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A Fight for Equality

The Figure of Satan between Paradise Lost and His Dark Materials

Relatrice
Prof. Alessandra Petrina

Laureanda
Giorgia Campagnolo
n° matr.1199848 / LTLLM

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*Ai miei genitori e nonni
che mi hanno spianato la strada
per costruire la mia Repubblica dei Cieli*

*To my parents and grandparents
who paved the path for me
to build my Republic of Heaven*

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FOREWORD

“But there are three debts that need acknowledgment above all the rest. [...] The second is to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*” (*AS*, p. 535).¹ This is what the English author Philip Pullman writes in the acknowledgment section at the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, the third and final book of his fantasy saga *His Dark Materials*. His story of a young girl losing her innocence through love and sacrifice was mostly inspired by the story of Adam and Eve’s temptation and the consequent loss of Paradise, but between Milton’s and Pullman’s works there are many other elements and characters in common. The very first thing we notice when we start reading the first book of Pullman’s trilogy – *The Golden Compass*² – is an excerpt from Book II of *Paradise Lost* (lines 910-919), which immediately explains where the inspiration for the full title of the saga came from. This extract is also very significant because it anticipates two elements that are fundamental for the plot of the trilogy:

Into this wild abyss,
The womb of nature and perhaps her grave,
Of neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire,
But all these in their pregnant causes mixed
Confusedly, and which thus must ever fight,
Unless the almighty maker them ordain
His dark materials to create more worlds,
Into this wild abyss the wary fiend [*Satan*]
Stood on the brink of hell and looked awhile,
Pondering his voyage; for no narrow frith
He had to cross.

(*PL*, II, 910-920)³

The first important element that emerges from these lines is the dark matter, namely the primordial matter of Chaos which, under the command of the Lord God, can

¹ Pullman, Philip, *His Dark Materials (Book Three): The Amber Spyglass*, New York: A Yearling Book, 2005, p. 535. This is the edition I use throughout. From now on, I will refer to it as *AS*. Italics are mine throughout.

² *The Golden Compass* is the American title of the book *Northern Lights*, which is the original title. *The Golden Compass* is the edition I use throughout.

³ Milton, John, *Paradise Lost*, edited by Alastair Fowler, London: Routledge, 2013, p. 155. This is the edition I use throughout. From now on, I will refer to it as *PL*. Italics are mine throughout.

congregate to form worlds, nature, life (*PL*, VII, 176-242), or disintegrate to return to its original state. The dark matter (otherwise called Dust, Shadows, Rusakov Particles, or Sraf in Pullman's story) was of great importance in the elaboration of the plot for *His Dark Materials*, as in the trilogy it represents the concrete proof of the existence of original sin, and therefore the knowledge of good and evil. However, I will not dwell much on this aspect in this thesis, except for explanatory purposes. What I will focus on instead is the second element that emerges in the verses above. Standing on the edge of hell there is a "wary fiend" who, during his journey to the garden of Eden, observes the void of the abyss that looms beneath him, as he ponders the hard mission that weighs on him. The figure in question is a fallen angel repudiated by Heaven for his boundless pride and ambition, and therefore condemned to eternal punishment in Hell. Satan is a very complex character in Milton's work: his psychology is so meticulously described that most scholars have thought him to be the true hero of the poem.⁴ Readers tend to identify with him already from the first two books of *Paradise Lost* through his hate speeches against God and twisted rhetoric toward his followers. Unable to accept any kind of punishment or subordination, Satan takes responsibility in front of the other devils for finding a new place to build his personal kingdom and corrupting the new creature of God (mankind) who lives there, thus taking revenge on the One⁵ who cast him out. Faced with this dark abyss, the Devil realizes that his pride is at stake, and there must be no room for hesitation or failure.

Although it is not explicitly mentioned, the figure of Satan is also present in a more articulated way in Pullman's trilogy. In fact, it seems that the Devil's greatest features – such as the spirit of rebellion, the ability to persuade and manipulate, and the thirst for power – are represented by multiple characters in *His Dark Materials*. At the

⁴ Robinson, Karen D., "His Dark Materials: A Look into Pullman's Interpretation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*", *Mythlore*, 24 (2004), p. 13.

⁵ I will use capital letters in pronouns and possessive adjectives when I am referring to God.

end of the saga, readers realise that many biblical episodes and characters are re-interpreted in a modern key: the two young protagonists playing the role of Eve and Adam are the new heroes who will save the worlds from tyranny and blind obedience, while God and his⁶ Regent are nothing more than impostors who want to keep themselves in power. In this regard, this thesis stemmed from a question I asked myself when – at the end of *His Dark Materials* – two characters potentially representing Satan sacrifice themselves to protect Knowledge and Freedom of thought: can the Devil be seen as the bearer of wisdom and awareness? It seemed that Pullman’s message was to portray the figure of Satan as the saviour of humanity, and I therefore wanted to describe the Devil’s fight for equality to verify whether this figure was really a good example to follow in rebelling against the tyrannies.

To do so, I divided this thesis into three chapters, in which I examined separately the two writers, their relationship with religion and authorities, and their interpretations of the Devil and his counterpart God. Since *Paradise Lost* is the primary source of Pullman’s saga, I found it necessary to analyse in the first chapter the writer John Milton in order to understand whether his historical-political context had influenced his work and, therefore, his depiction of Satan. Next, I wanted to retrieve some information from Milton’s epic poem to analyse the characteristics of God and angels that I would use later to describe the rebel angel. In the second chapter, I examined Philip Pullman’s relationship with religion in order to compare it with the theology behind his fantasy saga. As I did in the first chapter, I analysed the theological conception of angels and the Authority present in *His Dark Materials* to compare it with that of *Paradise Lost*. Finally, in the third chapter I used the theological foundations of the works analysed previously to focus specifically on the figure of Satan. I began the analysis of this

⁶ When I refer to the “God” of Pullman’s trilogy I do not use capital letters in possessive adjectives and pronouns, as he is not the true Authority.

character by extrapolating the major characteristics of the Devil from Milton's epic poem and equated them onto Pullman's version to see if the two Satan(s) matched. In the *His Dark Materials* version, I obtained a portrait of the Devil very close to that of *Paradise Lost*, but I concluded that this character is too ambiguous to be considered a good example to follow in rebelling against an absolutist and despotic system. Nevertheless, the analysed bibliography suggests that Satan's deeds are too symbolic, subversive, and fundamental to the development of human consciousness to be simply downgraded to mere contemptible acts.

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CHAPTER 1

John Milton: a call for a republic on Earth

1.1 Introduction

Borrowing William Blake's words, "the reason [John] Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, [...] is because he was a true poet, and of the Devil's party without knowing it".¹ This statement stems from the fact that Satan is the main hero of *Paradise Lost*. In fact, Milton thought that the Devil was the perfect figure to convey a message against the authorities and to make people aware of their status within society. In this chapter, I will analyse the figure of the Devil in Milton's epic poem both from the political point of view (the monarchy of Satan will be compared to that of God) and from the theological one (Satan's relationship with the Father, the angels, and mankind on Earth). The example of the Devil trying to seize by any means the throne in Heaven to proclaim himself the new Lord could be seen as an implicit metaphor of what sovereigns and institutions are able to do in front of their unwitting subjects and followers. For this reason, before delving into the analysis of this figure in *Paradise Lost*, I will briefly present the political and religious context in which John Milton lived. Although Milton lived in a completely different period from that of the writer Philip Pullman, this analysis will be useful to understand the character of Satan depicted in the *His Dark Materials* saga.

¹ Blake, William, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "The Voice of the Devil" (note), Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/45315/pg45315-images.html>, 2014. No pagination.

1.2 John Milton

1.2.1 Historical and political context

Since we are dealing with a politically engaged author,² it is first necessary to retrieve some historical notions of the era in which he lived, as it was a unique period for England. So, before delving into the analysis of the political part of *Paradise Lost*, I would like to briefly touch on some of the most important events of the years of the English Civil Wars. It seems that this specific period of political instability in the history of England was of particular inspiration for the works of this writer. Through his treatises, Milton expressed his political and theological ideology, which was very different from the common thought that characterized the society of the time.

John Milton was born on December 9, 1608, during a time of strong religious and political pressures. For the first part of his life, he lived under the reign of James I, who had to take the reins of four completely different nations: England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. As well as being culturally incompatible, they had various religious groups, including Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Puritans. The tensions between these communities were so strong that conflicts arose more than once in the British Isles throughout the first half of the seventeenth century.³

The climax of these religious and political tensions was reached in 1642, when the first Civil English War began. During the twenty-year period between 1640 and 1660, a strong sense of tolerance was growing among some intellectuals, and many liberal concepts such as freedom from press censorship, the separation of church and state, and especially popular sovereignty became more and more a primary necessity.⁴ The Stuart dynasty and the royalists, however, did not feel the same way: James I and

² Fowler, p. 41.

³ Greenblatt, Stephen, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century and the Early Seventeenth Century*, New York; London: W.W. Norton, 2012, pp. 1341-1343.

⁴ Greenblatt, *Norton Anthology*, p. 1361.

his successor firmly believed in the traditional notion of divine, hereditary kingship,⁵ and society had to be categorically divided into hierarchical scales and standardized to be better controlled. Furthermore, since religion was the basis of the socio-political order, it was necessary to the king of that time, Charles I, that all his subjects belong to a single church.⁶ The sovereign, therefore, had to convene a Parliament (previously dissolved in 1629) to request approval to raise an army to be led to the Scottish and Irish front, so as to appease the riots and try to spread Anglicanism. But the Parliament – which had already been developing a sense of independence since the 1620s – responded by criticizing the work of Charles I. So, the royalists clashed with the parliamentarians/republicans. After a period of negotiations and conspiracies, the king’s army was definitively defeated, and in 1649 Charles I was condemned for high treason together with the Presbyterians, which made a secret agreement with the King to the full restoration of the crown’s powers. Following the king’s assassination, executive power devolved upon a “Lord Protector”: Oliver Cromwell, leader of the parliamentarians. For the first time, the principle of divine right was questioned, and it was finally possible to speak of popular sovereignty. Cromwell established a new Parliament, consisting of Levellers, Diggers, and Millenarians, and Milton was appointed Latin secretary to the Commonwealth government.

John Milton always believed he was destined to serve his language and his country as a poet. His vast culture and knowledge of various languages – both modern and ancient – led him to work for Cromwell, but he had already begun to make several political interventions, thus demonstrating considerable courage and independence of thought. His main themes were divorce, the new science, freedom of the press, education, religious liberty and tolerance, regicide, church government, meritocracy,

⁵Loewenstein, David, “Rethinking Political Theology in Milton: *De Doctrina Christiana* and the Colloquy in Heaven in *Paradise Lost*”, *Journal for Early Modern Studies*, 18 (2018), p. 50.

⁶Greenblatt, *Norton Anthology*, p. 1345.

and republicanism.⁷ In such an era, many of these topics were considered rather bold and heterodox, if not heretical. Some works were published posthumously, others escaped censorship, but at one point, Milton was imprisoned for a short time after the coronation of Charles II. Nevertheless, he continued to fight for his ideas until his death – not even blindness stopped him from composing his treatises and poems.

As for his political orientation, Milton opposed any kind of hierarchy, insisting instead on meritocracy. For him, power had to belong to the people, and it was not a divine right as King James I and Charles I claimed:⁸ like all mortals, kings are sinners, descended from the same common and ancient parents. Although the 1534 Act of Supremacy had united the powers of the Church with those of the Crown, the poet wrote that the interests of the monarchy were incompatible with those of the Christian religion.⁹ It is the people who should decide to whom to delegate power, and a sovereign who assumes the right to rule alone is a tyrant who follows his own interests. Milton was therefore on the side of republicans (against the absolutism of kings), but actually, he was never comfortable with any kind of human rule.¹⁰

Like others in the tradition of Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli, Milton believed that different forms of government (e.g., monarchy, democracy, aristocracy) must conform to the nature of the people, and that people should have the government they deserved and were fit for.¹¹ Indeed, one of the reasons why the Commonwealth did not last long could be the mental backwardness of English society: Cromwell's army had fought to achieve a freedom that his countrymen, too deeply rooted in tradition, feared because for them it was still an inconceivable concept.¹² Another reason why the

⁷ Greenblatt, *Norton Anthology*, pp. 1897, 1899.

⁸ Greenblatt, *Norton Anthology*, p. 1342.

⁹ Wolfe, Don M., "Milton's Conception of the Ruler", *Studies in Philology*, 33 (1936), p. 255.

¹⁰ Fowler, pp. 42-43.

¹¹ Lewalski, Barbara Kiefer, "Paradise Lost and Milton's Politics", *Milton's Studies*, 38 (2000), p. 142.

¹² Wolfe, p. 259.

republic did not work was Oliver Cromwell himself, who in 1653 dissolved Parliament and started a dictatorial policy, where he abolished the established church, introduced censorship of the press, and assumed kingly dignities – as if he desired the return of kingship.¹³ Furthermore, there was yet no institutionally sanctioned method of transferring power upon Cromwell’s death in 1658,¹⁴ and Oliver’s son, Richard, proved unable to replace the father. Thus, although Milton wanted a republic, he ultimately had to acknowledge that Cromwell’s government was a partial failure.¹⁵

Nevertheless, we can say that Milton’s ideas were revolutionary for his time. Probably the England of 1600, a nation too tied to tradition and religion, was still too immature even to hear such modern and advanced opinions for those times. Through his treatises (e.g., *De Doctrina Christiana*, *The Tenure of King and Magistrates*, *Areopagitica*, *Defensio Secunda*, *Of Education*, *Eikonoklastes*, *On the Late Massacre in Piedmont*, and many others), we know for sure that the poet based himself on real events to express his thoughts and convey a message to society, and probably did so also with *Paradise Lost*, albeit in a more oblique manner.¹⁶ In section §1.3.2 I will analyse more closely some passages concerning the republic-monarchy dichotomy and other implications present in this epic poem.

1.2.2 Relationship with religion

Even with religious beliefs, Milton had some disagreements. His identification with more than one confession is very complicated, and many problems arose especially towards the institutions. According to the writer, religious authorities of his time interfered with the freedoms of the people, such as the free profession of religion, or the

¹³ Wolfe, p. 266.

¹⁴ Greenblatt, *Norton Anthology*, p. 1342.

¹⁵ Wolfe, p. 267.

¹⁶ Loewenstein, David, “Writing Epic in the Aftermath of Civil War: *Paradise Lost*, the *Aeneid*, and the Politics of Contemporary History”, *Milton Studies*, 59 (2017), p. 166.

freedom of thought and expression. These rights are just some of the many that Milton fought for all his life, and it did not matter if it meant fighting alone against these powers. If each person is their own guide in the interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures, people do not need intermediaries who impose their own worldview and rituals: it would be a violation of personal freedom.¹⁷ This theme will be very important also in the *His Dark Materials* saga, where the Church – the supreme earthly authority – controls every natural impulse and positive feeling.

John Milton was born to a noble and cultured Protestant family, in an environment where religious tensions were the order of the day. As mentioned earlier, in seventeenth century England different religious groups felt constantly threatened by other faiths and by the authorities. This was probably the main reason that prompted the author to devote himself to raising awareness in the population and institutions on religious tolerance. Milton went to university (where he had profound disappointments in terms of education) with the serious intention of taking orders in the Church of England, but immediately became disenchanted with the lack of reformation in the church.¹⁸ Over time, his Puritan inclinations became increasingly entrenched and led him to dislike the hierarchy of the established church and its insistence on the uniformity of worship.¹⁹ Thus, the poet found himself fighting the corruption of religious institutions.

After his fifteen-month “grand tour”, Milton returned to England to open a school, but he was soon involved in Presbyterian efforts to depose the bishops and reform church liturgy. He wrote five “antiprelatical tracts”²⁰ where he points out the resemblances between the ecclesiastical and political hierarchies. During the Second

¹⁷ Miller, Timothy C., “Milton’s Religion of the Spirit and ‘the State of the Church’ in Book XII of *Paradise Lost*”, *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture*, 13 (1989), pp. 10, 12.

¹⁸ Greenblatt, *Norton Anthology*, p. 1898.

¹⁹ Greenblatt, *Norton Anthology*, p. 1899.

²⁰ Greenblatt, *Norton Anthology*, p. 1899.

Civil War, however, the Presbyterians made a secret agreement with King Charles I because they were in favour of the full restoration of the powers of the crown: this disappointed Milton, who from that moment on detached himself from established religion of all kinds. He became more independent arguing for the primacy of the Scripture and the conscience of each believer as the guide to interpretation.²¹ In this regard, the most theological of Milton's texts is *De Doctrina Christiana*: this unfinished work reports his theological ideas, which seem to have been taken from both Protestant and Puritan thinkers, and speculates about morality, the subordination of the Son to God, and denies the Holy Trinity.

Despite Milton's efforts to break away from any kind of institution, many critics see this poet as a perfect Puritan, as indeed his works often demonstrate. Puritanism was a religious movement born between the sixteenth and the seventeenth century that sought to purify the reformed church promoted by Henry VIII and Elizabeth I of England.²² His followers were radicals: they opposed compromises between Catholicism and Protestantism, but their actions also extended to the reform of daily life, from the dress code to morality. This religious movement was one of the most persecuted during the first half of the sixteenth century, but they took part in the Civil War siding with Cromwell, thus contributing to the victory of the republicans. It was around the 1640s that Milton began to join this religion and share its theology.²³ The Calvinist religion was one of the major influences of Puritanism, which means one of its cornerstones was the doctrine of Predestination, according to which God has eternally chosen those whom he intends to save.²⁴ God would unquestionably be the supreme authority: the only One who can decide the fate of the Earth. According to Puritans, His

²¹ Loewenstein, David, "Rethinking Political Theology in Milton", p. 53.

²² The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Puritanism: Religion", <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Puritanism> (accessed January 29, 2023).

²³ Greenblatt, *Norton Anthology*, p. 1899.

²⁴ Fowler, pp. 177-178, n. 173-202.

power must be released from the political one which, due to the Act of Supremacy of 1534, was united with the crown. There is no divine authority of any kind on Earth (Puritans did not recognize the Pope), and they insisted on the simple and pure act of prayer to be absolved from original sin, because the relationship between the faithful and God must be direct and personal, without any kind of intermediation. A good Christian must be humble – without being corrupted by art and amusement – and obedient.²⁵

However, Milton never felt fully represented by any established religion, not even by Puritanism. The writer indeed shares many elements with that movement, but, in reality, Milton developed over the last thirty years of his life his own “political theology”, which seems to unsettle and reform – rather than legitimate – traditional concepts of political authority and sovereignty.²⁶ In fact, according to Alastair Fowler, Milton was against Predestination (“as in our will / To love or not; in this we stand or fall”, *PL*, V, 539-540), but closer to the doctrine of Arminianism: the poet’s God makes salvation depend on people’s will to avail themselves of grace, whereas Calvinists thought it impossible to contribute to one’s own salvation.²⁷ But perhaps the most important and heretical thing in his theology is the deconstruction of the essential unity of the Holy Trinity, crucial for Protestantism which is based on the word of the Bible (“For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one”, AKJV, 1 John 5:7²⁸). His anti-Trinitarian tendency is found above all in the dialogue in Heaven between the Father and the Son in Book III of *Paradise Lost*, but also in Book X when the Son descends to Eden to judge Adam and Eve (this passage will be analysed in more detail in section §1.3.3).

²⁵ Fowler, p. 314, n. 524-40.

²⁶ Loewenstein, “Rethinking Political Theology in Milton”, p. 35.

