



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Triennale Interclasse in
Lingue, Letterature e Mediazione culturale (LTLLM)
Classe LT-12

Tesina di Laurea

Cosmogony and Theocracy in Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials

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n° matr.2047297 / LTLLM

Anno Accademico 2023 / 2024

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FOREWORD

His Dark Materials is so much more than a complex young adult fantasy trilogy regarding the voyage young Lyra embarks on towards sexual and moral maturity. The Bildungsroman aspect is surely a fundamental tenet of the series; however, religion and faith play an even greater role into the establishment of the moral message the author aims to impart to his young readers. The story of the young girl who is forced by destiny and the high expectations of others to fight to make her way in a grown men-centred world to dismantle the unfairness of the old autocracy and lead winds of change to blow, is skilfully crafted both to spread empowering messages of self-determination and life-affirmation and to debunk the monotheistic religion myth our society has kept for hundreds of years to blindly buy into. Monotheistic religions' doctrine, with special reference to Christianity, heavily imbues the pages of *His Dark Materials*, a set of values so deeply rooted into the fictional making of this cosmos that the young protagonist must go to great lengths to eradicate them, heralding in their stead the inclusive philosophy of Dust. To portray a clearly Christian-inspired world, Pullman had to draw from the Bible, specifically Genesis, and from classical literature sources, which, as he himself did, attempted more vividly to rewrite the Christian canonical myth of origin, namely *Paradise Lost*.

The main purpose of this thesis is to conduct a thorough analysis of the universe of *His Dark Materials*, tracing all of Pullman's innovative takes on life, religion and spirituality back to their original sources, whether they be Greek cultural heritage, pantheism or Genesis. To do so I have divided this thesis into three chapters, each one designated to dwell on one macro topic pertinent to the creation of the fictional universe. I began by first drafting the way Pullman developed the concept and moved on to the possible influences and moral weight these choices carry in the economy of the series. In the first chapter I have analysed how much the structure

holding power in the trilogy resembles the one of hierarchical Christian religion, drawing strong parallels between the power-hungry Magisterium, the theocracy which reigns over it, and the organised religions of our world, with their way of exerting control over their unsuspecting worshippers through guilt. I have then located the three occasions when a Fall occurs in the saga, when temptation overcomes and sin flourishes, linking them to the true meaning of original sin Pullman adopts for his novels: desire to know more about oneself and always strive for individual betterment. I have addressed in the end the alleged antichristian criticism, proving how Pullman is in truth aligned with the core values of Christianity, strongly disapproving only of the decadence and corruption that fester in the Church of today. In the second chapter I have dwelt on the angelic figures who are of some significance in the ruling theocracy of the secluded Clouded Mountain, outlining how each is inextricably interwoven to Lyra's rise to adulthood and highlighting the differences and similarities with their biblical counterparts. Finally, in the third chapter I have delved into the concept of Dust, the true creator of Pullman's universe, picking up on the premises I had laid out in previous chapters. I reconnect Dust to her Miltonic predecessor Chaos, to then tackle the problem of the Abyss and how its relentless spreading poses the strongest environmental threat to the universe of *His Dark Materials*. I have then given an overview of humanity most trusted companions, daemons, and how they fit into the vast system of spirituality Pullman devised.

Pullman never leaves details to chance; everything is carefully thought out to convey the exact effect he wants to achieve, therefore even the seemingly most useless notion must be kept into account to outline an accurate assessment of his intents and purposes. From the Mulefa and their struggle with the ongoing loss of sraf to the imprisoned ghosts in the land of the dead; from the Authority and the war on several fronts waged against his prolonged tyranny to Lyra's journey towards self-discovery and sexual emancipation mysteriously connected to the ever-present entity of Dust; everything is laid out to define at the end a number of core

values Pullman intends to educate his young readers on. His burning desire to preach what, in his mind, is the right way to live outdoes the plot itself, which, putting aside the original setting and worldbuilding, is a classical coming-of-age story, a rewriting of the Fall of the primordial couple, in which a new Eve takes on the leading role to carry the emancipation started by her predecessor even further, and topple the oppressive system which stifled her feminine creativity. Even though this Eve succeeds in freeing the world from utter ignorance and servile obedience, she still must endure the ultimate sacrifice, separation from her loved one, setting the example of a life dedicated to the safeguarding of the human community, for whom one must set aside any kind of egotistical desire.

CHAPTER 1

Philip Pullman: an endless fight against organised religion

1.1 *His Dark Materials* and its theological implications

Pullman's universe significantly draws upon real and contemporary Christian imagery, merging actual elements from both Catholic and Protestant religions to create a carefully devised world on the cusp between fantasy and reality. The trilogy's Church features the worst aspects of the aforementioned confessions: Catholic absolutism and its unfaltering belief in the righteousness of the doctrine and Protestant zealotry exploited as means to ensure theocratic control.¹ The trilogy makes the reader acquainted with several worlds, some of which display remarkable similarities to our own reality; all, however, feature differences which at first glance may appear insignificant but actually hold deeper meaning and purpose. In Lyra's world, for instance, the Reformation took a different course, and the reformer John Calvin became pope and transferred the seat of the papacy to Geneva. This lesser detail may elude attention, it is purposely provided though to ensure that the reading public will draw specific and predetermined conclusions regarding the Magisterium. Mrs. Coulter explicitly mentions the means to which the Church is willing to resort to reach their long-dreamt goal of purging the earth of the original sin: killing children. Furthermore, she claims that the killing is backed by historical circumstances which are not equivalent to those we are accustomed with: "Killing is not difficult for them; Calvin himself ordered the deaths of children" (AS, 586). Pope John Calvin in this fictional reality allowed the massacre of innocent children he believed to be heretics, an event which clearly references the biblical myth of the nefarious slaughter of the

¹ MacNeil, William, "His Dark Legalities: Intellectual Property's Psychomachia in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* Trilogy", *Liverpool Law Review*, 38 (2017), p 19.

innocents ordered by king Herod.² One may assume that the Oblation Board members firmly believe their crusade to be fully justified, given the historical precedents set by the Church. Pullman by changing the course of history in his parallel universe can successfully depict the zealots power bearers as despicable enemies, thus justifying his hatred of them. His goal is to draw irrefutable strong parallels with the most renowned monotheistic religion, Christianity, and use these to warn our contemporary society of the dangers religious fundamentalists threaten it with. Pullman is not against the existence of a higher being per se, but against humans who try to claim divine authority for themselves and use it for evil purposes. Such individuals establish in time authoritarian systems of thought conceived to enslave their followers, otherwise known as theocracies, which foster restraint on bodily pleasures and persecution aimed at those who do not adhere to the socially embraced code of conduct.³

The Authority's attack on humanity is two-sided and concerns both the body and the soul. The Magisterium commits unbelievable violence against innocent children by conducting a medical procedure known as intercision, a process by which a victim's soul is forcibly separated from his or her body. Even in death, humankind is not safe: the Authority constructed a barren wasteland, resembling the Fields of Asphodel, in which the deceased must remain, wandering about for all eternity. The strict led Magisterium obviously resembles the pyramidal power structure of the Vatican Church, with the Oblation Board subtly referencing the Nazi experiments carried out on children on concentration camps or the church-approved castration procedures on young boys to employ them indefinitely in church choirs.⁴ On the other hand, there is no reference in the whole trilogy to Jesus Christ, or at least to his possible fictional counterpart, his teachings and loving character would not have fitted well with Pullman's

² Jacobs, Alan, "The Devil's Party", <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/magazine/364737/the-devils-party/> (accessed March 20, 2024).

³ Tucker, Nicholas, *Darkness Visible: Inside the World of Philip Pullman*, London: Wizard Books, 2007, p. 128.

⁴ Tucker, pp. 127-130.

picture of Christianity.⁵

God, along other abstract and insubstantial constructs like souls, ghosts and angels, has been made physical with the sole purpose of turning the unchanging and immortal entity into a killable being.⁶ The regent of heaven in *His Dark Materials* is neither omnipotent nor omnipresent, thus subverting the biblical theological principles that have him so described, and bears more resemblance to the devilish ruler of hell than to his Christian counterpart. Pullman intentionally twists and inverts traditional Christian dogmas in his narrative to convey a more personal and propagandistic message, meant to tackle the issue of the organised religion's grasp on the minds of millions of believers.

The Authority lays no actual claim to being the ruler of the cosmos, he⁷ is not endowed with any sort of superior attribute or godlike predisposition, he surged to the role by chance, because he was merely the first angel to be born out of Dust. Pullman by placing such a weak and ill-suited entity on throne of the entire universe and having beforehand drawn strong and indisputable parallels to the Christian religion of our world, implicitly undermines the authority and legitimacy of the biblical God. The cosmos itself runs independently from the Authority, it is a separate being with a volition of its own, and both the Authority and all other conscious beings came into being from the same primordial substance, Dust, whose origin Pullman leaves deliberately unexplained. The depicted God is no creator or demiurge, it is not according to his designs that the universe was originally shaped, matter occupies this position. Throughout the whole trilogy readers can clearly grasp the true intentions of the author: killing the Christian God in the minds of the reading public, stripping him of any moral high ground and replacing him with a more tangible and all-inclusive deity. This deity is called Dust, an all-embracing,

⁵ Jacobs, online.

⁶ Padley Jonathan, Padley Kenneth, "A Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven': *His Dark Materials*, Inverted Theology, and the End of Philip Pullman's Authority", *Children's Literature in Education*, 37(4) (2006), p. 328.

⁷ From now on I will address the Authority as a male entity, adhering to the choice of pronouns implemented in *His Dark Materials*.

benevolent being, the source of any intelligent creature's consciousness.⁸ The angel Balthamos says:

Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself. Matter loves matter. It seeks to know more about itself, and Dust is formed. The first angels condensed out of Dust and the Authority was the first of all. (AS, 472)

Matter is in the end the cradle of existence. At the centre of religious life there should not be a made-up God, to whom we carelessly address all our pleas and wishes, but the individual, the pinnacle of the evolution, where both matter and Dust reside. Pullman has never expressed hostility towards the religious impulse, which in his own words is “the sense of awe and mystery we feel when we look at the universe, the urge to find a meaning and a purpose in our lives, our sense of moral kinship with other human beings”⁹ and Mary Malone becomes the fictional embodiment of the author's heartfelt respect. Mary terribly misses Christianity, misses the “sense of being connected to the whole of the universe,” and being “connected to God” (AS, 731). The loneliness of atheism actively hurts her, losing God meant that she had disconnected herself from the “sense that the whole universe was alive, and that everything was connected to everything else by threads of meaning” (AS, 732). She feels at loss, wandering a universe without a purpose, a purpose previously given to her by religious devotion. Although this blind belief was one of her biggest driving forces in life she was still willing to put it aside, she openly rejected Christianity and her religious call to become faithful to something even greater, namely the cult of earthly life, the worship of the here and now as opposed to the treacherous deity's void promise of eternal afterlife in heaven. The rules and truths forced upon her by the Church were stifling her, she wanted to use the rigorous discipline of science to unveil the hidden mysteries of the universe, but ultimately realised that science

⁸ Tóth, Zsuzsanna, “Who are God's Enemies? Religious Debates on Philip Pullman's Trilogy, *His Dark Materials*”, in Zoltán Peterecz, Judit Szathmári, András Tamóc, ed., *Trends in American Culture in the Post-1960s Period: Proceedings of the 9th Biennial Conference of the Hungarian Association of American Studies*, Eger: Líceum Kiadó, 2013, p. 176.

