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***GNOSTIC SPIRITUAL HERITAGE
IN PHILIP PULLMAN'S HIS DARK MATERIALS
FANTASY TRILOGY***

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Abstract: *In Western culture Judeo-Christianity as the mainstream and Gnosticism with Hellenistic-Jewish roots as its rivalling counter-religion have had different approaches to the Tempter, the Temptation and the Fall of Man. Philip Pullman (1946-) incorporated the alternative memories of the formerly repressed Gnostic traditions into the mythopoesis of His Dark Materials (1995-2000) fantasy trilogy so as to express his antipathy for dogmatized and organized Christianity. In this paper I will rely on Renate Lachmann's hypothesis according to which Romantic literature of the fantastic served to preserve unofficial or forbidden philosophical-theological knowledge. On this basis, the connecting link between the pre-modern Gnostics and the contemporary Pullman seems to be the heretical William Blake (1757-1827), the successful (pre) Romantic transmitter of Gnosticism in English literature. I focus my attention to the trilogy's second and third books, The Subtle Knife (1997) and The Amber Spyglass (2000), to explore how the British author shaped particular Gnostic elements (self-development, emancipation and dualism) to his own liking instead of a slavish loyalty to Gnostic mythology. My aim is to argue that the acquisition of gnosis (special, liberating knowledge), the central item of Gnostic mythology, inevitably functions as the plot-organizing device of Pullman's narrative set in several parallel universes. To see what the original meaning can produce in a new context, I will analyse Pullman's conception of Dust as an all embracing and vitalizing force, characters such as the female angel named Xaphania as Sophia (Wisdom), the male angels called the Authority and Metatron as the demiurge(s), and a setting or rather an attitude named the Republic of Heaven as the proof for the anti-nihilistic position of Pullman's mythopoesis.*

The gradually secularized institutions of Christianity have been accused of failing to provide inner spirituality for their believers. Philip Pullman's (1946-) fantasy trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, is also a bold criticism of both organized religion and the canonized narrative of Christianity. The main objections of Pullman and his readers to Christianity are, according to Hugh Rayment-Pickard, its life-denial and authoritarianism: "the church appears more concerned with preserving its doctrines and traditions than in celebrating the vitality and goodness of life, more concerned with power and prestige than with people and sufferings" (90). Instead of

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the ancient Judeo-Christian paradigm of disobedience and divine punishment, namely the myth of the Fall of Man, the English author created a new myth of human dignity in the mythopoesis (fictional mythology) of the three books, entitled *The Golden Compass* (1995), *The Subtle Knife* (1997) (abbreviated as *SK*) and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000) (abbreviated as *AS*).

To give obvious expression to his aversion, Pullman's main source of inspiration seems to be Gnostic traditions underground within Christianity from the Middle Ages to the present. The most characteristic trait of Gnostic mythology built upon Hellenistic-Jewish foundations is *dualism*. The origin of all things is traced to a first principle, a pure, eternal and absolute power. From this hidden, unknown and unknowable deity there are series of cosmological emanations personified by figures known as aeons. In contrast to this spiritual world of reality and perfection (*pleroma*), the material world of illusion and imperfection (*hystereme*) was created by a demiurge. The created world is an error, "the consequence of a fall from and split within the deity" (Quispel 567). Basilides (117-138), Valentinus (c.100-c.160) and Marcion (c.75-c.145), the second-century great Egyptian gnostics of seemingly Jewish birth, proclaimed "a God beyond the Old Testament God" (570). Along this line of thought, the doctrine of a Gnostic group, the Ophites, praises the Snake who, by persuading Eve to taste the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge in Paradise, gave mankind the liberating knowledge of good and evil from the deceit of and the unjust subservience to the jealous Creator (Couliano 111).¹ This special knowledge is called *gnosis*, "an ontological passport to the human soul [imprisoned into a body] through the boundary between the two worlds and thence back to the godhead" (Goodrick-Clarke 28). In more details, "[a]s the gnostics use the term, we could translate it as 'insight,' for gnosis involves an intuitive process of knowing oneself. And to know oneself, they claimed, is to know human nature and human destiny. Yet to know oneself, at the deepest level, is simultaneously to know God; this is the secret of gnosis" (Pagels xx). Taking these all into account, I aim to prove that while in *His Dark Materials* trilogy Pullman peculiarly wove a Gnostic scheme of self-development and emancipation into the texture of a non-dualistic worldview, the acquisition of *gnosis* is inevitably his plot-organizing device.