²⁷ Fowler, pp. 177-178, n. 173-202.

²⁸ Authorized King James Version, *The Bible*, 1 John (5:7). All quotations from the Bible are taken from the King James version, available on www.biblegateway.com. From now on, I will refer to it as AKJV.

Even in this case, Milton proved to be an independent mind by trying to build his own systematic theology.²⁹ His rebellious spirit was very critical of the monarchical regime, a characteristic that we can find both in the character of Satan and in Pullman's saga.

1.3 *Paradise Lost*

1.3.1 Sources

Paradise Lost is an epic poem in twelve books published between 1667 and 1674. The main figure is Satan: an angel cast out of Heaven for his boundless pride and ambition. Unable to accept any punishment or subordination, he embarks on a journey in search of God's new creature to corrupt it, thus taking revenge on the Father and rebuilding his personal kingdom in Eden.

Milton always believed he could make a difference through his poetry, his political contributions, and his activities among his countrymen. As a good republican in the service of a leader he respected at the time, the poet aimed to spread culture to give life to a patriotic sentiment throughout England. His epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, was first published in 1667, a few years after the Restoration of the monarchy and after his personal dramas. In the meantime, Milton may have had a chance to reconsider his principles and his trust in the wrong authorities (he was deceived by Cromwell too), and therefore to revise some passages of his work. He realized in the previous two decades that the same problems that afflicted his nation also afflicted the rest of humanity. So, instead of focusing on his story of King Arthur (an iconic character in English

²⁹ Loewenstein, "Rethinking Political Theology in Milton", p. 36.

culture),³⁰ he decided to explain our common human condition based on the events narrated in Genesis.

The primary source of *Paradise Lost* is therefore the Bible. The version of the Bible most used by the author was probably the one authorized by King James I in 1611, but the poet may well have used other versions, since for him languages were not an obstacle (the fact that he came into contact with several versions of the Bible may be a valid reason why Milton may interrogate some statements, such as that on the Trinity). Fowler states that Milton, as a good Protestant, preferred Greek and Latin literature as a reference point:³¹ not for nothing the models of epic poems on which he relied most were Homer and Virgil. But there is another model to which the poet initially referred, and it is Lucan's *Pharsalia*: a historical poem translated in English for the first time in the 1620s that was very popular among republicans.³² Despite how we know it now, *Paradise Lost* was only made of ten books at the time of its first edition: this is because Milton initially preferred to rely on an epic poem model that reflected his republican ideas – such as that of Lucan – rather than Virgil's celebration of the glorious empire of Augustus.³³ Contrary to this model, *Pharsalia* was associated with anti-monarchical politics, as it celebrated the resistance and the defeat of the Roman republic against the tyrant Caesar. In short, in the seventeenth century, Royalists clung to Virgil and Homer's works, while Parliamentarians, Republicans and supporters of the Protectorate made Lucan's *Pharsalia* their sacred book. For his first edition, Milton not only decided to adopt Lucan's model of ten books, but also made the final decision to abandon rhyme, since it became a predominant element for heroic poems and dramas in the

³⁰ Greenblatt, *Norton Anthology*, p. 1897.

³¹ Fowler, p. 11.

³² Loewenstein, "Writing Epic in the Aftermath of Civil War", pp. 169-170.

³³ Lewalski, p. 146.

Restoration court.³⁴ He used instead the formal element of blank verse, which gave him more freedom. Milton rejected the epic tradition where brave heroes and bloody wars were the protagonists and chose instead to tell the story of our first parents who will yield to temptation, and of a rebel who will try to usurp the throne of the only true Kingdom.

Eventually, Milton rearranged his poem into twelve books in the final edition, in 1674, in which he added Michael's visions of the episodes taken from the book of Genesis, Exodus, and Revelation. It is probable that at some point, the writer finally wanted to reclaim the central epic tradition for his better subject and nobler heroism, at the time when royalist Virgilianism was no longer such an issue.³⁵ Based on this information, it would therefore seem that even Milton's formal choices and sources were conditioned by the political and social context of his time: the writer always maintained his ideas by trying to detach himself from tradition, and he did so by obliquely conflating the historical events with biblical-mythological ones.

1.3.2 Political theology

One of the central themes of Milton's political theology in *Paradise Lost* is therefore his analysis of the monarchy-republic dichotomy. At first, it may be misleading to speak of "republic", as this term is never explicitly mentioned in *Paradise Lost*, but there are instead two monarchies with two very different rulers: God and Satan. I will then analyse in this section the regimes of both sides, and finally try to explain how the construction of a republic is the only possible solution for the inhabitants of the Earth.

³⁴ Lewalski, p. 146.

³⁵ Lewalski, p. 146.

The government in Heaven is a (good) absolute monarchy, but in this case, the ruler – God – is sustained by His perfection. He is the supreme and undisputed Authority, and there is none equal to Him in power, neither Christ nor Satan (“For none I know / Second to me or like, equal much less”, *PL*, VIII, 406-407). There are good hierarchies, in which lesser angels place themselves under control, resting content in intelligent obedience. None of the angels elected God as their leader, but His spiritual superiority is evident, and all agree to be subordinated to the wiser and more virtuous Being.³⁶ Indeed, not much is revealed about the angels’ recognition of their authority: when the archangel Raphael begins to tell to Adam and Eve the origin of the revolt in Heaven, not much leaks about the origin of the angels and of the Empyrean. This absence of texture can be justified by the fact that not all knowledge of the heavenly facts is destined for the human ear (*PL*, V, 503-505, 570-573), both because we would not be able to understand, and because the matters of God are forbidden to us. When Satan is challenged by Abdiel before the beginning of the War in Heaven, the Devil provokes his faith in the Father by asking him if he remembers that God created him, and he goes on to say that none of the angels have concrete proof that He is the Creator of all. They are all sons of the same heaven, equal in form and power.

“That we were formed then sayst thou? *And the work
Of secondary hands, by task transferred
From Father to his Son? Strange point and new!
Doctrine which we would know whence learned: who saw
When this creation was? Rememberst thou
Thy making, while the maker gave thee being?
We know no time when we were not as now;
Know none before us, self-begot, self-raised
By our own quickening power, when fatal course
Had circled his full orb, the birth mature
Of this our native heaven, ethereal sons.
Our puissance is our own, our own right hand
Shall teach us highest deeds, by proof to try
Who is our equal: then thou shalt behold
Whether by supplication we intend*

³⁶ Wolfe, p. 269.

Address, and to begirt the almighty throne
Beseeching or besieging.”

(*PL*, V, 853-869)

Satan questions that the universe was created by God and that Christ contributed to the project. This argument raised by the Devil is a crucial point, as it is for him one of the reasons to rebel against the complete subordination required in Heaven and to take the place of God, but it is also fundamental as it will be one of the starting points in the elaboration of the fight against the Authority in *His Dark Materials*. It was humiliating enough for Satan that he did not have the same powers as the Father, and knowing later that part of His functions were transferred to the Messiah and not to him was the spark to trigger his revolt. The Devil denied his own creation and claims to have “created himself”: he failed in “self-knowledge” by arrogating to himself the power of God.³⁷

This is Satan’s “stated” motivation for leading a rebellion against God, His Son, and the circle of good angels. The war in Heaven is told to us through Raphael’s memories and point of view, so the information we have may not be complete or entirely true (it seems that even angels are at risk of misunderstanding, as they are spectators attempting to understand the events that happen around them.³⁸ I will better analyse angels in section §1.3.3). Anyway, what we know is that the Devil felt envy towards the Son, to whom God delegated many of his powers and responsibilities, and subsequently made a propaganda speech to his companions while they were sleeping, inciting them to take up arms and fight tyranny as if they were one body (*PL*, V, 673-693). The war in Heaven is described in two ways: the first recalls a typical duel of the ancient Greek classical poems³⁹ (the fight between Abdiel and Satan is associated with that of Hector and Achilles); the second way is a simple and confused mass of

³⁷ Fowler, pp. 335-336, n. 855, 860, 861-2, 864-5.

³⁸ Fallon, Samuel, “Milton’s Strange God: Theology and Narrative Form in *Paradise Lost*”, *ELH*, 79 (2012), p. 49.

³⁹ Smith, Nigel, “*Paradise Lost* from Civil War to Restoration”, in Neil Howard Keeble, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Writing of the English Revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 255.

indistinguishable fights, perhaps to indicate some sort of mockery or to make it hard to understand for readers.⁴⁰ It is not a simple coincidence that Milton wrote about a civil war in Heaven when he experienced one in real life. In both these wars, in fact, one side wants to depose the king in favour of a republic, but the difference is that in the poem the rebellion is against the only true King, while on earth there is a revolt against a man who assumes a divine title. It is also curious that even in heaven, fallen angels use artillery to fight, so trying to undo the chivalry and heroism of cherubs. Firearms recall the modernity of warfare, a fairly explicit reference not only to the English Civil Wars, but also to the Thirty Years' War in Europe. But Milton was anti-modernist, and in fact, God / Christ still manages to overwhelm the rebels using his lightning bolts (*PL*, VI, 470-495, 710-718).⁴¹

Satan, therefore, rebelled against a hierarchy that for him was only apparently perfect, and then proclaimed himself leader in Hell. However, his government is an example of (bad) absolute monarchy, although at first glance it may not seem so. In Book II, the Devil sets up an assembly at Pandæmonium where the fallen angels consult to plan a vengeance, but actually, this council is nothing but a simple advisory body for the ruler, and not an independent legislature.⁴² Pandæmonium does not correspond to the actual English Parliament: the utterances of Moloch, Belial, Mammon, and Beëlzebub are not merely individual contributions to a debate, but “a train of thought which passes through the mind of Satan”.⁴³ In short, this consultation is a surrogate for a Parliament, whose function is to support only the decisions of the monarch, just as Charles I wanted it to be before the outbreak of civil wars. Instead, we can state that Pandæmonium evokes more the House of Lords controlled by a monarch, rather than

⁴⁰ Smith, p. 256.

⁴¹ Fowler, pp. 362-363, n. 484-90, 486-91.

⁴² Lewalski, p. 153.

⁴³ Rudrum, Alan, *A Critical Commentary on Milton's Paradise Lost*, London: Macmillan, 1966, pp. 23-24.

the republican House of Commons.⁴⁴ In summary, the difference between the monarchy of God and that of the Devil is that in Heaven the Father rules by relying on voluntary obedience and submission, while in Hell Satan rules by his own ambition and by relying on his persuasion skills. According to Fowler, the figure of Satan could depict both King Charles I (and other Stuart sovereigns) and the Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell, as he was assuming more and more tyrannical tendencies in the 1650s.⁴⁵

In this way, as noted above, we cannot speak of a republic: that of Satan is nothing but a monarchy where he is the sole leader, and his companions are inferior to him and exist only to support his choices. In fact, also in this case nobody elected Satan as their head, but he himself “Established in a safe unenvied throne / Yielded with full consent” (*PL*, II, 23-24). He relied on the principle that a society’s passive acceptance establishes a binding social contract. The Devil resembles a Machiavellian prince who seeks to secure his throne by manipulating his fellows through his twisted rhetoric.⁴⁶ During the consultation at Pandæmonium, Satan is exalted “by merit raised” (*PL*, II, 5) and persuades his followers to pursue their goal by first appealing to his new “democracy”, like a smart politician. That empty and fiery abyss is not an end for them, but a new beginning: a place of real freedom. So, the Devil forces his peers into submission and blames all sins on God: the enemy of free will. Satan volunteers to seduce and corrupt the new creature or possess it for his own gain, thus demonstrating to the angels – and to the omniscient Father – that he is not inferior to Christ but, if he wishes, he can be as strong as the Creator (“in the shape / Of difficulty or danger could deter / Me from attempting. Wherefore do I assume / These royalties, and not refuse to reign”, *PL*, II, 448-451).

⁴⁴ Lewalski, p. 152.

⁴⁵ Fowler, p. 42.

⁴⁶ Lewalski, p. 153

Another feature that highlights even more the political theology present in *Paradise Lost* is the presence of terminology relating to monarchy, kingship, and imperialism.⁴⁷ These terms stand out above all in the first two books of the epic poem: this is because the fallen angels appear to be republicans in the eyes of readers, so the contrast with these kingly terms could leave readers a sense of perplexity. At this point, however, we can state that the government of Satan is not properly democratic, but only a perversion of libertarian principles,⁴⁸ and therefore we could consider it a monarchical regime like those on Earth. Book I is set immediately after the failed rebellion in Heaven and the subsequent fall of all rebels down to Hell. After a moment of astonishment, Satan wakes up and speaks with resentment referring to the Father using words like “throne” (*PL*, I, 103-105), “empire” (*PL*, I, 114), and “tyranny” (“and in the excess of joy / Sole reigning holds the tyranny of heaven”, *PL*, I, 123-124), while Beëlzebub refers to him as “O Prince, O chief of many throned compeer” (*PL*, I, 128). Examples of this type are innumerable and are both used by Satan and his companions, and by the narrator to refer negatively to Satan (“High on a throne of royal state, [...] / Satan exalted sat, by merit raised / To that bad eminence”, *PL*, II, 1, 5-6) and positively to God (“From the pure empyrean where he sits / High throned above all height”, *PL*, III, 57-58). The use of this terminology therefore serves to reinforce the evil of the Devil’s kingship,⁴⁹ as when Death – Satan’s son by incestuous intercourse with his daughter Sin – is described wearing a “kingly crown” on his head (*PL*, II, 673). From this point of view, Milton seems to condemn once again those monarchist tendencies aimed at limiting freedoms and mobility, and challenges readers to find analogies between the Kingdom of Satan and that of the Stuart dynasties.

⁴⁷ Smith, p. 260.

⁴⁸ Smith, p. 254.

⁴⁹ Lewalski, p. 152.

Anyway, the kingdom of the Almighty cannot be imitated in any way on Earth or anywhere else. Milton insists that God's preferred government for humans is the republic:⁵⁰ people who try to copy His regime are trying to prove themselves superior to their fellows, but in reality, they are breaking the will of the Lord, who made all mankind equal ("He gave us only over beast, fish, fowl, / Dominion absolute [...] / but man over men / He made not lord; such title to himself / Reserving, human left from human free", *PL*, XII, 67-71). Only He can exercise dominion over humans and angels. Satan – like earthly kings – is an imitator of God ("and in my choice / To reign is worth ambition though in hell: / Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven", *PL*, I, 261-263), and all imitators of God are tyrants.⁵¹ Therefore, Milton argues that a monarchy can only be good if there is a spontaneous and conscious submission of the people to a governor: something that rarely – if ever – happens. Otherwise, people must have the right and the possibility to depose the ruler.

The building of a republic, in which society is equal in rights and duties, is the only solution for human beings. Milton fought for a world where there could be tolerance, freedom, equality, and education. His Satan has the function to raise awareness of the status of the society, and thus to push people to take over the power that should belong to them. Not surprisingly, even Philip Pullman in *His Dark Materials* insists in the choice of a republic rather than a kingdom.

1.3.3 Theology

As we saw in section §1.2.2, from the theological point of view – as from the political one – Milton demonstrated throughout his life that he had thoughts independent of any institution or authority. It is true that the events of *Paradise Lost*

⁵⁰ Lewalski, p. 150.

⁵¹ Lewalski, p. 151.

were mainly inspired by Genesis, and that the Bible is the Holy Scripture of which every believer should take strict account; however, there are elements that Milton may have interpreted in his own way during the writing of his epic poem. Before we start talking about Philip Pullman's saga, I would like to analyse the representations of three different figures of *Paradise Lost*: God, the angels, and the Church. In *His Dark Materials*, these elements are in a sense three different manifestations of the power of the Authority, portrayed in this saga as a negative influence on the lives of people. In Pullman's saga, the figure of God and that of Satan seem to merge with each other, where the evil part prevails over the good one, exerting tyranny on earth. So, before delving into this topic, it is first necessary to understand the representations and dynamics of these figures in *Paradise Lost*, in order to compare them with those of *His Dark Materials*.

The first image that I will then analyse is the representation of the figure of the Almighty. We meet Him for the first time in Book III of the epic poem, seated on the throne of the Empyrean, surrounded by clouds, and emitting a radiant divine light. On His right sits His only Son; around Them, the seraphs and cherubs which "stand thick as stars" (*PL*, III, 61). According to the Bible, God is the One who created the universe, the Sun, the planets, and the Earth out of Chaos. He has absolute power over time, space, and matter, and He has the power of foreseeing every dimension of Creation. A concept that is both fundamental and contradictory – both in the Bible and in *Paradise Lost* – is the relationship between God's foreknowledge and man's freedom. This is because – it is explained directly by the Father himself – in foreknowing all events the Almighty did not cause them: He created mankind free to fall, already knowing that this

would happen.⁵² When in Book III God observes Satan who is crossing Hell's boundaries to reach and corrupt the new world created for humans, He manifests a sense of resignation. He was not physically present during the consultation at Pandæmonium which took place in the first two books, but He is already aware of the plan of the devils. Not only that, He also already knows that Satan's plan will succeed, and that Adam and Eve will disobey Him.

“[...] so will fall,
 He and his faithless progeny: *whose fault?*
Whose but his own? Ingrate, he had of me
 All he could have; I made him just and right,
 Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.
 [...] *what proof could they have given sincere*
Of true allegiance, constant faith or love?
 [...] *What pleasure I from such obedience paid,*
 When will and reason (reason also is choice)
 Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled,
 Made passive both, [...]
 So were created, nor can justly accuse
 Their maker, or their making, or their fate;
As if predestination overruled
Their will, disposed by absolute decree
 Or high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed
 Their own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,
Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault, [...]
I formed them free, and free they must remain”.

(*PL*, III, 95-124)

Adam and Eve will transgress His “sole command” (*PL*, III, 94) by eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. In this excerpt, God reiterates that the fault is not His because He created humankind free. He could have made people more obedient, but He would have felt no satisfaction in seeing them so passive. Instead, the Father prefers humans to submit to Him of their own accord, confessing their sins and dedicating their entire life to worshipping the Almighty. Milton thought God's greatest gift to human beings was reason and the freedom of choice: it would have been illogical to make mankind free to choose and at the same time not free to make wrong choices. A person incapable of making mistakes would have been a person incapable of significant

⁵² Elledge, Scott, “Background Notes on Certain Important Concepts and Topics in *Paradise Lost*” (Angels), in Milton, John, *Paradise Lost: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*, edited by Scott Elledge, New York: W.W. Norton, 1975, p. 396.

decisions, of enjoying a sense of achievement, and incapable of fully loving God and His creations.⁵³ Furthermore, if mankind had not been given free will, the decision to disobey Him would have meant that the Lord himself caused disobedience: if this were the case, God could be seen as a tyrant, causing mankind to fall, and then punishing them for something that was not their own choice.⁵⁴ Critics might still wonder if a good God would really allow Satan to rebel, or Christ to suffer, or Adam and Eve to fall into misery,⁵⁵ but the possibility of disobedience and the subsequent Fall was meant to show the importance of the Lord's gift of free will to humankind.⁵⁶

Thus, Milton expresses his anti-Calvinist idea on Predestination: the poet's God makes salvation depend on people's will to avail themselves of grace, whereas Calvinists thought it impossible to contribute to one's salvation,⁵⁷ because the Almighty decided from the beginning which individuals would be saved or damned. Even in the last two books we are told that salvation was given to us through Christ's sacrifice: for the author, the gift of eternal life is free and can be refused. Only the will of men and women through their faith can answer God's call. This is interesting because it shows us the difference between the beliefs of the Puritans – with which Milton is affiliated – and what Milton himself describes in his work. In Book XII, after Michael informed Adam of the consequences of his choices in the future, the couple leaves Eden with a sense of hope for the future of humanity (“Her [Eve's] seed shall bruise thy [the serpent's] head”, *PL*, X, 181), and they will try for the rest of their lives to redeem themselves from the sins committed. It is only by loving God consciously that eternal life may be achieved.

