Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* Trilogy

S.J. Masson

To my mind, one of the main interests of Philip Pullman's controversial trilogy is not specifically related to the books. It lies in the almost universal popularity they enjoy. Like *Harry Potter*, the series' success has extended well beyond the children's market. Is it because of its imaginative plotline? Is it its sheer adventure? Does it lie in the author's skill in winning our admiration for Lyra, the relentlessly optimistic, indomitable heroine? Is it that adults too can instinctively identify with her battle against a largely faceless, unjust authority? Or is it perhaps that Pullman offers yet another conspiracy theory to explain its evil? All of these things and more have made *His Dark Materials* compelling reading for many. Surely there is something more than the author's considerable artistic skill at work. But what is it?

Another issue we will need to consider is the uneasy sense that Pullman has transgressed the bounds of (children's) fiction and ventured into territory where he could be charged with disseminating hateful propaganda. It could be argued that Pullman's transgression of genre has a precedent in the fictional writings of his *bête noire*, C S Lewis, most notably in his *Narnia Chronicles* and 'science fiction trilogy'. This is certainly the author's own contention. The latter of these works in particular acts as a sort of framework for Pullman's novels. In fact, a non-Christian friend who cannot abide Lewis for the beliefs he feels Lewis foists upon the reader, also dismissed Pullman for misusing his licence as a storyteller to 'preach at him'. While I suspect we will need to differ about Lewis's merits (and integrity) as an artist, the comparison has some merit in it. I will venture a brief comment about this in a moment.

It is difficult to know where to begin a discussion of these challenging, troublesome and entertaining books. It would be very easy to attack them for their surprisingly facile, if not puerile, attack on Christianity; for their cavalier disregard for factual accuracy; for their admixture of scurrilous libel with half-truths; for the fact that the followers of the Authority, i.e. the church, are so 'monolithically odious', without any light or shade. This review could simply add to the tone of hostility it has understandably received from Christians for all these things. Pullman's attack on Christianity is so indiscriminate in fact that it projects a unity amongst Christians that otherwise only exists in the rose-tinted dreams of liberal ecumenism. No Christian escapes Pullman's enmity, though one might wish that all believers *were* really as zealous for Christ as the followers of the Authority appear to be for it.

Nonetheless, I can see no benefit in responding to Pullman's crude portrait of the church in kind. Such a response would probably add to its appeal to those already sympathetic to an attack on Christianity and it would probably lend credibility to Pullman's caricature of Christians as cogs in a machine designed to repress human individuality. Why engage on the terms an adversary presents when they are so obviously mistaken? I think we need to search a bit more deeply if we are to make a response that might befit people who believe that the world-view of Christianity is undergirded by the truth, which, as S T Coleridge once put it, allows us to distinguish its 'proper offspring from the changelings which the gnomes of

vanity or the fairies of fashion may have laid in its cradle or called by its names.' The reason why Pullman's books appeal is that there *is* something that rings so very true about them. And yet they are so astonishingly wrong-headed about Christianity. How do we reconcile these things?

As I suggested, the way ahead may be in answering the question why has this trilogy been so popular? My suspicion is that the primary reason lies in the constitution of the very society in which we are living. More than two centuries ago, William Wordsworth complained that:

> …a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the encreasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupation produces a craving for extraordinary incident which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. To this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves.

Wordsworth's observations find their echo today in politicians' complaints of voter apathy, in the experience of artists who cannot find an audience for their work unless they dally with the sensational, and with the difficulty that teachers encounter to inspire their pupils to learn anything that does not already conform to their immediate interests and experiences.

All of these guardians of authority have to compete against (and often conform to) the combined forces of the entertainment age: the reduction of public utterances to sound-bites; the uniformity imposed upon human thought and conduct to make it more amenable to analytical measurement as behaviour (as if we were nothing but animals); above all, the belief that 'reality' is the world dictated to us by economic forces. Is it any wonder that supernatural tales like Pullman's are having so strong a pull on the imagination of so many? They fill a spiritual void that the model of man as a trousered ape (or as a consuming organism) cannot. We Christians who understand ourselves to be made in the image of the invisible God should not be surprised at his success. Maybe there is even something that we can learn from it.

It is certainly not insight into the nature of God. It is an insight into what our culture now instinctively associates with the *traditional* concept of God, and what it would consequently like to see as a more enlightened alternative. Our culture instinctively equates authority with uncaring and repressive tyranny. There is no point in denying it. Contempt for authority, *aka* tolerance, is the *lingua franca* of our global society. Pullman has quite rightly observed that Christian doctrine does not conform to it, maintaining instead that all authority derives from God, and that his claim to sovereignty is just and unimpeachable.

