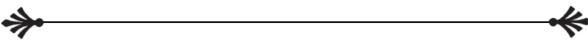




The Amber Spyglass

by Philip Pullman



“And she herself was partly Shadow-matter. Part of her was subject to this tide that was moving through the cosmos. And so were the Mulefa, and so were human beings in every world, and every kind of conscious creature, wherever they were. And unless she found out what was happening, they might all find themselves drifting away to oblivion, every one.”

—Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*



Content Synopsis

The volume preceding “The Amber Spyglass” in Philip Pullman’s “His Dark Materials” sequence of novels, “The Subtle Knife,” ended with Will Parry, bearer of the subtle knife that can cut windows between worlds, having both found and lost his missing father in a few terrible moments. He returns to camp to find his witch-allies attacked by the soul-draining Specters, and his newfound friend and partner in adventure, Lyra, gone. Lyra has clearly been abducted, since she has left behind her most precious possession, the truth-telling alethiometer (the “Golden Compass” of the first volume.) Will is so shocked by this new loss that he barely registers the presence in the camp of two figures: angels.

“The Amber Spyglass” opens in a cave in a secluded valley high in the Himalayan Mountains of Lyra’s world. Lyra has been taken by her mother, Mrs. Coulter. Having learned that Lyra’s destiny is to disobey the church and become a new Eve, Mrs. Coulter knows that she should turn her daughter over to the Church she serves, but instead she is keeping Lyra with her in a drugged sleep.

The two angels Will meets, Balthamos and Baruch, are wise and of great age, but not omniscient. Nor are they gentle, shinningly virtuous entities; Balthamos can be acerbic, sarcastic, petulant and impatient. They plan to take to Lord Asriel, (Lyra’s father and leader of a rebel army) a secret they have learned that will help him in his challenge to “The Authority.” “The Authority” has given himself many names: “God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty,” but he is not the creator; he was the first angel, condensed out of Dust. Dust, the central idea of the series, “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” (33). It represents conscious thought, self-awareness, independent thought, and the intellect. “The Authority” told those who came after him that he created them. One exercised independent thought, found out the truth, and was banished. The rebel angels serve her. Balthamos and Baruch do not name their leader, but we suspect

that she is one of the Eves—the women whose intellect and courage have led to the “Fall” in so many different worlds. The angels want Will to go with them, taking the subtle knife, the only weapon that will work against “The Authority.” Will refuses to go, however, until the angels have helped him to find Lyra. They decide that Baruch will take the secret to Asriel while Will and Balthamos will go on to rescue Lyra.

Baruch reaches Asriel but is mortally wounded. Before he dies, he reveals that “The Authority” has retired to an inner crystal chamber. “The Regent,” an angel called Metatron, who was once Baruch’s brother Enoch, is the real power of the Kingdom. He and “The Authority” have decided that conscious beings have learned to think for themselves more than is desirable (which is why there has been so much Dust in the worlds). They plan to intervene and restore their own absolute authority and power. “The Authority” is to be moved into a permanent citadel, and the Chariot is to become an engine of war. An inquisition will be set up in every world, and the republic Asriel hopes to build will be destroyed.

Back in the mountains, a local girl, Ama, obtains herbs from a Holy man to counteract Mrs. Coulter’s potion, and wake Lyra, but meanwhile the Church’s Consistorial Court has sent a priest, Father Gomez, to find and assassinate Lyra. Gomez is to find her by looking for “the Tempter,” who will be a woman from another world. In our world, Dr. Mary Malone, the scientist who had found a way to talk to angels, and had been told by them to follow Lyra, acting like “the serpent,” finds her way from our Oxford to a new world. This new domain is populated by extraordinary beings, the Mulefa, who exist in perfect harmony with their environment. She finds that this world too has Dust, or “scraf” as the Mulefa call it, and that it has been in their world since their species became self-aware thirty-three thousand years ago. She finds a way of making scraf visible, using

two translucent sheets of amber enamel to make a spyglass. As Mary learns to communicate with the Mulefa, she learns that their world is changing; the balance of nature has been altered; the trees on which the Mulefa depend are sickening, and Dust is flowing away.

While Lyra sleeps, short italicized sections of narrative that intercut with Will’s story show that she is dreaming. In her dream, she meets Roger, the Jordan College boy who had been her friend and who died because Lyra took him to her father. Roger is in a grey place full of grey shadows of people who have given up all hope. Lyra decides it is the world of the dead. Only Roger has hope, which springs from his utter confidence in Lyra.