⁵³ Elledge, “Background Notes” (Angels), p. 396.

⁵⁴ Robinson, p. 9.

⁵⁵ Elledge, “Background Notes” (Angels), p. 396.

⁵⁶ Robinson, p. 10.

⁵⁷ Fowler, pp. 177-178, n. 173-202.

“Greatly instructed I shall hence depart,
Greatly in peace of thought, and have my fill
Of knowledge, [...] *I learn that to obey is best,*
And love with fear the only God, to walk
As in his presence, ever to observe
His providence, *and on him sole depend,*
Merciful over all his works, with good
Still overcoming evil [...]”.

(*PL*, XII, 557-566)

Free will is also negatively exemplified by Satan:⁵⁸ since the Father created His Son to whom He delegated many of His powers and responsibilities, the Devil felt envy towards him. He then exploited his freedom, guided by his ambition and pride, to try to obtain the same powers as the Son and overthrow the Kingdom of the Lord. He rebelled against what was a perfect and blissful seat, where equality was assured, and was punished with exile from Heaven along with his fellows (“him who disobeys / Me disobeys, breaks union, and that day / Cast out from God and blessed vision, falls / Into utter darkness, deep engulfed, his place / Ordained without redemption, without end”, *PL*, V, 611-615). But still, Satan did not give up even after he was sent to Hell: amid darkness and wild flames, he plotted vengeance against his Father and set out for Eden without encountering any obstacles. God, meanwhile, watched him and did nothing to stop him, and he did not intervene even when in Book IX he tempted Eve under the guise of a serpent. At that moment, both Satan and Eve were aware that they were abusing their freedom, and they probably knew that they could not get away with it either. Satan was aware of the Father’s omniscience, but he was too proud to back down, just as Adam and Eve knew they cannot escape Judgement (“they themselves ordained their fall. / The first sort by their own suggestion fell, / Self-tempted, self-depraved: man falls deceived / By the other first: man therefore shall find grace, / The other none”, *PL*, III, 128-132).

⁵⁸ Smith, p. 255.

If we look carefully, we can see that God rarely appears in the poem. Such reluctance to represent the Lord seemed to be typical of early modern narrative poems, particularly of those written under the wide and deep influence of Protestant theology.⁵⁹ In the case of *Paradise Lost*, at the beginning of Book III, Milton invokes the help of the “holy light” (*PL*, III, 1) to be able to describe the divine and blissful seat of the Almighty, but he is unable (or unwilling) to present the Father in detail. When God appears, He is represented as too bright or obscured by clouds to be seen and described, and most of the time – except for Books III, X, and XI – He is present only in the memories of the archangels Raphael and Michael. Descriptions of the Lord – if any – are short and fragmented and can be found only through the praises of the angels (even if what we find are adjectives concerning the uniqueness of His powers, and not those physical, *PL*, III, 372-382).⁶⁰ But what is important in this poem is that even more rarely do we see God directly performing some deeds that give a turn to the plot, because they are actually accomplished by His Son. To give an example, in the Bible the Judgement of the transgression of God’s prohibition of the forbidden fruit is pronounced directly by the Father in the Garden of Eden (“And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden [...]: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees”, AKJV, Genesis 3:8). However, in *Paradise Lost*, the Almighty asks His Viceregent Son to descend to Eden to pronounce the Judgement on Adam and Eve.

“But whom send I to judge them? *Whom but thee
 Viceregent Son, to thee I have transferred
 All judgement, whether in heaven, or earth, or hell.*
 Easy it may be seen that I intend
 Mercy colleague with justice, sending thee
*Man’s friend, his mediator, his designed
 Both ransom and redeemer voluntary,
 And destined man himself to judge man fallen”.*

(*PL*, X, 55-62)

⁵⁹ Fallon, p. 34.

⁶⁰ Fallon, p. 40.

In this extract, God immediately asks from his heavenly throne who to send down to Paradise to judge the earthly couple, thus excluding himself completely from the task. It seems to be taken for granted that this is a work for the Son, who accepts to fulfil the will of the Father. He then descends into Eden, but in later lines Christ is identified as “God”, and not as the “Son” (“he from wrath more cool / Came the mild judge and intercessor both / To sentence man: the voice of *God* they heard / Now walking in the garden”, *PL*, X, 95-98). According to Milton, when Christ administers righteousness on earth, he takes the place of the Father and assumes a divine title upon himself.⁶¹ As mentioned in section §1.2.2, Milton aggressively deconstructs the concept of the Holy Trinity: the Son and the Father are represented as distinct characters.⁶² God is unquestionably the Authority, but in *Paradise Lost* He delegates many of His powers and responsibilities to the Son, making the Father even more hidden from the eyes of the readers. Christ is therefore the mediator, the word, and the actor of the will of the Almighty, but he will never be equal to his Father. In conclusion, God is a rather absent and indispensable figure in Milton’s poem. For this writer, the Lord must remain quite a taboo, a taboo that – as we will see – Pullman has no problem breaking or even belittling.

The second image I wanted to analyse in this section are angels, as Satan himself was an angel of the highest rank in Heaven (“Satan, so call him now, his former name / Is heard no more in heaven; he of the first, / If not the first archangel, great in power, / In favour and pre-eminence”, *PL*, V, 658-661). Between the angels in Milton’s poem and those in Pullman’s saga there are differences in materiality and representation. In *His Dark Materials* there is no true figure of God, but only angels, of which one managed to succeed in conquering the heavenly throne, thus proclaiming himself the

⁶¹ Fowler, p. 545, n. 101.

⁶² Loewenstein, “Rethinking Political Theology in Milton”, p. 44.

only Authority. In a sense, Pullman's saga tells what would have happened if Milton's Satan had succeeded in winning and becoming the absolute King.

In *Paradise Lost* we do not know how angels were created (Satan affirms this during the discussion with Abdiel at the end of Book V, lines 853-869⁶³), but they already existed before the creation of Adam. According to the scale of nature, these creatures are inferior to God and superior to human beings. Angels appear as they are described in the Bible: shining, beautiful, winged, and endowed with intellect and will. They also have bodies, even if they are not made of flesh, but of the "fifth element" (ether), and in this way angels can assume either sex and any size or shape.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, we are told by Raphael that they can eat, make love, and enjoy all the sensations of the five senses, in addition to the fact that they are immortals and cannot be hurt (even if Satan was wounded by Michael during the War of Heaven). Angels are more perfect than humans but, unlike God, they are not omniscient, and their intelligence is similar to that of humans: they can therefore only tell what they see, but they do not possess absolute truth. In Milton's epic poem – as in Pullman's saga – there are two hosts of angels: the rebellious ones and those faithful to God. They therefore have free will, and for this reason they can make mistakes and misinterpret events like human beings.⁶⁵ It was precisely because of Satan's misunderstanding of equality in Heaven that he induced the angels to rebel. Furthermore, at the end of Book III, the archangel Uriel – the guardian of Eden's gates – is easily deceived by the Devil, who turns himself into a cherub and thus managed to enter Paradise. Not only that, but Eve is also deceived by Satan's transformations (in the narrative arc he is a wolf, a cormorant, a lion, a toad, a serpent, etc.). Every angel can be therefore manipulated, as well as

⁶³ These lines have already been quoted in section §1.3.2.

⁶⁴ Elledge, "Background Notes" (Angels), p. 394.

⁶⁵ Fallon, p. 49.

human beings (“For neither man nor angel can discern / Hypocrisy, the only evil that walks / Invisible, except to God alone, / By his permissive will”, *PL*, III, 682-685).

However, the hierarchy of nature is not fixed: mobility is possible, and a creature can ascend or descend by merit. Adam is told by Raphael in Book V that if he and his wife remain obedient and live under the conditions of the Lord, they may one day become angels and dwell in Heaven. This was probably God’s idea to fill the places in Heaven left vacant by the fallen angels (*PL*, VII, 186-191).⁶⁶

“Your bodies may at last turn all to spirit,
Improved by tract of time, *and winged ascend*
Ethereal, as we, or may at choice
Here or in heavenly paradises dwell;
If ye be found obedient, and retain
Unalterably firm his love entire
Whose progeny you are”.

(*PL*, V, 497-503)

As we know, Adam and Eve lose their chance to ascend to Heaven after the Fall, but they still decide to dedicate the rest of their lives to worshipping the Creator, teaching their progeny to do the same. Only after Christ’s sacrifice, however, will sin and death be vanquished, and people will dwell among the angels and God. This is what Milton wanted to demonstrate in his poem: if we devote our lives to worship the Lord, we might obtain eternal life. The transformation of humans into angels is also possible in *His Dark Materials*. We have a couple of examples there, but the most important is Metatron: the same usurping angel who was once a man known as Enoch, and whom after his death the Authority took to his Kingdom (*AS*, p. 399).

The third and last image I want to focus on is the Church and religious institutions. In *His Dark Materials*, ecclesiastical institutions – known as the Magisterium – are those that hold absolute power and dominion on Earth. They are the arm of Authority operating directly on the political and cultural arrangements of the mortal world. The Magisterium controls all knowledge, lifestyle, impulse and positive

⁶⁶ Carver, P.L., “The Angels in *Paradise Lost*”, *Review of English Studies*, 16 (1940), p. 419.

feeling, but this is not enough. In this fantasy saga, the Church aims at the very control of minds, in order to better submit people to its rule under the pretext of God. Pullman's is, without doubt, a denunciation against those religions that limit the freedom of human beings to idolize an abstract deity. Although Pullman's message is slightly different from that of Milton, the seventeenth-century poet also deals with the corruption of the Church in Book XII of his epic poem.

After the natural upheavals, Christ's Judgement for Adam, Eve, and the serpent for their disobedience, and the irruption of Sin and Death in our world, the archangel Michael is sent down to reveal to Adam God's intentions for the future of mankind. His tales disclose the whole "scheme of salvation" implied in Christian dogma, which will be the main topic of the rest of the poem.⁶⁷ Milton's intent in these last two books is to ensure that our first parents leave Paradise aware of their actions and their consequences, with the hope and faith that one day "[woman's seed] shall bruise [the serpent's] head" (AKJV, Genesis 3:15). So, Adam is taken to the top of a hill, and the archangel purifies his eyes so that he can see how his choices will affect the history of humankind. In these visions we can see various biblical episodes (concerning the books of Exodus and Leviticus), but in the end Michael warns Adam of those who profess the Word of God for their personal ends.

"[...] but in their room, as they forewarn,
Wolves shall succeed for teachers, grievous wolves,
Who all the sacred mysteries of heaven
To their own vile advantages shall turn
Of lucre and ambition, and the truth
With superstitions and traditions taint,
Left only in those written records pure,
Though not but by the Spirit understood.
Then shall they seek to avail themselves of names,
Places and titles, and *with these to join*
Secular power, though feigning still to act
By spiritual, *to themselves appropriating*
The Spirit of God, promised alike and giv'n

⁶⁷ Prince, Frank Templeton, "On the Last Two Books of *Paradise Lost*", in Costantinos Apostolos Patrides, ed., *Milton's Epic Poetry: Essays on Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, p. 235.

To all believers; *and from that pretence,
Spiritual laws by carnal power shall force
On every conscience [...]*”.

(*PL*, XII, 507-522)

As I said in previous sections, *Paradise Lost* is a poem that engages creatively and provocatively with the politics and religious conflicts of the recent past and contemporary history. Milton never refers to a specific monarchy or institution; he always remains vague, and his denunciations are very generalized.⁶⁸ Undoubtedly, in the lines above (507-522), the complaint is directed against everything that in the Church is not built on faith,⁶⁹ that is, all those who, under the pretext of the Spirit of God and his laws, exercise power to suppress every individuality. This passage leaves the reader with the idea that all earthly institutions compromise the truth, and that religious belief and practice cannot be imposed, for no earthly authority is above faith and conscience.⁷⁰ Fowler writes that “in Protestantism, the ultimate doctrinal arbiter was individual conscience, not authority”:⁷¹ this means that every person must be critical and careful not to fall into the trap of false churches which try to control minds and bodies. By “grievous wolves” (*PL*, XII, 508) Milton probably refers to the English clergy, but also to the metaphor used for Satan when in Book IV he jumps into the confines of Eden (“As when a prowling wolf, / Whom hunger drives to seek new haunt for prey, / [...] Leaps o’er the fence with ease into the fold”, *PL*, IV, 183-187). Church corruption is therefore associated with Satan and his hypocrisy: they both hide the truth and will persecute those who persist in worshipping the true faith, until the “day of respiration”⁷² (*PL*, XII, 539-540) comes. In the meantime, their followers will live blind and unaware of the vices of the institutions.

⁶⁸ Loewenstein, “Writing Epic in the Aftermath of Civil War”, pp. 166-168.

⁶⁹ Fowler, p. 670, n. 508-37.

⁷⁰ Miller, pp. 7-9, 12.

⁷¹ Fowler, p. 670, n. 511-22.

⁷² The Day of Judgement.

As Milton did in *De Doctrina Christiana* and in *Of Reformation*, also in the extract above he condemns the spiritual tyranny of religious institutions, which force human obedience and inhibit the faculty of personal opinions.⁷³ Milton's attack could very well demonstrate both the proud Puritan that this poet is (i.e., each person must be able to interpret God's Word for himself, without any institution as mediator), as well his maturation during the Commonwealth period,⁷⁴ after which he lost all trust in any authority, political or religious. John Milton is a very complex author: his adherence to Puritanism can be either total or hesitant, but what is certain is his reluctance to rely on those who assume power over unaware people and demand herd uniformity. Each of us must instead demonstrate that we are faithful to God, worshipping Him as we believe is best, but only through education can one understand the evils of the institutions that are in charge.⁷⁵

At this point, we conclude that the character of Satan in *Paradise Lost* represents the ideal figure for Milton to stage his fight against the tyranny of monarchies and institutions. But precisely because the Devil is the main hero of the epic poem, the author induces readers to beware of even hypocrisy, that is, of those sovereigns who, under their promises of peace and equality, take advantage to gain power and reign on their own. However, the figure of Satan is even more complex than I have described in this chapter. Anyway, the English writer Philip Pullman has been able to transpose the complexity of this character into his fantasy saga. I will now present this writer's attitude towards religion and how he represented Satan in *His Dark Materials*.

⁷³ Fowler, p. 670, n. 515-24.

⁷⁴ Miller, pp. 7-9.

⁷⁵ Lewalski, p. 142.

CHAPTER 2

Philip Pullman against the Kingdom of Heaven

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I presented the historical and political context of Milton's time, and I used it as a background for the study of the epic poem to see if the protagonist Satan had a central role in expressing a message against the tyranny of the monarchy. In this chapter, I will instead focus on the second subject of analysis of this thesis, namely *His Dark Materials*, which seems to draw readers to prefer a society of equality without impositions from above. To do so, I will first analyse the contemporary writer Philip Pullman and his relationship with religion and his literary sources before delving into the theological conception of *His Dark Materials*. This saga will be compared above all with Milton's work, since *Paradise Lost* was the primary source for Pullman, as he himself stated:

It started with my publisher, David Flickling. We had lunch together, and he said, "What would you like to write?". And then the devil entered into me, and I said, "Well, what I'd really like to write is *Paradise Lost* for teenagers in three volumes".¹

The religious setting in this fantasy trilogy is probably connected with Pullman's distrustful view of Christian theocracy.² Although Milton and Pullman use the same sources, the two writers go their separate ways and then convey surprisingly similar messages to readers. Before specifically analysing the Devil in the next chapter, I will now examine the worldbuilding of the trilogy and Pullman's theology in relation to the protagonist of this thesis.

¹ Nicholson, Catriona; Parsons, Wendy, "Talking to Philip Pullman: an Interview", *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 23 (1999), p. 126.

² Iannucci, Fiorella, "Philip Pullman, interview with Fiorella Iannucci", *Il Messaggero* (27 aprile 2007), p. 22.

2.2 Philip Pullman and *His Dark Materials*

2.2.1 Relationship with religion

Philip Pullman is one of the greatest writers for children of our time. He is known to the public especially for the *His Dark Materials* trilogy, which is composed of *The Golden Compass* (also known as *Northern Lights*, 1995), *The Subtle Knife* (1996), and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000). Despite positive reviews, the message conveyed by this trilogy was not well seen by some religious groups.

If Milton's identification with religion proved to be complex but consistent with his ideology, Pullman showed that he had no doubts about his religious orientation, although a deeper analysis of *His Dark Materials* will allow us to notice more details. Philip Pullman declared he is an atheist and "a passionate believer in the democracy of reading".³ The starting point for the elaboration of his most famous saga is the accusation against theocracy and all kinds of totalitarianism,⁴ especially the Christian one. This accusation emerges clearly throughout the trilogy, as shown in the second volume where Pullman condemns the Divine Authority and the Church that aim at the total "[suppression] and control of every natural impulse" (*SK*, p. 50)⁵ of every conscious being. Indeed, both Milton and Pullman denounce the abuse of power by the institutions that hold control, although the two writers approach the issue with completely different methods. In this section, I will analyse Pullman's attitude toward the Christian faith by looking at his statements and the figures in his fantasy saga.

The reason Pullman wanted to write an epic tale does not seem to be particularly related to contemporary challenges – as, instead, was essential for Milton. Anyway, in

³ Philip Pullman, "My Books", <https://www.philip-pullman.com/home> (accessed April 20, 2023).

⁴ Trisciuzzi, Maria Teresa, "La «Polvere Scintillante» della Conoscenza e il Conflitto tra Autorità e Libertà in Philip Pullman. Le Nuove Strade Fantasy della Letteratura per Ragazzi", *Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica*, 5 (2010), p. 11.

⁵ Pullman, Philip, *His Dark Materials (Book Two): The Subtle Knife*, New York: A Yearling Book, 2005, p. 50. This is the edition I use throughout. From now on, I will refer to it as *SK*. Italics are mine throughout.

His Dark Materials, there is extensive use of religious terminology and specific allusions to Christian institutions.⁶ The Church – better known as “Magisterium” (which is Latin for “teaching of the Word of God”⁷) – is already mentioned in the second chapter of *The Golden Compass*, and we immediately notice that those who work there are part of the Christian ecclesiastical offices, all strictly male: priests, friars, fathers, cardinals. But in Pullman’s saga every term related to Christianity has a strongly negative connotation:⁸ what makes *His Dark Materials* truly revolutionary is the manipulation of the role of God and the Church, which in the story appear as antagonists. Firstly, it is stated that God himself does not exist, that he was the first angel who began to condense out of Dust and lied to all those who came after him saying that he was their creator (*AS*, pp. 31-32). The Authority is such a controlling tyrant that he founded a “Limbo” to prevent people’s spirits from going to “Paradise”. And secondly, in the trilogy, there are several episodes of child abuse by the Consistorial Court of Discipline (an organ of Magisterium).

