

Interview

"I don't think the world was ever disenchanted.
It still is enchanted."

Excerpts from an Interview with Philip Pullman
(Part 1)

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The interviewee: Philip Pullman (1946-) is a British writer of children's and young adult literature. His best-known work is a fantasy fiction based on Judeo-Christian narratives; it is entitled *His Dark Materials*, consisting of *Northern Lights* [*The Golden Compass* in the USA] (1995), *The Subtle Knife* (1997), and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000). In trans-textual relation with English canonical works of literature, among others by John Milton and William Blake, *His Dark Materials* stands out as an instructive coming-of-age story and a bold criticism of religious fundamentalism. Consequently, these novels have been honoured by several literary prizes, such as

the Carnegie Medal and the Whitbread Book of the Year Award; have caused indignation in particular Christian communities in the USA and the UK; and have aroused the interest of scholars of the humanities, especially litterateurs.

The interviewer: Zsuzsanna Tóth is a PhD candidate in English Literature at the University of Szeged, in Hungary. In recent years she has paid attention to the representations of the religious experience of completeness without the presence of the Judeo-Christian God in *His Dark Materials*. She is currently working on her PhD dissertation, a comprehensive analysis of the way Pullman's fiction is related to a contemporary social process, the so-called 're-enchantment' (the increasing popularity of alternative forms of religiosity because of the increasing unpopularity of Christian institutions) in Anglophone societies. The majority of her pre-arranged questions to Philip Pullman are connected to this academic research.

The interview: After an exchange of a few emails since July 2014, the interview was finally held on 1st June 2015, in a rainy Monday afternoon. On Pullman's kind suggestion, the conversation took place in The Eagle & Child Pub (the venue of the Inklings, an Oxford writers' group, including J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, from 1930s to 1960s), in Oxford, United Kingdom.

Key words: Self-representation, criticism of organized religion, superstition, inspiration, classification of literature, school of morals, criticism of literature, freedom of speech, *His Dark Materials* trilogy

Tóth: Do you have a consciously built self-representation [for being an author of literary fiction]? That, I mean, do you plan in advance what you will answer to some issues?

Pullman: No, I try *not to* plan. Because I found over many-many years of writing that I write *better*, it's more *fun*, it's more *interesting*, when I don't know what's gonna happen next, when I don't know what's gonna come up in the course of writing a story. So I prefer just to start right here, as if I'm beginning walking to the dark.

T: Mmhmm.

P: And I find always that something interesting there or I see something where I wouldn't expect it. And if it's interesting, I follow it and see where it takes me. When I first began to write novels in my very early twenties, I did make the mistake of making a plan. I thought one had to make a plan. It's obvious. You're doing a big thing, you have to make a plan. So I spent six months making a very long, careful plan of a novel I was going to write. In the end I was so bored I just threw away and wrote another novel, a different novel altogether. Ever since that I have never written... never had a plan.

T: Okay. I meant the question that when you [as a public figure] are *asked*, like in this situation about any issues, political issues, or about literature, or education, and in these cases, do you have to or should you plan in advance what to answer to these questions?

P: Again no. Because I prefer to be spontaneous, and I hope if I can answer spontaneously, I will probably tell the truth, more likely to tell the truth, than if I prepared a series of answers beforehand. Besides, a conversation, the interview, the discussion can develop in different directions and I don't want to shut those all before we begin.

T: I see. Have you ever said anything that you later minded? That 'Oh, I shouldn't have said it'?

P: [Laughing] Yeah, once I said, in answer to a question about belief in God, I think I said there is no evidence; there is no evidence to the existence of God. And the interviewer said, "Well, what sort of evidence would satisfy you?" And I said, "Scientific evidence is the only thing that makes any difference. It's the only one that matters." I wish I haven't said that, now. 'Cause I don't believe it is the only one that matters. There are other kinds of evidence as well. I mean there's evidence of, of experience, spontaneous experience, there's evidence from one's emotions and feelings, from the testimony of people who are not one's self but who seem to be reliable. There's all sorts of evidence of things not just purely scientific evidence.

T: I see, thank you.

T: In *His Dark Materials* you have a very strong criticism of organized religion. While you were working on *His Dark Materials*, did you have a thought that you yourself censored or omitted later, because you found it too rude or too harsh?