Will meets Iorek Byrnison, the bear-king; just as he is leading his people away from their thawing, Arctic homeland to the icy regions of the highest mountain ranges, Will joins their group. A party sent by Asriel also reaches the Himalayas, including two Gallivespian spies, small, fierce, dragonfly riders, the Chevalier Tialys and Lady Salmakia. So too do the zeppelins of the Consistorial Court converge at the spot, bringing the Church’s Swiss Guard. In the cave, Lyra wakes, and Will tries to use the subtle knife to cut a way out of that world before she is taken by either side, but the knife breaks. The Gallivespians assist Will and Lyra in their escape, and an uneasy alliance is formed. They find Iorek Byrnison, who mends the subtle knife physically as Will mends it mentally.

Lyra is determined to find Roger in the land of the dead, and Will is equally determined to find his father. They cut a way into a world where the dead are visible, and follow them along a road to a miserable, polluted, shantytown on the edge of a lake, the transit port of the dead. There, they have to wait. Everyone here has a companion who follows them everywhere—their death. The deaths tell the living when it is time to die, and cross the lake. Lyra and the others can no longer keep their deaths at bay as in their own worlds, but must each

call up their deaths and face them. With great courage, Lyra faces her death, but a harder thing is to come: the hardest thing of her life so far. All of them will leave a part of themselves behind; Lyra's is visible, her demon. She must leave Pan: "And then for the first time Lyra truly realized what she was doing. This was a real consequence. She stood aghast trembling, and clutched her dear demon so tightly that he whimpered in pain" (295).

Torn apart by pain physical and emotional, the four arrive at a desolate wasteland. The land of the dead is presided over by dreadful ancient harpies to whom "The Authority" has given the power to see the worst in everyone who arrives in their domain. Lyra tries to get past their leader, "No-Name," by offering a story of the kind she has used many times in the trilogy—fantastic, impossible, but diverting, but the harpy screams "Liar" and dives at her, gouging a deep wound in her scalp. Will treats the wound, but Lyra, in shock, has lost much of her confidence and fire. The harpies torment and terrify the dead, preying on their secret shames and worst fears. Lyra finds Roger and becomes the focus of the ghosts' attention when she speaks about the living world. They plead for more and she tells them the story of her adventures in Oxford. They are spellbound, and so are the harpies. Having had nothing to feed on for thousands of years but wickedness, cruelty, pettiness, and greed, the harpies find nourishment in hearing about sun, wind, rain, and the narrative of lives with a purpose. A bargain is made: the harpies will remain guardians of the land of the dead; they will escort the dead from the landing place to the window Will is going to cut into the outer world. In exchange, the dead must tell the harpies their stories. If the dead lie or hold anything back, the harpies have the right to refuse to guide them. In return for the story of Lyra and Will's adventures, the harpies guide them to the part of the land of the dead that lies closest to the upper world. Once outside, the particles that make up the dead will fly apart, and they will cease to

have any physical integrity, but they will become part of all that is. Some ghosts, devout believers in the Church, refuse to believe Lyra, but most follow her, in an almost unending column, into the passage.

Mrs. Coulter has been taken by Asriel's forces and is held captive. She escapes in a stolen "intention craft," a new invention, but a Gallivespian, Lord Roke, manages to slip onboard with her. She returns to the President of the Church, but is no longer trusted because of her failure to deliver her daughter, and she is put under arrest. One of the priests steals Mrs. Coulter's locket, which contains a lock of Lyra's hair. The hair is used to make a bomb whose effects will be directed to wherever Lyra is. Although she has been unscrupulous and ruthless throughout the trilogy, Mrs. Coulter loves her daughter and is willing to fight to the death to avert this danger from Lyra, but in a last-minute struggle, the President wins by cutting the bond between himself and his demon, providing the energy needed to detonate the bomb. Lord Roke is killed, but Asriel arrives in time to take Mrs. Coulter away.

In the underworld, the ghost of Will's father, the shaman Grumman, or John Parry, tells Will to find the strand of Lyra's hair that is shorter than the rest, cut it off to the scalp, and put every piece into another world. The detonation does not kill Lyra, but it causes violent tremors and rock falls in the underworld, and a seemingly bottomless pit opens at the edge of the precarious ledge along which the children have to lead the dead. Will knows that it is worse than a chasm in rock; it is a window into a world, perhaps an eternity, of blackness. Lyra falls. No-Name, the harpy, swoops down to rescue Lyra, and restores her to Will. They reach the end, and Will cuts a way through. Lyra gives No-Name a name: Gracious Wings, and bids her farewell until her real death, which she no longer fears. Some of the ghosts, led by John Parry and Lee Scoresby, hold back from the dissolution they long for to help

fight Metatron, because the spirit-sucking Specters used by Metatron’s army can’t hurt them. Lyra and Will go out into a raging storm and a raging battle.