Nevertheless, within the saga there are many elements that recall the events of the Bible or that follow the structure of *Paradise Lost*, but many of them are reinterpreted with a more scientific reading than the Judeo-Christian culture (while still remaining within the genre of fantasy). The temptation of Adam and Eve and their subsequent Fall, the liberation of the spirits trapped in Limbo (the Land of the Dead), and the defeat of death and sin, all happen differently from how we are told by the Bible. But perhaps the most important change in this trilogy is the existence of Dust: a concept necessary to understand Pullman’s theology and the message he wanted to convey about equality. As I mentioned in the Foreword, Dust is an essential element in

⁶ Gooderham, David, “Fantasizing as It Is: Religious Language in Philip Pullman’s Trilogy, *His Dark Materials*”, *Children’s Literature*, 31 (2003), p. 156.

⁷ Akin, Jimmy, “Magisterium: The Teaching Authority Given by Christ to the Church”, <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/magisterium> (accessed April 28, 2023).

⁸ Gooderham, p. 159.

Pullman's saga because it gives us an alternative interpretation of God. It is explained at the end of *The Golden Compass* that the term comes from the Bible, more precisely from the episode of the Lord's punishment after the Fall in Genesis ("In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for *dust* thou art, and unto *dust* thou return", AKJV, Genesis 3:19; *GC*, p. 373⁹). Dust is an elementary particle that, if observed with the right instrumentation, is attracted to human beings and to every intellectually and sexually conscious being. Since it had little effect on children, the Magisterium and the Consistorial Court decided that Dust was the tangible and concrete proof of original sin, namely the testimony of Eve's disobedience that caused misery to humanity. In *The Subtle Knife*, scientist Mary Malone discovers that Dark Matter (another term for Dust) consists of particles of consciousness (*SK*, p. 88). When she can communicate with them, they reveal that they are the angels who rebelled against God, and that they are entirely made of Dust ("From what we are, spirit; from what we do, matter. Matter and spirit are one", *SK*, p. 249). At the beginning of the third volume, a couple of angels disclose to Will (the male protagonist of the story) that God himself is actually an angel made of Dust like everyone else. Again, in the same book, Mary Malone discovers that Dark Matter is gradually disappearing, and among the major causes, there is the Divine Authority that blocks in every way the flow of these particles. The task of Lyra and Will – the two young protagonists who play the role of the new Eve and Adam – is to restore the flow of Dust and continue to regenerate it, otherwise there can be no consciousness or knowledge. If the two children fail in their mission, the world will become an empty place, full of beings incapable of thinking or understanding themselves, and it would be the triumph of tyranny because no one could rebel against the power of God. It is not

⁹ Pullman, Philip, *His Dark Materials (Book One): The Golden Compass*, New York: A Yearling Book, 2005, p. 373. This is the edition I use throughout. From now on, I will refer to it as *GC*. Italics are mine throughout.

completely certain whether the Magisterium is aware that they are worshipping a usurping god or whether they are aware of his plans, but they are convinced that they are right. For them, Eve and the Dust are the scapegoat of all miseries and sins, a testimony of the fact that humans are dirty, a nullity in comparison to God.¹⁰ By eliminating Dust from the universe, the Magisterium can build a world without death and corruption. Their fanaticism will lead them to do experiments on children, and they will not scruple to try to brutally kill the new Eve: the eleven-year-old Lyra.

This brief excursus on Dust allows us to go deeper into Pullman's conception of God. Like Milton, in *His Dark Materials* the writer re-evaluates the consequences of the Fall: Dust is beautiful, divine, and good. It constitutes the soul, body, and spirit of every living being, and it also constitutes the whole structure of the universe. To elaborate these fictional particles, in fact, Pullman was not only inspired by the term from Genesis or by the sentence taken from *Paradise Lost* ("Unless the almighty maker them ordain / *His dark materials* to create more worlds", *PL*, II, 915-916), but also by the scientific notion of Dark Matter: a truly existing particle that constitutes a considerable part of the universe and that is present everywhere.¹¹ Starting from these premises, Dust is what makes us all equal, part of a larger scheme. If in *His Dark Materials* God is only a usurping angel, and all angels are made of Dust like mankind and everything else, it means that there is no great chain of beings, and everyone is infused with the divine.¹² With this interpretation, Pullman does not appear to be an atheist, but rather a panentheist.¹³

¹⁰ Freitas, Donna; King, Jason E., *Killing the Imposter God: Philip Pullman's Spiritual Imagination in His Dark Materials*, Hoboken: John Wiley, 2007, p. 23.

¹¹ Dihal, Kanta, "How Philip Pullman's Dark Literary Material Shed Light on Science and Religion", <https://theconversation.com/how-philip-pullmans-dark-literary-material-shed-light-on-science-and-religion-86238> (accessed May 14, 2023).

¹² Freitas, King, p. 32.

¹³ Tóth, Zsuzsanna, "Mirror-Images; or, Love as Religion in Philip Pullman's Trilogy, *His Dark Materials*", *Romanian Journal of English Studies*, 10 (2013), p. 292. A panentheist is "a person who believes that God encompasses and interpenetrates the universe but at the same time is greater than and

In this trilogy, God is not showed as an all-powerful entity who created man in his image (“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness”, AKJV, Genesis 1:26); instead, Pullman completely undermines this depiction. He is not, as we imagine, the Creator full of mercy who foresees everything while sitting on his throne. The only true divine power is Dust: the particles that give us consciousness, knowledge, and freedom.¹⁴ It is formed when matter “seeks to know more about itself” (*AS*, pp. 31-32), and it is renewed when it comes into contact with other matter. In this way, all living creatures and the surrounding world are constantly connected; humans cannot live without Dust/God and vice versa. God is everywhere around us and it is in continuous evolution. If Dust is the true god in *His Dark Materials*, what people should be thankful for is the fact that it exists thanks to Eve’s choice to eat the forbidden fruit: the Fall is presented as a *felix culpa*, where human beings decided of their own will to live a full life instead of passively obeying the authorities.¹⁵

Pullman’s saga is a hymn to experience, love, and individuality. Despite the writer’s statements about being an atheist, his trilogy is not a story where God is absent, but he paradoxically created a universe imbued with divinity.¹⁶ And it is not just the third chapter of Genesis being rewritten, but the whole Christian myth: Lyra and Will play both the role of Moses in the liberation of the spirits from the Land of the Dead¹⁷ (a “prison camp [...] established by the Authority in the early ages” where people are psychologically tortured, *AS*, p. 33), and the role of Christ when they sacrifice their love to enable the Dust to continually regenerate. The sacrifice of one’s own happiness for God’s sake (that is, Dust) is a strongly Christian theme, as it requires unconditional

independent of it” (from Oxford English Dictionary, “Panentheist, *n.* and *adj.*”, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/260442?redirectedFrom=panentheist#eid>, accessed June 7, 2023).

¹⁴ Freitas, King, p. 33.

¹⁵ Tóth, “Mirror-Images; or, Love as Religion in Philip Pullman’s Trilogy, *His Dark Materials*”, p. 291.

¹⁶ Freitas, King, p. 32.

¹⁷ Freitas, King, p. 120.

devotion to the Lord (“He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me”, AKJV, Matthew 10:37). Pullman comes to an unexpectedly Christian conclusion when, at the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, the two protagonists give up their mutual love to return to their worlds to preserve Dust. Love must be sacrificed for a Greater Love, that is, for Knowledge itself.¹⁸

Narratively speaking, the element of Dust in the saga suggests that the writer remained faithful to the Christian tradition more than he would have liked, and he failed to depict a world without God. Like Milton, Pullman accurately traces the structure of the Genesis but, as in *Paradise Lost*, the Fall gives readers a sense of hope for the future.

2.2.2 *His Dark Materials: sources*

Pullman’s story is set across various parallel worlds. According to a witch prophecy, two children from two different Oxford(s) – Lyra and Will – must save everyone from eternal death and restore the flow of Dust: a fundamental matter for life which the divine Authority and religious institutions try for centuries to suppress.

Despite Pullman’s stated aversion to the fantasy genre (“Fantasy [...] was only interesting because I could use it to say something truthful and realistic about human nature”¹⁹), the writer used it to convey a true message of life and freedom against oppression. Not for nothing, Pullman has repeatedly stated his opposition to the books of C.S. Lewis (the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*), accusing them of indoctrinating children in the Christian religion and therefore into conservative ideas on gender and

¹⁸ Freitas, King, pp. 156-159.

¹⁹ Gray, William, *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth: Tales of Pullman, Lewis, Tolkien, MacDonald and Hoffmann*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 152.

sexuality.²⁰ *His Dark Materials* can be seen as a response to the Christian indoctrination imposed by Lewis's books,²¹ as Pullman aimed instead to encourage children to be curious, to know the world in relation to their bodies, and to rebel against what is not right. The message Philip Pullman wanted to give children is a message of freedom and equality. The writer was probably inspired by literary works that had as a theme the "loss of innocence and the conquest of awareness", and so he built his own myth by revisiting the Fall of Adam and Eve, looking at it in a more optimistic light.

Philip Pullman stated in the acknowledgments section at the end of *The Amber Spyglass* that he "[has] stolen ideas from every book [he has] ever read", and that "there are three debts that need acknowledgment above all the rest" (*AS*, "Acknowledgments", p. 535). First and foremost, *His Dark Materials* is a retelling of Milton's epic poem; and secondly, the saga refers also to a number of romantic poems and classic works – which I will discuss in the following pages. In both these works there is a prophecy: in *Paradise Lost*, the word spreads among the fallen angels about a prophecy concerning the creation of a new creature to repopulate Heaven (*PL*, II, 345-351); and in Pullman's saga, the prophecy directly concerns the protagonist, who will have to wear the shoes of the new Eve and who will provoke a new Fall and "the end of destiny" (*GC*, p. 310). Between Milton's and Pullman's works there are topoi in common, such as the Garden of Eden, Satan's fortress and the seat of the Authority, but they have also some episodes in common, such as the temptation, the Fall, the building of a bridge between worlds, and the War in Heaven. As for the characters, Eve is not the only figure borrowed from the poem and brought into the trilogy, but there is also Adam, good and bad angels, God, the serpent and, of course, Satan. In addition to playing the roles of our early ancestors, Lyra and Will are also the new Moses when they guide the spirits of people

²⁰ Gray, William, "Pullman, Lewis, Macdonald, and the Anxiety of Influence", *Mythlore*, 25 (2007), pp. 119-120.

²¹ Trisciuzzi, p. 11.

outside the Land of the Dead (as I noted before). The moment of the Fall comes after Exodus, that is, the salvific moment when the two children free the ghosts of dead people from slavery and psychological tortures induced by the Authority, and encourage them to participate in the creation of new lives. To sum up, the events of the Exodus and those of Genesis are therefore reversed, but they are of great importance for the realization of the prophecy and for the salvation of the balance of the universe.

This means that *His Dark Materials* is also obliquely inspired by the events of the Bible. In *Paradise Lost*, the events of Exodus are only just mentioned in Book XII, while in the last volume of Pullman's saga, the revisiting of the second book of the Bible occupies a considerable part. In addition to being reinterpreted, the moment of the temptation in Genesis is literally rewritten in three different ways.²² The first is at the end of *The Golden Compass* when Lord Asriel (Lyra's father and the one who wants to defeat the Authority) explains to his daughter the meaning of Dust by reading the Bible. In the trilogy, the text borrowed from Genesis is slightly modified for plot purposes, but scholar William Gray affirms that the version of the Bible used by Asriel is exactly the same as that used by Milton (the Authorized King James Version),²³ although I am not quite sure about that. The second version of the Genesis can be found in the middle of *The Amber Spyglass*, when scientist Mary Malone arrives in a new world inhabited by Mulefa: elephant-like creatures, endowed with consciousness, who use seedpods as wheels to move. In this passage, a creature named Atal tells Mary the myth about the origin of their use of seedpods.

“Ever since we have had the sraf,²⁴ we have had memory and wakefulness. Before that, we remembered nothing”.

“What happened to give you the sraf?”

“We discovered how to use the wheels. One day a creature with no name discovered a seedpod and began to play, and as she played she –

²² Gruner, Elisabeth Rose, “Wrestling with Religion: Pullman, Pratchett, and the Uses of Story”, *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 36 (2011), pp. 279-281.

²³ Gray, *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth*, p. 173.

²⁴ Mulefa's term for Dust or Dark Matter.

“She?”

“She, yes. She had no name before then. She saw a snake coiling itself though the hole in a seedpod, and the snake said [...] ‘What do you know? What do you remember? What do you see ahead?’. And she said, ‘Nothing, nothing, nothing’. So the snake said, ‘Put your foot through the hole in the seedpod where I was playing, and you will become wise’. So she put a foot in where the snake had been. And the oil entered her blood and helped her see more clearly than before, and the first thing she saw was the sraf. It was so strange and pleasant that she wanted to share it at once with her kindred. So she and her mate took the seedpods, and they discovered that they knew who they were, they knew they were Mulefa and not grazers. They gave each other names. They named themselves Mulefa. They named the seed tree, and all the creatures and plants”.

(*AS*, p. 224)

Mulefa have therefore an oral tradition of a myth that is very similar to that of Genesis, where a female creature was tempted by a snake, and then she and her people became aware of the world and themselves. And finally, the third and last retelling of Genesis is the actual Fall, happening at two different times: the awareness of the mutual feelings of Will and Lyra thanks to the stories of Mary Malone (the scene of their first kiss when Lyra gives Will a red fruit at the end of *The Amber Spyglass*), and the subsequent decision of both to exile themselves from Paradise to return to their worlds to preserve the creation of Dust. As in Milton, Pullman’s Fall is also seen as a *felix culpa*. Although in *Paradise Lost* Adam and Eve lost forever something important for them (the direct contact with God, Paradise, innocence, and bliss), they agreed to leave the Garden of Eden with the hope that one day their offspring will defeat Sin and Death. Similarly, although in *His Dark Materials* Will and Lyra sacrifice their sexual fulfilment and their future together, they do so of their own free will to save consciousness in the universe. The sacrifice of the two young protagonists of the trilogy – which resembles the very sacrifice of Christ – is, therefore, a much more conscious and touching act than that of Adam and Eve, who, submissive, have no choice but to abandon Paradise and wait for salvation.

Among the other major “debts” (*AS*, “Acknowledgements”, p. 535) to which Pullman refers there is also the romantic poet William Blake: a great admirer of Milton and a man who opposed the religious tolerance of injustices, evils, and self-

annihilation.²⁵ Pullman may have been inspired by his ideology, but also by the themes covered in his collection of poems *Songs of Innocence and Experience*; in particular, in *Little Girl Lost*, the protagonist Lyca (which recalls the name of Lyra in *His Dark Materials*) faces the hard passage of childhood innocence to the painful adult life.²⁶ It is interesting to observe how this theme is also very similar to that treated in the essay *On the Marionette Theater* by Heinrich von Kleist (the last of Pullman's "debts"), where only with hard work one could regain childlike grace in an even more valuable way (Lyra has the unique gift of knowing how to read the alethiometer, a tool that can tell the truth, but at the end of the story she loses this ability and decides to spend her life to learn again to read it).²⁷

More generally, however, *His Dark Materials* has strong romantic influences, as can be seen from the narrative structure where heroes embark on a journey to save the world, and at the same time, they experience personal growth and self-realization. In his trilogy, Pullman attempts to reconcile human beings with nature, and the element of resistance against any kind of institutional constraint or religious system is a characteristic of English and German Romanticism too.²⁸ Among the authors that Pullman took inspiration from is Lord Byron, regarding the theme of the contrast between true stories and lies in the Land of the Dead ("But I hate things all fiction [...]. There should always be some foundation of fact for the most airy fabric, and pure invention is but the talent of a liar"²⁹), and John Keats, from whose poems Pullman took inspiration for the mental state that must be assumed in order to communicate with

Dust:

²⁵ Trisciuzzi, p. 15.

²⁶ Kristjanson, Gabrielle, "Beyond *His Dark Materials*: Innocence and Experience in the Fiction of Philip Pullman", *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 25 (2014), p. 425.

²⁷ Nicholson, Parsons, pp. 118-119.

²⁸ Gray, *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth*, pp. 3-4.

²⁹ Moore, Thomas, *Life of Lord Byron, Vol. 3, With His Letters and Journals*, "Letter 270 to Mr Murray. Venice, April 2, 1817", Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/16548/pg16548-images.html>, 2005. No pagination.

You can't see them [Dust particles] unless you expect to. Unless you put your mind in a certain state. You have to be confident and relaxed at the same time. You have to be 'capable [...] of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'.³⁰ You have to get into that state of mind. That's from the poet Keats, by the way.

(SK, p. 88)

This quotation is taken from a letter from the poet Keats addressed to his two brothers, where he listed the qualities of great writers. Referring to Shakespeare, he described him as a man capable of “negative capability”, that is, capable of entering a mental state of uncertainty and perceiving in order to be able to grasp more truths and signs of meaning.

Finally, in *His Dark Materials*, it is possible to find resonances with some classic works, which may have influenced the worldbuilding of the trilogy, or which simply coincide with Pullman's thoughts. From the point of view of the materiality of body and soul, Pullman shares the conception of Lucretius, one of the major Latin writers. Lucretius drew away from the common opinion of his Roman community that believed in superstitions and a vengeful God, and he attempted in his writings to explain the nature of things. In *De Rerum Natura*, the philosopher insisted that the universe is made of matter and void: atoms move in a vacuum and aggregate to form bodies and souls in an endless cycle, and there is no life after death because atoms will form the basis for new lives.³¹ Although Pullman does not seem to have taken into account Lucretius' work,³² the philosopher's treatise seems to coincide with the definition of Dust given in *His Dark Materials* and with the conception of death in *The Amber Spyglass*. The second and most striking example is the presence of tangible dæmons in the trilogy of Pullman: an idea that the writer decided to adopt from Plato's *Symposium* to interpret the tripartition of human nature. According to the author, it is the presence

³⁰ Keats, John, *The Letters of John Keats (1816-1820)*, edited by Maurice Buxton Forman, London: Oxford University Press, 1947, p. 72.

³¹ Oram, William A., “Pullman's Matter: Lucretius and Milton in *His Dark Materials*”, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 23 (2012), pp. 419-420.

³² Oram, p. 418.

of dæmons that makes *His Dark Materials* a fantasy trilogy: they are the external and concrete manifestation of a person's soul in the form of an animal (*figure 1*). The soul and its physical body are an interdependent couple, which can never move away from each other, and dæmons can talk to their own humans to guide them in their choices. Plato writes that this tangible soul may be an inner voice of reason that helps people to find their way to God – a bridge to the divine.³³ But dæmons can be considered by certain cultures, instead, as beings that limit the connection between the human and the divine sphere, a voice that persuades people to act badly.³⁴ Pullman chose to include both of these interpretations of “dæmon” in his saga: not surprisingly, the Magisterium wants to sever the bond between humans and dæmons to eliminate any link with evil, and they do so through the practice of “intercision”³⁵ (*GC*, p. 213) on children – whose dæmons have not yet taken a definitive form (which means that, according to the Church, sin has not yet affected them, and they could therefore still be “saved”).



Figure 1: Leonardo da Vinci, "Lady with an Ermine", Czartoryski Museum, Kraków. Pullman got the idea of dæmons from this painting, where it seems to be a psychological link between the person and the creature.

Philip Pullman decided to heroize witches and fallen angels (the Church's enemies from the beginning), and characters of dubious moral quality such as Satan and two children who can tell lies and can kill, in order to question an authority consolidated over the centuries that has always justified its evils. Through

³³ Dvorak, Jacob, “The Philosopher Within: The Daimōn in Plato”, *Philomathes*, <https://www.apsu.edu/philomathes/DvorakPhilomathes2019.pdf#search=Plato> (accessed May 11, 2023).

