Utopian Fantasy*

I wish to suggest that the formative potential of *His Dark Materials* is best understood if it is seen as an example of what Jack Zipes has described as 'utopian fantasy'.<sup>5</sup> Fantasy and fairy tales are often

**Fantasy  
writing  
can be a  
liberative  
social  
process**

characterized as timeless and ahistorical, and as exercising a universal appeal. The circumstances of their composition, in this view, do not matter. But Zipes challenges this, insisting that such writing is part of a social process which reflects continuing conflicts in society over power and social relations. Such tales, Zipes claims, are shaped by existing social patterns but also by the longing that those patterns might be changed.

They contain 'the wish-fulfilment and utopian projection of the people', the aspiration to a better life.<sup>6</sup> Thus they demand a political understanding.

<sup>5</sup> *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy-Tales* (London: Heinemann, 1979); *Fairy-Tales and the Art of Subversion* (London: Heinemann, 1983); *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988); *Creative Storytelling: Building Community, Changing Lives* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995); *When Dreams Came True: Classical Fairy-Tales and Their Tradition* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999); (ed), *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell*, 6.

Zipes' understanding of the fairy tale as essentially a utopian tract owes much to his reading of Bloch's seminal work *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (*The Principle of Hope*).<sup>7</sup> Bloch's Marxist faith was that human beings could shape their destiny to conform to their deepest longings and needs. Zipes quotes a passage from *The Principle of Hope* in which the vision of the coming good is invoked: '... something comes into being in the world that shines into everyone's childhood and where no one has yet been—home'.<sup>8</sup>

Fairy tales or fantasies, in Zipes's view, are not other worlds into which one escapes, even with a view to returning to one's everyday world better equipped to deal with it. Still less are they didactic tracts. They are to be understood rather as essentially subversive. They challenge familiar power-structures; they are manifestos for social change. *His Dark Materials* is such a story.

John Parry, Will's father, tells his son about,

... the two great powers [that have] been fighting since time began. Every advance in human life, every scrap of knowledge and wisdom and decency we have has been torn from the teeth of the other. Every little increase in human freedom has been fought over ferociously between those who want us to know more and be wiser and stronger and those who want us to obey and be humble and submit. (SK 335)

The subject of *His Dark Materials* is this immemorial conflict between the two principles—spiritual servitude and spiritual liberation—not the death of God and the defeat of the Church. The 'spiritual' in this context, in these pages, is to be understood not primarily as a matter of inward sensibility but rather as a dimension of the social and the relational.

There is, in Pullman's view, 'nowhere else', but there is 'something else', the possibility of a new order. Lyra says at the end to her daemon:

We have to be all those difficult things like cheerful and kind and curious and brave and patient, and we've got to study and think and work hard all of us and then we'll build ... the republic of heaven. (AS 548)

<sup>7</sup> Translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell*, 129.

At the heart of fantasy, Zipes teaches us, there is a deep sense of unrest. The conditions that we experience are intolerable, and must be changed. The story is told in the longing that it will come true and—for this is how such utopian fantasy works—the same longing is awakened in the hearer or reader of the story. As we read the story—as we read *His Dark Materials*—we too catch the vision of what can be, of what *shall* be if we join together in trying to make it all come true.

‘As we read the story ....’ The spirit is above all nurtured by narrative. As the ghosts of the dead pass into light with joy, this is their last word:

‘Tell them stories .... You must tell them true stories, and everything will be well, everything. Just tell them stories. (AS 455)

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