Mrs. Coulter, piloting the intention craft again, finds the Clouded Mountain and Metatron, whom she tricks into believing she will betray Asriel and Lyra. She lures him to Asriel, and together they take Metatron over with them into the pit. Metatron has sent “The Authority” to a place of safety, but with only a small guard, which is attacked by cliff-ghosts. After a fight in which Tialys dies, Lyra and Will find “The Authority” alone in his crystal litter/prison. “The Authority” is ancient, terrified, and demented. Once in the air, his fragile form disintegrates. The God of Lyra’s world, and others, is dead.

When Will and Lyra are reunited with their demons, Will finds that in this world he has a visible demon, Kirjava, who is in the same shape as Pantalamon now often takes. To save the demons from Specters, he cuts into the Mulefa world. Because Lyra and Will are almost grown up, Dust is beginning to be attracted to them. In the battle, they began not only to feel the effects of the Specters but also to see each other in ways other than as friends. As they come together in an idyllic clearing, Father Gomez, the priest sent to kill Lyra, is tracking them, but as he raises his rifle, he is stopped by Balthamos the angel, ashamed of having failed the children in the battle back in Lyra’s home world, and determined to protect them now. He kills Father Gomez, but then dies himself. Dr. Malone learns that Dust began to flow away at the same time the subtle knife was created; the knife has created wounds in nature through which Dust is lost into the abyss. As Lyra and Will return from the clearing hand-in-hand, radiant with love, she realizes that the tide has turned; Dust is flowing back to that world. But it isn’t enough. Dust is escaping into the abyss through every window cut by the knife, and every time a window is opened a Specter, a sliver of the abyss, emerges.

Lyra cannot live in Will’s world, nor he in hers for more than a short period, which means that once apart they will never meet again. Except—they learn that Dust is not constant; it can be renewed by thinking, feeling, and gaining wisdom. If each of the adventurers in each of their worlds encouraged their people to learn and understand, one window could be kept open. For a moment Lyra and Will have hope, then they realize: one window must be kept open to release the dead. They make the choice.

Before Lyra returns to her world and Will smashes the subtle knife, they go to Oxford’s Botanic Garden, and locate a bench that exists in both worlds. Every year of their lives, at midday on Midsummer’s Day, they will both sit on the bench in their parallel worlds, and remember.

Historical Context

“The Amber Spyglass” was first published in 2000, three years after “The Subtle Knife,” and too long for many fans of the series, some of whom took to writing to the author demanding the next episode, and posting spoof reviews of the next volume on the web. The novel’s cosmic upheavals and metaphysical debates were congruent with preoccupations of the millennium, but no specific date is given for the events of the stories.

Societal Context

The Mulefa live in harmony with their environment and are largely a pastoral community, but they do use some low-level technology which, in being peaceful and ecologically sound, could be a lesson to the other societies depicted in the series, such as our own, which are dependent on ecologically expensive and wasteful high technology. In a recent message on his website, Philip Pullman put the case for action to protect the environment in our world:

The great entrepreneurs who set the Industrial Revolution going couldn’t have known, when they invented their steam engines and

burnt vast amounts of coal, what the results would be two hundred years later; the inventors of the internal combustion engine and the automobile, the Henry Fords, couldn't have known. But it's what they did to set up the way the world works now, and it's what we've done to keep it going, that is going to destroy human civilization unless we wake up very soon.

In "The Amber Spyglass," he shows the consequences of such actions, implicitly warning every member of society that if we continue to do nothing we shall be culpable, since, unlike our ancestors, we are informed of the impending catastrophe. In Lyra's world, Asriel's hugely wasteful method of going between worlds has caused an environmental catastrophe; the magnetic field of the world has altered, the northern polar ice cap is melting, we assume that low-lying lands are flooded, and we see the Arctic bears migrating south in a vain search for new hunting grounds.

Religious Context

Unlike the other volumes in the trilogy, "The Amber Spyglass" doesn't have illustrations by Philip Pullman. Instead, each chapter is headed by a quotation, many from Milton and Blake. One, from the Gospel of St. John is "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (321). "The Amber Spyglass" makes explicit and overt the major theme of the sequence: the dangerousness of fundamentalist, authoritarian religion and the need for freedom of thought, open-mindedness, tolerance, and simple kindness rather than imposed rigid codes of morality.