P: Excellent and interesting question. No, I don't think I did. As I went through the book, as the story developed, and I saw what Lyra was fighting, I became more and more determined to criticize it as strongly as I could. And I don't think there's anything I was holding back or... No, no.

T: Okay. There are many similarities between you and William Blake. One of them is that both of you see Jesus as the embodiment of every virtue, and both of you define God, the Father as a tyrant and the oppressor. And my next question is concerned with this statement that in 2010 you along with others signed an open letter against the visit of Pope Benedict XVI. [1]

P: That's right. Yeah.

T: And now there is another pope, since 2013, Pope Francis, who has become famous for his humility, his concern for the poor, and yet he says that, let me quote him, "It is absurd to say you follow Jesus Christ but reject the Church." [2] What is your opinion about this pope?

P: Well, I was critical of the visit of Benedict, not because it was Benedict, not because it was a pope, I don't mind popes coming to this country. But I don't think we should pay for it.

T: I see.

P: If they want to come, they should pay their own way. But he was a guest of this country and I thought, well, we don't need to do that.

T: I didn't think of that.

P: No, that's all right, it wasn't very clear in the articles that came out. As far as Pope Francis is concerned, he seems to be a different kind of man altogether. As you say, a much more humble man, a much more... much less interested in the splendour and the grandeur and the wealth of the Church, and more concerned with the poor. And this is a good thing. I'm sure he has several points on which I would disagree with him, but he seems to me like a good man.

T: Do you think that he will bring or establish new reforms in, for instance, the clerical hierarchy of the Church?

P: Well, he has, I think he says he'd like to, but the clerical hierarchy of the Church has had two thousand years to become extremely strong, extremely resistant to any change that diminishes their power and their wealth and their glory. So I think he's got a struggle on his hands. It won't be easy for him.

T: Do you say that Christian organized religion, I mean the Anglican Church, or the Catholic Church, becomes less and less significant now in the United Kingdom?

P: I think the influence of the Catholic Church is becoming less powerful than it was. Not only in Britain, but also in Ireland. Particularly because of the issue of child abuse, by... sexual abuse by Catholic priests, which has caused a great scandal, a *huge* scandal, and the Church is much less respected than it was. A sign of it you see in a recent vote that Ireland had in favour of same-sex marriage, which would have been *impossible* to imagine only ten years ago. But things have changed so much that the influence of the Catholic Church has become less and less important.

T: But, well... the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church will *never* disappear. Don't you think?

P: I don't think they will ever disappear. One reason is that they do, at their best, what religion has always done; I suppose they provide comfort and consolation for people in times of trouble, they provide a sort of series of rites of passage, you know, staging posts in life: baptism, marriage, death, funeral, and so on. And the

Church will always do that sort of thing. Nothing has replaced it yet and I can't see it being replaced for a long time.

T: Okay. Thank you.

P: The problem, I mean you might have a question about something, the problem with the Church is not what it believes, the problem with the Church when it gets its hands on political power. That's the problem.

T: Yes. Very early Dante had the same problem with the Catholic Church.

P: Dante. [Laughing]

T: Do you think that people need a little every-day magic in the form of superstition?

P: Yes. I do. I am very superstitious in spite of being very rational about things, yes, I am superstitious. I know it's absurd but I think it's... it is something that helps us with things that aren't entirely predictable. People who have *risky* occupations, sailors, actors, are very superstitious quite often. You don't know what storms the ocean is gonna bring so you don't whistle on a ship because it's very bad luck. You don't know how the audience is gonna behave tonight so you wish your fellow actors "Good luck!" before you go on the stage, but you mustn't say "Good luck!," you say "Break a leg!" Things like that. I see it in myself, I see it in other people, and I think there's absolutely nothing wrong with it.

T: Is there any particular superstition that you believe in?

P: Yes. I have one superstition about my books... while I'm using this pen. When I write my books. Why? Because it's a *lucky* pen.

T: I see.

P: Why is it a lucky pen? I don't know. It's worked before, it must work again. Well, a lot of people have superstitions. Do you know the story about the physicist... What was the name? Niels Bohr?

T: No, sorry.

