

Pullman, to Adam

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 27 May 2001

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Alice Turner — 27 May 2001, 15:12

Adam:

At 18:51 2001-05-24, alga wrote:

"An Almost Christian Fantasy," the review by Daniel Maloney in the Catholic journal First Things of Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy

is

up. Intelligent analysis, I think, not just religious but literary.

<http://print.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0105/reviews/moloney.html>

Thanks for pointing this out. I agree it's a very perceptive review.

I

think Moloney has put his finger on the basic flaws of the ending, though

he's wrong to state as a definite fact that Will and Lyra do no more than

kiss. (I'd also dispute his claim that atheists can't write fantasy, but

that's another issue.)

I think he's probably right about the kiss. Her daemon, after all, has not yet settled. And if they did have sex, in her role as Eve she would have to get pregnant, which is a bit much for a 13-year-old. Unless we're doing inner-city realism, which we emphatically aren't. (Agree about the atheists, see below.)

Interesting that such a sympathetic review appears in First Things, which I

think of (possibly mistakenly) as quite conservative, both theologically and

socially. Moloney does say that if Pullman's anti-Christian propaganda had

been presented more effectively, then he would have advised parents to keep

their children away from the books.

Yes, isn't that interesting! I do know what he means, though.

Dust doesn't seem too hard to explain, at least in broad outline; in fact,

Pullman pretty much lays it out in HDM, especially TAS. Dust is matter that

has begun to become conscious of itself (TAS, 31), matter and spirit being

one in Pullman's metaphysics (TSK, pb, 249) Dust is both produced by conscious beings (TAS, 491) and sustains consciousness in these beings (don't have a specific page reference at the moment, but I clearly

recall it
being stated that if the Dust goes out of the universe so will
consciousness). I'm not so clear about the Specters; in particular,
their
being created whenever the Knife is used seems contrived by Pullman to
keep
Will and Lyra apart. (And why, after presenting his Church as evil
for
suppressing scientific investigation, does he throw in this
man-was-not-meant-to-tamper-with-the-unknown stuff?)

(On the subject of Dust, I think it was a mistake of Pullman's to
identify
Dust with dark matter. It seems that a lot of fantasy writers whose
stories
are set in, or cross over with, our world give in to the temptation
to
identify their MacGuffin with whatever unexplained scientific
phenomenon is
currently au courant. Not only does this mix genres, it will date
their
books horribly when the phenomenon is discovered either to have a
perfectly
mundane explanation, or worse yet, not to exist after all.)

in terms of
Manichaeism Light and Dark and a logical world-view (pretty damned
hard
to do when there are infinite worlds).

I'm not sure what you're referring to when you talk of Manichaeism.
There's no evil Supreme Being in Pullman's books, any more than there
is a
good Supreme Being. The Authority is evil, but only in the sense that
Hitler was evil, not in the sense of an evil Principle. And Pullman's
characterization certainly isn't Manichaean, as you're undoubtedly
aware;
viz. the harpies, who have been evil and serving the Authority for
thousands
of years, but are converted to good (a darn sight too quickly, if you
ask
me).

And Mani also posited a radical dualism between matter and spirit,
something
Pullman rejects.

I think he borrowed the Dark/Light thing from Mani and is playing around with it--it gets out of
his control, though it starts really well, first with the epigraph and then with Asriel's photographs.
In the Brit editions, apparently there are epigraphs (or maybe it's margin notes) to each chapter
in the first two books, and he own drawings in the third. What a shame the US editions left
these out; they might be quite enlightening.

Incidentally, for those interested in Gnosticism, I discovered a
website on
Gnosticism called the Gnosis archive. It includes translations of the
Nag
Hammadi writings and some of the Corpus Hermeticum, as well as a links
page,

and is maintained by believing Gnostics. It's at
www.webcom.com/~gnosis/welcome.html

Actually there are nearly 100 Gnostic sites, some (most) of them pretty ridiculous. Look under
Yahoo: Religion.