When Nicolas Hytner's adaptation of "His Dark Materials" was staged at the British National Theatre, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, surprised many church-goers by expressing admiration for the series. A conversation between the two men on the subject of religious

education, the representation of religion, and Pullman's books took place at the theater and is available on the Internet. Philip Pullman said that the figure of "The Authority" in the series is "one of the metaphors I use. In the passage I wrote about his description, he was as light as paper—in other words he has a reality which is only symbolic. It's not real, and the last expression on his face is that of profound and exhausted relief." Of the theme of the Fall in "The Amber Spyglass," Pullman said that he saw it not as something that happened only one time, but repeatedly: "The Fall is something that happens to all of us when we move from childhood through adolescence to adulthood and I wanted to find a way of presenting it as something natural and good, and to be welcomed, and, you know, celebrated, rather than deplored" (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk>).

In Christian culture, the Fall begins with Eve's succumbing to the temptation of the serpent and in turn tempting Adam to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. In Pullman's worlds, this stands for coming into consciousness, self-awareness, and desire for knowledge. We see that every world has had an Eve. Mary's Mulefa friend, Atal, tells her that a female "creature" first learned to use the seed-pod wheel and the Dust-laden oil, thirty-three thousand years ago. Atal uses a metaphor of a snake in the hole of a seed pod, which asks, "What do you know? What do you remember? What do you see ahead?" to which the creature replies "Nothing, nothing, nothing." Then the hitherto unnamed female put her foot in the hole of the pod, and became the first to learn to devise the Mulefa's ingenious method of traveling: "She and her mate took pods and they knew that they were Mulefa" (236–7), i.e. gained self-awareness.

Scientific & Technological Context

The Mulefa have little metal, though they do work in wood, stone, and cord, and do produce ornamental as well as functional things. Their means

of transport is rolling along natural highways of basalt using giant seed pods and a naturally produced lubricating oil, and they have bone spurs, perfectly adapted for the purpose, to connect them to the pods. The environmental benefit is that the seed pods are too hard to split from normal biodegrading, but eventually crack from wear on the roads, so the Mulefa are part of the life-cycle of the trees.

In Lyra's world, both the Church and the rebel army have invested much of their effort and ingenuity into developing weapons and methods of transport and communication to serve the military forces. Their technology is part-scientific, part metaphysical. The Church has modified the "intercision" mechanism of separating child from demon seen in "The Golden Compass" to produce energy enough to launch a remote bomb. Lord Asriel has an "intention craft," a silent and almost invisible flying machine that is directed by its pilot's intentions but can only be flown by beings that have demons, since it is powered by a current flowing between a helmet worn by the person and a cable held by the demon. The Gallivespians can communicate between worlds via a "lodestone resonator," which has had its particles entangled and has then been split, so that when one half is played by a bow, the other will reproduce the sounds.

Biographical Context

Philip Pullman studied English at Exeter College, Oxford, on which he loosely based his Jordan College. While writing the trilogy, he was living in Oxford, and working in a shed at the back of his garden, though he has since moved to a village elsewhere in Oxfordshire. Before becoming a full-time writer, he was a school teacher for a number of years and later taught trainee teachers at Westminster College, also in Oxford. He was therefore very well acquainted with contemporary and classic children's literature before he began writing it.

He has been awarded several prizes, including the Carnegie Medal, the Guardian Children's Book Award, the Astrid Lindgren Award (with illustrator Ryoji Arai), the *Publishers' Weekly* best Book of the Year Award, and the Whitbread Book of the Year Award (for "The Amber Spyglass," the third in the "His Dark Materials" trilogy), in the first instance of that prize going to a book classified for children (though read by many adults). Pullman produced illustrations for the first two volumes of the trilogy and small pictures as running heads for the second, to indicate which world the characters are in at the time. These were not printed in the first U.S. editions of the novels, but are present in the 2002 editions published by Knopf.

Philip Pullman has a web site that contains biographical and background material as well as his illustrations for his novels and a FAQ section. His acknowledgements pages in "The Amber Spyglass" also point to a third (in addition to Milton's "Paradise Lost" and the poetry and engravings of William Blake) source of inspiration for the novel and the series, an essay by Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre" (1810), which Pullman first encountered in translation in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1978 (550). The essay, a conversation between two men, discusses, among other things, the relationship between grace and innocence, or between affectation and the loss of innocence with its acquisition of self-consciousness.

With the completion of the "His Dark Materials" trilogy, Pullman's work attracted a great deal of critical interest, ranging from many fan websites to in-depth critical analysis. Two of the most interesting full-length publications are "His Dark Materials" *Illuminated: Critical Essays On Philip Pullman's Trilogy* edited by Millicent Lenz and Carole Scott, and Claire Squires' "Philip Pullman's "His Dark Materials" Trilogy: A Reader's Guide."

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