⁹ Pullman in Tóth, *Who are God's Enemies? Religious Debates on Philip Pullman's Trilogy, His Dark Materials*, p. 172.

alone is not enough, there are limitations to what your rational mind can achieve, an open mindset prone to the unearthly is always needed. Mary is an ambivalent character and successfully portrays the anti-religious and atheistic stance of the author, who does not repudiate the idea that a higher will may exist somewhere in the outer universe, but firmly believes that this entity is not the one worshipped by organised monotheistic religions.¹⁰ Pullman empathizes with the human's natural quest for purpose and knowledge, and repeatedly advocates for the free pursuit of them, elements he deems key for the conscious development of oneself.¹¹ This search for one's fitting place in the universe is spoiled when an organised religion of whatever kind seeks to channel your bewilderment into a cause beneficial to them. They do not teach people to think for themselves, but rather teach them what they should think. The angel Baruch reports that:

The Authority considers that conscious beings of every kind have become dangerously independent [...] He wants to set up a permanent inquisition in every world. (AS, 494)

The Magisterium led by the puppet Authority and by its general Metatron aims to put an end to this essential hunt for knowledge. The church wants to prevent a world dominated by fully developed and consciously aware individuals who could notice the unwilling shackles they live with and attempt to gain their freedom. This is the reason why it is the Oblation Board's sole mission to deny children the opportunity to develop toward sexual and mental maturity, turning them into adult automata, irrevocably alienated from their humanity. The Church here is more akin to a totalitarian regime than to an organised religion; its main concern is not worship but, as Anne-Marie Bird claims, "to eradicate those elements that might threaten its absolute power, namely, individuality, liberty, and human consciousness".¹²

¹⁰ Chantal, Oliver, "Mocking God and Celebrating Satan: Parodies and Profanities in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*", *Children's Literature in Education*, 43 (2012), p 298.

¹¹ Wood, Naomi, "Paradise Lost and Found: Obedience, Disobedience, and Storytelling in C. S. Lewis and Philip Pullman", *Children's Literature in Education*, 32 (2001), p. 239.

¹² Bird, Anne-Marie, "Without Contraries is no Progression": Dust as an All-Inclusive, Multifunctional Metaphor in Philip Pullman's "*His Dark Materials*", *Children's Literature in Education*, 32 (2001), p. 118.

For thousands of years Christianity has taught its followers the same recursive truth: that God is omniscient, and allowed evils to exist because his judgment is correct no matter what, his divine knowledge of all things that were and will be is absolute. His followers in time learned the consequences of questioning that truth. The premise of *His Dark Materials* lies in exposing an alternative reality of religious history: there is no reason to blindly accept God's truth, especially considering all the atrocities committed in his name. Those who decide to remain ignorant and thoughtlessly pledge themselves to the service of an ill-intentioned monotheistic organised religion are a cancer to civilization, and the reason for its eventual demise.

1.2 A rewriting of the biblical Fall

The Fall marks a unique and defining moment for humankind, it led to the birth of the original sin and the loss of Eden and of the first couple's privileged position in it. For the Christian church in our world and the Magisterium in Lyra's the Fall is portrayed as the worst possible outcome of the primordial fight between the omnipotent God and his law-defying subject Satan. Adam and Eve had been God-fearing creatures destined to spend their eternal life frolicking without a care in the ever-green meadows of Eden; they knew no hunger, had no needs as long as they did not fall into the temptation of eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. Having failed to overthrow God's authority during the war in heaven, Satan aims to attack God indirectly through his creatures pushing them to eat the forbidden fruit, and thus gifting them with knowledge and awareness. Having disobeyed the orders of the almighty Father, the primordial couple is banished from Eden and becomes tarnished with the stain of the original sin, a stain passed down to all generations to come that will inevitably bring pain, loss and suffering.

In *His Dark Materials* the Fall is a key episode that will revolutionise more than once the entire shape of the cosmos. Laura Feldt brilliantly underlines how in Pullman's trilogy not just one Fall but three are narrated, each happening in a different world and involving different protagonists.¹³ No matter their substantial differences they all hold dear the same set of values advocated by the author: freedom, consciousness and suffering.

The first Fall is the closest to the biblical version and can be considered a direct quotation, bearing though subtle differences from the original as it can be seen in the following example:

But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. 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 daemons shall assume their true forms, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. (GC, 229)

From the short extract we can evince multiple relevant elements: the shift between the pre- and post-lapsarian state brings daemons to assume their true final form, and what is to gain from the Fall is knowledge, self-awareness and the ability to distinguish between good and evil, all features promised by the serpent to grant godhood. This explicit link between the Fall of Man and the change of a daemon into its permanent form, will in the future lead the Magisterium to label children as pure and innocent (their daemon changes constantly and therefore the bearer has not reached sexual and intellectual maturity) and adolescents instead as victims of the original sin, doomed to a corruption strictly tied to self-knowledge and sexual desire. The ruling power of Lyra's world, strongly subjected to the will of the Authority, interprets the episode as extremely problematic, humans should have never gained freedom of thought, they traded loyalty to a benevolent ruler and an idyllic life for disobedience, lust and sinfulness. The Magisterium's newfound purpose is to prevent such a descent into sin from happening to

¹³ Feldt, Laura, "Fantasising the Fall - Reception and Transformation of Genesis 3 in Philip Pullman's Fantasy Trilogy *His Dark Materials*", in K. Nielsen, ed. *Receptions and Transformations of the Bible*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2009, p. 51.

children whose daemon has not yet stabilized, by making “a little cut, and then everything’s peaceful. For ever! [...] dæmons bring all sorts of troublesome thoughts and feelings, and that’s what lets Dust in” (GC, 179). The Church’s intention is to permanently halt the natural process of individual growth by cutting away the soul, stripping the body of its physical manifestation; the daemon, thus, as Bird says, “rendering mind and body separate entities”.¹⁴ The extent of the emotional damage the child suffers is incalculable: the individual remains alive, but the body is left wandering the earth without what made it human in the first place, without subjectivity, humanity, a husk of their former selves ready to be properly guided by the hands of a magisterium that so carefully crafted it. This devious procedure is officially carried out to eradicate Dust from the world, hindering with each intercision its worldwide spreading. The biblical quote:

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 shalt thou return
(Genesis, 3:19)

holds according to Asriel the reason why Dust and the original sin are connected. Some “church scholars” claimed that the actual meaning is “thou shalt be subject to dust” (GC, 230), implying that our own nature dictates us to lead sorrowful and sinful lives, which are unavoidable consequences of our intimate relationship with dust.

The second mention of a Fall occurs when Mary Malone is talking to the female Mulefa Atal about Dust and is related to the Mulefa origin myth. As Feldt states, it is an “alternative version of the Fall story itself, much resembling an indigenous myth [...] a re-interpretation of the received Fall story”.¹⁵

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.” [...] 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

¹⁴ Bird, p. 117.

¹⁵ Feldt, p. 54.

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, 596-97)

This version of the Fall provides the reading public all the necessary information to rightfully interpret the original sin/Dust/sraf. It is neither a curse, nor a punishment carefully delivered by an enraged divine being, it is a gift, one which grants rebirth and turns pre-conscious individuals to awaked ones, endowed with memory and self- and world-recognition.¹⁶ Dust, in the universe of *His Dark Materials*, does not bestow consciousness upon every sentient being, something is required of them, a strong innate desire to know more about oneself, to become wise and know good from evil.¹⁷ An everlasting urge to know always more, to aim for intellectual betterment, the same urge all of us felt when adolescence commenced, and we started our journey to becoming fully developed individuals with our own opinions. Fitzsimmons describes “the mulefa myth [...] as the negation of the Christian/Magisterium myth”.¹⁸

This alternative Fall narrative displays striking differences compared to the original Old Testament version. There is no divine authority, no prohibition, temptation or transgression or any sort of reference to food or sex. What clearly resembles the Christian biblical episode is the presence of the snake, whose role here is not that of a tempter but of a counsellor, an initiator of events, which pointed the unnamed female Mulefa towards the path of remembrance and meaningful existence.¹⁹ Atal clearly states that the discovery of sraf radically changed for the better the history of her species, it actually brought history and its recording into existence: “Ever since we have had the sraf, we have had memory and wakefulness. Before that, we remembered nothing.” (AS, 596-97). The serpent in the trilogy is not portrayed as the evil

¹⁶ Feldt, p. 55.

¹⁷ 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), pp. 222-223.

¹⁸ Fitzsimmons, p. 222.

¹⁹ Feldt, p. 55.

tempter, the animal form of the rebel angel Lucifer, who purposely deceived Eve to exert his revenge on God, but as a benevolent force with no negative moral connotation, deeply inspired by the gnostic doctrine and the Mannerist concept of the *figura serpentinata*.²⁰

The third version of the Fall occurs instead when Will and Lyra, inspired by the touching words of Mary, indulge their mutual desire for kissing on a sunny morning in the land of the Mulefa (AS, 742). This can be considered the main event of the trilogy, the point of no return, the happening the Magisterium strived to prevent at all costs. Some red fruits offered by Lyra and gently lifted to Will's mouth heavily reference the eating of the forbidden fruit and signal the irrefutable victory of the serpent/tempter Mary over the church bigots, represented here by the would-be assassin Father Gomez, anticlimactically slain by the angel Balthamos without ever confronting the protagonists (AS, 743-744). An angel, Dust personified and the divine emissary par excellence, sacrifices himself out of love for the protagonists, strongly suggesting that the truest religion is not that preached by a sinful Church trying to pull the strings of the world, but rather that of love, that of Dust, spirit and matter intertwined that are connected to and connect everything.²¹

The Church seeks to forestall the new spreading of Dust throughout the universe, which will come about when the second Eve connects body and spirit with her Adam, thus reaching adulthood, individuality and the wisdom which generally comes with it. To grow one must experience both good and evil, the immense joy of love and being loved and the suffering caused by loneliness and the figuring out of oneself, and this dichotomy is the reason why this Fall does not end on a happy note.²² To ensure that the universe will not see the definitive

²⁰ Atkinson, Amanda, "The Figura Serpentinata in *Paradise Lost*", *Studies in Philology*, 120(2) (2023), p. 341, *figura serpentinata* is literally translated as serpentine figure, and is a pictorial and sculptural style originated during the Italian Renaissance "as a means of conveying inner virtue, *energeia*, and the unending processes of growth and change that characterize human life and creation".

²¹ Feldt, p. 58.

²² Robinson, Karen D., "His Dark Materials: A Look into Pullman's Interpretation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*", *Mythlore*, 24 (2004), p. 7.

demise of Dust all windows between worlds need to be closed, Will and Lyra must remain on their native world and bid to their love story farewell. It is their fated duty as the embodiments of the primordial couple to suffer in order to grant everyone else a chance at happiness. As Robinson Karen states: “it is the understanding that good can come out of suffering that is gained through the eating of the fruit”.²³ Genuine wisdom implies self-sacrifice, and the sacrifice made to obtain higher knowledge was what allowed Dust to come into being in the first place. In truth only after the first Adam and Eve have eaten the fruit, disobeying God’s only rule, Dust is created. God cursed them to live sorrowful and limited lives, eventually leading to their deaths and their return to Dust. Without the original sin, humanity would not have been fated to return to Dust and Dust itself would not have come into existence.²⁴

Lyra and Will fall in love to unburden mankind of all the guilt and shame which have always been tied to sexuality and love. Their bodily and spiritual union, which is the equivalent, in biblical terms, of eating the forbidden fruit, does not imply an apocalyptic descent into sin and temptation; on the contrary, it offers forgiveness and relief from a stifling patriarchal hierarchy.²⁵ This oligarchy claimed power over men and women by means of fear and degrading, and sowed the idea of eternal damnation into human souls, a fate one can supposedly only avoid through unconditional faith and servility, attributes which ultimately amount to nothing in the eyes of the Authority. The young couple offers hope for the future, eternal reincarnation through Dust and the concrete example that lives can be successfully led without heeding anybody else’s rules.

The Fall of the first couple is no longer seen as a catastrophic sign of human imperfection, but rather as a pivotal moment for humanity, a *felix culpa* (fortunate fault or fall) that celebrates our now fleeting and precarious existence, rather than condemning it.²⁶ In *His*

²³ Robinson, p. 9.