³⁴ Online Etymology Dictionary, “Daimon (n.)”, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/daimon> (accessed May 11, 2023).

³⁵ A practice used by the General Oblation Board – an organ of the Magisterium – to sever the link between body and soul (human and dæmon). This process can kill the person or leave him/her in a state of permanent shock.

the excessive use of religious language and the writer's choices of sources, Pullman managed to instigate religious authorities and institutions.

2.2.3 *His Dark Materials: theology*

After having investigated the writer's relationship with religion and having contextualized his work, at this point we can turn our attention to some of the most important figures in *His Dark Materials* directly linked to Pullman's Satan. As I did in the previous chapter, I will focus on the images of the Authority, the angels, and the Church, which seem to have negative influences on the lives of humankind through lies and limitations of freedom of action and thought. I will therefore draw comparisons between the works of Pullman and of Milton to further explore the contrasts between the different sensitivities of the two authors towards the sacred Christian text and the earthly authorities.

The first figure I will analyse is God, even if Pullman refers to him most of the time as "the Authority", perhaps to diminish his benevolence and every link with the divine.³⁶ The image we have of him (in *The Amber Spyglass*, God is clearly identified with a male entity: "Between them they helped the ancient of days out of *his* crystal cell; it wasn't hard, for *he* was as light as paper", *AS*, p. 410) has – even in the case of Pullman – very rarefied descriptions. The Authority appears physically in the narrative only on three occasions: on two of them he is hidden from the eyes of the readers because trapped in a crystal litter (*AS*, pp. 396, 400, 410), but his presence is dominant throughout the trilogy. Very little is known about him, except that it is revealed that he was the first angel to have condensed from the Dust, and that from that moment he lied to all the creatures that formed after him, claiming that he was their creator ("The

³⁶ Gooderham, p. 164.

Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty – those were all names he gave himself”, *AS*, p. 31). As in *Paradise Lost*, Pullman focuses on the fact that the alleged Creator claims to be such by exploiting the ignorance of his successors (see section §1.3.2 and *PL*, V, 853-869). Although even in this case the angelic knowledge is forbidden (*AS*, p. 210), the host of angels who have not sworn allegiance to the Authority reveal that in the beginning this deity took advantage of his position to proclaim himself the absolute God who watches over everything. Precisely because of his obsession with total control, the Authority instituted in early ages a prison camp for ghosts – the Land of the Dead – and gave harpies who lived there the power to see the worst things that ghosts did in their lives before they died. The purpose of this place is to imprison the spirits of the dead made up of Dust to prevent them from being reunited with the outside world, thereby hindering the cycle of the particles of consciousness, and making the universe an increasingly passive and lobotomized place. This process seems to have continued for at least thirty thousand years, since the first human beings appeared on Earth (*SK*, p. 89), and perhaps the first effects began to be seen when the first religious institutions appeared in the world. The fanaticism of these institutions had always hindered access to true knowledge and forced people to annihilate themselves with the false promise of a blessed life after death. Thus, a vicious circle began to form in which the flow of the Dust was more and more hampered.

This false god has always abided in his fortress, called the Chariot (or the Clouded Mountain) because “it moves from place to place” (*AS*, p. 32), and has no fixed seat. As time passed, however, the Authority grew older and more fragile, and his fortress gathered more and more clouds around it, so no one has seen the summit of this mountain for thousands of years. These clouds recall the descriptions of God’s siege in

Paradise Lost, but if in Milton's work they have the function of maintaining an aura of mystery to preserve the taboo in showing the Lord directly, in Pullman's work they are meant to hide the fragility of the Authority.³⁷ This deity is therefore depicted as an ordinary living being, a victim of the passage of time. He then decided to delegate more and more powers to his Regent Metatron but, at a certain point, the latter took advantage of the situation to take control and betray the Authority. Metatron, however, decided to keep him alive by trapping him in a crystal box, probably not to create insurrections among the angels on his side, or to let him die slowly. The First Angel, now dethroned and without any power, remained imprisoned to rot until Lyra and Will find the crystal litter during the final battle and free him with the subtle knife (also called *Æsahætt*, or God-Destroyer, *SK*, p. 273): a blade inspired by Michael's sword in *Paradise Lost* that was "tempered so, that neither keen / Nor solid might resist that edge" (*PL*, VI, 322-323).

Will cut through the crystal in one movement and reached in to help the angel out. Demented and powerless, the aged being could only weep and mumble in fear and pain and misery, and he shrank away from what seemed like yet another threat. [...] Between them [Lyra and Will] helped the ancient of days out of his crystal cell; it wasn't hard, for he was as light as paper, and he would have followed them anywhere, having no will of his own, and responding to simple kindness like a flower to the sun.

(*AS*, p. 410)

When he is finally freed, the image of the Authority that appears to us is unsettling: he has nothing radiant, divine, and strong as Milton portrayed in his poem. Rather, he is a being wrinkled from old age, fragile as paper, and vulnerable to the slightest touch, so much so that "in the open air there was nothing to stop the wind from damaging him, and to their dismay his form began to loosen and dissolve" (*AS*, p. 410). This is the only moment in which we finally meet God in the whole trilogy, but the scene is so downplayed that "it had all taken less than a minute" (*AS*, p. 411); even the reader forgets what happened after a few lines. This is further evidence of how little

³⁷ Freitas, King, pp. 12-13.

Pullman gave importance to a religious deity, so much so that readers themselves may wonder whether the Authority actually ever had any particular power.

The Authority in *His Dark Materials*, in fact, has no foreknowledge, as the power of absolute control was obtained by deception. It is not a God who leaves mankind to decide on their own lives but rather wants to eliminate self-awareness. He made sure that churches were formed in various parallel worlds in order to better control the social, cultural, and political life of human beings. However, there seems to be a power that transcends that of the Authority himself, that is destiny (or predestination). Already from the second chapter of *The Golden Compass*, a prophecy is revealed concerning Lyra: a destiny that can be fulfilled “without realizing what she’s doing” (GC, p. 31). We have seen before that Pullman highlights the notion of self-determination against the tyranny of religious powers, but the concept of destiny in this trilogy seems to oppose his idea of freedom,³⁸ just as in the case of the contrast between God’s foreknowledge and humankind’s free will in *Paradise Lost*. In the first volume of the saga, there is a scene in which the concepts of destiny and free agency are clearly differentiated by the witch Serafina Pekkala while she is talking with the aeronaut Lee Scoresby:

“You speak of destiny,” he said, “as if it was fixed. And I ain’t sure I like that any more than a war I’m enlisted in without knowing about it. *Where’s my free will, if you please?* And this child [Lyra] seems to me to have more free will than anyone I ever met. Are you telling me that she’s just some kind of clockwork toy wound up and set going on a course she can’t change?”

“*We are all subject to the fates. But we must all act as if we are not,*” said the witch, “or die of despair. There is a curious prophecy about this child: she 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 her destiny to do it. If she’s told what she must do, it will all fail; death will sweep through all the worlds; it will be the triumph of despair, forever. The universes will all become nothing more than interlocking machines, blind and empty of thought, feeling, life...”

(GC, pp. 309-310)

Even though fate seems to be something that restricts freedom, people always act without their self-awareness, and they are still responsible for the good deeds they

³⁸ Gruner, p. 277.

do.³⁹ Lyra and Will have always acted as they themselves believed was best, and they were free to make their mistakes. Even John Parry (Will's father) seems to limit his son's freedom when he tells him that, as the bearer of the subtle knife, he is destined to be a warrior and that his task is to fight alongside Lord Asriel against the Authority ("You're a warrior. That's what you are. Argue with anything else, but don't argue with your own nature", *SK*, p. 320).⁴⁰ In the end, Will decides to act in his own way and uses the knife not to kill the Authority, but to save him. Faced with this kindness, the old angel answers him with a smile and a sigh of relief.⁴¹

The Authority depicted in *His Dark Materials* is a tyrant. In this trilogy, the accusations that Satan made against God in *Paradise Lost* in front of the other angels are well founded. Pullman's God is a deity who despises freedom and equality. Anyway – as we shall see in the next chapter – the Authority's tyranny does not even come close to the oppression that his usurper Metatron would want to impose on Earth. The relationship between the Authority and Metatron is reminiscent of the relationship between God and His Son in Milton's poem, with the difference that the first two possess a different physical and moral nature. The next theological figure of *His Dark Materials* that I want to dwell on are angels, although it is not exactly an image detached from the previous one. As we have seen, there is no true deity in Pullman's saga, and both Metatron and the Authority are of an angelic nature. Analysing the representations and the story of the angels in the trilogy will help us to understand the strengths and weaknesses of Pullman's Satan.

When in the beginning the first elementary particles of Dust began to thicken, the first creatures that were formed were the angels. The first angel was the Authority, who deceived all who came after him, but the truth was discovered by a wiser female

³⁹ Freitas, King, p. 99.

⁴⁰ Freitas, King, p. 100.

⁴¹ Freitas, King, p. 101.

angel named Xaphania. There was a civil war between the angels: the first great War in Heaven, like the one set in Book VI of *Paradise Lost*, where Xaphania led the rebellious angels against the army remaining faithful to the Authority, even if the latter managed to prevail and exiled Xaphania and all her companions. Since then, the rebellious angels have wandered between worlds for thousands of years, patiently waiting for the right opportunity for a new rebellion (*AS*, p. 208). This excursus follows fairly closely the war described by Milton in his poem, though the rebellious angels are depicted as heroes.⁴² Serafina Pekkala meets angels (otherwise called *bene elim*, or Watchers) for the first time in *The Subtle Knife*, and she is told that their task is to carry messages from heaven (*SK*, p. 137), and that these creatures are flying northwards to the constellation of Ophiuchus (the Serpent-Holder, Satan's entry into the Earth in *Paradise Lost*⁴³. "All things from the north are devilish", *AS*, p. 100) to reach Lord Asriel's fortress. This man, in fact, has already begun to raise a great army to face the Authority, and many creatures from countless worlds have responded to the call, including the rebellious angels.

Angels are described throughout the saga as beings of human-like form, but taller, naked, winged, ancient, and bright. These creatures are made of pure Dust and light, but they have no flesh, and for this reason they are weaker (*AS*, p. 11). They are in fact invisible in daylight, immaterial, and they can change shape and become human or animal, just like Satan in Milton's work. Precisely because "matter loves matter" (*AS*, p. 31), what angels lack is body mass, which is what they most desire to have ("They haven't got flesh [...]. In comparison with them, we're still stronger. They envy us. That's what fuels their hatred", *AS*, p. 375). Furthermore, angels have a very long life, but they can grow old and die, being made of the same particles that make up every

⁴² Gray, "Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth", p. 180.

⁴³ Fowler, pp. 145-146, n. 707-11, 710.

living being. This conception of materiality contrasts with Milton, who states that the absence of a body would strengthen the spirit. For Pullman, instead, the absence of flesh would mean not being able to participate in the cycle of the cosmos and not be able to enjoy the physical pleasure of nature.⁴⁴ Another difference between *His Dark Materials* and *Paradise Lost* is that the angels in Milton's poem are all considered masculine, although they should actually be genderless.⁴⁵ In Pullman's trilogy, the figure of Xaphania impersonating truth and wisdom⁴⁶ breaks Christian tradition and a secular patriarchal system, thus proposing an unorthodox reading of the Bible.

Moreover, it seems that angels can be born in two different ways: by natural aggregation of Dust, or through direct intervention by another angel. In *His Dark Materials*, there are two examples of people who, once dead, managed to become angels: the first is Regent Metatron (on whom I will dwell in the next chapter), and the second is Baruch. However, when Baruch and his partner Balthamos are introduced at the beginning of *The Amber Spyglass*, they refuse to give any explanations to Will.

“Are you a man? You sound like a man”.
“Baruch was a man. I was not. Now he is angelic”.
“So [...] he was a man, and then... Do people become angels when they die? Is that what happens?”
“Not always. Not in the vast majority of cases... Very rarely”.
“When was he alive, then?”
“Four thousand years ago, more or less. I am much older”.
[...] “But how do people become angels?”
“What is the point of this metaphysical speculation?”
“I just want to know”.
“Better to stick to your task”.

(*AS*, pp. 16-17)

The angel Balthamos interrupts the conversation, meaning not to reveal anything. Shortly after, Baruch states that his spirit never went to the Land of the Dead thanks to Balthamos' intervention (*AS*, p. 33), so the transformation from person to angel is a process that involves outside help just before the spirit goes into the Land of

⁴⁴ Oram, p. 423.

⁴⁵ Fowler, p. 496, n. 457-8.

⁴⁶ Gray, “Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth”, pp. 165-166.

the Dead. Therefore, the new angel is composed only of the spirit of the person who once lived.

Finally, the last element that I would analyse before delving into the analysis of Satan is the Church, known as Magisterium in Lyra's world. Philip Pullman wanted through his work to denounce religious fanaticism and any legalized institution that, under false preaching and promises, deceives unaware people to conform them to their liking. The writer, of course, did not forget the persecutory acts and the bloody wars carried out in the name of God over the centuries aimed at forcibly converting people to believe in the only religion authorized by the State. But it seems that there is something personal in his attacks on the Church, as Pullman did not only provide negative caricatures of anything concerning the Magisterium, but he even invented very harmful practices such as "intercision" and "pre-emptive absolution".⁴⁷

The Magisterium is the pure portrait of hypocrisy: it is a secular organization so well thought out that the same people who work there seem to act without regard or morals, so much so they are firmly convinced that they are acting for the greater good. Apparently, in *His Dark Materials*, it seems that the Churches in the various worlds were born at the behest of the Authority, when the Dust began to drain away from the cosmos, and their task is to exercise direct control in social life. These religious institutions do not seem to be present everywhere, but in Lyra's world, they exercise a strong power throughout the globe (*figure 2*). The headquarters is located in Geneva, but in the main trilogy, the whole



Figure 2: Magisterium logo designed for the HBO TV series "His Dark Materials". V.E.S.O. stands for "Vna ecclesia super omnibus" [sic], which is Latin for "One Church Over All".

⁴⁷ Gray, "Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth", p. 172.

organization consists of several organs, councils, and committees that compete with each other for the conquest of more funds and power.⁴⁸ Among these, the Consistorial Court of Discipline (CCD) – an office that deals with heresy and disbelief – is the body that most actively operates against Lord Asriel and Lyra. Thanks to a friar able to read the alethiometer, the President of the CCD discovers that Lyra will have to be tempted as Eve was. To prevent this from happening again, Father Gomez is charged with killing her, as he is the only one to have gone through the “pre-emptive penance and absolution”. This doctrine invented by the writer and exaggeratedly distorted (although not entirely far-fetched) consists in doing penance for a sin not yet committed, which requires a series of self-flagellations and scourgings so as to build up a store of credit (*AS*, pp. 71-72). Once this process is completed, the penitent is granted absolution in advance, and in this way, Father Gomez feels authorized by God to commit a grave sin such as killing a child. Another equally immoral doctrine practiced by the Magisterium is that of “intercision”. The General Oblation Board (from the term “oblates” that indicates the children given “in sacrifice” to the Church to make them monks, *GC*, pp. 89-90), led by Mrs. Coulter (Lyra’s mother), kidnaps orphaned children in order to practice experiments on them where their *dæmon* is cut. If the subjects managed to survive, they would never again have the slightest awareness of themselves, and they would remain alive but without any soul or will.

Religious leaders use pleasant words founded on truth as masks to justify the evils they commit, but the other side of the coin is people who accept the lies.⁴⁹ The scientists who work for the General Oblation Board are convinced that they are doing good, that by eliminating Dust on children, scientists can give them a future without sin; while a group of believers in the Land of the Dead decides not to follow Lyra and Will

⁴⁸ Pullman, Philip, *The Book of Dust (Volume Two): The Secret Commonwealth*, Oxford: Penguin, 2019, p. 247.

⁴⁹ Freitas, King, p. 64.

out of that wasteland because they believe they are already in Heaven, just as the Church had promised them. In short, Pullman's denunciation is therefore very similar to that proposed by Milton in Book XII of his epic poem, although in *His Dark Materials*, it is clear that the complaints are mainly addressed at the Christian religion. Both writers urge their readers not to be passive and to act when they realize the falsity of the preaching of those who hold power ("For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers", AKJV, Matthew 23:4).⁵⁰ The theme of evil masquerading as good is recurrent in the Judeo-Christian tradition:⁵¹ the same Satan of *Paradise Lost* is dressed up as a good angel when he enters into Paradise in Book III, and even his former name Lucifer means "light-bearer". But, as we will see, Pullman's Satan does not advocate evil, but rather, he is on the side of humanity.⁵²

Although both Philip Pullman and John Milton insisted on warning people about the institutions that hold power, the two writers clearly have different attitudes towards religion. As I have pointed out in this chapter, Pullman takes a completely antagonistic attitude toward everything that concerns religion. One could say he almost wants to make fun of the Christian faith with his fantasy trilogy by affirming the non-existence of God and the hypocrisy of the Churches. Anyway, his books cannot be considered theological works, as his interpretations of Christian practices are very generalized and superficial. According to him, what can eradicate the tyranny of the Kingdom of Heaven is the freedom to make mistakes, as Eve and Lyra did, and the courage to build a Republic where everyone is placed on the same level, as Satan did.

⁵⁰ Freitas, King, p. 71.

⁵¹ Freitas, King, p. 63.

⁵² Freitas, King, pp. 68-69.

CHAPTER 3

Satan and the building of the Republic of Heaven

3.1 Introduction

Among the various characters in *His Dark Materials* which have been borrowed from Milton's epic poem, the figure of the Devil is probably one of the most fascinating and original that Pullman has interpreted in his fantasy trilogy. Although the name of Satan is seldom explicitly mentioned in Pullman's saga, this character is present, albeit called with different names. Given the complexity of this particular personality, it is misleading to identify a single character in *His Dark Materials* that represents the Devil in his entirety. Therefore, in this chapter, I decided to analyse Satan based on his distinguishing behavioural traits.

Before focusing on the trilogy, it is first necessary to introduce John Milton's Rebel Angel. To do so, I will go through Satan's soliloquies and emotions that guided him in the decisions he took in order to derive the qualities of the Devil that I need to describe the characters who stand in for Satan in *His Dark Materials*.

3.2 Satan in *Paradise Lost*

Since in *Paradise Lost* Satan is one of the characters who most speaks through soliloquies, it is quite sure that Milton's intent was to closely analyse the Devil's inner thoughts. The Enemy of God and humankind is depicted in the epic poem no longer as an angel, but closer to human impulses from the point of view of his behaviour.¹ It is not a coincidence that both Satan and his companions demonstrate almost human feelings – such as envy, resignation, frustration, and obstinacy – during the consultation

¹ Fowler, p. 114, n. 99-101.

at Pandæmonium. After the Fall, creatures who first disobeyed God lose then any contact with the divine, just like Adam and Eve after eating the forbidden fruit in Book IX (“But this pre-eminence thou had lost, brought down / To dwell on even ground now with thy sons”, *PL*, XI, 347-348). Even the Devil loses part of his angelic nature after rebelling,² as is shown in Book VI when Michael manages to wound Satan with his sword during the War in Heaven (“then Satan first knew pain [...] / and from the gash / A stream of nectarous humour issuing flowed / Sanguine”, *PL*, VI, 327, 331-333). The fact that the Devil in *Paradise Lost* is represented through human qualities makes the character more understandable to readers, who are more inclined to sympathize with him than with God. As we shall soon see, it is no wonder that the figure of Satan is portrayed by human beings in *His Dark Materials*.