Yet why does Pullman believe that God's authority means tyranny? How is it moreover that the church of the God who took on human flesh, who loved us and gave himself for us, sinners though we are, could become so strongly implicated with authoritarianism? We need not search very far. It is not *inherent* in church government or church history. It is not even inherent in worldly authority.

The common sentiment that Pullman expresses, that accepting authority means inviting tyranny, is a response evoked by the totalitarian nature of modern society itself.

Hannah Arendt, one of the most astute commentators on modern totalitarianism and the changes that have come about in the human condition in the scientific age, notes that the contemporary sense of 'authority' as tyranny derives from the workings of *modern* society, not any traditional doctrine:

> The striking coincidence of the rise of society with the decline of the family indicates clearly that what actually took place was the absorption of the family unit into corresponding social groups. The equality of the members of these groups, far from being an equality among peers, resembles nothing so much as the equality of household members before the despotic power of the household head, except that in society, where the natural strength of one common interest and one unanimous opinion is tremendously enforced by sheer number, actual rule exerted by one man, representing the common interest and the right opinion, could eventually be dispensed with. The phenomenon of conformism is characteristic of the last stage of this modern development.

Pullman mistakenly suggests that the relentless conformism imposed by modern forms of government is the product of the Christian idea of Divine sovereignty; when in fact it is the product of Enlightenment rationalism and its re-presentation of 'God' as an absolute mathematical necessity, without personal character, to which human society should conform in order to be 'ethical'. As Arendt again observes:

> Statistical uniformity is by no means a harmless scientific ideal; it is the no longer secret political ideal of a society which, entirely submerged in the routine in everyday living, is at peace with the scientific outlook inherent in its very existence. (43)

Pullman's response to such a mechanistic horror (which he presents terrifyingly in a scene in *Northern Lights* in which the Authority uses a machine to sever a child's body from his 'soul' – or to use Pullman's terms, *daemon*) is characteristically Romantic, even Shelleyan. His response to *this* form of authority, totalitarian human construct that it is, is understandably rebellious: rather than the 'Christian' *kingdom* of heaven, Pullman concludes his trilogy with a vision of a *republic* of heaven on earth, based on his idea that what we are essentially as humans is a sort of gooey mass of 'feeling', a primal energy without any individual character.

Heresy and tolerance

Yet mistaken identity cannot exonerate Pullman from responsibility for his work, certainly not with the pretensions he has for it. It is important to recognise his implicit claim to take on the mantle of the epic writer, which includes being a teacher of the nation. I have already observed that *His Dark Materials* models itself most explicitly on C S Lewis's science fiction trilogy. It was if anything an understatement. The plot and characters are in fact almost wholly derived from it and Narnia. Pullman begins his narrative where Lewis ends his (in *That Hideous Strength*): in a college in Oxford, the improbable site of a cosmic struggle between good and evil that unfolds upon the backdrop of the politics of dons. This is pure Lewis. So are the trips to parallel worlds through invisible windows that begin in

the second book, *The Subtle Knife*, which function for the children much like the back of the wardrobe in the attic does in Narnia.

Nonetheless, we need to look beyond Lewis's stories to realise the full extent of the heresy in Pullman's argument. Pullman is at odds not just with Christianity but with the ideas of mankind that have been held in the Western world from the Classical age onwards. For Lewis's own efforts in his sci-fi trilogy were nothing but an adaptation, for the scientific age, of the vision of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which, for its part, was a Christian revision of the traditional epic narratives of Homer and Virgil.

Lewis, like his friend and fellow-poet J R R Tolkien, confronted the radical challenge posed by scientism, science fiction (and the ideas of modern society which pursue statistical uniformity as a political agenda) to the traditional image of man by creating an alternative, tradition-compatible *natural supernaturalism*, one that neither denied the good of God's creation nor ignored its fallenness or need of redemption. In these writers' stories, the world is not a prison-house that needs to be escaped through science; but it is not an unfallen world either. The enemy lies within; the need for redemption is total.

And God is always at work: 'Aslan is on the move' in *The Narnia Chronicles*, his is a 'deeper magic' than even the Witch who slew him ever knew; the precious 'substance wherewith Maleldil remade the worlds before any world was made' redeems the universe in Lewis's *Perelandra*; a greater power than even Sauron, the mere maker of the rings of power, is at work in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.