²⁴ Robinson, p. 6.

²⁵ Tucker, pp. 122-123.

²⁶ Tóth, *Who are God’s Enemies? Religious Debates on Philip Pullman’s Trilogy, His Dark Materials*, p. 173.

Dark Materials it is not eternal afterlife that is sought and cherished, but the here and now, material life that must be enjoyed to its fullest, sins and all.

1.3 The newfound meaning of the original sin

To fully grasp Pullman's innovative take on the meaning of the original sin we must first get familiar with the interpretations religious literature has to offer in this regard. I consider Calvin's definition the most fitting to properly describe the pillars upon which the notion of original sin is based and to convey the Magisterium's heartfelt hatred towards it. Original sin, he writes, is

hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which first makes us liable to God's wrath, then also brings forth in us those works which Scripture calls "works of the flesh".²⁷

From this brief explanation we may observe that the original sin has several core characteristics: universality, hereditariness, incompatibility with God's precepts and a certain affinity with flesh, lust and sexuality in wider terms.²⁸ To begin with, original sin is something shared by everyone, an infamous mark inherited upon birth and instrumental in making humankind stand out from the rest of God's creations. It stems from Adam and Eve, progenitors of the human race, and indicates the first disobedience ever recorded, alongside "attitudes, orientations, propensities and tendencies which are contrary to God's law, incompatible with his holiness, and found in all people, in all areas of their lives".²⁹ It signals the inherent human inclination for sinning and deviating from the chosen path, namely God's rigorous laws, which, if followed to the letter, would not allow any room for movement, any potential for natural

²⁷ Calvin in Blocher, Henri, *Original sin: Illuminating the riddle*, Michigan: Wm. B. Eedermans Publishing Co., 1999, p. 18.

²⁸ Blocher, p. 18.

²⁹ Blocher, p. 18.

change or variation. It is peculiar to our human nature to always fight for freedom, the freedom to fully express oneself and choose the lifestyle that best suits one, and history suggests that when a power structure prevents such freedoms, it is living on borrowed time. I would not dare to compare the first couple's life in Eden to the lives of those who live under non-democratic political systems, however, it is safe to assume that they did not partake of the countless liberties most of us are accustomed to. Adam and Eve were, at least in their unfallen condition, mere playthings, puppets created by a puppeteer who soon grew tired of them and left them to purposelessly stroll about in the idyllic fence designed just for them. They had no knowledge of the world surrounding them and were not aware of their rather unique features, which significantly set them apart from the other creatures of the earth. That is when "Dust, in the form of an angel, disguised as a serpent"³⁰ persuaded them to engage in the ultimate sin. In Pullman's version of the biblical story the Fall is not linked to the regret one must feel for the pre-fallen state, that is eternal life spent alongside the creator, but rather to the celebration of the severance of this unwillingly imposed tie with such divine being. Pullman's variations put an emphasis on the moment of self-awakening Dust induced, the moment that enabled human history to finally begin. If the first Eve did not indulge in temptation humans, technically her offspring, would have probably never existed, since only thanks to the Dust-caused awareness the first couple came to the knowledge of nakedness, sexuality and most likely lust.

Instead of treasuring original sin as the primary cause for life on earth, the Magisterium, in their scriptures, highlights only the shame and guilt it brought, as can be seen in the following example:

for until that moment it had seemed that they were one with all the creatures of the earth and the air, and there was no difference between them: And they saw the difference, and they knew good and evil; and they were ashamed, and they sewed fig leaves together to cover their nakedness [...]
(GC, 229)

³⁰ Fitzsimmons, p. 224.

Nakedness is immediately associated with embarrassment and mortification, something which must be kept concealed, locked up and never be exploited. The Magisterium indeed highly prizes celibacy and prudishness, strongly condemning on the other hand those who falter in their abstinence and fall prey to the basest sexual desires. This low-key obsession for purity is instead the symptom of a firmly rooted sickness within the Magisterium, the morbid fixation with adolescents' bodies and an unnatural interest in their sexual lives. Throughout the whole trilogy this body of men strives to apprehend Lyra, to control her and to hamper the natural course of events, which, if they successfully did, would have led her never to fall in love or feel erotic attraction. Mrs Coulter herself, one in their ranks, exposes their moral filth and proves their high morals to be just a shaky house of cards, in a touching episode when she wholeheartedly refuses to deliver her daughter into their custody:

If you thought for one moment that I would release my daughter into the care—the care!—of a body of men with a feverish obsession with sexuality, men with dirty fingernails, reeking of ancient sweat, men whose furtive imaginations would crawl over her body like cockroaches—if you thought I would expose my child to that, my Lord President, you are more stupid than you take me for. (AS, 657)

In a world ruled by a tyrannical Authority, whose reign the Magisterium is the representative on earth, a crusade is being waged against Dust, the true divinity, and “the manifestation of Love itself, the fundamental attractive force pervading and binding the universe”.³¹ The secular enemy of the Church is indeed Dust, which stands for life, free and independent thinking, desire personified which “feeds on Desires”.³² The whole concept of the original sin in *His Dark Materials* can be summed up in just a few words: desire to desire. This is the first sin ever committed, the one fault Eve will for eternity be blamed for: the willingness to aim for individual betterment, to exceed externally imposed limits and reach physical and spiritual fulfilment, with physical fulfilment heavily implying sexual and emotional

³¹ Tóth, Zsuzsanna, “Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman’s Religious Fantasy, *His Dark Materials*”, Doctoral thesis (PhD), University of Szeged, 2020, p. 35.

³² Fitzsimmons, p. 223.

gratification. Of course, for Dust to permanently settle on one this burning desire to know and be more must be incessant, resulting in a never-ending cycle: more Dust means more thinking and more thinking translates into more yearning, which then attracts more Dust.³³ This is the predicament the Mulefa find themselves in: “They are Slaves to their own Utopian existence”³⁴ and fear a feasible return to dullness and homogenisation more than they fear actual death.³⁵

One of the most effective ways for the Church to limit the spreading of Dust and avoid sharing the Mulefa’s fate is to condemn Eve for what she did and instil among the theocracy’s subjects the irrational idea that sexual and intellectual longing are sins worth feeling remorse for. Beside the introduction of the notion of sin, the Magisterium attentively cultivated the cult of the Authority, for without a divine, righteous, holy being whom all try to please and emulate, there would not be guilt: humanity’s way for coping with its apparently inferior and fallacious nature.³⁶ The institution bears resemblance, also in this matter, to the Christian religion, which has always made every effort to channel this artificially crafted sense of guilt “to control sexual love and to make it subservient to religion”.³⁷ The intercision is as well a means to ensure that lustful wishing will be forever eradicated in young children, before its grasp on them grows too strong to be effectively tackled.

In Pullman’s universe, what the serpent offers, and what we can call original sin, is therefore Dust and the chance to escape an ensnaring Eden: “a place of temporal and moral stasis with no opportunities for growth or development”.³⁸ The tempter himself is an angel born out of Dust, thus reaffirming the theory that Dust (angels) “flock[s] to your thinking like birds” (SK, 302) and is meant to, in Satan’s own captivating words, “excite their minds / With more

³³ Fitzsimmons, p. 223.

³⁴ Fitzsimmons, p. 226.

³⁵ Fitzsimmons, p. 226.

³⁶ Blocher, p. 24.

³⁷ Tóth, *Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman’s Religious Fantasy, His Dark Materials*, p. 37.

³⁸ Bird in Tóth, *Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman’s Religious Fantasy, His Dark Materials* p. 39.

desire to know ...” (IV, ll.522–523). Eve and Adam trade paradise for knowledge, Lyra and Will love for the existence of Dust in the universes, which will otherwise “become nothing more than interlocking machines, blind and empty of thought, feeling, life ...” (GC, 193-194); as Promethean figures they all must pay the highest of prices to grant life the best fighting chance there possibly can be.³⁹

1.3.1 The alleged antichristian values

Pullman’s trilogy surely condemns organised religions’ morally controlling attitude towards their believers, pointing out its author’s dislike for those who praise spirituality and the care of the soul above flesh, earthly needs and shallow urges. I believe that Pullman’s goal though is not to demystify Christianity core values, which, anthropologically speaking, mirror the positive values he advocates, but rather debunk in the eyes of a young audience the myth of the flawless Christian religion, still worldwide regarded as the paradigm of piousness and humility.⁴⁰ Beside his not too subtle damning staging of the Church, he is also interested in outlining the basis of a religion of his own, one thought to be based on a more inclusive and genuine philosophy, which, if warmly welcomed, assures an impeccable balance between matter and spirit, individuality and community. The story traces step by step the journey towards adulthood Lyra and Will embark on, allowing readers to properly understand that the human condition is so much more complex than generally believed, and is characterised by a plethora of elements one can hardly put together in a few self-righteous sacred texts. When other currents of beliefs bitterly judge children for growing up, because, as Smith intelligently puts it: “as they approach adolescence they are increasingly able to handle abstract ideas, and

³⁹ Sadri, H., “Original Sin as Salvation: The Apocalyptic Boon in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*”, in J., Filipovic, Z., Sadri, H., ed., *Broken Mirrors: Representations of Apocalypses and Dystopias in Popular Culture*, New York: Routledge, 2019, pp. 13-17.

⁴⁰ Feldt, p. 63.

ultimately, the realization of sin and guilt”⁴¹, Pullman writes a children’s fantasy novel which teaches what it means to become adults, and that it is perfectly fine to do so.⁴² Adulthood is in truth, according to Pullman’s way of thinking, the stage of life held in the highest esteem, for it endows self-awareness gain and individuality development, attracting thus more Dust, which possibly gifts one a life lived to its fullest. Infancy and childhood are transitional periods, starting points of a self-discovery journey that culminates in the stabilization of one’s daemon, a rite of passage some scholars deem discriminatory and class-conscious, as it underlines how in *His Dark Materials* the figure of a daemon always suggests the fixed role the human counterpart is supposed to play in society, apparently negating Pullman’s own egalitarian principles.⁴³

The human experience the author wants to convey in his books shows on the one hand a celebration of sexual intercourse, love, individual will and experience, and pictures on the other self-sacrifice, pain and reason as essential features of our being human.⁴⁴ I beforehand highlighted desire’s underlying part in the genesis of Dust in the universe, however, feeling entitled to follow one’s innermost instincts and indulge each whim denotes a detrimental moral philosophy, one the author would without a doubt dissuade the impressionable audience from embracing. In Pullman’s own words: "Putting your own feelings first [...] is not a republican virtue."⁴⁵, for Will and Lyra to choose life together in spite of Dust’s sake, means retracting everything their edifying journey stood for, and fating the universes to uttermost demise. *His Dark Materials* focuses on the concept of self-sacrificing for a just cause and strongly discourages of those who value feelings above duty.⁴⁶ It is the young couple’s burden, as

⁴¹ David Smith in Blocher, p. 23.

⁴² Burt, Stephen, “Fighting since Time Began”: Milton and Satan in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*”, in Knoppers, L.L., Semenza, G.M.C., ed., *Milton in Popular Culture*, New York: Macmillan, 2006, p. 53.

⁴³ Tóth, *Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman’s Religious Fantasy, His Dark Materials*, pp. 43-44.

⁴⁴ Feldt, p. 62.

⁴⁵ Pullman in Burt, p. 53.