Nevertheless, Satan proves to be a very complex and ambiguous figure. Though the name of the Devil is not explicitly mentioned in Genesis,³ the book of Revelation clearly connects the figure of the snake with Satan (“And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth”, AKJV, Revelation 12:9). By the way, it is already presumed by readers that in Genesis the snake was not just any snake, given its great role as a subverter of the entire human history when he induced Eve to disobey the Almighty.⁴ If we consider the fact that the tempter reptilian in Genesis is introduced as the most “subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made” (AKJV, Genesis 3:1), we can conclude that the first characteristic of Satan is his ability to deceive and persuade others. Already from the first book of the Bible, therefore, the serpent is

² Rosenfeld, Nancy, *The Human Satan in Seventeenth-Century English Literature: from Milton to Rochester*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008, p. 2.

³ Rosenfeld, p. 5.

⁴ Sweeney, Marvin A., “Review of *The Good and Evil Serpent: How a Universal Symbol Became Christianized*, by James H. Charlesworth”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 80 (2012), p. 275.

presented as an evil being, the counterpart of God, and the identification of Satan in the Christian tradition.⁵ At the beginning of Book I of *Paradise Lost*, after a brief summary of the entire poem, the first character introduced is the Devil, who is immediately associated with the figure of the snake and, therefore, with the ability to tell lies (“The infernal serpent; he it was, whose guile / Stirred up with envy and revenge, deceived / The mother of mankind”, *PL*, I, 34-36). However, it would seem that this initial association between Satan and the reptilian is primarily a way of introducing the poem to readers by recalling the recognizable classical images of the Bible. In *Paradise Lost*, there are several scenes in which Satan manages to prove his persuading abilities, both before the rebellion (when he induced many angels to side with him to fight against God in Book V) and after his Fall to Hell (when he deceives Uriel to come down to Earth in Book III, and when he seduces Eve both in Book IV and IX), but this seems to be a prerogative of the Devil rather than the snake itself. In Book IX, after Satan takes over the body of a sleeping snake (*PL*, IX, 181-191), he begins to praise the beauty of the woman as they approach the Tree of Knowledge. At that moment, Eve is at first astonished by the reptilian’s intellect:

“What may this mean? Language of man pronounced
 By tongue of brute, and human sense expressed?
The first at least of these I thought denied
To beasts, whom God on their creation-day
 Created mute to all articulate sound;
 [...] *Thee, serpent, subtlest beast of all the field*
 I knew, but not with human voice endued;
 Redouble then this miracle”.

(*PL*, IX, 553-563)

The only race to whom God gave the gift of speech and intellect is humankind; all the rest of living beings of the sky, sea, or land are only beasts on which to dominate. From the surprise that Eve shows in the lines above, we understand that human language is not at all a prerogative of the serpent; neither is the faculty of distorting the

⁵ Sweeney, p. 275.

truth and the power of seduction. All these qualities come from the one who at that moment is manipulating the reptilian's body, that is, the Devil. This shows that the snake is innocent: an animal exploited by Satan for the sole purpose of attracting the attention of Eve,⁶ who – as expected – remains fascinated by the serpent and asks it to continue talking. However, despite the innocence of the snake, it seems that in the Bible the reptilian is still condemned by God to crawl on its belly and eat dust forever (AKJV, Genesis 3:14). In *Paradise Lost*, although at first it seems that the Judgement of the Son is addressed to the snake (*PL*, X, 175-181), we discover later that the punishment directly concerns Satan. In fact, once he returns victorious to his companions in Hell, they do not have time to rejoice that the Devil and all his legions turn into snakes (“a greater power / Now ruled him, punished in the shape he sinned, / According to his doom”, *PL*, X, 515-517), thus doomed to be continually tempted to eat delicious fruits that in their mouths turn into dust (*PL*, X, 547-572). All this shows us that one of Satan's main characteristics – the ability to persuade and seduce – is not directly attributable to the serpent, as it is innocent and a mere means to the Devil's purposes. These qualities are instead attributable to Satan both before and after his Fall, and are therefore part of his personality since his creation. This brings us to the next point to examine.

To analyse the personality of Satan more in detail, it is necessary to consider not only the moments in which he faces his enemies, victims, or companions, but above all, the moments in which he reckons with himself.⁷ The only way to try to understand Satan's thoughts is through his five soliloquies⁸ in *Paradise Lost*, and what is noticeable

⁶ Rosenfeld, p. 27.

⁷ Johnson, Samuel, “Paradise Lost”, in Scott Elledge, ed., *Paradise Lost: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1975, p. 523.

⁸ Fowler, p. 217, n. 32-41.

is a creature afflicted with confusion and anger.⁹ When the Devil eludes Uriel's guard at the end of Book III, he manages to reach Earth, but the sight of Paradise reminds him of the bliss lost forever. At that moment, Satan offers a brief version of the facts according to his point of view, and he does not seem to be able to fully admit his faults:

“O sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams
That bring to my remembrance from what state
I fell, how glorious once above thy sphere;
Till pride and worse ambition threw me down
Warring in heaven against *heaven's matchless king*:
Ah wherefore! He deserved no such return
From me, *whom he created what I was*
In that bright eminence”.

(*PL*, IV, 37-44)

By listing the two characteristics responsible for his Fall (pride and ambition), Satan shows that he has enough awareness of himself.¹⁰ In this way, the rebel angel confirms Raphael's version when the latter recounts the War in Heaven to Adam and Eve in Book V: Satan's desire for revolt was born when for the first time he saw himself displaced after Christ was announced as Regent of God. To counter his disappointment, the Devil decided to rely on his pride and ambition: by using his rhetorical skills, he brought a large number of allies to his side to reject the monarchy imposed by God and to claim equality in Heaven (“Who can in reason then or right assume / Monarchy over such as live by right / His equals, if in power and splendour less, / In freedom equal?”, *PL*, V, 794-797). However valid were his motivations stated in front of his companions, his boundless pride was precisely the reason why Satan misunderstood the concept of power and equality in Heaven.¹¹ The fact that the Devil was disappointed that he was no longer God's favourite might also mean that he had always hoped to gain more and more powers from the Father. For this reason, Satan's claim for equality could be an

⁹ Rosenfeld, p. 1.

¹⁰ Broadbent, J.B., “Satan”, in Scott Elledge, ed., *Paradise Lost: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1975, p. 463.

¹¹ Fallon, p. 49.

excuse to mask his egotism, as evidenced by the high number of soliloquies present in the poem, where he excludes his companions.¹²

In the lines extracted from Book IV and quoted above (*PL*, IV, 37-44), therefore, the rebel angel recognizes his nature, but he is blaming his Father for having created him so proud and perfect. Satan is convincing himself that his Fall was caused by God, and since God is the absolute Authority (“heaven’s matchless king”, *PL*, IV, 41), the angel is sure that he cannot fully repent (“he created what I was”, *PL*, IV, 43).¹³ Having been created by the Almighty so proud, tormented, and insecure, the Devil decides that he himself will be His ruin, since “the hell [is] within him, for within him hell / He brings” (*PL*, IV, 20-21). Satan then convinces himself that he is mentally unable to feel remorse and has no choice but to pursue his purpose of corrupting humanity, for that is what his true nature requires. Consequently, if he ever succeeds in repenting, it will go against his nature: pride and repentance cannot coexist in Satan’s mind. From this moment on, Satan will rely on his negative feelings to take revenge on the Father (“all good to me is lost; / Evil be thou my good”, *PL*, IV, 109-110). The only way that the Devil has to be true to himself is to believe his own lies¹⁴ and pursue his goal already knowing that he will be defeated (“heaven’s matchless king”).

Therefore, the Devil accepts with resignation his proud and lying nature, and at the same time he accepts to be hopeless. The only reason he goes forward is his anger and frustration at not being able to prevail over the Father in the War in Heaven. In fact, Satan’s spirit of rebellion does not cease even after being sent to Hell with his companions. His perseverance in rebelling is another characteristic of this angel, who does not want to stop even in the face of failure or the omniscience of God.¹⁵ This

¹² Rudrum, p. 10.

¹³ Fowler, pp. 219-220, n. 73, 82, 93-7.

¹⁴ Rudrum, p. 11.

¹⁵ Fowler, p. 118, n. 188-90.

determination is always dictated by his pride, but it is also necessary to maintain his reputation among his hosts: Satan must show the other fallen angels that he is a true leader who believes in the cause and who does not give up. If the Devil ever appeared weak for a moment in front of others, it would be the end of his reputation and of all he has been fighting for.

Despite his speeches against the absolute monarchy of God, however, the rebellion is not about the equality that Satan is claiming for his companions, but rather a personal battle between the Devil himself and his pride. In this way, the meaning of the name of Satan (from the Hebrew “adversary”)¹⁶ is not only being an enemy of God but also an enemy of himself (“myself am hell”, *PL*, IV, 75): the Devil’s mind is a continuous conflict between his personalities, as we will also see in *His Dark Materials*. With a tyrant in charge, like Satan, Charles I, or Cromwell, it will never be possible to guarantee equality to the people.

3.3 Satan in *His Dark Materials*

In the last section, I briefly analysed some passages of *Paradise Lost* that concerned the figure of Satan. My intent was to extract from the text what I thought were the main aspects of this character, namely persuasive skills, pride and ambition, and a rebellious spirit. Taking into consideration also Satan’s relationships with the other angels and with his Father, I came to the conclusion that the Devil is engaged above all in an inner struggle, where his personalities are at odds with each other. What I want to propose in this section is a possible interpretation of the figure of Satan present in *His Dark Materials*.

¹⁶ Rosenfeld, p. 6.

Some scholars who gave their opinion on Pullman's trilogy, such as Karen D. Robinson, identified some characters of the saga as representative of the Devil, for instance, Lyra's parents (Mrs Coulter and Lord Asriel).¹⁷ However, I believe that this statement is not entirely exhaustive. Based on the three main qualities of Satan that I listed earlier, I would now like to present four different characters of *His Dark Materials* who separately embody these attributes. In short, I will first make a distinction between the serpent and the persuasive skills, that is, between Mary Malone and Mrs Coulter. In a second moment, I will analyse the rebellious spirit of Lord Asriel and compare it with the proud and ambitious nature of Satan, personified by the usurper angel Metatron. In particular, the last three characters are linked together by a very thin thread, in a precarious balance between oblivion and redemption, between the Abyss and the true Republic of Heaven.

3.3.1 The serpent

"Find the girl and the boy. Waste no more time [...]. You must play the serpent" (SK, p. 250). This is what angels communicate to scientist Mary Malone during her Dark Matter studies. At this point in the narrative, it is still unclear what this statement might mean, but we understand that the girl and the boy in question are Lyra and Will. At the beginning of *The Subtle Knife*, Mary meets Lyra for the first time, and they immediately realize that they are both looking for the same information about Dust/Dark Matter. After an initial diffidence between the two, Lyra manages to win the trust of the researcher thanks to her alethiometer. This truth-telling tool works thanks to Dust, which communicates with the reader through the various symbols indicated by the hands on the dial. The girl proves to be able to read it by revealing the scientist's past:

¹⁷ Robinson, p. 13.

before getting a steady job as a physics researcher, Mary Malone was a nun who at one point stopped believing in the Church and renounced her vows (according to Lyra's reaction to this discovery, in her world the Magisterium would never allow such freedom, *SK*, p. 91). Not a little bewildered, Mary then decides to show Lyra the machine she built – called the Cave – that can see Shadow particles.¹⁸ The girl is able to communicate with this machine by making symbols appear on the screen, just as she is used to do with the alethiometer, but she tells the scientist that the computer can be programmed to communicate through words to make it more understandable. Shortly after, Mary manages to reprogram the Cave: she discovers that these Shadows are actually angels and that she has an important role in the unfolding of the plot (*SK*, p. 250). At this point, at the suggestion of the particles, Mary embarks on a journey through parallel worlds until in *The Amber Spyglass* she arrives in the world of Mulefa. Meanwhile, the scientist manages to keep in touch with the Shadows thanks to the I Ching sticks:¹⁹ in this way, Mary Malone (aka the serpent) always seems to have access to the truth just like Lyra (aka Eve) with her alethiometer.²⁰ In this new world, the researcher accepts to help the local population of Mulefa by trying to find out what is causing the death of the flowers of seedpods, which are vital to the life of these creatures. Thanks to an amber spyglass she built to be able to see the Shadows, Mary discovers that the flow of the Dust does not fall from above but moves horizontally, so that the flowers cannot be fertilized by these particles of consciousness. As a result, many trees are dying and the Mulefa would not be able to obtain the oil of the seedpods necessary for their intellectual survival.

¹⁸ Shadow particles, Shadows, Dust, Dark Matter, Rusakov particles, and sraf are all synonyms.

¹⁹ A Chinese method of divination “based on symbols known as the eight trigrams and sixty-four hexagrams” (from Oxford English Dictionary, “I Ching, *n.*”, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/90817?redirectedFrom=I+Ching#eid>, accessed June 9, 2023). In *His Dark Materials*, this method can be used as an alternative to the alethiometer or the Cave to communicate with the Dust.

²⁰ Gruner, p. 283.

While Mary thinks about how to solve the seedpods situation, she also ponders the meaning of “serpent”, that is, the role the angels assigned to her. The scientist, therefore, decides to rely on the historical information of the Mulefa to try to understand more about Dust. As reported in the previous chapter,²¹ the story that reveals the origin of the use of seedpods has to do with a female creature and a snake that suggested her to put her foot in the hole of the seedpod. This Mulefa myth, although very similar to the Genesis version, has a different interpretation from what we are used to. As the creature Atal points out, “the oil entered her blood and helped her see more clearly than before” (*AS*, p. 224), and from that moment on, Mulefa realised that they were conscious people and not animals. The seedpod trees are for this reason sacred to them, and nature continues to live in symbiosis with the local population like an Edenic Paradise.²² In Atal’s tale, the language of the snake was not deceitful, but was an invitation to the other creature to play (“Put your foot through the hole in the seedpod where I was playing, and you will become wise”, *AS*, p. 224). After listening to the snake, this creature welcomed the Knowledge with such pleasure that she wanted to share it with her mate. The moment of the serpent’s “temptation” is not seen by Mulefa as a Fall, but as an Awakening from oblivion.²³ The serpent spoke the truth, and it was a salvation for this population to have listened to him. If we also take into account what the serpent told Eve in Genesis, we realise that the reptilian does not completely lie there either.

And the serpent said unto the woman, *Ye shall not surely die*: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, *then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil*.

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and *a tree to be desired to make one wise*, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.

(AKJV, Genesis 3:4-6)

²¹ This extract (*AS*, p. 224) has already been quoted in section §2.2.2.

²² Fitzsimmons, Rebekah, “Dialectical ‘Complexifications’: the Centrality of Mary Malone, Dust, and the Mulefa in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*”, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 22 (2011), p. 215.

²³ Fitzsimmons, p. 222.

The snake of Genesis indeed has intentions of its own, but he is right when he says that Eve does not die if she eats the fruit (at least it is not a short-term effect) and that she will be able to distinguish Good from Evil. At the end of *The Golden Compass*, the same version of the Bible used by Lord Asriel to explain the concept of Dust to Lyra states the same thing:

And the serpent said unto the woman, *Ye shall not surely die*: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, *then your eyes shall be opened, and your dæmons shall assume their true forms, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.*

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and *a tree to be desired to reveal the true form of one's dæmon*, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.

(GC, p. 372)

In both versions, in addition to Eve's desire to know Good and Evil, the serpent speaks the truth about their eyes being opened. The difference between Lyra's world and the Mulefa world lies – as mentioned earlier – in the interpretation of the message of Genesis: in the first world, in fact, there is the Magisterium that spreads an extremely negative view of the serpent and Eve among the people. In the Mulefa world, however, there is no religious institution that imposes a systematic point of view, and yet these creatures live in harmony with nature. The first creature who used the seedpods created a moment of intellectual birth, and Mulefa worship and respect the snake as a sacred animal ("Snakes are important here. The people look after them and try not to hurt them", AS, p. 437). This interpretation of the serpent is not entirely unusual: the symbolism of this animal varies across cultures, in many of which the snake stands for wisdom and health, and it is not necessarily a symbol of evil.²⁴ In this way, Philip Pullman wanted to interpret the snake not as an irredeemable influence on living beings, but as an animal bearer of good, knowledge, and painful truth.²⁵

Mary Malone understands what she has to do when, at the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, she meets Lyra and Will in that paradisaal world. What the scientist learnt

²⁴ Sweeney, p. 277.

²⁵ Fitzsimmons, p. 221.

during her stay at the Mulefa's village served to prepare her for her role: all she has to do is tell true stories in order to push these children to know themselves. One evening, Mary decides to tell them about the moment she chose to abandon Church doctrine to indulge her pleasures and pursue happiness ("I'd made myself believe that I was fine and happy and fulfilled on my own without the love of anyone else", *AS*, p. 443). Sister Mary Malone fell in love with a man, and at that moment, she realised that it was not worth it spending the rest of her life remaining chaste without ever experiencing the feeling of being in love again ("Will anyone be the better for making me more miserable? [...] There's [...] no one to bless me for being a good girl or to punish me for being wicked. Heaven was empty", *AS*, p. 445, reworded). It is thanks to this story that Will and Lyra finally get to know their bodies and realise their feelings for each other. Their sexual encounter is the ultimate transition from innocence to experience, and it is so powerful that it restores the flow of the Dust to what it was before. Just as the Virgin Mary was the mother of the Saviour who defeated Sin and Death, so too Mary Malone can be defined as the mother of the sexuality of the two "children-no-longer-children" (*AS*, p. 470).²⁶

However, the scientist's task does not end there: the serpent's last tragic charge is to exile himself from Eden together with the two ancestors. Despite the fact that the snake is innocent and that he contributed to the birth of human awareness, Mary and the two children are asked to make a further sacrifice: to return to their worlds to preserve the reproduction of Dust. Also in the case of *His Dark Materials*, the serpent suffers the consequences of exile. Mary, Lyra, and Will finally choose to give freedom to others by giving up their own happiness.²⁷ Mary Malone has always acted of her own free will, so her role as the snake cannot be considered an instrument of Satan as in the Bible or in

²⁶ Freitas, King, p. 148.

²⁷ Fitzsimmons, p. 227.

Paradise Lost. Consequently, the serpent in *His Dark Materials* cannot be placed side by side with the figure of the Devil as the next characters I will analyse can be.

3.3.2 Marisa Coulter

If scientist Malone cannot be considered the actual temptress of Pullman's trilogy, we can turn our attention to another character of the saga who undoubtedly represents seductiveness and malevolence. To analyse the figure of Satan in *His Dark Materials*, in fact, we must take into account the nature of the Devil in relation to how he seeks to achieve his goals. For this reason, from this moment on I will present a tripartition of Satan's nature by assigning a part of it to three different characters who, in Pullman's trilogy, have shown that they are ready to do anything to achieve their ends.

