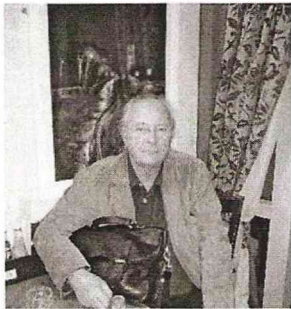


## Interview

"I don't think the world was ever disenchanting.  
It still is enchanting."

Excerpts from an Interview with Philip Pullman  
(Part 2<sup>1</sup>)

Zsuzsanna Tóth  
University of Szeged, Hungary



**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 1<sup>st</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> The first part of this interview was published in the *ESSE Messenger*, 25-1 Summer 2016.

**T:** As a writer of children's and adolescents' literature, have you new ever sensed a kind of division between high literature and popular literature?

**P:** There is that division. Nowadays we tend to think of it as a division between literary fiction and genre fiction. But it's less marked in books for children. That way I was lucky in writing this book, or having published as a children's book, first of all. Because children aren't bothered by whether it's a genre book or a literary book, they don't feel that this one is something that they ought to read and something else which is *beneath* their consideration. Adults do. So I was lucky to find an audience first among children, and then later among adults, I said, and you've probably heard it in your literary quotations. Because *His Dark Materials* has had far more readers, more adult readers, by being published as a children's book, than it would if it had been published as an adult book.

**T:** Mmhmm.

**P:** Because if it would have been published as an adult book, it would have been called a fantasy from the start, and most adults wouldn't read it because they're not interested in fantasy.

**T:** So most critics and scholars claim that, you know, *His Dark Materials* is fantasy, and fantasy usually has been regarded as low literature or popular literature. Have you sensed it, or was it a kind of problem, ever?

**P:** It's come up, it's been mentioned. It doesn't worry me because after all, much great literature has been a fantasy. Dante, you mentioned Dante?

**T:** Yes.

**P:** That's a fantasy. *Paradise Lost* is a fantasy. And much of Shakespeare is fantastical. The great social realist novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the English novels, the Russians, the French, were of course [...] social realist. Fantasy was not regarded as interesting or important then. But in 1865, I think it was, along came *Alice in Wonderland*, obviously a fantasy. And clearly, obviously for children, too. So I think fantasy sort of drifted towards the children... the world of children's books. And, you know, people like him [pointing to a painting – representing Tolkien – hanging on the wall], and C.S. Lewis, found themselves writing the sort of books they wanted to write, which were fantasy stories, because they both loved fantasy; and found themselves, whether they wanted to or not, being read by children.

**T:** And what do you think, what will be your future place in literary history?

**P:** [Laughing] That's not for me to decide.

**T:** [Laughing] Okay.

**P:** I haven't a clue. I don't have the faintest idea. I'm very happy to have published the first of these books twenty years ago, and to find that it's still in print, and still selling, and still being talked about. That's wonderful, I couldn't ask for any more than that. If I'm still being read in a hundred-years' time, wonderful, but I won't be around, I won't know.

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**T:** You often emphasize the importance of stories and story-telling, and you seem to have a strong sense of mission. And, on the other hand, you also say that you write for yourself. So, you are a story-teller, and would you define yourself as a prophet? In any sense of the word?

**P:** No, I don't think so. It's an interesting word there, an interesting idea because I write like J. G. Ballard. Do you know J. G. Ballard's work?

**T:** No.

**P:** English writer of what used to be called science fiction. I think he died about ten years ago. He wrote a number of extraordinary books, and he is what I would call a prophet, not only in the sense that he wrote about things that were gonna happen in the future, may-come-true, but also in the sense of being a great... moralist, like the Hebrew prophets who, after all, criticised and denounced the societies of their day, from a moral point of view. "This is wrong, it's wrong to behave like that, you should worship God, you should not worship money," all that sort of thing. So there was a strong sense of a moral message coming through in his prophecy. However, I suppose, I do feel that there's a moral strain in what I write...