⁴⁶ Burt, p. 53.

responsible adults, to put aside personal preference and willingly choose each day the benefit of others over their own. This crucial self-sacrifice is not an abstract ideal, meant to be complied with just for the sake of an honourable principle, it is concrete, a tangible effort put into the construction of the Republic of Heaven. The Republic, whose name may mislead someone into thinking it concerns divinely approved afterlife, acknowledges Dust as the key to consciousness unlocking and strives to safeguard it by creating a safe haven on earth, where sensual and intellectual curiosity are incited.⁴⁷

The Kingdom of Heaven ceased forever to exist, since both the Authority and its de facto ruler Metatron had been slain, and although it proved to be a fake utopia made up of empty promises, it fulfilled nonetheless a vital need: it gave mortals a sense of purpose and a sense of having a place in the universe, it took from them uncertainty about one's future and replaced it with a promised noble destiny, a common destination everyone should long for. Notwithstanding the deceitfulness at the base of its design, the Kingdom succeeded in creating a wider meaningfulness to existence and a sense of connection to things, a shared drive to live which rules out alienation. These are the premises Pullman's Republic of Heaven strives to adhere to, and the core of the author's values: create a substitute on earth of the disastrous Heaven, a paradise this time meant for the living, a "universal democracy in which no one is subject to the Authority".⁴⁸ This utopian system is not governed by organized forms of belief, there is no undisputed sovereign, it is the individual who is the centre of religious life.⁴⁹ In this heaven, each person must nurture their individual life, they have the cardinal duty to live to the best of their possibilities, all in the name of the tacit life affirming principle strongly endorsed in the trilogy. According to this principle everyone should engage with the physical world

⁴⁷ Tóth, *Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman's Religious Fantasy, His Dark Materials*, p. 49.

⁴⁸ Fitzsimmons, p. 230.

⁴⁹ Tóth, *Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman's Religious Fantasy, His Dark Materials*, p. 49.

without abstaining from earthly pleasures in fear of some kind of otherworldly repercussion, there is no more a hell a divine authority may sentence you to, there is only togetherness with Dust, never-ending rebirth as new matter or spirit. This philosophy is very well encapsulated by Tóth's coined term: *memento vivere* tradition⁵⁰, a notion which at first glance may appear as an invitation to care-free living but has in truth rigidly established limits. Since humans are not "isolated units of self-interest"⁵¹ but are rather connected through Dust to the entire cosmos, they surge to the role the absent divine being should have occupied: they are nature and Dust's caretakers, and being such, their needs should never outweigh those of the universe; "no part of the entirety can be more important than the entirety itself".⁵² Human beings in the Republic of Heaven must then focus their energies on their here and now selves, but never forget that before the universe they are insignificant fleeting things, whose peaceful existence is guaranteed by the combined effort of each and every of them. As to why the seat of the Republic of Heaven is not located in a single ethereal place, Pullman himself claims that: "this world where we live is our true home. [...] This is a physical universe and we are physical beings made of material stuff".⁵³ He then reaffirms the concept of natural belonging to our home world in the books through Mr. Parry's words: "We have to build the Republic of Heaven where we are, because for us there is no elsewhere" (AS, 678). This last phrase points either to the fact that in the fictional universe of *His Dark Materials* one can only live ten years in a world into which they were not born into, otherwise death by sickness occurs, or to the fact that we are granted just one worldly life, a utopian existence in a heavenly sphere is simply impossible.

⁵⁰ Tóth, *Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman's Religious Fantasy, His Dark Materials*, p. 48.

⁵¹ Pullman in Tóth, *Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman's Religious Fantasy, His Dark Materials*, p. 50.

⁵² Tóth, *Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman's Religious Fantasy, His Dark Materials*, p. 120.

⁵³ Pullman in Tóth, *Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman's Religious Fantasy, His Dark Materials*, p. 47.

Pullman's riveting system of thought patterned itself after the Gnostic belief, a religious and esoteric branch of standard medieval Christianity. According to Gnostic tradition the spiritual and material world are two separate things, the former devised by a perfect, eternal being, an unknown God, and the latter an imperfect illusion created by heinous demiurge, an error sparked by an internal split within the deity⁵⁴. Gnostic doctrine is thus firmly rooted in a non-dualistic and anti-materialist standpoint, which disavows anything even remotely related to evil matter while seeking divine enlightenment within the boundaries of the imprisoned soul⁵⁵. Their ultimate goal is to reach *gnosis*, deep and complete knowledge of oneself through which godhead may be glimpsed, as human nature should, in theory, mirror the divine one⁵⁶. What Pullman draws from Gnostic heritage and what he drastically changes to adapt to his personal belief is easily recognizable. The whole concept of the malevolent Authority and of Xaphania and her rebel angels, agents of wisdom in their everlasting war against the self-proclaimed ruler and his lackeys, can be unarguably traced back to Gnostic mythology. The central myth of Jewish Gnosticism clearly illustrates how the demiurge and Sophia, both spiritual entities created by the unknown God and his spouse, waged war for the awakening of human consciousness, and how it was Sophia who, in this version of the biblical myth, played the role of the serpent and gifted mankind knowledge and awareness (Dust).⁵⁷ The mythical genesis of the fantasy universe, as well as the importance placed upon the intuitive quest for self-knowledge the protagonists embark on have clear Gnostic roots, unlike the books' moral conclusions on matter and mortal life. Pullman by embracing Dust as the birthing principle of the universe, attempts to mend the historical religious disparity between matter and spirit, creating an interconnected universe, crafted by the very "embodiment of the [...]"

⁵⁴ Tóth Zsuzsanna, "Gnostic Spiritual Heritage in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* Fantasy Trilogy", *Cultures of Memory, Memories of Culture*, 3(1) (2013), p. 173.

⁵⁵ Tóth, *Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman's Religious Fantasy, His Dark Materials*, p. 34.

⁵⁶ Tóth, *Gnostic Spiritual Heritage in Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials Fantasy Trilogy*, p. 173.

⁵⁷ Tóth, *Gnostic Spiritual Heritage in Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials Fantasy Trilogy*, p. 176.

nondualism”.⁵⁸ The angels themselves, the first beings condensed out of Dust, confirm to Mary Malone the dichotomy inherent to Dust: “From what we are, spirit; from what we do, matter. Matter and spirit are one” (SK, 397). I would even argue that this is not a clear-cut dichotomy, matter in the trilogy appears to be even more invaluable than spirit. The sole existence of daemons, souls which take a corporeal form to build an ever-tighter, seamless bond with their physical vessels, suggests how materiality is prized in *His Dark Materials*. Not to mention the envy the angels feel towards men’s flesh: even they, creatures who in the collective imagination are the closest thing there can be to divinity, long for “precious bodies, so solid and powerful, so well-adapted to the good earth!” (AS, 686). Baruch and Balthamos explicitly tell Will how they would cherish having a physical body with which to fully participate in material reality, and make the most of one's senses to reach the pinnacle of pleasure (AS, 726). What Pullman features here is a homosexual love story between two angels, who cannot savour the full extent of their love, hindered, as it is, by their spiritual castrating nature.

Pullman wants to acknowledge matter’s rightful sacred place in the universe by claiming that “Since matter is grounded in divinity, flesh partakes of God's goodness”⁵⁹, subverting thus all know religious canons. Although this may seem a bold statement, and a calculated reproach of religious traditions and norms which have, as of now, become severely outdated and stifling for those who still abide by them, we must bear in mind that these are still just children’s fantasy novels. Rather than scoring a propaganda point over clergymen and religious institutions and winning over to his cause the few children who grasp the meaning of the many subtle references, I think Pullman is more interested in pointing out to the adults to be the path to follow to become responsible and self-conscious citizens of the world. The main values he educates his young readers in are: tolerance of sexual orientation, goodness of sexual

⁵⁸ Tóth, *Gnostic Spiritual Heritage in Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials Fantasy Trilogy*, p. 175.

⁵⁹ Oram, William, “Pullman’s Matter: Lucretius and Milton in His Dark Materials”, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 23 (2012), p. 421.

intercourse, mindfulness of environmental issues, anti-imperialism and above all biophilia, the love of life.⁶⁰ This willingness to instil in the audience such admirable principles does not completely overshadow, however, a possible personal grudge held against the Christian religion, whose similarity with Magisterium practices is not unfathomable to those with a keen eye.

⁶⁰ Feldt, p. 59, Tóth, *Gnostic Spiritual Heritage in Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials Fantasy Trilogy*, p. 175.

CHAPTER 2

The theocracy of heaven

2.1 The absence of God

It is unarguable that the primary features of the Christian God, at least as the holy scriptures depict him, are: immensity, infinity, eternity, immutability, omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience.¹ Our feeble human minds are incapable of fathoming the full extent of his being, thus leading to the frequent practices of anthropomorphism and anthropathism: ascribing to non-human divine entities human features and emotions to enable an easier and smoother assimilation into societal beliefs.² None of the aforementioned attributes can be found in Pullman's Authority, the supposed cornerstone of religious life in the universe, although this may not fulfil the reading public's expectations, since the saga is set in a Christian-coded universe at whose pinnacle lies precisely the Authority. There is no need to project onto him human traits and limitations, because he is already an inherently weak corporeal being: when Mrs. Coulter catches a glimpse of him in the secluded Clouded Mountain she gets the "impression of terrifying decrepitude, of a face sunken in wrinkles, of trembling hands, and of a mumbling mouth and rheumy eyes" (AS, 669). This is no suitable description for the ruler of Heaven, whose true infinite appearance should be inconceivable and mind shattering to human beings. From this description I also gather that the Authority is subject to the cruel ravages of time, unlike the undying Christian God, who clearly states his

¹ Fallon, Samuel, "Milton's Strange God: Theology and Narrative Form in *Paradise Lost*", *ELH* 79 (2012), p. 33.

² Fallon, p. 37.

being immutable: “For I am the Lord, I change not” (Malachi, 3:6).³

Since the Authority can be physically located in a circumscribed area, Pullman disavows the Christian tenet of God’s omnipresence; as well as that of omnipotence or omniscience, for the Authority has deliberately chosen four thousand years ago another angel “far more proud, ambitious and merciless”⁴ to take his place as the rightful regent of the Kingdom of Heaven.⁵ This unexpected turn of events, which strongly clashes with the idea of an eternal and all-knowing deity, may bring one to deduce that the Authority had grown too old and tired to efficiently run both his earthly and heavenly domain. The predilection for a younger, power-hungry angel, who quite resembles the Authority at his prime, when he willingly deceived his fellow angels and confronted Xaphania to ensure his safe dominion over the universe, indicates that those driving principles, which led him to become the first liar in history, have definitely abandoned him. His lust to rule and his witty mind have faded away, leaving a shell of his former self, who in his last moments of clarity of mind entrusted the keys of his precious kingdom to his younger version and locked himself away in his Citadel, gathering around it, as time passed, thicker and thicker clouds to prevent his subjects to witness his slow but relentless decay (AS, 473). Unlike the Paradise longed for by Christians, the Chariot (another name for the Citadel) is not a place meant for the souls of the righteous. In Pullman’s saga the particles which make up body and soul (daemon) immediately rejoin, after death, the universe, all but those making up ghosts, which in this reality take on a corporeal form.⁶ All ghosts, after their earthly departure, are brutally sent by decree of the Authority to the land of the dead and are sentenced to remain there for all eternity, in perpetual suffering at

³ Padley Jonathan, Padley Kenneth, “A Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven’: *His Dark Materials*, Inverted Theology, and the End of Philip Pullman’s Authority”, *Children's Literature in Education*, 37(4) (2006), p. 330

⁴ Tóth, Zsuzsanna, “Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman’s Religious Fantasy, *His Dark Materials*”, Doctoral thesis (PhD), University of Szeged, 2020, p. 38.

⁵ Padley, Padley, p. 330, Tóth, *Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman’s Religious Fantasy, His Dark Materials*, p. 38.