The alternative memory of Gnosticism as a counter-religion to Christianity has successfully been preserved in unofficial forms of literature for posterity. Gnosticism has always been outside of the mainstream, even at the edge of oblivion. Karen L. King points out that Gnosticism as a term was invented simply to "aid in defining the boundaries of normative Christianity" (2). In comparable dualistic categories of self and other, "Gnosticism has been classified as a marginal, sectarian, esoteric, mythical, syncretistic, parasitic, and Oriental religion, in contrast to mainstream, authentic, ethnic, historical, rational, or universal religions, such as orthodox Christianity" (3). In this light, it is not surprising that Gnosticism is known by the reports of its opponents, such as Irenaeus (c. 180), Hippolytus (c. 200) and Epiphanius (c. 350) (Quispel 567). Independently of the authors' attitude to the

¹ Pullman himself makes it clear that the Temptation and the Fall are depicted "not as the source of all woe and misery – but as the beginning of true human freedom, something to be celebrated, not lamented" (qtd. in Watkins n.p.).

subject of their writing, however, Renate Lachmann defines writing itself as both “an act of memory and a new interpretation, by which every new text is etched into memory space” (301). By quoting and discussing philosophical, aesthetic, theological, historical and scientific knowledge, literary fictions become the construing of “intertextual bonds between literary and non-literary texts,” and “the bearer of actual and the transmitter of historical knowledge” (306). The German literary theorist claims that the literature of the fantastic, especially in Romanticism, operated as

a mnemonic device that makes the forgotten or repressed reappear and compensates for what was lost as a result of cultural constraints. This mode of writing supported and nourished suppressed traditions of knowledge which ran as an undercurrent below the main-stream of Enlightenment. The authors of fantastic texts were fascinated by the exclusive nature of the disciplines of arcane knowledge with their doctrines and practices, (...) and by the hope of regaining through them long-forgotten insights into human nature and the lost order of the world. (306-7)

Although Pullman’s fantasy series does not belong to the Romantic era, the heretical works of his most influential literary idol do.

The direct transmitter of the Western spiritual heritage of Gnosticism to the anticlerical author was in all probability the prophetic poet and artist, William Blake (1757-1827). Gilles Quispel attributes the launching of the gnosis of modern times to the German mystic, philosopher and shoemaker Jacob Boehme (1575-1624) (573). Primarily inspired by Boehme, Blake’s influential gnosis – as an initiation into a divine revelation – is “the only authentic gnosis of the entire Anglo-Saxon world” (573). Although he was a deeply spiritual man, he was hostile to dogmatized religion and all forms of organized religion, involving the Church of England. His early works less Gnostic in character, especially *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793), sharply oppose the dogmatic suppression of natural desires and the discouragement of earthly joy. Witnessing his preference of the New Testament to the Old Testament, his later works, such as *Jerusalem* (1804-1820), encompass his vision of humanity redeemed from “fall into Division” into “Resurrection to Unity” by self-sacrifice and forgiveness. In line with the Gnostics, the poet separated the true God from nature (matter) whose creator he regarded as evil. Ioan P. Couliano claims that

Blake’s *[First] Book of Urizen* (1794) is a free Genesis paraphrase (...). Urizen, the architect of this universe, is the hypostasis of the hatred and contempt that Blake himself felt for the soulless, mechanistic philosophy of [Isaac] Newton and for [John] Locke’s sensualism, and at the same time he is the legalistic tyrant of the Bible. Creation is defined as both a contradiction and a fall in six stages, the six days of Genesis. (251)

The moment of creation means to be the moment of the fall, when “the immediate concomitant of individuation is anxiety;” in more details, “[t]he world divides into the I and the not-I. From then on, it is perpetual fear, paranoia, and

struggle. Urizen finds the universe he now considers 'external' to be threatening. He develops a terror-filled and hostile relation to it, embarking on futile efforts to bring it under his control" (Quinney 32). It is not known where Blake could have read or heard about Gnosticism which had been kept alive in the Middle Ages by dualistic sects such as the Cathari in southern France and northern Italy, and the Bogomils in Bulgaria and the now former Yugoslavia (Quispel 573). The Codex Askewianus and the Codex Brucianus were discovered in Egypt in the eighteenth century, and the writings found near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt was discovered in 1945 (567). Nevertheless, Blake might have shared the same sociological factors (such as intellectual isolation and destructive social conditions) with the gnostics.² Pullman, however, leaves no doubt that he incorporated Blakean ideas into *His Dark Materials*: "[i]n aligning the rebellious angels with good and freedom, rather than authority, repression and cruelty, I'm in a long tradition. William Blake consciously and Milton unconsciously wrote about this, so I'm in line with the English dissenters" (qtd. in Cooper 355).