Do your moral and religious objections refer to Will and Lyra's separation,
or to the whole idea of Lyra being the new Eve, whose love for Will saves
the universe? If the latter, I agree that "the Eve thing" is very weak as a
resolution to the plot (Pullman does provide a sort of explanation, though a
weak one, on TAS p. 478), but it fits with the theme of innocence vs. experience, a major theme of the book (though my sense is that it's not
developed as effectively as it could have been). The Church, identifying
experience with original sin, wants to keep everybody innocent. The Dust is
attracted to experience, since the experienced--adults--are more conscious
than the innocent--children. This is why the Church thinks Dust is connected to original sin, iirc. Pullman is in favor of experience, because
it increases consciousness--an interesting reversal on the usual attitude in
children's and young adult books that childhood = goodness and adulthood =
corruption (even if Pullman doesn't carry it through consistently:

despite

the bad children in Cittagazze, most of the children in HDM are good and
most of the adults are either corrupted or at least morally ambiguous, though there are some exceptions). So in choosing experience over
innocence
(without consciously realizing she is doing so), Lyra is coming down on the
right side of the book's major dualism.

Hmm. This paragraph illustrates how tangled things get. But let me remind you that Lee Scoresby, Will's father and the gyptians are neither corrupted or morally ambiguous (well, Will father is a bit strange). Nor are the Cittagaza adults on horseback who guard the children. The witches are a special case, like the angels, being simply beyond morality. They are certainly not corrupted, even (in the case of the angels) in serving Asriel or even in killing Will's father. But this is, once again, a place that Pullman's logic is fuzzy.

I would not object to the Lyra/Eve thing if Pullman had just shut up about it and let us form our own conclusions. But to actually insist on the connection and then emphatically to separate her from Adam as though THAT would simply brush Original Sin aside seems specious to me. There's also the role of Eve as Mother of Us All, and it makes me squirm to put a 13-year-old in that position--see above. There's also, as I have said before, all the howdyado about her having to make this Great Choice that will save the world (or not) all unknowingly and by herself but, when push comes to shove, she is both pushed and shoved.

No. "Balthamos said quietly, '...He was never the creator. He was an angel like ourselves--the first angel, true, the most powerful, but he was formed of Dust as we are, and Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself....He told those who came after him that he had created them, but it was a lie.'" (TAS, 31-32) So the Authority is not the Demiurge, because matter pre-existed him.

Yes, I remembered this after I sent the Demiurge message. But for the sake of argument, the original Gnostic Demiurge is also mistaken in the belief that he was the creator. He too was messing around with what was already there in the pleroma. He too lied. He was less of a creator than Sophia, who created *him* and who also put the divine pneuma in mankind so that they are greater, i.e. closer to the divine, than spirits or angels--Pullman follows this division, and so does Crowley. I think you have to admit the analogy--Pullman is not just inventing all his (dark) materials.

Actually, the Authority is "lower" even than that. Dust is not the first conscious matter, as I mistakenly stated in my earlier post; it is brought into existence by conscious living beings. (TAS, 451; this is the passage I couldn't locate in my previous post about how the vanishing of Dust would be the end of consciousness.) So the angels, including the Authority, are dependent for their existence upon fleshly consciousness already existing. Angels are lower, not higher, than humans in Pullman's cosmology, reflecting his high valuation of matter (see TAS, 375; also a passage I can't find at the moment, where somebody talks about how much the angels wish they had bodies).

Right, see above.

As far as I can tell, there is no God in Pullman's world. The Authority dies on pp. 410-11, and yes, it's a very good thing (even for the Authority). And the absence of God also seems to be portrayed as a good thing.

I think this may be true, both parts of it. If cornered, Pullman might refer to the Alien God, though I suspect he may personally be an atheist, as is Crowley. You absolutely don't need to be religious to use these wonderful (dark!) materials--I just wish his logic were consistent. In a Gnostic universe, however, the Alien God would definitely not be a plot factor! The best you could hope for would be Sophia.

Okay, now I see what you meant by saying you objected to the Eve thing on moral and religious grounds. But I think you have hold of the wrong end of the stick. The cosmic choice, the choice it is Lyra's destiny to make

and
must make freely, is not the choice to give up Will. It is her choice
to
love Will and show her love. The Church's values are the opposite of
Pullman's, but the Church can read the alethiometer; and according to
the
Church, it is Lyra's giving into "temptation," not her rejection of
temptation, which will lead to the triumph of "Dust and sin." (TAS,
68) And
since Dust is good, and the Church is bad, Lyra's "temptation" is
good.
Recall also that the Dust, speaking through Mary's computer, tells
Mary she
must "play the serpent," which she does by telling Lyra of her love
affair
and awakening Lyra's sexuality. Original Sin is not "averted": in
Pullman's
metaphysics, it doesn't exist. The "Fall" is good, since it leads to
greater consciousness: recall the mulefa's story of the serpent.