⁶ Oram, William, “Pullman’s Matter: Lucretius and Milton in *His Dark Materials*”, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 23 (2012), p. 424.

the hands of the harpies, desperately longing for the “flowing of blood of the living human beings”⁷. The Authority intentionally targeted ghosts, to punish sentient beings for attaining prohibited knowledge, namely the deep understanding of oneself, the desire to surpass universally acknowledged limits and achieve, thanks to Dust, oneness with body and soul, a fully awake conscience:

The body, which had evolved by the power of nature, by matter loving itself, was to rejoin the rest of the material world, for nothing material can ever be destroyed. The particles that were the body circulate in a wider consciousness for ever, joyfully. The *dæmon*, which was the gift of the rebel angels, dissolved like the body into unity with the material world [...]. But the ghost, which had betrayed the Authority by falling in love with body and *dæmon*, was not allowed to join them. Instead it was condemned to spend eternity in the World of the Dead, where without the warmth and shelter of its body and the companionship of its *dæmon* it languished cold and unhappy for ever.⁸

Another one of God’s alleged functions the Authority fails to perform is that of judge of all: God is supposed to reward the righteous ones with eternal life spent alongside him and condemn the sinners with an eternity of pain and sorrow in hell. The Authority instead has precluded anyone from entering Heaven, even those entitled to it, perhaps to prevent anyone from coming to the right conclusion that he is not the creator or most likely to undermine the power and influence of this universe true God: Dust. By forcing all ghosts to spend eternity frozen in limbo, entrapped in a designated otherworldly prison, the Authority forbids a proper renewal of Dust, since souls, matter and ghosts, all made of Dust, are meant to re-enter, at the time of death, “the grand cosmic system of reincarnation”⁹, fuelling the dwindling amount of Dust and eventually creating new flesh and spirit.

“The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty – those were all names he gave himself” (AS, 472). These biblical epithets prove that the connection between the Authority and the Christian/ Judaic God is not subtle or meant

⁷ Oram, p. 425.

⁸ Pullman in Tóth, *Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman’s Religious Fantasy, His Dark Materials*, p. 106.

⁹ Pace, Jordan, “God the Father or Mother Divine? : Subversive Theology in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*”, Senior Thesis, Trinity College, 2017, p. 74.

to be clear just for a few theology experts but is explicitly highlighted by the author himself through Balthamos' mouth. The strong parallelism is carefully devised to make the profound differences between the two stand out even more. The titles which should have elevated his social standing were appointed to him by none other than himself, proof that he was never worthy of them; it is a mockery, a way of belittling God Almighty and implying that no one can validate the epic deeds and efforts he is claimed to have performed. Another element hinting at the mockery theory is the name Authority itself: it suggests an approved and legitimate power or arguably control imposed by force, gained without consent and with tyrannical overtones.¹⁰ In *His Dark Materials* the role the Authority undertakes is that of mere pawn and ideological symbol: he is kept alive in a glass litter, by orders of Metatron, to serve as a puppet leader, to channel all the reverence and devotion his name evokes into Metatron's persona, legitimizing his own religious policies.¹¹ When Lyra and Will meet him for the first time it is reported that: "He would have followed them anywhere, having no will of his own, and responding to simple kindness like a flower to the sun" (AS, 708). The same war, which is said to be waged against the Authority, is actually waged against the system of ideas he comes to personify; the real angel, whose name is no longer recorded, appears in the story just once to dissolve shortly afterwards into the particles from which he had evolved and which he came to bitterly despise.¹²

¹⁰ Chantal, Oliver, "Mocking God and Celebrating Satan: Parodies and Profanities in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*", *Children's Literature in Education*, 43 (2012), p. 295.

¹¹ Tóth, *Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman's Religious Fantasy, His Dark Materials*, p. 38.

¹² Schweizer, Bernard, "And He's A-Going to Destroy Him: Religious Subversion in *His Dark Materials*" in Millicent Lenz, Carole Scott, ed., *His Dark Materials Illuminated: Critical Essays on Philip Pullman's Trilogy*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005, p. 169, Chantal, p. 297.

2.2 Metatron: the pinnacle of lust and hypocrisy

The character of the villainous Metatron is inspired by the biblical story of Enoch, the seventh son of Adam, who, according to Genesis and several apocryphal writings, lived at the time of the Great Flood and sired the father of Noah.¹³ Enoch was the prophet, directly chosen by God, to foretell the great catastrophe that laid ahead and to lead his progeny to survival, ensuring that their life would be henceforth lived in God's name and according to his doctrine.¹⁴ Enoch was then granted the privilege of sharing in the primordial secrets of the cosmos and is said to have witnessed the bewildering sight of both heaven and hell while still alive.¹⁵ He never came to know death since he ascended in Heaven to forever stand in flesh beside God the Almighty.¹⁶ In just one of the apocryphal writings dedicated to Enoch, and reportedly written by Enoch's hand, it is stated that he was transfigured into a fearless angel, by the name of Metatron, who will later become overseer of the heavenly crowds.¹⁷ One of the other few mentions of Enoch in the Bible is in the epistle to the Hebrews, in which St. Paul praises Enoch for his unwavering faith and links the great honour bestowed upon him to such outstanding piety:¹⁸

By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God. (11:5)

The biblical portrait of Enoch is radically different from the one of the angel Metatron we readers are acquainted with in *His Dark Materials*: Pullman attempts once more to subvert the established religious canons to depict anything and anyone, even remotely related to the Church, as immoral, evil, and hypocritical. This time the hard criticism is directed at the angel

¹³ Szönyi, György, "Enoch - the Modern Apocalyptic Hero. Contemporary Cultural Representations of the Biblical/Apocryphal Patriarch", *IKON*, 8 (2015), pp. 157.

¹⁴ Szönyi, p. 158.

¹⁵ Szönyi, p. 158.

¹⁶ Szönyi, p. 158.

¹⁷ Szönyi, p. 158.

¹⁸ Szönyi, p. 157.

allegedly in charge of the heavenly troops, the most fitting one to harness the Magisterium forces against the teenager protagonist and everything she stands for, namely life-affirming Dust and emancipation from tyrannical oppressors. Metatron, as effective head of the Church, embodies all the twisted values his organization has become in time known for. The sin Pullman chooses to stain him with is lust: a visceral, uncontrollable urge to possess everything and everyone, in body and mind, to force himself upon others and crush their wills. His thirst for power has led him progressively to decrease the relevance of an already weakened Authority to interfere directly in human affairs and personally dispose of anyone who defies his sovereignty. “Metatron is proud, and his ambition is limitless” (AS, 494). These are the words used by Baruch to describe the current regent, words which perfectly suit his long-term war project: he intends to

turn the [Clouded] mountain into an engine of war. 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. (AS, 494)

Ruling the angels and being head of the Magisterium is no satisfactory goal, his greed goes beyond the physical boundaries of a single universe: his burning thirst will be quenched only when all existing churches in the multiverse are dismantled and replaced with his creed, when all souls are under his dominion. His warmonger nature prevails over the sacrality of the religion he is the head of, and even the Clouded Mountain, to whom all believers turn in search of divine assistance, cannot be spared, and is mercilessly turned into a savage, unholy battlefield.

In the trilogy Metatron has additionally shown a strong inclination towards female flesh: when he comes face to face with Mrs. Coulter he almost immediately starts to recall the sixty-five years spent on earth as a man who enjoyed the pleasure of having many wives, none of them comparable of course to the desirable Mrs. Coulter. His straightforward adulation signals his craving for her flesh, at the scent of which he “seemed to gulp” (AS, 704), like a

dog which cannot control his salivation when faced with food. This obsession for Lyra's mother will eventually bring about his demise: Mrs. Coulter, having understood that angels "lacking flesh, [...] coveted it and longed for contact with it" (AS, 701), lured him to drop his defences, allowing Asriel to strike.¹⁹ Metatron's compulsion for women denotes his great hypocrisy: he is blinded by sheer sexual desire, but is still willing to take Lyra's life to avert her bodily union with Will, the fated reunion of Eve and Adam which marks a new bountiful flow of Dust in the universe. The Church's gospel, which lauds celibacy and abstinence, is then a sanctimonious façade, a meaningless doctrine meant to shepherd the oblivious believers into submission; the members of said Church, the ones most supposed to uphold these values, are instead allowed to sin to their heart's content. This hypocrisy is best encapsulated in the concept of "preemptive penance", which allows agents of the Church to do "penance for a sin not yet committed [...] so as to build up, as it were, a store of credit [that grants] absolution in advance" (AS, 502).²⁰ Another example of the Magisterium's hypocrisy is the way Mrs. Coulter exploits her sexuality to move up the ecclesiastical ranks when her ultimate mission is to "eradicate the world of sexual maturity".²¹

Metatron cannot be deemed a true character, just like the Authority, he is the embodiment of the author's view on organised religions, particularly on Christianity. His role in the events narrated in the trilogy is to provoke in the readers feelings of contempt and even disgust, at least when sexual banter is concerned, and to portray the Magisterium as an institution of power-hungry, hypocritical buffoons. Pullman probably chose him as the target of this negative depiction because he was one of God's favourites, an angel born from a man

¹⁹ Pace, pp. 31-32.

²⁰ Pace, pp. 32-33.

²¹ Pace, p. 33.

who can still remember the intoxicating effect of women's touch, a corruptible individual at the peak of the hierarchy whose fall results to be the most thunderous.²²

2.3 Xaphania and her Satanic values

The apocryphal book *Wisdom of Solomon* provides detailed explanation regarding the mythical role played by Sophia (alias Xaphania) in the gnostic creation myth of the cosmos: she is referred to as “the emanation of God's glory, [...] the immaculate mirror of his energy, [...] even the spouse of the Lord”.²³ This last quote evinces her prominence in the newly born Christian universe, one equally mirrored in *His Dark Materials* and only matched by that of the vile demiurge, who will in time be addressed as the Authority. In the trilogy there is no hint or reference to a possible kinship between the two, however, Pullman later reveals that an intimate relationship of sorts surely developed between the pair, one which allowed the unveiling of the one lie upon which the universe had been based:

[t]he Authority loved her, and in his love for her he told her the truth: he was not the creator. She urged him to rule wisely with the strength and power he had acquired, and to make the truth known to all the angels; but he would not.²⁴

In the books the matter is treated rather coldly; from what a reader can gather, Xaphania, being the wisest among the angels, found out the truth on her own and challenged the Authority to stretch his views beyond greed and power, but utterly failed and was exiled from the Citadel: “One of those [angels] who came later was wiser than he was, and she [Xaphania] found out the truth, so he banished her” (AS, 472). Her banishment and will to fight over her fellow angels' emancipation from such despotic and treacherous head drove her to wage war against the impostor god-figure and attempt to undermine his tyrannical reign. “There are two great

²² Tóth, *Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman's Religious Fantasy, His Dark Materials*, p. 39.

²³ Quispel in Tóth, *Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman's Religious Fantasy, His Dark Materials*, p. 40.

²⁴ Pullman in Tóth, *Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman's Religious Fantasy, His Dark Materials*, p. 40.

powers, [...] and they've been fighting since time began" (SK, 439). This timeless battle shattered the precarious integrity of the then sole universe, paving the way for the coming of what we now call multiverse: a complex system of countless parallel universes, all covering the same area, but concealed and unreachable to one another.²⁵

The perennial struggle for equity and freedom from groundless servitude, as well as the path towards the spreading of knowledge and wisdom Xaphania embarks on, bear close resemblance to Satan's own rebellion against the Christian God. His claim to become the rightful ruler of Heaven was backed by the unproved notion that he and God were equals and partook of the same angelic nature.²⁶ This premise is fulfilled in *His Dark Materials*: both the Authority and Xaphania are angels, possibly even siblings or lovers, and the Authority's self-proclaimed right to govern is undisputably arbitrary. By restaging the first rebellion to be recorded in church history, and providing evidence for Satan's unbacked claim, Pullman is perhaps subtly claiming that he would have preferred things to have gone in the Devil's favour. According to the trilogy's encouraged values Lucifer's quest for legitimacy in the universe and his willingness to defy established authority are not blasphemous deeds, on the contrary, they are models of virtue that must be sought after; setting aside, of course, the assumption that he is inherently evil. Proof of this theory are Pullman's own words: he explicitly stated that while Milton unknowingly sided with the Devil, he himself is "of the Devil's party and know[s] it."²⁷ Since the Authority/God won the war against Xaphania/Satan, the Bibles of the respective universes have gone on to tell the winner's version of the story, omitting the fact that the regent of Heaven is no creator.²⁸ By choosing Xaphania as the embodiment of a successful Satan;

²⁵ Tóth, *Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman's Religious Fantasy, His Dark Materials*, p. 33.