Partly evoking Blake's peculiar imagination, Pullman's mythopoesis basically dissolves the sharp ontological dualism of "good spirit versus evil matter" of Gnostic mythology. Counter to the life-denial pessimism of Gnostic anti-materialism, he consciously commits himself to biophilia, the love of life here and now:

My myth does owe something to Gnosticism, but it differs in one essential characteristic. The Gnostic worldview is Platonic in that it rejects the physical created universe and expresses a longing for an unknowable God who is far off. My myth is almost the reverse. It takes this physical universe as our true home. We must welcome and love and live our lives in this world to the full. (qtd. in Cooper 355)

The quasi divine embodiment of the resulting nondualism is called Dust, invisible self-conscious and communicative particles stating "from what we are, spirit; from what we do, matter. Matter and spirit are one" (*SK* 221). Anne-Marie Bird identifies Dust with the author's "attempt to mend the dichotomies of religious division;" namely "[b]y envisaging everything as connected with everything else, Pullman effectively upsets and transforms the antithesis between conventionally divided entities, rendering them as two halves of a more complex and integrated whole" ("Without Contraries..." 122). In this way, the contemporary author seems to share "Blake's acceptance and appreciation of the human being as a dynamic, inclusive being comprising body and soul, good and evil, the notion being that opposites are inadequate unless synthesised" (122). He also agrees with Blake's conviction that "the separation of the contraries limits 'Energy': that is, imagination, consciousness and, related to this, the capacity to enjoy physical, or earthly pleasures" (122). Moreover, Pullman's angels, as creatures of Dust (*SK* 220), also subvert the superiority of spirit to matter. They are holy in their venerable appearance and infinite knowledge:

² See Sorensen for a detailed analysis.

They shone not as if they were burning but as if, wherever they were and however dark the night, sunlight was shining on them. They were like humans, but winged, and much taller; and, as they were naked, the witch could see that three of them were male, two female. Their wings sprang from their shoulder blades, and their backs and chests were deeply muscled. (SK 123)

Nor did she [the witch] know how far their awareness spread out beyond her like filamentary tentacles to the remotest corners of universes she had never dreamed of; nor that she saw them as human-formed only because her eyes expected to. If she were to perceive their true form, they would seem more like architecture than organism, like huge structures composed of intelligence and feeling. (SK 125)³

However, these creatures are not only mortal, but also weaker than humans who “have true flesh, [the angels] have not” (AS 10). As a result, angels “long to have our precious bodies, so solid and powerful, so well-adapted to the good earth!” (AS 336). Last but not least, a part of human beings’ soul is materialized in visible and audible form, which is called daemon. In the light of the Gnostics’ lamentation on the human soul’s suffering from getting trapped in a body, Donna Freitas points out that as Pullman makes the daemon both material and spiritual (i.e. the product of Dust), he is, “from a Gnostic perspective, polluting the only pure aspect of human existence” (42). To be sure, Dust is the essential component of all living being.

In conformity with Gnostic scenarios, the fate of mankind’s welfare is in the hands of supernatural forces in *His Dark Materials*. Pullman’s angelology (study of angels) largely relies on the Ethiopic, apocryphal *Book of Enoch* (2nd century BC-1st century AD), and more importantly on the collection of texts found at Nag Hammadi, among which the so-called *Apocryphon of John* (also the *Secret Book of John*) (2nd-century AD) expounds the central myth of Jewish Gnosticism revolving around the opposition of two aeons. Here is a summary by Quispel:

From the Unknown God (who exists beyond thought and name) and his spouse (who is his counterpart and mirror) issued the spiritual world. The last of the spiritual entities, Sophia, became wanton and brought forth a monster, the demiurge. He organized the zodiac and the seven planets. He proclaimed: “I am a jealous god, apart from me there is no other.” Then a voice was heard, teaching him that above him existed the Unknown God and his spouse. Next, the “first Man in the form of a Man” manifested himself to the lower angels. (...) Thereupon the lower angels created the body of Adam after the image that they had seen, an imitation of the Man, who clearly serves as an ideal archetype for the human body. For a long time the body of Adam lay unable to move, for the seven planetary angels were unable to raise it up. Then Sophia caused the demiurge to breathe the *pneuma* he had inherited from her into the face of his creature. So begins a long

³ Milicent Lenz points out the similarity between these beings and “the illuminated architectonic figures” in William Blake’s artwork (“Philip Pullman” 146).

struggle between the redeeming Sophia and the malicious demiurge, the struggle for and against the awakening of human spiritual consciousness. (569-570)

This endless struggle between the demiurge and Sophia is almost literally repeated in Pullman's anticlerical narrative.