Perhaps the challenge that Pullman's brand of mythmaking makes not just to Lewis but to tradition can best be illustrated by comparing their ideal of human nature. For Shelleyan Romantics such as Pullman (and most of our society), 'the deep truth is imageless'. For them, this means that human 'spirituality' – the essence of humanity – can thus be symbolised by an empty plastic shopping bag floating in the breeze (such as we see at the end of the film *American Beauty*) or by Pullman's visible 'stream-of-consciousness' at the end of his trilogy, the 'dust' that he suggests captures the essence of human nature.

For Christian writers such as Coleridge, Lewis and Tolkien, truly *imaginative* fiction affirms itself a derivative product of 'the living power and prime agent of all human perception … a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite *I AM*.' It thus does not express human *autonomy*, it expresses the *relationship* of human lives (and human stories) to a God in whose image they have been created, male and female.

This fact has a further implication, which addresses Pullman's claims that Christianity is inherently anti-individualistic. It is the very relational character of human existence, so much a part of Christian doctrine, which *allows for individuality*, the unique sense of personhood each human being has an intimate knowledge of, but requires the presence of *others* to confirm. In the Western tradition, *plurality*, i.e. the fact that men (and not man) inhabit the earth is the fundamental human condition. For all the vitriol Pullman pours upon the inclination of 'Christian' teaching *against* our bodies – which has some truth in the unorthodox teaching of St Ambrose and Augustine it must be admitted – it is telling that in his brave new world our ultimate destiny lies in an unembodied form.

I realise that this has hardly been a typical book review, but the challenges of Pullman's trilogy actually lie beyond one. This is the work of a cultured charlatan who has appropriated the work of many writers to his own familiar postmodern ends. I have already mentioned the danger of demonising him. Yet we cannot simply ignore

him either. Trivialising the real challenges he poses is to capitulate and give them the weight of profundity that his skill as a writer warrants, but which his ideas truly lack. These are not really children's books, and there is something of the night in them.

A few examples illustrate this well. The alethiometer, the 'truth-meter' that Lyra uses, is far too suggestive of *Ouija* boards not to worry parents that their children will be encouraged down the dark path of divination. The name of Lyra's *daemon*, the alter ego Pullman has probably appropriated from Plato's reference to Socrates' tutelary spirit, is Panthalaimon, 'all of blood.' Similarly, the redemption of the universes seems to hinge upon a sexual encounter between Will and Lyra on the cusp of puberty, enacting a sort of undoing of the fall. These are thoroughly troubling ideas, and they reflect a strange amalgam of Pelagianism (the doctrine that there is no such thing as original sin) with the contradictory idea that sexuality is somehow *redemptive*. It is thus not only heresy, but poor heresy at that, though it derives some semblance of comprehensibility from the traditional clothes it puts on.

Yet one thing about Pullman's pick-and-mix theology is rather comforting. The books lose their appeal as the series progresses. I have yet to meet a single person who has not been terribly disappointed with the final book, *The Amber Spyglass*. I suspect that there is a simple reason for this. What attracts us to these stories initially is that they have all the marks of a grand adventure. They are truly well-written, and the children, Lyra and Will, *personally* exhibit the courage, loyalty, honesty and fairness that incite our genuine admiration, much as J K Rowling's children do.

However, unlike the case of Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, these virtues seem to bear no relation to the idea of ultimate good, which is only really revealed in the final instalment of the trilogy. The powers of good and evil, so admirably presented as realities in Rowling's books, give way to the 'higher virtue' of tolerance in Pullman's earthly eschatology. And this leaves the reader ice-cold, the dull sensation that is the residue of a virtue divested of sacrificial, atoning love.

Much as one would expect of one enamoured of the virtue of the Enlightenment god (which Pullman tries to foist onto Christianity), we are left with a complacent, abstract and wholly intellectual virtue. The irony is heavy indeed, though I suspect that it will escape most readers. In a sense, an awareness of this irony is far less important than the effect of Pullman's failure. I cannot imagine that the heaven of these novels will appeal to anyone not already ensnared in the superficial wiles of Pullman's abstract intellectualism.

The unfortunate fact that the media and the contemporary intelligentsia are riddled with such people is not Pullman's doing. The widespread success of these novels may however be a further sign that the persecution of orthodox Christians in this country (indeed worldwide) has now attained a ground of intellectual respectability. It certainly should signal that it is no longer possible for Christians to hold on to the vain idea that they are influential within the establishment of this country. Perhaps we should welcome the fact that the popularity of this trilogy has announced such a setback to the earthly power of the church, and pray that it is a sign that Aslan is indeed on the move. This is certainly the case; for our part, we must make every effort to proclaim Christian truth and divest it from such an ill-fitting Authority.