²⁶ Pace, p. 22.

²⁷ Pullman in Bertodano, Helena, "I am of the devil's Party", <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/donotmigrate/3572490/I-am-of-the-Devils-party.html>, (accessed August 30, 2024).

²⁸ Pace, p. 23.

Pullman ultimately tries to set things right: if a deceitful narrative is widely believed in our universe, then at least in Pullman's own fictional one the truth must be conveyed, i.e. that "[t]he Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake" (AS, 727). Given that a female angel was chosen to portray the leader of the rebellion it may be that the author wanted to dismantle one other core principle of organized religions: their widely legitimated androcentrism, which unfortunately leads to women's marginalization in religious life.²⁹ Pullman furthermore devotes special attention to women's experience and grace: when Xaphania tells Lyra that her ability to read the alethiometer comes from her involuntary grace she is implying that her feminine innocence enables her to succeed at something that many illustrious older men have failed to do.³⁰ Xaphania here serves the purpose of female guide, sending a fellow woman on the path towards regaining her inner grace, which can be reobtained "after a lifetime of thought and effort [and] [...] is deeper and fuller than grace that comes freely" (AS, 759).

At the same time Xaphania is called upon to fill the role of yet another crucial figure of Christian mythology: the tempting serpent, the one who calls into question the boundaries set by the tree of Knowledge, always towering over Adam and Eve and reminding them of God's will and ungraspable power. In *His Dark Materials* Xaphania acts as the original serpent, who introduced to the first man and woman the concept of reasoning in a system where only blind, unconditional faith was accepted; and as the tempter of the Mulefa, who led the unnamed Mulefa to insert her foot through the hole in the seedpod, allowing Dust-enriched oil to enter her blood system. The tempter of the second Adam and Eve is a role which pertains instead solely to Mary Malone, who rather than trying to awake in them reasoning and revolutionary

²⁹ Tóth, *Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman's Religious Fantasy, His Dark Materials*, p. 40.

³⁰ Schweizer, p. 167.

thoughts serves as an educator in matters of love, both physical and mental. In casting Xaphania as a well-intentioned serpent, meant to guide and help thrive rather than tempt and corrupt, Pullman draws again on gnostic traditions, above all on the Ophites: a gnostic group which praises the serpent as the liberator of mankind and bearer of the gift of knowledge, the only means through which servitude to the evil demiurge can be rescinded.³¹

2.4 Will and Lyra filling the gap of the missing Christ

As I already mentioned in chapter one, Christ does not fit with the image of organized monotheistic religions Pullman wants to outline: his preachings were far from being sanctimonious and the moral virtues he fostered were concrete, life-changing values for which all, should stand independently from religious background. Above all he lived by his principles, denouncing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, to whom the Magisterium members can, to a certain extent, be compared. God and his Son must be kept out of the picture, to allow the building of a godless multiverse where “[t]here may have been a creator, or there may not” (AS, 588), and in his stead arrange for an evil demiurge to rule. The latter’s downfall and the protagonists’ subsequent coming-of-age are the culmination of the entire trilogy. While there is no clear-cut evidence that a creator ever existed, there is one reference in *The Amber Spyglass* which hints at the existence of Christ in the fictional narrative of *His Dark Materials*, or at least of a Christ-like individual. When Lyra asks her death if anyone ever attempted to reach the land of the dead and then safely come back he replies: “Not for many, many ages” (AS, 622), which brings me to make the posit that Jesus could have at some point trodden this invented multiverse; either all the records about him have been erased, or so long has passed since his resurrection that no living creature can bear his memory. His factual absence from the saga does not mean

³¹ Tóth, *Gnostic Spiritual Heritage in Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials Fantasy Trilogy*, p. 173.

though that everything he symbolized is absent too, his duties and core principles find exemplification in the characters of Lyra and Will. They bear the burden of saving the entire multiverse on their young shoulders, it is they who set mankind free from the oppressive grasp of the Authority, granting him sweet death and return to Dust; they release the dead from their stifling prison and, by making the ultimate sacrifice of living forever apart, heal a wounded cosmos, whose many cuts endangered Dust's widespread circulation. The deliverance of tortured ghosts especially, bears close resemblance to the biblical concept of the resurrected Christ harrowing hell.³² This iconographic tradition sees the resurrected Christ tearing the gates of Hell apart and rescuing Adam and all the souls held captive by Satan to usher them into Paradise.³³

“And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). These are words uttered by Christ himself to his believers and the words Pullman uses as opening of chapter twenty three of *The Amber Spyglass*, a cunning reference which highlights both the way Lyra saves the ghosts (by pushing them to tell true stories about their mortal lives to the warden harpies) and the striking similarity between the two, who make truth-telling one of their moral pillars. From the beginning of the novels Lyra has, de facto, always been a master storyteller, who lied to get her way and repudiated truthfulness with every fibre of her being. When she reaches the underworld the harsh encounter with the harpies comes as a terrible shock to her. They can easily pierce through her web of lies, that is when she has an epiphany: the best stories which feed the listener's hunger for knowledge are those based on lives lived to the fullest of their potential.³⁴ If we omit Lyra and Will's escape from the land of the dead, which can be seen in every respect as a resurrection, what truly suggests an overlap between the two young protagonists and Christ is their shared commendable sense of duty, their

³² Padley, Padley, p. 332.

³³ Padley, Padley, p. 332.

³⁴ Oram, p. 428.

determination to give up life or love to save strangers, forswear every chance at happiness for the highest of purposes: the benefit of others.³⁵

³⁵ MacNeil, William, "His Dark Legalities: Intellectual Property's Psychomachia in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* Trilogy", *Liverpool Law Review*, 38 (2017), p. 22.

CHAPTER 3

Cosmogony and eschatology

2.1 Dust: mother of all

Dust, as I briefly mentioned in the previous chapters, is the keystone of the fictional universe of *His Dark Materials*, the binding factor around which the entire plot and the cosmos itself revolve. Dust can be found in the inexplicable link between human and daemon, although it is said that only at the threshold of adulthood does Dust truly approach; and when the bond with Dust is irrevocably rescinded the human becomes deprived of any emotion or personality, unlike when they engage in erotic or platonic love, which seems to be Dust's privileged channel for settling on life forms. We know that the fruit from the tree of knowledge, offered by the serpent to the first Eve and Adam, is just a metaphor of Dust, as is the oil in the seedpod the serpent lures the unknown Mulefa into entering. To conclude we know that angels are the first sentient beings born out of Dust and that all living beings, at the time of death, are supposed to return to Dust, in an endless cycle of reincarnation. These many pieces of information help get the gist of the meaning and function of Dust, but they do not contribute to its clear definition.

Dust can be regarded as “the ultimate, unifying and animating principle of the universe”¹, it is a particle brimming with life which operates as the foundational unit of Pullman's godless universe, which is “self-creating, self-organizing, and self-sufficient”.² These conscious particles are the true makers of the cosmos, they act on their own will, attracted, on their universal peregrination, by the burning desire to know more, and gift the

¹ Freitas and King in Tóth, Zsuzsanna, “Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union: (Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman's Religious Fantasy, *His Dark Materials*”, Doctoral thesis (PhD), University of Szeged, 2020, p. 35.

² Colás in Tóth, p. 34.

oblivious compounds of matter deemed fit awareness of itself and its surroundings. This awareness, which allows one to discern good from evil, equalling the free will of Christian theology, differs from universally shared consciousness, which, in this system, is a basic property of matter: everything holds a certain degree of consciousness from humans to inanimate objects to mere atoms.³ Dust is both the sine qua non and final product of human self-consciousness: it awoke in humans, angels and Mulefa alike self- and world-recognition, though demanding at the same time a degree of engagement, a strong will bursting out with longing for wisdom. This longing naturally comes with growth, which is innately linked with the struggle to find our own identity. Xaphania explains to Lyra and Will that: “Conscious beings make Dust—they renew it all the time, by thinking and feeling and reflecting, by gaining wisdom and passing it on” (AS, 759). Although Dust is the driving and binding principle of the universe, it is bound to follow the unfolding story of those individuals it bestowed its blessing upon: without their constant renewal through death and thinking alike Dust would inevitably perish, the dire consequences of which we cannot begin to fathom. It is unclear, based on the previous statements alone, whether Dust first sparked the evolution of consciousness or whether natural evolution gave birth to Dust, but on the premise that Dust comprises every shred of matter and spirit in the universe, I can safely assume that the former option is more likely.

Dust brings matter and spirit together, being both made of the same substance they are in all respects indistinguishable: “[s]pirit is Dust acting in one way (‘from what we are’), and matter is Dust acting in another (‘from what we do’)”.⁴ Dust is the metaphor exploited by the author to convey the notion of an intertwined and interdependent universe, and since Dust itself lies at the centre of this intricate system, acting as common ground for everything, it would not

³ Tóth, p. 30.

⁴ Freitas and King in Tóth, p. 34.

be implausible to say that it stands for the missing God Pullman seems to have discarded. This unorthodox form of divinity is not disengaged and uninterested, on the contrary, it is all-embracing, it connects everything and everyone and has them all share the same roots, namely the same birth out of Dust. This philosophy may resemble pantheistic doctrines, although it differs from them because pantheism does preach God to be in each and every part of the created world, but nonetheless still considers him hierarchically superior to it.⁵ Dust instead is a life affirming principle which levels out any self-proclaimed difference between the created universes, it embodies love for life itself, stepping into the role of the moral successor of the Greek cosmic principle Eros.⁶

2.2 Chaos: the Miltonic predecessor of Dust

In order to devise a vivid and convincing worldbuilding which deeply resonates with readers and always seems to ring true, Pullman had to develop a genesis of the narrated universe which heavily drew from universally shared knowledge, namely the Christian creation story and theological background, but also from previous world-renowned literature, contributing to adding authority and a precedent to his refreshing interpretations of life and religion. Concerning Dust, the cornerstone of this literary universe, the main source of inspiration was the Miltonic chaos of *Paradise Lost*, the dark materials after which the entire trilogy is named.

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

(II, ll.911-916)

Milton describes chaos as the womb and, at the same time, grave of nature: a boundless, infinite aggregate of dark materials, which are nothing more than the constituent parts

⁵ Tóth, p. 92.

⁶ Tóth, p. 35.

comprising the universe's mass. These dark materials are not an endless reserve of dull, immobile matter; on the contrary, they are sentient particles exuding vital energy and always engaged in a never-ending struggle.⁷ Although they contain the power of creation they are not endowed with a will of their own, it is their fate to patiently await one whose creative ability will guide them in the shaping of a universe which will indulge their designs to the letter: "the Almighty Maker". It is clear that Pullman bases the concept of Dust on that of chaos, he, however, expands it, ascribing prominence to this half-forgotten creation system and making it the fulcrum of his literary cosmos, the true protagonist of the trilogy, around whose salvation the whole sequence of events revolves. The animate atoms of *Paradise Lost* evolve into a conscious network, which according to their own volition, birthed both matter and spirit; what in *Paradise Lost* is all but a means to an end, a mere instrument meant to blindly follow who wields it, in *His Dark Materials* is the Maker himself, or even better the Mother of all, the perpetually pregnant female emanator of life.⁸

The idea that God was not the ultimate creator who snapped matter out of nothingness and into existence was quite pioneering at Milton's time.⁹ The Augustinian ontology suggested that matter was close to the nothingness it originated from and brought forth the notion that matter inherently turned to sinfulness and that it required for the flesh hard discipline and guidance from the soul to evade the inevitable descent into evil.¹⁰ Milton instead stated that:

original matter was not an evil thing, nor to be thought of as worthless: it was good, and it contained the seeds of all subsequent good. It was a substance, and could only have been derived from the source of all substance. It was in a confused and disordered state at first, but afterwards God made it ordered and beautiful.¹¹

The first matter loses then, according to Milton, any evil characterization, marking it only as a

⁷ Bird, Anne-Marie., "Without Contraries is no Progression": Dust as an All-Inclusive, Multifunctional Metaphor in Philip Pullman's "*His Dark Materials*", *Children's Literature in Education*, 32 (2001), p. 114.