While the Creator is unknown, two male angels can be identical with the tyrannical demiurge of Gnostic mythology.

The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty – those were all names he gave himself. He was never the creator. (...) The first angels condensed out of Dust, and the Authority was the first of all. He told those who came after him that he had created them, but it was a lie. One of those who came later was wiser than he was, and she found out the truth, so he banished her. (AS 28)

He is, in Freitas' words, "[a]n imposter – an angel masquerading as God" (xiii), who four thousand years ago chose another angel far more proud, ambitious and merciless to be the Regent of the Kingdom of Heaven. He is called Metatron, used to be "a man once, a man called Enoch, the son of Jared – six generations away from Adam" (AS 334). While Metatron assumes power step by step, he gradually reduces the significance of the more and more ageing, impotent and senile Authority on the one hand, and he has the intention of intervening directly in human life with the help of clerical spies and inquisition on the other hand. For this reason, "[t]here's a war going to be fought, by all accounts, the greatest war ever known" (SK 193). The similarity between Blake's demiurge-figure Urizen and Pullman's Authority and Metatron is easily recognizable.

However, the banished female angel associated with Sophia has been doing her best to undermine the tyrannical reign. Having lost the first battle against the Authority, Xaphania has been wandering between uncountable worlds. With the rebel angels she intervened in human evolution for "vengeance" (*ibid.* 221), exactly thirty thousand years ago, when the conscious particles of Dust, the vitalizing life-force, began to gather around human beings, when "the human brain became the ideal vehicle for this amplification process;" namely, "[s]uddenly we became conscious" (*ibid.* 211). The serpent, the mythic Tempter of Eve is none other than Xaphania. By offering knowledge – alias Dust – to mankind, she "inadvertently liberated 'man' from a spurious Eden: a place of temporal and moral stasis with no opportunities for growth or development" (Bird, "Without Contraries" 121). Since then,

All the history of human life has been a struggle between wisdom and stupidity. She [Xaphania] and the rebel angels, the followers of wisdom, have always tried to open minds; the Authority and his churches have always tried to keep them closed. (...)

And for most of that time, wisdom has had to work in secret, whispering her words, moving like a spy through the humble places of the world while the courts and palaces are occupied by her enemies. (AS 429)

Furthermore, challenging the traditional conceptions of organized religion as a male dominated community, the figure of Xaphania should be regarded as a female deity, benevolent, graceful and compassionate, who could satisfy “the contemporary need to balance ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ archetypes” (Lenz, “Philip Pullman” 158).

At the end of Pullman’s story, Wisdom gains a temporary victory over Stupidity. First, Metatron is defeated by an extraordinary man, called Lord Asriel, “the greatest commander there ever was” (*SK* 242), who condemns “the ‘slave morality’ endorsed by religious establishments” (Bird, “Circumventing...” 193), and who is “a kind of Nietzschean *übermensch*, willing to go beyond good and evil in quest of his goals” (Hatlen 88). Even Xaphania decides to pledge “[her] alliance to Lord Asriel, because [she] see[s] in his great enterprise the best hope of destroying the tyranny at last” (*AS* 186). Following Neil Forsyth’s train of thought, that “[t]he essential role of Satan is opposition,” and “as the adversary, he must always be a function of another, not an independent entity” (4), when Lord Asriel defeats Metatron in a heroic, hand-to-hand fight, there is no more need for him. As a result, this man perishes together with the angel, falling down into an endless abyss. In contrast to this climatic episode, the death of the Authority is like a casual note on the margin. Although he is ready to die long ago, Metatron has prevented him from doing so because the Authority is needed to “serve as a figurehead for [Metatron’s] own ‘religious’ policies. From a theological perspective, (...) an old-fashioned, rigid image of God fostered by an uncompromising religious organizational structure is both abnormal and unnatural” (Leet 185-6). The key figures of the cosmic war, two twelve-year-old children, Lyra Belacqua and William Parry, playing the second Eve and the second Adam in Pullman’s narrative, find the Authority left alone in a crystal litter. Not recognizing who he might be, they try to help him:

Between them they helped the ancient of days out of his crystal cell; it wasn’t hard, for he was as light as paper, and he would have followed them anywhere, having no will of his own, and responding to simple kindness like a flower to the sun. But in the open air there was nothing to stop the wind from damaging him, and to their dismay his form began to loosen and dissolve. Only a few moments later he had vanished completely, and their last impression was of those eyes, blinking in wonder, and a sight of the most profound and exhausted relief. Then he was gone: a mystery dissolving in mystery. It had all taken less than a minute, (...). (*AS* 366-7)

The two children involuntarily disburden the Authority from the weight of the extreme length of his being, giving him the gift of final annihilation. After the religious obscurantism of the demiurge(s) is over, the possibility of a new horizon opens up for Sophia. Xaphania as a divinity worthy of religious devotion can and should continue her graceful campaign for opening human minds: “the struggle isn’t over now, though the forces of the Kingdom have met a setback. They’ll regroup under a new commander and come back strongly, and we must be ready to resist” (*ibid.* 429).