As already mentioned, the character of *His Dark Materials* who is closest to the tempting and persuasive nature of Satan is Lyra's mother: Marisa Coulter. In her first appearance in *The Golden Compass*, the woman is physically described in parallel with her dæmon: she is a young, elegant, and attractive lady with a fluffy-haired golden monkey. As explained in section §2.2.2, in Lyra's world dæmons are the external manifestation of a person's soul in animal form, which can tell us a lot about the type of person we are dealing with. These animal-souls usually have their own names (like Lyra and her Pantalaimon, or Serafina Pekkala with her goose-dæmon Kaisa, etc.), but in the case of Mrs Coulter, she is the only major character in the saga whose dæmon's name is never revealed. Not only that, but the monkey also never seems to utter a word (except for one line in *The Amber Spyglass*, p. 217), while instead other dæmons in the trilogy express their thoughts aloud with their own humans. The absence of a name for Mrs Coulter's dæmon could be a first hint at the devilish nature of the woman, as in

Paradise Lost angels lost their former name when they fell into Hell. According to Alastair Fowler, in fact, the names of fallen angels mentioned in the first two books of Milton's epic poem are not their real names (like the name of Satan himself), and everything that belongs to Evil has no name.²⁸ However, while the monkey-dæmon never speaks, speech is just the most powerful weapon Mrs Coulter possesses.

The first time we meet this woman, she is therefore described as a charming lady with an exotic dæmon whose fur seems irresistible to the touch, but her good looks hide cruelty ("and he saw that the sweet-faced woman and the evil monkey were one being", *SK*, p. 204).²⁹ Mrs Coulter is a loyal agent of the Magisterium and, although she cannot hold important roles like her male colleagues, she managed to make her way by starting to study the Dust. To support the Church's cause, she sets up a new experimental body – the General Oblation Board – that aims at severing the bond between child and dæmon to prevent Dust (original sin) from settling on them. At the beginning of *The Golden Compass*, many orphaned children are kidnapped on Mrs Coulter's orders to conduct experiments on them in the Arctic. This innocent-looking woman has no problem convincing children to follow her, just as she has no problem enchanting Lyra with her stories of exploration when she sees her for the first time. In this regard, although Marisa Coulter is Lyra's mother, the girl never grew up with a parental figure: she always lived at Jordan College convinced that she was an orphan. Actually, this child was born out of wedlock, and out of shame Mrs Coulter abandoned her and went on with her career. Only when children begin to disappear for her experiments, the woman decides to take Lyra with her. The child is initially unable to resist her charisma, and she is completely enchanted by the woman's beauty and intelligence, but little by little the young girl realises that she is imprisoned by her lies. Lyra agreed to come with

²⁸ Fowler, p. 352, n. 262-4.

²⁹ Freitas, King, pp. 60-61.

her in the hope that Marisa would take her on an exploration to the North, but the girl feels somehow deceived. The child realises she is right when, during a party, she discovers that Mrs Coulter is in charge of the people who kidnap children, and therefore Lyra was exploited by her own mother as a lure for other kids.³⁰

Mrs Coulter is one of the most complex and ambiguous characters in the entire saga. This woman does not seem to be able to do good without thinking afterwards of personal gain, and she acts only through betrayals and deception.³¹ Even when Mrs Coulter rescues Lyra from intercision, the woman cannot stop herself from asking to give her the alethiometer. Fortunately, Lyra quickly realises the danger of being near her and flees at every first opportunity. Nevertheless, Mrs Coulter is very intent on finding her daughter, even more when she discovers that Lyra has to play the role of the New Eve. At the end of *The Subtle Knife*, the woman manages to find and capture Lyra with the help of Spectres: abominable creatures from the Abyss who managed to enter the worlds through the cracks created by the subtle knife, and who feed on Dust and adults' dæmons. This woman's ability to control these dangerous creatures makes her character even more interesting: as she can distance from her dæmon, Mrs Coulter is thus able to "deny" a part of herself and detach herself from the world. According to Marisa, she is able to control these creatures because they understand she "can give them more nourishment if they let [her] live" (*SK*, p. 310). This passage is not explained in detail, but it seems that the Spectres are able to see Mrs Coulter's deeper personality, just as the usurper angel Metatron when they meet each other:

"Yes, I see," said Metatron.

"What do you see?"

"Corruption and envy and lust for power. Cruelty and coldness. A vicious, probing curiosity. Pure, poisonous, toxic malice. You have never from your earliest years shown a shred of compassion or sympathy or kindness without calculating how it

³⁰Rutledge, Amelia A., "Reconfiguring Nurture in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 33 (2008), p. 123.

³¹ Freitas, King, p. 61.

would return to your advantage. You have tortured and killed without regret or hesitation; you have betrayed and intrigued and gloried in your treachery. You are a cesspit of moral filth”.

(*AS*, p. 398)

Marisa Coulter conquers the Spectres and Metatron thanks to her corrupted soul, but her deceptive nature is so ingrained that she is able even to deceive herself thanks to her great capacity for self-control (“And she knew that her nature would have to answer for her”, *AS*, p. 398). Like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, this woman is well aware of her nature, and does not intend to change it, but to use it to her own advantage for one last sacrifice. After discovering what Lyra’s real role in the whole affair is, the woman hides the girl for a while in a cave and forces her into a drugged sleep. Despite this violent act, Lyra’s sleep is important for the development of the plot, thanks to which she understands what her destiny is, just as when Satan first tempts Eve in a dream at the end of Book IV of *Paradise Lost*.³² In that moment, Mrs Coulter ponders her loyalty: continuing to support the Magisterium would mean killing her daughter – the New Eve who will bring again sin and death; while protecting her daughter would mean antagonising the most powerful organization on Earth. It is not actually certain whether Mrs Coulter wants to prevent Lyra from succeeding in her mission or simply prevent her from being harmed.³³ However, despite the fact that she physically repressed her daughter and even considered killing her,³⁴ the woman seems to have become somewhat attached to Lyra. Certainly, her affection is not the best example of motherly love, but during the whole of the saga, Mrs Coulter manages to save Lyra’s life more than once.

Thus, Mrs Coulter manages to seduce even the Regent of heaven. From her statements before the fight against Metatron, it seems that she is acting to protect her daughter and to ensure that she fulfils her destiny. She affirms she lied all her life to be

³² Robinson, p. 12.

³³ Robinson, p. 13.

³⁴ Tóth, Zsuzsanna, “Dreadful Monsters or Self-sacrificing Parents? Satanic Characters in Philip Pullman’s Trilogy, *His Dark Materials*”, *The Round Table, Partium Journal of English Studies*, 3 (2013), no pagination.

ready for that fight so that the usurping angel would not see within her the shred of love for her daughter that was growing up amid all the evil she committed (“I wanted him to find no good in me, and he didn’t. There is none. But I love Lyra”, *AS*, p. 405). Given her proud and cunning nature, it is natural that the thing Marisa fears most in the world is oblivion (“I can’t bear the thought of oblivion”, *AS*, p. 381), but perhaps that is precisely the reason why she sacrifices herself to allow Lyra/Eve to fall into temptation. If she does not defeat Metatron, tyranny and oblivion will live for eternity, and although she falls into the void of the Abyss along with Asriel and the usurper angel, she puts aside her fear to protect Dust. As scholar Zsuzsanna Tóth affirms, Mrs Coulter is one of those characters who remain faithful to herself until the end despite her evolution throughout the trilogy.³⁵ Indeed, it remains unclear whether Marisa Coulter sacrificed herself to protect her daughter or to prevent oblivion from reigning forever. In any case, she allowed the temptation of Eve to take place, thus confirming her satanic role within *His Dark Materials*.

3.3.3 Lord Asriel

The next characteristic of Satan that I will now analyse is the rebellious spirit and ambition that drove the leader of the fallen angels to lead an insurrection against God or, in the case of *His Dark Materials*, against the Authority. As much as Satan’s seductive abilities are indeed peculiar to the Devil, what most distinguishes this figure is his determination to accomplish an unthinkable as well as impossible feat, that is, to oust God to take His place. In Pullman’s trilogy, this characteristic is represented by two different figures, the first of which is Lord Asriel. However, if in *Paradise Lost* the act of rebellion is led by the ambition to take the divine power of the Almighty, in *His*

³⁵ Tóth, “Dreadful Monsters or Self-sacrificing Parents?”, no pagination.

Dark Materials Asriel does not seem to have a desire for power (which is what his contender Metatron aspires to), but he only aims to permanently destroy the tyranny in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Lord Asriel is not introduced at first as Lyra's father, but as her uncle who occasionally visits her at Jordan College after spending months doing research in the Arctic. From the outset, therefore, he proves to be a detached figure – almost indifferent to what happens to his daughter³⁶ – and completely focused on his work. In fact, he rarely appears in the books, but he is one of the first important characters we get to know when we start reading *The Golden Compass*. During a private meeting at Jordan College, while Lyra is hiding in a wardrobe eavesdropping, Asriel presents his recent findings to the academics. Thanks to a special instrument, he discovered that elementary particles called “Dust” are attracted to adults more than to children; with the same instrument, he saw a city through the northern lights. After obtaining funding for his work, Asriel returns to the North and does not reappear until Lyra and her friend Roger join him at the end of the first volume. At this point, the man seems happier to see Lyra's friend than his daughter: this is because he needs a child to go on with his research. Through the cruel practice of intercision, in fact, Asriel discovered that the cut between human and dæmon releases a large amount of energy, an energy which the man intends to use to rip the fabric of the universe and create a path to the city in the aurora.

When Lord Asriel brutally murders Roger to create a bridge between parallel universes (“Over the dark abyss, [...] a bridge of wondrous length / From hell continued reaching the utmost orb / Of this frail world”, *PL*, II, 1027-1030), he finally shows himself for what he is: a man willing to do anything to achieve his ends, just like Satan. According to what Asriel says to Marisa, it seems that his aim is to find the source of

³⁶ Tóth, “Dreadful Monsters or Self-sacrificing Parents?”, no pagination.

Dust and destroy it (*GC*, p. 396), but it turns out at the beginning of *The Subtle Knife* that he is “aiming a rebellion against the highest power of all” (*SK*, p. 46).

The Church teaches that some of the angels rebelled before the world was created, and got flung out of heaven and into hell. They failed, you see, that’s the point. They couldn’t do it. And they had the power of angels. *Lord Asriel is just a man, with human power, no more than that. But his ambition is limitless. He dares to do what men and women don’t even dare to think.* And look what he’s done already: he’s torn open the sky, he’s opened the way to another world. Who else has ever done that? Who else could think of it?

(*SK*, p. 47)

What the Church refers to are the events recounted by the prophet Isaiah and Revelation in the Bible (AKJV, Isaiah 14:12-15; AKJV, Revelation 12:7-9), where the rebellion of Satan and his companions to be equal to God is mentioned. This means that if Asriel is against the Authority, then he does not intend to destroy Dust as he affirms to Marisa, but he wants just the opposite. In the case of Pullman’s trilogy, the rebel angels are acting against a tyrant, and their leader – the satanic Asriel – must be prepared to sacrifice everything in front of his troops, even if it means sacrificing his own daughter³⁷ or her innocent friend Roger. It is not a coincidence that Asriel’s name is “an alternative spelling of Azrael, the angel in Jewish and Muslim mythology who severs the soul from the body; that is, the angel of death”.³⁸ Asriel cuts Roger off from his *dæmon* (soul), but this murder is in his opinion justifiable for the greater good.³⁹ Not by chance, Lord Asriel’s *dæmon* is a snow leopard, for it represents leadership and strength, and at the same time ferocity and cruelty.⁴⁰ The fact that this man often conducts his research in the North and that his *dæmon* is an animal adapted to harsh climates suggests Asriel’s devilish nature, as the Arctic is Satan’s place⁴¹ and “all things from the north are devilish” (*AS*, p. 100).

³⁷ Rutledge, p. 122.

³⁸ Townsend, John Rowe, “Paradise Reshaped”, *The Horn Book Magazine*, July/Aug. (2002), p. 419.

³⁹ Freitas, King, p. 80.

⁴⁰ Tóth, “Dreadful Monsters or Self-sacrificing Parents?”, no pagination.

⁴¹ Fowler, pp. 145-146, n. 710.

However, the great deeds of this man do not end there. Once the path to a new world has been opened, Asriel proceeds with his goals without looking back and builds a fortress of gold and adamant on a mountain for his army (“Anon out of the earth a fabric huge / Rose like an exhalation [...] / Built like a temple, where pilasters round / Were set, and Doric pillars overlaid / With golden architrave”, *PL*, I, 710-715). Little by little, Lord Asriel gathers a large number of followers from across the universes: people who in their world were marginalized and persecuted by the forces of “their” Church.⁴² It should be noted that, unlike the council called by Satan in the Pandæmonium in Book II, the various commanders of Asriel’s army seem to play an active role in the final decisions. It is true that, in *Paradise Lost*, Moloch, Belial, Mammon, and Beëlzebub intervene freely, expressing their considerations in front of everyone, but – as I pointed out in section §1.3.1 – their speeches seem to follow a single logical reasoning as if it were a stream of Satan’s thoughts.⁴³ Moreover, once the Devil arrives to Pandæmonium from Eden in Book X, the other fallen angels were awaiting the news of the success of the mission without doing anything (“And all about found desolate; for those / Appointed to sit there, had left their charge, / Flown to the upper world; the rest were all / Far to the inland retired”, *PL*, X, 420-423). Instead, in the meetings called by Asriel everyone makes their own concrete contribution, such as sending spies or sharing information that others were not aware of. Lord Asriel thus manages to unite his huge army by a single purpose:

We are not colonialists. [...] We’re not going to invade the Kingdom, [...] but if the Kingdom invades us, they had better be ready for war, because we are prepared. [...] No kings, no bishops, no priests. The Kingdom of Heaven has been known by that name since the Authority first set himself above the rest of the angels. And we want no part of it. This world is different. *We intend to be free citizens of the Republic of Heaven.*

(*AS*, pp. 210-211)

⁴² Freitas, King, p. 81.

⁴³ Rudrum, pp. 23-24.

Lord Asriel wants to destroy the Authority and his Kingdom of tyranny to establish the Republic, where there will be no kings or bishops, but citizens of equal status. This man's army aims at freedom and knowledge to preserve Dust. However, even though Asriel is not acting for himself and has good intentions, "[his] great enterprise will fail in the end for the same reason" (*AS*, p. 363). As grand and unimaginable as Asriel's enterprise is, he will ultimately fail because his republic will be still imposed from above, that is, decided by the few who hold power.⁴⁴ Instead, the true Republic must be decided freely from below, by each individual, just as Milton intended to do with his countrymen.

Eventually, Asriel understands this, and lets his daughter defeat the Authority even though this undoubtedly costs him his pride and his life. All his life he thought he was the chosen one to free the universe from tyranny, but he finally recognizes that he has to step aside ("It's my daughter who has to live, and it's our task to keep all the forces of the Kingdom away from her", *AS*, p. 379). Contrary to what many scholars think, however, I do not believe that Asriel sacrificed himself for Lyra's sake. The man only agrees to protect his daughter after he has confirmation that the witches' prophecy has come true (after Lyra and Will freed the ghosts from the Land of the Dead), and that the child must therefore live to "fall into temptation" and renew the Dust. In other words, Asriel only begins to take Lyra seriously when he discovers that her plans coincide with his own.⁴⁵ It is unlikely that Asriel would have sacrificed himself for his daughter had she not been the object of the prophecy: this man considers himself too important to protect with his life "a perfectly ordinary child" (*AS*, p. 200). Therefore, it is quite likely that Asriel – like Marisa Coulter – also maintains his nature to the end. He never forgets his goal and makes sure that the temptation takes place. Lord Asriel

⁴⁴ Freitas, King, p. 82.

⁴⁵ Rutledge, p. 122.

has always put his pride first, so he does not sacrifice himself for the love of Lyra, but so that the Republic triumphs, to allow everyone to have their freedom. It is up to the reader to decide whether Asriel's act is benevolent or malevolent, but after all, a satanic character like him cannot be examined lightly.

3.3.4 Metatron

If Lord Asriel represents the part of Satan who, as in *Paradise Lost*, seeks to overthrow the Kingdom of God to make everyone equal, the angel Metatron represents the purely selfish side of Satan. As I mentioned in section §3.2, the Devil's personality in Milton's epic poem is very complex and his motivations are accompanied by a great sense of sadness and resignation. But, in all probability, Satan hides within himself a desire to obtain absolute power all for himself, as evidenced by his disappointment with the Father when He downgraded him below Christ. Satan's pride in not showing repentance leads to his Fall, but in Pullman's trilogy, it seems that the angel's ambition succeeded in bringing him to the throne. In this final section dedicated to the figure of the Devil in *His Dark Materials*, I will analyse the character of Metatron based more on the information transpiring from the trilogy.

Metatron appears physically only once at the end of the third volume, but we begin to know something about him throughout *The Amber Spyglass*. The first thing we need to know about him is that Metatron was once a man called Enoch: "the son of Jared, the son of Mahalalel, the son of Kenan, the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam" (*AS*, p. 399), as indeed it is written in Genesis. His name, therefore, comes from the Bible, where it is also said that "Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him" (AKJV, Genesis 5:24). This information is all the Bible tells us about this character since the Book of Enoch was banned from the canonical books of the

Bible. However, it seems that the figure of Enoch in Pullman's trilogy was inspired by Harold Bloom's *Omens of Millennium*,⁴⁶ in which Bloom interpreted some events in the Books of Enoch. Among other things, Bloom explained in his work Enoch's transformation from man to an angel, his ascension to become as powerful as God (the archangel Metatron), and above all his sexual affairs to mate with earthly women.⁴⁷ Philip Pullman constructed the antagonist of his fantasy saga based mainly on these characteristics.

As mentioned in section §2.2.3, humans may become angels after spending their lives on Earth. This is what happened to Enoch; after sixty-five years of life, "the Authority took [him] to his Kingdom" (*AS*, p. 399). Thanks to the First Angel's help, Enoch's spirit did not go to the Land of the Dead, but gradually became Regent of the Clouded Mountain as he shared the same desire for dominion with the alleged God. The Authority trusted Enoch – now called Metatron (from the Greek "he who stands next to the Throne")⁴⁸ – so much so that as the centuries passed, he delegated more and more powers to him. When the First Angel was old enough, Metatron deceived him and trapped him in a crystal box, and proclaimed himself the new Authority. In a way, the Regent's usurpation could be a hypothetical vision of how things would have been if Satan has succeeded in conquering the Father's throne for his own purposes.

"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 increasingly independent, so Metatron is going to intervene much more actively in human affairs. [...] The churches in every world are corrupt and weak, he thinks, they compromise too readily... He wants to set up a permanent inquisition in every world, run directly from the Kingdom".

(*AS*, p. 61)

⁴⁶ Gray, "Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth", p. 166.

⁴⁷ Bloom, Harold, *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection*, New York: Riverhead Books, 1996, pp. 46-48.

⁴⁸ Orlov, Andrei A., *The Enoch-Metatron Tradition*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005, p. 93.

According to this initial description of Metatron, the usurper angel is identified as “proud” and “ambitious”, which are the two adjectives Satan uses to describe himself at the beginning of Book IV.⁴⁹ From this point of view, Asriel and Metatron do not seem different: both have a “limitless ambition” that leads them to build a Republic and a Kingdom respectively, both want to impose a governmental system on the people, and both are willing to do anything to achieve their goals. However, Asriel can be redeemed because – despite his unscrupulous means – he wants to preserve Knowledge, while Metatron’s purpose is to destroy it in order to be the only thinking being in the universe. If Lord Asriel loses the battle against Metatron, the latter will intervene directly in human life, establishing a permanent Inquisition worse than any initiative taken by the old Authority or the Church (*AS*, pp. 373-374).