⁸ Bird, p. 114.

⁹ Pace, Jordan, "God the Father or Mother Divine? : Subversive Theology in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*", Senior Thesis, Trinity College, 2017, p. 7.

¹⁰ Rumrich, John, "Milton's God and the Matter of Chaos.", *PMLA*, 110(5) (1995), p. 1037.

¹¹ Milton in Rumrich, p. 1037.

neutral, tangled foundation for the building of God's universe. God himself in *Paradise Lost* describes chaos as part of himself, a limb of the deity, though not directly controlled by him, which acts as an agent of creation, the female counterpart to divinity placed under the hierarchal control of the male one.

Boundless the deep, because
I Am who fill Infinitude, nor vacuous the space.
Though I uncircumscribed myself retire,
And put not forth my goodness, which is free
To act or not, necessity and chance
Approach not me, and what I will is fate.

(VII, ll.168-173)

Chaos is boundless because God fills it with his infinite being, though he willingly refrains from involving himself in its affairs and from influencing it with his goodness, which would then be reflected in what will be shaped through chaos.¹² Chaos is God's limitless potential, severed from him and subjugated to the free will of those who engage with it, whether it be Christ or Satan. After creation has taken place, chaos returns to be as boundless and erratic as it was before, always leaving room for changes in the already established order, although, once Satan's child, Death,¹³ immobilizes the previously free matter, chaos cannot further allow changes to its realm to occur, "the fall has imposed [a] [...] new order: the tyrannically oppressive structure of evil".¹⁴

The fact that chaos is infinite and makes an essential contribution to creation raises some questions: how come chaos is infinite when God is allegedly the only infinite being? How can God fill chaos without being there?¹⁵ These are only a few of the paradoxical contradictions we encounter throughout the reading of *Paradise Lost*. In this poem God is portrayed by Milton directly on the scene, he retains all the characteristics of divinity commonly associated with him, but his character is physically defined, even anthropomorphised, attributes that are quite

¹² Rumrich, p. 1043.

¹³ Death in *Paradis Lost* is the fruit of the incestuous union between Satan and Sin..

¹⁴ Rumrich, p. 1040.

¹⁵ Rumrich, p. 1043.

irreconcilable with Christian divine idolatry of the time.¹⁶ Apart from the improbable association of immutability, immortality and infinity with the Miltonic God, what truly strikes one is the unclearness of his actions and temperament. When Satan leads Eve and Adam to yield to temptation, he appears enraged, ready to damn humanity without a second thought, as if he could not have foreseen the sequence of events that were about to unfold. If God were all-knowing and loved dearly his creatures, as often proclaimed in the scriptures, why did he not stop them from such a ruinous fall? If, having been made free to fall, their destiny was to defy him and face divine punishment, why did he set them on this strenuous path, with no chance of atonement and redemption? In mentioning the fallen angel, he seems neurotic, and excessively cruel: “whose fault?/ Whose but his own? Ingrate, he had of me/ All he could have; I made him just and right” (III, ll.96-98). He is blaming them for following the exact same path he set them on, harshly criticizing the inherent tendencies he shaped them with.¹⁷ The Son here takes on the role of wise father and reprimands God for his unfitting behaviour: “That be from thee far,/ That far be from thee, Father, who art judge/ Of all things made, and judgest only right” (III, ll. 153-155). By acting too emotionally he is playing into the Devil’s hands, unmaking for him his own creations, and bringing about his own goodness and greatness to be both “questioned and blasphemed without defence” (III, ll.166). Peter Herman affirms that: “[e]xpecting to find a just, merciful God, many readers find themselves confronting a God who is querulous at best, tyrannical at worst”.¹⁸ This representation of the divine ruler as despicable monarch is therefore arguably carried out to demonise purposely the old-fashioned conception of God as the ultimate creator and supersede him with a more befitting and unprejudiced one: chaos, the predecessor of Dust.¹⁹

¹⁶ Pace, p. 7.

¹⁷ Pace, p. 5.

¹⁸ Fallon, Samuel, “Milton’s Strange God: Theology and Narrative Form in *Paradise Lost*”, *ELH* 79 (2012), p. 47.

¹⁹ Fallon, p. 47.

Chaos in *Paradise Lost* has unarguably a female characterization: the process of creation faithfully resembles childbirth, with creation being the final product of an organic union between the male imagination and the female chaotic body.²⁰ To channel the primordial powers of chaos to his perverted aims, Satan must struggle with the “boiling gulf” (II, l.1027) of the abyss, scratching his way through “with difficulty and labour” (II, l.1021). Chaos is always in a warlike state and requires fighting to be dominated, the pain of this experience is perhaps a metaphor of the pain women endure during labour or of love seen as war born of the intermingling of the sexes.²¹ Praising chaos as the womb of creation and indispensable physical vehicle of God’s creative abilities means equally worshipping Eve, whose prolific potential is somewhat of chaotic origins, and all women’s generative ability. Pullman develops this point even further, abolishing any kind of trace that an Almighty Maker ever mingled in the creation of the universe of *His Dark Materials*, and venerating in his stead the Mother of all, Eve the scion of Dust. Eve is unable to rival the Christian God; she is not born immaculate nor with godhead within her reach, she is a woman who fell into temptation, sinned, was punished with the gift of painful labour and sacrificed her everything to acquire the liberating knowledge which entails sweet independence. She, together with Dust, has become a beacon of the human burning desire for knowledge, a model of virtue who made suffering and sacrifice her strongest suit, an empowering message meant to be passed on to her universal progeny; lest greed and ambition still bring stagnation and decay where Dust should freely flow and enrich human life.

2.3 The Abyss: the true Hell of Pullman’s universe

In *His Dark Materials* Death is a temporary condition, namely a name given to the shift of one’s atoms from their body/soul/ghost to another unspecified destination; the Dust

²⁰ Pace, p. 13.

²¹ Rumrich, p. 1039.

temporarily used to make up one's earthly vessel or consciousness has run out of time and must return to the great cosmic cycle of Dust, to wander the universe and eventually give life to something else entirely. There is no Heaven or Hell, no final judgement, everyone is entitled to partake in the endless cycle of resurrections and contribute to the correct functioning of the cosmic recycle. The land of the dead is an artificial prison with the sole purpose of curbing the prolific flow of Dust and indulge the vengeful lust of an undermined Authority. True Hell is annihilation, utter nothingness, severance from the blissful hope of eternal life through reincarnation: the Abyss.

The malevolent Abyss embodies the source of all the universes' evil, the natural predator of life itself: an ever-hungry black hole perpetually sucking Dust, in the form of consciousness, from the universes and voiding them of humans able to feel and think. The spectres, whom readers encounter first-hand in *Cittagazze*, are the emissaries of the Abyss who feed on adults' daemons and drain individuals of "the capacity for attention and curiosity [...], just as the abyss itself swallows Dust wholesale".²² The children of *Cittagazze* are spared the dreadful fate of death in life because they lack the sufficient maturity to start questioning their inner self and therefore attract considerable amounts of Dust. The advent of the Abyss is what the young protagonists strive to prevent, the ever-present foe who lingers in the back of Xaphania and the rebel angels' minds, not quite the Abyss itself but the thought of a universe stripped of its light, a dwindling flow of Dust "moving out toward the sea" (AS, 626) and never coming back. Disregarding the considerable amount of Dust held back in the land of the dead, the other main cause of the Abyss' always tighter grasp on Dust is the power of the subtle knife. The subtle knife was created during the age of the Enlightenment in *Cittagazze*, a mighty tool capable of "split[ting] open the very smallest particles of matter" (SK, 438-439) and opening

²² Oram, William, "Pullman's Matter: Lucretius and Milton in *His Dark Materials*", *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 23 (2012), p. 422.

rifts between the worlds. The openings, however, unbalance the fragile equilibrium of the universes, causing Dust to leak “out of the worlds and into nothingness” (AS, 754). Tóth quite originally interprets the knife's usage as an act of rape: the subtle knife penetrating a non-consenting Mother Nature wounds her, leading to the unwelcome birth of spectres as a consequence of this invasion.²³ The subtle knife can furthermore be considered Pullman's own ring of power (from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*) but with a crucial difference: the knife does not unavoidably corrupt its bearer and great good can be achieved through a thoughtful and pondered usage of it; nonetheless, it suffers in the end the same fate as the ring: destruction for the benefit of a greater good.²⁴ The subtle knife embodies ultimately the author's heartfelt warning about the detrimental outcomes of technology abuse, exploiting the metaphor to draw strong parallels between the safeguarding of Dust and that of our environment.²⁵ Scientific innovations must not be limited or demonised, it is their indiscriminate use which threatens cosmic peace; technology can serve good purposes, it just needs to adapt to the preexisting culture and function according to its needs, creating a mutually depending environment like that of the Mulefa.²⁶

2.3 Daemons and souls: spirituality in His Dark Materials

Daemons, throughout the trilogy, are depicted as humanity's guardian angels in animal shape, trusted companions and advisers who voice one's innermost conscience and whose constant interaction with their human provides the author the perfect excuse to turn intimate

²³ Tóth, p. 101.

²⁴ Markman, Arthur, “Science, Technology and the Danger of Daemons”, in Yeffeth Glenn, ed., *Navigating The Golden Compass: Religion, Science And Daemonology In His Dark Materials*, Dallas: BenBella Books, 2005, p. 67.

²⁵ Markman, p. 67.

²⁶ Markman, pp. 67-68.

thoughts into dialogue and confrontation.²⁷ Virtually all the daemons we encounter are of the opposite sex to their humans' counterparts, as if they were two sides of the same coin, a unit that can only be made whole when body and spirit are together. This predominantly dualistic nature of human beings is further proved by the inextricable bond between human and daemon; one cannot cover an excessive distance without the other, or else they suffer excruciating pain. The connection has proven to be physical, tangible, it can be severed with the right means and brings the pair to share the same feelings, even the same fate: if one dies, so does the other (unlike ghosts, which do not seem to be that close with the remaining parts of the tripartite unit), if one gets touched, the same touch is felt on the other's skin, which is the reason why no one is allowed to touch somebody's else daemon.

Knowing exactly what he was doing and exactly what it would mean, he moved his hand from Lyra's wrist and stroked the red-gold fur of her dæmon. Lyra gasped. [...] With a racing heart she responded in the same way: she put her hand on the silky warmth of Will's dæmon, and as her fingers tightened in the fur, she knew that Will was feeling exactly the same what she was. (AS, 763)

As we can evince from the short extract there is an ulterior dimension to daemons than simply embodying one's soul and moral compass: an erotic one. Daemons are made of Dust, the epitome of love for life, and act as the agents of this all-loving principle. In *His Dark Materials*, daemons take on the role of guides, arousing people toward sensual desire and wisdom, driving them through the lengthy process of self-discovery.²⁸ I have already established the fundamental role the self-discovery journey plays into leading Dust to settle on humans, daemons are essentially Dust's enablers: they motivate their flesh and blood counterpart to pursue physical pleasure and knowledge, because the latter are indispensable factors in building the kind of self-knowledge Pullman advocates through the entire trilogy. Full self-identity is only achieved through external stimulation, it requires a constant stream of

²⁷ Tucker, Nicholas, *Darkness Visible: Inside the World of Philip Pullman*, London: Wizard Books, 2007, p. 145.