There has been an erroneous tendency to associate anticlerical literary works reminiscent of Gnostic ideology with nihilism. During the nineteenth century, the age fond of creating mythopoesis, Romantic poets seemed as if they had reinvented Gnostic mythology – primarily *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) and *Cain* (1821) by Lord Byron (1798-1824). These artistic inventions were stimulated, according to Ioan Petru Culianu, by the desire to “foster human liberation from the bonds of Christianity, especially as far as its Old Testament inheritance was concerned” (577). All of these Romantic poets arrived at the idea that “the god of the Old Testament, who is also creator of this world, is an evil god who must be opposed. (...) For them, the world and man had become worthy of salvation from the clutches of the religious tyrant, and a sort of active nihilism was the way to reach that goal” (577). However, Culianu concludes that despite the close resemblance, this Romantic position was “precisely the reverse of the Gnostic position, insofar as the latter expressed a metaphysical denial of the world on behalf of transcendence, while the former expressed a nihilistic denial of transcendence on behalf of this world” (idem). Anyway, Romantic mythologies are closer to nihilism than Gnosticism; and he reminds us that the history of modern nihilism should be kept apart from that of Gnosticism (idem).

Similarly, the partly Gnostic mythopoesis of Pullman’s trilogy is not nihilistic at all because of the emphasis on the necessity of gnosis. The author claims that “[n]ow that I’m conscious, now that I’m responsible, there *is* a meaning, and it is to make things better and to work for greater good and greater wisdom. That’s my meaning – and it comes from my understanding of my position. It’s not nihilism at all” (qtd. in Spanner, n.p.). In parallel with Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844-1900) statement on the death of God, expounded in *The Gay Science* (1882),⁴ Pullman’s emphasis on consciousness, responsibility and meaning are to be realized in the grandiose task of building a new kind of Heaven: “[t]he Kingdom of Heaven has been known by that name since the Authority first set himself above the rest of the angels. (...) We intend to be free citizens of the Republic of Heaven” (AS 188). Lord Asriel’s republic, as Freitas emphasizes, would function much like the Authority’s kingdom, at least in structure, “imposed, however benevolently or malevolently, from above” (82). However, the desirable Republic of Heaven – that “[w]e have to be all those difficult things like cheerful and kind and curious and patient, and we’ve got to study and think and work hard, all of us” (AS 464) – is rather an attitude or “an orientation to life” (Lenz, “Philip Pullman” 160), “a higher level of consciousness” (123). Freitas insists that keeping their freedom in mind, even “[t]he powerless must reclaim responsibility for themselves and not hand it over to an Authority” (85). Gnosis is to be acquirable only inside the frames of this kind of Republic of Heaven implying that longing for somewhere else, be it a spirit world or another parallel universe, is unnecessary and harmful. Everyone should be the useful citizen of his or her own world.

⁴ Briefly, after the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition is dead, when religion as lie, pity as illness, the other world as deceive are over, desires to redefine human existence and to revive the formerly repressed vitality and love of life appear.

In this paper I argued for the acquisition of *gnosis* as the inevitable plot-organizing device of Philip Pullman's fantasy trilogy. An original Gnostic motif (self-awareness as the culmination of man's development) is used in a new, non-dualistic context. As a result, the potential for salvation that lies within us can be reached with wisdom, through the unity of external (spiritual-physical) and internal (corporeal-sensual) experiences. In this way, in the end each and every person would seem "the true image of what human beings always could be, once they had come into their [divine] inheritance" (AS 421). Both the (pre) Romantic William Blake and his twentieth-twenty-first-century intellectual heir revived some items of the mythology of the marginalized Gnosticism in their distinct mythopoesis to criticize a particular attitude of Christianity, best exemplified in the anthropomorphic image of the God of the Old Testament. In the light of literary remembrance based on intertextuality, a theory by Renate Lachmann, an almost forgotten counter-religion has been kept alive through not only historical recordings, but also literary fictions of the fantastic.

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