P: One of the great figures of quantum physics in the early twentieth century. He had a horseshoe nailed up over outside his laboratory. And somebody said, 'Surely you don't believe in that?', and he said 'No, I don't believe in it, but they tell me it works whether you believe in it or not.' So, I think that's right.

T: You have been asked several times about writing a story and inspiration. Once you said a very-very interesting definition of how you are inspired, and in completely mystical terms. And can I read it aloud?

P: Yes, please.

T: "As I write, I find myself drifting into a sort of *Platonism*, as if the story is there already like a pure form in some gaseous elsewhere." [3] So, someone has the impression that there is this sense of obligation, a 'should' that you cannot escape from, and the author's task seems to bring the story into the world, into the surface, and to give it flesh, and so the teller is subordinate to the tale. So, given that you are a materialist, it seems to be a little bit strange.

P: Well, yes, I'm a materialist, but matter is more mysterious than we think. And matter is *conscious*, for example.

T: Yes?

P: We know that matter is conscious because I'm made of matter and I'm conscious. And the same is true of you. And that being the case, why should we think that my pen is not conscious, for example? My pen has done a lot of work, and it has been in my hand while I've been writing lots of things.

T: [Laughing]

P: Now this is maybe, this is where it becomes a little fanciful. But... I am superstitious, I do accept things like that, you know, the word 'enchantment' came up earlier on, didn't that?

T: Yes.

P: To me the world, I don't think the world was ever disenchanted. It still is enchanted. So I'm quite happy with that sort of thing. I'm quite happy to be thought a mystic or whatever it is.

T: In this Platonic concept, there is a kind of phenomenon called 'illumination' or 'epiphany,' and would you define this sort of Platonism, while you are writing, as epiphany?

P: An epiphany is a sudden realization of something...

T: Mmmmm.

P: ... Yes. Well, the Platonism that I am conscious of when I write is a little slower than that. Sometimes, though, after you've been thinking about a problem for a long time: "How does she get from here to there? What is it, why does she go there? What's it making her go there? I want her to be there, but I can't... she doesn't seem to want it. What is it?" I mean, you think about it and you write down various suggestions and you go for a walk and you come to the pub and you have a drink and everything.... And *eventually*, when you're sitting in your chair, and you suddenly: 'Oh, yes, that's the reason, of course, she has to go there to find him! Why didn't I think of that before?' That feels like an epiphany. But it's also the result of a lot of thinking and a lot of wondering, a lot of trying things out. But it often does come suddenly.

T: So the key to this epiphany is divine creative power.

P: Yeah. Things can come very soon, very easily, very quickly, or they can come after a lot—a long period of effort. But the recognition when they do come is identical, I think. For example, the question of daemons in *His Dark Materials*. I couldn't get the story started until I realized that Lyra had a daemon. Whom she could talk to, and they could argue, and discuss things, and it was... It makes telling the story a lot easier. But when I thought... and first all the daemons changed shape, adults' as well as children's. And then I wrote a chapter or so, I thought, "Well, what's the purpose of this? What are these daemons doing in the story? How are they helping?" And: "I don't know. They helped *me* write it, but they don't help the story at all." And suddenly, I realized, yes, they do, because children's daemons can change and adults' demons don't. [4] That's... that was a real epiphany. Of that sort.

T: I see.

P: But it had come because I'd been thinking about it and thinking about it and thinking about it.

The Part 2 of this interview will be published in this year's Winter issue (25-2) of the *ESSE Messenger*.

Notes

[1] "Harsh judgements on the pope and religion," *The Guardian*, 15 September 2010. Accessed on 20 February 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/15/harsh-judgments-on-pope-religion>.

[2] "Pope's Mass: It's absurd to say you follow Christ, but reject the Church," *ROME REPORTS, All the news and videos on the Pope and the Vatican*, 30 January 2014. Accessed on 20 February 2016, <http://www.romereports.com/2014/01/30/pope-s-mass-it-s-absurd-to-say-you-follow-christ-but-reject-the-church>.

[3] Quoted from: No author, *New Humanist*, vol. 117, issue 1 (March 2002): no page. In Hugh Rayment-Pickard, *The Devil's Account. Philip Pullman and Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2004), 24.

[4] In *His Dark Materials* this difference between the ability of children's daemons and that of adults' daemons signs a natural passage from childhood to adulthood, from ignorance to experience and knowledge: growing up.