²⁸ Tóth, p. 44.

new experiences, new pieces of information that are elaborated, internalized and eventually come to define one, each one like a missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle of their life. The most valued and enriching form of experience is interaction with other thinking beings, some of which inevitably turn into deep and long-lasting relationships. “[T]he self in Pullman’s universe is relational”²⁹: confrontation of any sort, especially with loved ones, leads to the intellectual, emotional and sensual awakening of the self Pullman fervently wants his readers to aspire to.³⁰ Daemons are the other party of one’s most prized and dear relationship in life, they are meant to entice one’s young mind, awake it from adolescent dullness by ceaselessly questioning their actions, sowing doubt where certainty lies, thus aiding in building strong and lasting moral character. “[W]hat we call a self is nothing more or less than the relation between our daemon and us. [...] this relation is also dynamic”³¹, meaning that, just like daemons’ animal shape is bound to change again and again (at least until the end of adolescence), one’s natural tendencies inherited at birth are not rigid parameters, used to label human beings, but a mere starting point, from where to grow alongside the daemon into multifaceted adults.

Pullman did not develop the whole concept of daemons from scratch, he drew from ancient Greek culture, renaissance art and even shamanistic religions. In book X of his *Republic*, Plato mentions for the first time a “divine sigh or daimonion, which was a voice within warning him against particular courses of action”³², in brief a tutelary spirit received at birth which seemingly fulfils the same purpose as the daemons we are accustomed to: safeguarding their human ward by counselling on the best course of actions. Setting aside daemons momentarily, the platonic tradition believed Eros to be a divine spirit among those who mediated for humanity and allowed its members to fully partake of that spark of divine

²⁹ Colás in Tóth, p. 42.

³⁰ 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), pp. 224.

³¹ Colás in Tóth, p. 42.

³² Ferguson in Tóth, pp. 41-42.

potential residing deep within themselves.³³ Eros then fulfilled the position of this universe Dust, with daemons acting as its emissaries, enabling humans to access the wakeful state, connected to the emotional and physical fulfilment which was privy to the gods. The idea of a divine guardian came then from platonic tradition, however, the shape they had to take was the fruit of Pullman's well-established interest for the arts. He claimed to have taken inspiration from paintings such as Leonardo's "The Lady with the Ermine" and Tiepolo's "Young Woman with a Macaw", where the portrayed character appears to have developed a strong psychological connection with the animal.³⁴ The animal shape furthermore helped with the visual concept of dialogic confrontation (aside from talking animals being a literary trope of the fantasy genre), and holds special meaning for shamanistic religions. Animal symbols are indeed used to convey specific attributes, ranging from intellectual prowess to physical strength, and in *His Dark Materials*, as I mentioned in chapter one, the animal shape of a daemon matches the characterization of the human it is attached to.³⁵

³³ Tóth, p. 41.

³⁴ Tóth, p. 42.

³⁵ Tóth, p. 43.

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ITALIAN SUMMARY

L'universo letterario di Pullman, nonostante sia stato pensato per la fruizione da parte di bambini e adolescenti, lascia a un'attenta e ponderata lettura moltissimi spunti di riflessione anche da adulti. Ciò che da lettori alle prime armi può sembrare una semplice scelta peculiare, sia essa di stile o trama, assume per i lettori più avvezzi tutto un altro significato. I continui rimandi alla religione cattolica, la cosmogonia dell'universo e persino il viaggio di Lyra verso l'emancipazione emotiva e sessuale da una società dominata da uomini che mirano al controllo del suo corpo e delle sue scelte non possono più essere ignorati, o relegati a meri fattori di contorno che arricchiscono un già vivido romanzo di formazione. Le coincidenze possono esistere nella vita come in letteratura, tuttavia esse non possono estendersi alla stesura di ben tre romanzi; vi è da parte di Pullman un piano editoriale definito e strutturato, che pone il suo pubblico di giovani lettori dinanzi a un'aspra critica antiimperialista e anticlericale, promuovendo a sua volta messaggi di inclusività, accettazione della propria sfera sessuale e solidarietà sociale. La storia di rivalsa di questa seconda Eva, che dopo millenni si appropria delle libertà a lei negate sin dalla creazione, e che solo timidamente aveva tentato una ribellione ai massimi sistemi (Dio e il giardino dell'Eden da lui creato per tenere l'umanità docile e ignorante) mangiando il frutto proibito, è strumentale nella diffusione di una morale che per Pullman è una filosofia di vita. Reinterpretare la caduta e donarle un finale consono, non denigratorio dell'inclinazione umana per la conoscenza e l'indipendenza, anche se comunque amaro in quanto contempla sacrificio, ricalca la propensione dell'autore a valorizzare la natura umana, fin troppo bistrattata e tacciata di essere peccaminosa; dandole la giusta dignità e incanalandola verso ciò che lui considera prosperità della società. In questa tesi analizzo la morale di Pullman, declinandola sotto tutte le sue possibili sfumature, e come essa impregna ogni pagina di *Queste Oscure Materie* a partire dalla creazione dell'universo stesso e

giungendo alla storia e alle scelte compiute dalla giovane protagonista, soffermandomi inoltre sulle fonti di ispirazione dell'autore, prime fra tutte la Genesi e il *Paradiso Perduto* di Milton.

Nel primo capitolo ho dapprima delineato le somiglianze indiscutibili tra il Magisterium, controllato dal primo angelo mai nato, Autorità, e il suo emissario Metatron, e le religioni monoteistiche organizzate, con particolare attenzione posta al cristianesimo. Il Magisterium dovrebbe essere un collegio di luminari, i rappresentanti della divinità sulla terra, uomini che quindi dovrebbero ergersi al di sopra delle masse come esempio di virtù e grazia, ma che in realtà si rivelano sadici e ipocriti che mirano a controllare gli indifesi fedeli attraverso un costante senso di colpa minuziosamente orchestrato. Sono inoltre disposti a separare ragazzini dal loro daemon pur di indebolire l'influenza della Polvere, l'unica vera minaccia al tirannico regno dell'Autorità. Sono poi passato a identificare le tre occasioni nelle quali avviene una Caduta all'interno dei romanzi per proporre una disamina su cosa il peccato, e in particolare il peccato originale, voglia davvero significare in *Queste Oscure Materie*. La Caduta delle varie etnie, oltre a quella personale di Lyra, è da considerare una *felix culpa*, un motivo per gioire e non per condannare coloro che si sono fatti tentare. Il desiderio di conoscere di più, sia su sé stessi che sul mondo circostante, attira la Polvere, vera fautrice del creato, che elargisce i suoi doni a coloro che mostrano spirito d'iniziativa, un accecante desiderio di essere qualcosa di più di un mero involucro di carne pensante. L'intervento della Polvere dona coscienza di sé, crea identità personale, separando quindi dalla schiera della materia coloro che sono ritenuti degni di assurgere al ruolo di membri di un'organizzazione sociale, intervento benefico portato per l'appunto dal peccato di voler apprendere più di quanto viene inizialmente concesso. Mi sono concentrato infine sulle critiche poste a Pullman di aver scritto una serie di romanzi moralisti che altro non sono che un'estesa dichiarazione di guerra ai modelli di pensiero puramente cristiani. La filosofia dell'autore ricalca invece fortemente gli appena menzionati valori, facendo del sacrificio verso la comunità (sulle note del martirio di Cristo) e dell'amore e

accettazione della vita e del prossimo i punti cardine dei suoi libri, abiurando però allo stesso tempo la gerarchia di potere dell'attuale religione cristiana, raffigurata appositamente come un manipolo di uomini farisaici che calpesterebbero tutto e chiunque, anche i valori da loro stessi predicati, per tenere stretto il potere acquisito.

Nel secondo capitolo ho rivolto la mia attenzione alla teocrazia che domina l'universo di Pullman, parlando di ciascuna delle figure di spicco tra le schiere angeliche e del ruolo che ricoprono nella trama, oltre a evidenziare come le storie di queste adducano rilievo agli insegnamenti morali tanto promossi dall'autore. L'autorità si proclama creatore dell'universo, fondando, su questa prima bugia, le basi del suo regno multiversale, essendo in realtà unicamente il primo essere senziente a essere nato dalla Polvere. Intimorito dalla costante presenza della vera divinità generatrice (Polvere) attua un piano per diminuirne l'influenza, creando il mondo della morte, un limbo dove rinchiudere i fantasmi di coloro il cui corpo e spirito è già morto, per impedire che si riuniscano al grande ciclo di reincarnazione cosmica instaurato dalla Polvere. Nei libri compare una sola volta un vecchio essere decrepito e oramai non più pensante, tenuto in vita solamente in virtù di ciò che il suo nome simboleggia. Metatron è il generale delle forze celesti dell'Autorità e vero leader dell'impero teocratico. Già uomo asceso ad angelo in carne ed ossa, rappresenta l'emblema dell'ipocrisia dell'istituzione da lui capitanata, divorata dalla lussuria e dalla brama di potere. A lui e al suo angelico esercito si contrappone Xaphania, personaggio ispirato ai miti gnostici della creazione dell'universo, che simboleggia la saggezza oltre che essere il baluardo della Polvere nella lotta contro il despotico regime dell'Autorità, ricordando un giovane Lucifero che si ribella alla stringente morsa di Dio. Lei interviene direttamente nella missione di diffusione della Polvere nell'universo, agendo da serpente tentatore nella Caduta sia dei primi uomini che dei Mulefa. Mi sono infine accinto a parlare della figura di Cristo e di come Lyra e Will siano i suoi discendenti morali, che compiono l'ultimo sacrificio per assicurare la salvezza certa della Polvere e quindi

dell'universo da Lei creato.

Infine, nel terzo e ultimo capitolo ho affrontato la cosmogonia di questo universo fittizio, parlando più ampiamente della Polvere e dei daemon, come diretta conseguenza del posarsi della Polvere sugli esseri umani, oltre che dell'Abisso, l'incarnazione del predatore naturale della Polvere, e del precedente letterario a cui Pullman si è ispirato per l'ideazione di questa entità progenitrice, il Caos di *Paradiso Perduto*. La Polvere è la nascita e la fine di tutto ciò che è materia e spirito nell'universo: ogni cosa è stata creata grazie alla polvere e a lei infine deve tornare per garantire un eterno riciclo cosmico di corpi e volontà. Oltre ad essere la reale divinità di questo universo letterario, la Polvere è un organismo collettivo e cosciente il cui unico scopo è diffondere vita e amore in un altresì vuoto e freddo spazio, facendo le veci del principio cosmico Eros dell'antica cultura greca. L'abisso è d'altro canto l'unico ostacolo alla supremazia della Polvere, una voragine di nulla cosmico volta a divorare tutta la vita e la coscienza dell'intero universo se lasciato indisturbato, e simbolo della crisi ambientale sperimentata di prima mano da noi tutti. Il Caos è il precedente miltoniano a cui Pullman più si rifà nel creare il suo multiverso, è un bacino di materia primordiale, privo però di volontà propria, che plasma l'universo assecondando la volontà di chi lo utilizza. Rappresenta l'abilità creativa femminile di Dio, che però sottostà ancora a Lui o a un'altra forza maschile a Lui paragonabile, immensa e indispensabile ma comunque non libera e sovrana come la Polvere. Ho trattato infine la figura del daemon, elemento di spicco dell'opera letteraria e uno dei motivi principali per cui la saga è conosciuta. Il daemon è un animale parlante che accompagna qualsiasi essere umano, rappresenta la sua anima, creando una dicotomia anima corpo quasi indissolubile, e agisce come promotore della Polvere nei confronti del suo umano. Il suo scopo principale è quello di condurre l'altra sua metà corporea alla ricerca di conoscenza e amore, innescando il processo di conoscenza e accettazione di sé che avviene solo con il confronto

diretto con persone amate, e che porta inevitabilmente ad attirare l'attenzione della Polvere.