I just can't buy that either. A young teen falling in love is not making a choice, she is giving in to
little dancing hormones. She can make a choice about "going all the way" or not but there is
nothing to indicate that these two very young kids do that--it's ambiguous, and my inclination is
to think they don't, but it's not from choice: it's that they are really too young for sex; they are
in a sort of bliss. The kids on the fan fiction site think it's the most romantic thing in the world.
Mrs. Coulter, who serves the Church, seems to have been, and remains, rather a lively sort in
that department. I'd forgotten about that Mary/serpent thing, but that seems entirely too
muddled to me as well.

Granted, Pullman muddies the waters by requiring Lyra and Will to make
another decision later, in which they do have to resist "temptation";

but,

as I discuss below, if they make the wrong decision at that point, it
will
not destroy the world. And reading the end of Chapter Thirty-Five, in
which
Lyra and Will express their love (TAS 470), it's clear that this is
when
the world is saved.

I'll read that again.

From Eli:

If it had occurred to Will and Lyra

that
the obstacles were not absolute, they could have gone on to ask
more
interesting questions: what if everybody did it? are we special,
to
justify it? And the question Pullman didn't dare to ask them: even
if
we can, should we?

In a way, he did quite right. I don't know that they would have
answered the way he wanted. The honest story, I want to call it
though

I really shouldn't, might be a tragedy.

But the decision that Lyra and Will have to make at the end is not to close up all the windows: the angels tell them to do this. The decision they have to make is to resist the temptations, first for one of them to go to the others' world and have ten years of happiness and then death; and then to use the extra Dust they will create to keep a window open for themselves instead of keeping their promise to the dead. These decisions they do make without being coerced by threats of cosmic disaster.

(I'm not saying I find this part of the book well worked out. Your objections are valid. Also, it makes little sense for Xaphania to first tell Will that there is a way he can learn to travel to other worlds, which will take him a lifetime to learn; and then say that they can't leave any natural windows open because if they did, Will would spend a lifetime searching for it (TAS, 494-495). And come to think of it, couldn't Xaphania leave one natural window open, and then tell Will where it is? I'll have to go back and look at the readerview discussion, because the more I think about it, the stranger Pullman's insistence on their separation seems.) It's exactly like "The Cold Equations": the author stacks the deck to force a "tragic" choice upon his characters, which when examined more closely is not really forced at all. There has to be a name for this type of scene, where the characters frantically come up with ways to escape the choice the author wants to force upon them, and an all-knowing authority figure comes up with ad hoc reasons why they won't work.

Absolutely agree--and remember that Will's father preceded him. Pullman is going to have to address some of this in his Dust book, I would think.

-alga

Adam Stephanides — 28 May 2001, 15:20 · follows Alice Turner

on 5/27/01 2:12 PM, Alice Turner at pei047 at attglobal.net wrote:

I think he borrowed the Dark/Light thing from Mani and is playing around with it--it gets out of his control, though it starts really well, first with the epigraph and then with Asriel's photographs.

Well, the use of Dark/Light imagery doesn't necessarily indicate influence from Manichaeism--it's common enough. In fact, I don't recall noticing any influence of Manichaeism in particular, though there is Gnostic influence.

In the Brit
editions, apparently there are epigraphs (or maybe it's margin notes) to
each chapter in the first two books, and his own drawings in the third.
What a shame the US editions left these out; they might be quite
enlightening.

Other way around; the drawings were in the first two books, and the epigraphs in the third.
There is a website, www.geocities.com/the_golden_compass/index.html which has the
epigraphs. It also has the covers to the UK editions of NL and SK, both the juvenile and adult
editions (I quite like the adult covers), but none of Pullman's drawings yet. From my cursory
scan of the epigraphs, I'd say they're interesting but don't settle anything (a number of them
are drawn from the Blake poem at the start of TAS), but a closer analysis might reach a
different conclusion.

Incidentally, Random House didn't use his drawings because they thought it made the book look
like a children's book; and they didn't use his epigraphs because they hadn't used his drawings,
and they wanted to get the book out in a hurry. (The readerville discussion, message #91). Nice
to know they have so much respect for the integrity of the books they publish.

Adam:

(even if Pullman doesn't carry it through consistently:

despite
the bad children in Cittagazze, most of the children in HDM are good
and
most of the adults are either corrupted or at least morally ambiguous,
though there are some exceptions).