Metatron must be defeated, but it is not as easy as it may seem. Although it is claimed that angels in *His Dark Materials* are weaker than humans because they have no flesh, the usurping angel seems to have somehow retained his physical strength from when he was human (“He would not have been able to dominate the Kingdom unless he was very strong indeed, strong in every way. [...] Metatron would relish the combat, and win”, *AS*, p. 379). The reason why the Regent is more difficult to destroy can be explained by the fact that he himself has once been a man. This would demonstrate why the old angel who was the Authority disintegrates at the slightest breeze, whereas a furious fight is needed to defeat Metatron.⁵⁰ According to this logic, even the angel Baruch – who was once a man – should have retained the same physical strength, but probably the difference between Baruch and Metatron lies in the type of angelic rank they attain (Baruch claims to be a low-ranking angel in *AS*, p. 33).

⁴⁹ These lines (*PL*, IV, 37-44) have already been quoted in section §3.2.

⁵⁰ Holderness, Graham, “The Undiscovered Country: Philip Pullman and the ‘Land of the Dead’”, *Literature & Theology*, 21 (2007), p. 279.

However, the angels' greatest weakness is flesh: precisely because they lack it, they desire it so much that it is a sort of ecstasy for them.⁵¹ Angels greatly envy the strong bodies of human beings, and Metatron, in particular, longs for flesh. As the Regent himself states in *The Amber Spyglass*, Enoch loved all kinds of carnal pleasures, which is why he had so many wives when he was alive (*AS*, p. 399). Mrs Coulter knows for certain what the Regent craves and decides to use her seductive skills one last time to charm Metatron ("She trusted to her flesh, and to the strange truths she'd learned about angels [...]: lacking flesh", *AS*, p. 399). Lyra's mother then uses her innate ability to deceive Metatron with her lies, and the usurper angel is so completely captivated by Marisa that his only thought is to possess her (*AS*, p. 405). Despite the Regent's millennia of experience in deceiving other angels and reigning in all universes, his own ambitious and greedy nature is Metatron's undoing. In the case of Satan, his persistence in pursuing his goal of destruction can only make him an adversary of himself: his strength is also his weakness, and there is nothing that will ever make him feel worthy enough. It is no coincidence that the three characters who impersonate Satan in *His Dark Materials* fight with each other and fall together into the Abyss. In a sense, Coulter, Asriel, and Metatron represent the anti-Trinity in Pullman's saga (just as Satan, Sin, and Death are the anti-Trinity in *Paradise Lost*⁵²): the three become one when they go to their deaths by falling into the dark void.

3.4 The Abyss: the ultimate Fall of Satan

The scene in Book II of *Paradise Lost* in which Satan contemplates the abyss beneath him before embarking on his journey to Eden is symbolically important in interpreting the relationship between the Devil and oblivion in *His Dark Materials*.

⁵¹ Oram, p. 423.

⁵² Fowler, p. 152, n. 869-70.

Into this wild abyss,
The womb of nature and perhaps her grave,
Of neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire,
But all these in their pregnant causes mixed
Confusedly, and which thus must ever fight,
Unless the almighty maker them ordain
His dark materials to create more worlds,
Into this wild abyss the wary fiend
Stood on the brink of hell and looked awhile,
Pondering his voyage.

(*PL*, II, 910-919)

As I have explained in the Foreword, these lines connect Milton's epic poem with Pullman's trilogy, but – at this point of my analysis – on a narrative level this passage acquires another meaning related to Satan. The abyss can be both death and the cradle of life: a place where matter can aggregate to form new worlds and bodies or decompose at the command of the Almighty. Dark Matter (or Dust) arises from that infinite void, but the abyss is also the counterpart of matter, that is, the grave into which Dark Matter goes once its life cycle is over. This reasoning is also valid in Pullman's trilogy, where the contrast between Dust and Abyss can be explained in another way by the following formula:

Dust : Abyss = Consciousness : Oblivion.

In *His Dark Materials*, the Abyss is the embodiment of everything that destroys freedom and consciousness, and the Spectres are the emissaries of the Abyss who feed on adults' dæmons (made of Dust).⁵³ The real enemy of conscious beings is not Satan, but the unawareness of the existence of knowledge and freedom, and thus oblivion. Clearly, even the Devil is terrified of oblivion for himself: for a character as proud as he is, his great deeds cannot be thwarted. But Satan wants to exploit the power of the Abyss to rule over all universes without the risk of creating insurrections. In fact, if the Abyss sucked all the Dust from the worlds, "the universes [would] all become nothing more than interlocking machines, blind and empty of thought, feeling, life" (*GC*, p.

⁵³ Oram, p. 422.

310). However, the complexity of Satan's personality leads him – whether willingly or unwillingly – to offer human beings the possibility of knowing Good and Evil again. This is what happens during the final fight between Marisa, Asriel, and Metatron at the edge of the Abyss: Lyra's parents struggle to make their daughter fall into temptation (to preserve consciousness), but on the other hand, Metatron will stop at no obstacle to reign over the universes. Motivated by three different goals – to protect Lyra, to build the Republic, and to obtain absolute power – the two men and the woman engage in a furious fight to prevail over one another but, in the end, the collaboration between Marisa and Asriel succeeds in prevailing over the angel's strength, and they all fall together into the Abyss.

Satan's great endeavour, both in *Paradise Lost* and in *His Dark Materials*, is doomed to failure because his pride does not allow him to repent for his actions or recognise his fears and weaknesses, so it is not clear to him either what he really wants to achieve (“If Satan also be divided against himself, how shall his kingdom stand?”, AKJV, Luke 11:18). The eternal fall of Marisa, Asriel, and Metatron is a demonstration that Satan himself is the cause of his downfall, and the punishment for his boundless ambition is precisely oblivion (“and then your poor ghost would go on falling and falling into an infinite gulf, [...] forever conscious and forever falling”, *AS*, p. 359). In the scene in *Paradise Lost* in which Satan stops at the edge of the abyss before setting off on his journey, a bond is created between him and the dark void: a bond that will always drag the Devil to itself, locking him away for centuries to come (“And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, and cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up”, AKJV, Revelation 20:2-3). Satan's greatest enemy is oblivion, and the Abyss is his ultimate Fall.

After this comparative analysis between *Paradise Lost* and *His Dark Materials*, I still cannot state with certainty whether Pullman's trilogy is a retelling of Milton's epic poem, or a "What-If" story,⁵⁴ namely, an alternative version of a known story that uses a theoretical question as the basis for a new story ("What if Satan managed to get the better of God?"). Because in *His Dark Materials*, the Devil gives Eve the chance to fall into temptation, and Satan succeeds in conquering the throne of God, Pullman's trilogy is likely both a retelling and a "What-If" story. In both Milton's and Pullman's works there is a clash between the forces of the Kingdom and those of the Republic, and in both works Satan is the ideal character to represent this fight and the hypocrisy of institutions and authorities.

However, this does not mean that the figure of the Devil is necessarily an example to follow in rebelling against tyranny. In both works, Satan's endeavours are unquestionably ambitious and are apparently driven by a good reason, namely, to break down hierarchies in order to make people equal. The figure of the Devil shows us that it is right to rebel against what restricts people's freedom, but he is not the best example to follow because true rebellion must start with every single individual. Leaders often tend to act in sole pursuit of their personal ends, and they rarely follow the needs of the people: that is why Satan was for Milton the portrait of Charles I and Cromwell. However benevolent his intentions, Asriel also wanted to impose a republic, but it is precisely the fact of "imposing" something from above that is wrong. The Republic of Heaven can only be built by small everyday actions, by being curious, by being kind to others, and by helping people to live a full life. Each person must follow what their dæmon suggests (whose name, as noted above, recalls the word "demon"), for it is our soul, made of Dust, that makes us equal and divine, and it is our inner voice that guides

⁵⁴ "That involves speculation as to what might have been, had antecedent conditions been different; an instance of this" (from Oxford English Dictionary, "What-If, *adj.* and *n.*", what-if, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/228089?rkey=BXjqoi&result=2#eid>, accessed June 20, 2023).

us to freedom. Human beings are naturally made to be free, and – for what it is worth – it is thanks to Satan that we can realise this.

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ITALIAN SUMMARY

Nel momento in cui un lettore termina per la prima volta la lettura della trilogia di Philip Pullman, *His Dark Materials (Queste Oscure Materie)*, diventa subito chiara la correlazione che esiste tra gli avvenimenti di questa saga fantasy e la Genesi, ovvero il primo libro del testo sacro per eccellenza per i cristiani. Un po' meno chiara potrebbe essere invece la correlazione tra l'opera di Pullman col poema epico di John Milton, *Paradise Lost (Paradiso Perduto)*, ma, alla fine del terzo e ultimo volume della saga, Pullman rende giustizia a Milton nella sezione dei ringraziamenti, dove afferma di essersi ispirato alla sua opera. Il poema di Milton, infatti, approfondisce alcuni eventi della Bibbia e racconta la tentazione di Adamo ed Eva da un punto di vista diverso: quello di Satana.

Tra le varie analogie che sono presenti tra la trilogia di Pullman e il poema di Milton vi sono luoghi come il giardino dell'Eden, la fortezza del Diavolo e il sulfureo lago dell'inferno, ma vi sono anche gli stessi episodi come la guerra in Paradiso, la tentazione del serpente, la punizione per aver mangiato il frutto proibito e il conseguente esilio dal giardino. Inoltre, non si può fare a meno di notare le corrispondenze tra i personaggi della trilogia e quelli del poema: i due ragazzini protagonisti di *His Dark Materials* vestono i panni dei nuovi Eva e Adamo, i quali devono essere tentati dalle storie di una scienziata per preservare la conoscenza stessa, ma le forze della Chiesa e di Dio (che nella trilogia sono coloro che puntano al controllo totale degli esseri coscienti) vogliono impedire che il peccato originale si rinnovi per mantenere gli esseri viventi in costante obbedienza e senza la conoscenza del bene e del male. *His Dark Materials* si rivela fin da subito una riscrittura di *Paradise Lost* molto fedele e dettagliato anche per un lettore inconsapevole.

L'idea di questa tesi è nata quando, al termine della lettura, mi sono domandata quale personaggio impersonasse il Diavolo nella trilogia di Pullman. Nonostante la società occidentale sia abituata a pensare a Satana come la personificazione del puro male, Pullman ha voluto stravolgere il pensiero comune rendendo le istituzioni religiose e lo stesso Dio gli antagonisti della storia, mentre il serpente tentatore è stato rappresentato come portatore di saggezza e libertà dall'oppressione. Tuttavia, dopo una breve riflessione mi sono resa conto che in *His Dark Materials* vi è più di un personaggio dalla morale ambigua che poteva descrivere la psicologia di Satana. Ma prima che potessi affermare tutto ciò con sicurezza, era necessario esaminare prima le circostanze e le dinamiche di *Paradise Lost* (ovvero la fonte primaria della trilogia di Pullman) prima di provare a dare un giudizio definitivo sul Satana di Pullman.

Mentre leggevo il poema epico di Milton, mi sono subito accorta della rilevanza che l'autore dava ai pensieri e alle riflessioni del Diavolo. Oltre a ciò, mi hanno colpito soprattutto le accuse che Satana faceva nei confronti del Regno di Dio, incolpando il Padre di esercitare una tirannia sugli angeli, i quali gli obbedivano e lo lodavano come se fosse la loro unica ragione di esistenza. Per contro, il Diavolo voleva proporre una sorta di repubblica dove tutti gli angeli sarebbero stati liberi ed eguali, ma in verità ciò che avrebbe fatto non era altro che un tentativo di prendere il posto di Dio per regnare su tutto il Creato. Essendo la dicotomia tra monarchia e repubblica un altro tema di *His Dark Materials*, ho deciso di studiare in dettaglio la lotta intrapresa da Satana per l'uguaglianza tra gli esseri viventi.

Per la stesura del primo capitolo mi sono dedicata alla lettura di saggi riguardanti la teologia di *Paradise Lost*, e molti di essi riportavano episodi storico-culturali dell'epoca di Milton. Perciò ho deciso di redigere un breve excursus storico per contestualizzare meglio il pensiero dell'autore prima di concentrarmi sul poema vero e

proprio. Effettivamente, il particolare periodo storico dello scrittore nel quale si tentò di instaurare una repubblica in Inghilterra aveva molte corrispondenze con gli episodi trascritti nel poema epico: il governo del Lord Protettore Oliver Cromwell dimostrò che un sistema politico imposto dall'alto non poteva essere in alcun modo duraturo, e che il vero problema risiedeva nella popolazione inconsapevole del proprio status. In seguito, un ulteriore studio sul rapporto tra Milton e le fedi religiose ha dimostrato che il poeta perse negli anni la fiducia nelle istituzioni religiose, in quanto esse contribuivano alla limitazione della libertà delle persone. Stabilite queste premesse, ho potuto in seguito analizzare *Paradise Lost* sotto una luce diversa. La scelta delle fonti per la stesura del poema epico è una prova iniziale di come Milton volesse distaccarsi in ogni modo dalla cultura monarchica del suo paese per rivendicare la libertà di espressione. Prima di concentrarmi sulle caratteristiche di Dio, gli angeli, e le istituzioni religiose descritti in *Paradise Lost*, ho voluto confrontare le due monarchie presenti nel poema. In breve, la monarchia di Dio consiste in una gerarchia perfetta dove gli angeli si collocano volontariamente nei vari gradini e si sottomettono al Padre per adorare le Sue creazioni, ma Satana è convinto che questo sistema sia troppo forzato e limitativo, soprattutto nei suoi confronti. Perciò, il Diavolo convince alcuni angeli a schierarsi dalla sua parte per ribellarsi al Regno di Dio, facendo leva sul fatto che tutti loro ignorano come sia in realtà avvenuta la Creazione e che il Padre potrebbe per questo non essere il vero Creatore. Una volta sconfitto, però, Satana si autoproclama il Signore dell'Inferno, raggiungendo così parzialmente il suo obiettivo di essere al di sopra di tutti gli altri, anche se ciò non è ancora abbastanza per lui. L'unica vera monarchia che può esistere è quella di Dio, mentre per tutte le altre creature l'unico sistema conforme può essere solo la repubblica, poiché il Signore creò gli uomini eguali.

Nel secondo capitolo ho messo momentaneamente da parte *Paradise Lost* per cominciare ad analizzare Philip Pullman e *His Dark Materials*. Per prima cosa, ho voluto fare un po' di ricerche sull'autore e sul suo rapporto con la religione: nonostante egli sia dichiaratamente ateo e nella sua trilogia abbia cercato in ogni modo di sminuire l'immagine tradizionale di Dio, la stessa conclusione della sua storia rivela involontariamente una vicinanza al pensiero cristiano. La sua concezione panenteista della "Polvere" ("Dust") che pervade tutto il cosmo pone da una parte tutti gli esseri coscienti sullo stesso piano, rendendoli eguali e divini, e d'altra parte questo concetto rende in un certo senso Dio onnipresente. Quello che Pullman voleva affermare era che la Polvere (la prova concreta del peccato originale) è cosa buona, e che Satana è colui che ha permesso agli esseri umani la possibilità di vivere una vita consapevole e in modo egualitario. Perciò, se Satana è colui che voleva aiutare l'umanità, Dio e i suoi seguaci sono coloro che volevano sottomettere tutti gli esseri sotto il loro dominio totalitario. Per questo motivo, ho concluso il secondo capitolo esaminando le caratteristiche dell'Autorità, della sua schiera di angeli e delle istituzioni religiose sulla Terra comparandole con quelle di *Paradise Lost*. Essendo questi tre elementi tre diverse manifestazioni del potere tirannico di Dio in *His Dark Materials*, ho pensato che per capire meglio Satana fosse necessario analizzare le sue controparti.

Infine, nel terzo e ultimo capitolo mi sono concentrata finalmente sulla figura del Diavolo. Nel primo paragrafo, ho analizzato brevemente il Satana di *Paradise Lost*, e mi sono subito resa conto che questo personaggio presenta caratteristiche simili a quelle umane. Il Diavolo di Milton è una figura orgogliosa e molto ambiziosa: qualità che non gli permettono né di pentirsi delle sue azioni, né di rinunciare ai suoi obiettivi, e nemmeno di accettare la realtà. Satana è assetato di potere per sé stesso, a dispetto di quello che afferma di fronte alla sua schiera di angeli ai quali aveva promesso un mondo

pieno di uguaglianza. A tal proposito, una delle prime caratteristiche con cui il Diavolo viene presentato nella Bibbia è la sua abilità nell'ingannare gli altri e la sua seduttività. Nella Genesi, infatti, è implicito il fatto che il serpente che tenta Adamo ed Eva sia in realtà lo stesso Satana. Nella mia tesi, però, ho voluto distinguere il Diavolo dal rettile, in quanto ritenevo che quest'ultimo fosse innocente e un semplice strumento dell'angelo ribelle. Detto ciò, ho raccolto le tre principali caratteristiche del Satana di Milton che mi sarebbero serviti per poter descrivere il Satana di *His Dark Materials*, ovvero l'abilità di persuasione, l'animo ribelle, e l'orgoglio smisurato.

Data la complessità del personaggio del Diavolo in *Paradise Lost*, è probabile che Pullman abbia voluto attribuire le maggiori qualità di Satana a tre diversi personaggi nella sua trilogia. In relazione all'abilità di seduzione, anche in questo caso ho distinto il personaggio che nella saga copre il ruolo di "serpente" (la scienziata Mary Malone) dal personaggio che effettivamente usa il suo fascino per ottenere ciò che vuole (la signora Coulter). In *His Dark Materials*, il serpente è una figura fondamentale nella sconfitta della tirannia, ed è portatore di libertà e conoscenza. Egli è del tutto innocente a differenza della signora Coulter, la quale sacrifica la vita di bambini per raggiungere i suoi scopi. Invece, per quanto riguarda l'orgoglio e l'ambizione, vi sono due figure nella trilogia che rappresentano queste qualità: Lord Asriel e il Reggente Metatron. Il primo è colui che è riuscito a costruire un ponte tra i mondi e a radunare un grande esercito per guidarlo in una rivolta contro l'Autorità e costruire una Repubblica, mentre il secondo è un uomo diventato angelo che ha tradito Dio per prendere il suo posto e governare su tutti i mondi.

La signora Coulter, Lord Asriel e Metatron sono i tre personaggi di *His Dark Materials* che rappresentano in tre diversi modi la natura di Satana, ma tutti e tre hanno una cosa in comune: la paura dell'oblio. L'ultimo elemento che ho voluto analizzare è il

rapporto tra Satana e l'Abisso; di come l'oblio sia il miglior alleato del Diavolo ma anche il suo peggior nemico. Nel libro dell'Apocalisse viene descritta la definitiva disfatta di Satana dopo essere imprigionato nell'Abisso, e anche in *His Dark Materials* tutti e tre i personaggi che rappresentano il Diavolo cadono infine in quel vuoto infinito. L'oblio è il destino di Satana, la definitiva punizione per il suo orgoglio smisurato, ed è proprio questo che lo porterà alla rovina del suo Regno e di sé stesso.

Alla fine di questa tesi, sono giunta alla conclusione che, nonostante la figura di Satana sia per Milton e Pullman il personaggio ideale per rappresentare l'ipocrisia e gli abusi di potere delle autorità politiche e religiose, non è tuttavia il perfetto esempio da seguire per ribellarsi a un sistema ingiusto e limitativo. La vera Repubblica dei Cieli non può essere imposta da un singolo leader, ma deve essere costruita da ogni individuo attraverso la curiosità e l'empatia. Il nostro "demone interiore" ci può guidare alla libertà e all'uguaglianza, ma è la coscienza donataci da Satana che ci pone dei limiti, impedendoci di agire passivamente cadendo nell'oblio.