Hmm. This paragraph illustrates how tangled things get. But let me
remind you that Lee Scoresby, Will's father and the gyptians are neither
corrupted or morally ambiguous (well, Will's father is a bit strange). Nor
are the Cittagaza adults on horseback who guard the children. The
witches are a special case, like the angels, being simply beyond
morality. They are certainly not corrupted, even (in the case of the
angels) in serving Asriel or even in killing Will's father. But this is,
once again, a place that Pullman's logic is fuzzy.

Yes, these are the exceptions I was thinking of. But while these are all (I think) socially marginal
figures. The adult world portrayed by Pullman is, as a whole, thoroughly corrupt.

I would not object to the Lyra/Eve thing if Pullman had just shut up
about it and let us form our own conclusions. But to actually insist on
the connection and then emphatically to separate her from Adam as though
THAT would simply brush Original Sin aside seems specious to me.

The separation between Lyra and Will has nothing to do with Original Sin, since the books reject
the idea of Original Sin, as I've argued before. (Nor did the Gnostics believe in Original Sin as a
yielding to temptation; I'm surprised that you read the books as Gnostic books and still read the
ending as you do.) And whether or not Lyra and Will have sex, they definitely "fall"; Lyra's
bringing the fruit to Will's mouth, and his accepting it, make this clear.

There's
also the role of Eve as Mother of Us All, and it makes me squirm to put
a 13-year-old in that position--see above.

Obviously Lyra can't literally be the Mother of Us All, whether or not she has sex (and I also dislike the idea of her being pregnant). If she and Will are Parents to humanity, it is in a metaphorical sense: they are "the true image of what human beings always could be, once they had come into their inheritance." (TAS, 470)

But for the sake of argument, the original Gnostic Demiurge is also mistaken in the belief that he was the creator. He too was messing around with what was already there in the pleroma.

As far as I can tell, though, the Authority doesn't even shape the material universe out of pre-existing, as the Demiurge did. Our universe came into existence by itself; the Authority just moved in and took over.

He too lied. He was less of a creator than Sophia, who created *him* and who also put the divine pneuma in mankind so that they are greater, i.e. closer to the divine, than spirits or angels--Pullman follows this division, and so does Crowley. I think you have to admit the analogy--Pullman is not just inventing all his (dark) materials.

I wasn't aware of that fact about Gnosticism, and it is an interesting commonality. But for Pullman, humans are above angels not because they contain the divine pneuma, but because they are flesh. I would argue that HDM is not Gnostic, although it's influenced by Gnosticism (of course, the waters are muddied by the fact that "Gnosticism" was not a term any of the people we think of as Gnostics ever used; it was applied by later historians.)

I think this may be true, both parts of it. If cornered, Pullman might refer to the Alien God, though I suspect he may personally be an atheist, as is Crowley.

In the readerville discussion, Pullman says he personally doesn't believe in God (message #65). And I, myself, don't recall any evidence of the Alien God in the books.

The cosmic choice, the choice it is Lyra's destiny to make and must make freely, is not the choice to give up Will. It is her choice to love Will and show her love.

I just can't buy that either. A young teen falling in love is not making a choice, she is giving in to little dancing hormones.

Agreed that Lyra is not making a conscious choice between innocence and experience, as it seems to me that Pullman's theme really requires. But she does make a sort of choice, in showing her love to Will by giving him the fruit. And for the reasons I've given before, it is this choice which is the cosmic choice she is destined to make.

I think the internal evidence is clear, but I have external evidence as well. In the readerville discussion I referred to earlier, Pullman says: "Temptation: I've been asked this question a lot, or a variation of it. The event is signalled as clearly as i could without making it ridiculously overt. Mary in her marzipan story is giving them the information they need to progress to the next stage of their development. It isn't represented as transgressive because in the mulefa world growing up was never seen as a loss, but a gain: their story of the snake and the wheel shows that. Mary is told to play the serpent, and in that world, that means bring wisdom. And next day she actually gives them some fruit, and it's fruit that Lyra lifts to Will's mouth, knowing exactly what it will mean. The signals are all there." (message #31)

I'd forgotten about that Mary/serpent thing, but that seems entirely too muddled to me as well.

This seems pretty straightforward to me, once you recognize that here Pullman is using a Gnostic version of the myth, in which the serpent is the good guy because he encourages Adam and Eve to gain the knowledge the Demiurge hid from them.

I'll have to
go back and look at the readerview discussion, because the more I
think
about it, the stranger Pullman's insistence on their separation
seems.)

Rereading the readerville discussion, it seems to me that Pullman wanted to have his lovers tragically sundered, but didn't succeed in creating a situation where this would follow naturally, so resorted to the dice-loading we see.

--Adam