**T:** Yes.

**P:** But I would prefer to think of it in terms of a tombstone in a church, in the city where I was born, in Norwich. There's a little church yard there and a tombstone from 1801. And it says this, I remember it, word for word, "This stone is dedicated to the talents and virtues of Sophia Ann Goddard, who died in 1801, aged 25 years." She was evidently an actress. "The former"—that is, her talents—her talents "illuminated the"... wait a minute... as such... is ... that's right. Her talents "shone with lustre, in the great school of morals, the theatre, while the latter"—that is, her virtues—"illuminated the private circle of life with sentiment and so on." But the idea of the theatre as a school of morals, there's something that interested me a great deal. I love that little tombstone, and every time I go to Norwich, I buy a bunch of flowers and put it on the tombstone for Sophia Ann Goddard, who was evidently a very good actress as well as a lovely person. Now a school is somewhere where you learn to do things, somewhere where you can try things out in safety. And if you're learning to make... if you're learning to be a carpenter, you learn how to manage your tools...

**T:** Mmhmm.

**P:** ... you learn how to lift safely, you know, the instructors is saying, "Don't hold the chisel like that, because you'll cut yourself. Hold it like this." Or, you know, "If you saw too hard, you'll damage the saw, go gently, take it easy." It's where you learn to do things like that. So a school of morals is somewhere where we can learn the importance of other people. Learn the importance of other people's feelings, learn how to emphasize with them, how to enter into their... enter imaginatively into their lives, and their sorrows, and their problems, and their joys, and their happiness and so on. So fiction in general, and theatre as well, does function, for me, as a school of morals. And in that sense, if that's what prophets talk about, then, in that sense, [laughing] I'm a prophet. I am, actually.

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**T:** Let's talk about the relationship between the artist and the critics. It's definitely the critics who need artists, I know you also write criticism, and what I wonder whether artists need critics – or not.

**P:** I don't think I've ever learnt anything from a critic that helped me write. Even great critics, like Harold Bloom, like... English critics like F. R. Leavis, even great

critics have told me interesting things about other people's books. But nothing of that remains when I sit down to write. So I have learned nothing from critics.

**T:** Hmmm.

**P:** Nothing useful anyway. What purpose do they serve socially I don't... well... I suppose critics and newspaper-reviewers, which isn't quite the same thing, that reviewers read newspapers, write about new books that they come up, they bring into the attention of the public and the booksellers, so they serve a sort of purpose ... in the entire economic structure of book selling and publishing. But even that's changing now, with Internet book-selling, and the great change, the great revolution in publishing that's been brought about in the last what? ten-fifteen years, we're living through the... a fourth huge revolution in story-telling. First was when we learnt to talk. Uncountable tens of thousands of years ago. When someone'd say, "Ugh."

**T:** [Laughing]

**P:** They could say 'lion,' or 'horse,' or something. That was the first one, we needed to talk. The second one was when we learnt to write things down. Making marks on anything: clay, or wax, or the walls on the cave when we learnt to make marks, to preserve the story, to be read later on. The third revolution was, of course, Gutenberg, printing, in the fifteenth century. And now, we're in the middle of the fourth, which is the digital revolution. And it's allowing readers to respond immediately to a story in the same way by putting words onto a screen, by writing their own fiction in response to it, by talking to each other about it, you know, all the things that the Internet can do. And it's so big, it's so huge, that we don't know what the effect will be in the end. But that's the fourth revolution we are in the middle of now.

**T:** Mmhmm.

**P:** So maybe critics would become more important because immediately a book is out, instantly a hundred, two hundred thousand reviews can be placed on the line with... Maybe they will become less important because people will think 'What, they're all online, so what? I don't agree. I'll read the books I want to read.' We just don't know. It's too soon.

**T:** Well. I think that the answer to my next question has already been answered that what do you think about the ways your works are analysed, or interpreted, or do you read such works?

**P:** No.

**T:** That's all? No.

**P:** No. They send me the books. I've got about twenty books on the shelf, that are all about my work.

**T:** Aha.

**P:** It's no helpful. It doesn't tell me anything that will help me to write another book. I think usually, well, 'You haven't got that right,' you know, 'it's not what I was trying to do at all.' Or else something, 'Oh, yeah, that's good. Oh, yeah. Oh, I'll take the credit for that. Yes, I was clever to say that, because it sounds good.' But really I don't take much notice of them.

**T:** Okay. So you don't read them. Then the next question is useless, I mean that was there any study that pointed out what you had wanted to say as a message, or was there any interpretation that turned out to be a misinterpretation for you?

**P:** Well, there are those, yeah. Plenty of misinterpretations. But I don't argue with them.

**T:** Mmhmm.

**P:** There's no point. If I wrote to everyone who I thought had read my book in the wrong way.... Well, what am I trying to do? Am I trying to change their mind? What for? Let them say what they like, I don't mind. The greatest advice about reviewing and critics in general was 'don't read it, measure it.' So don't read it. 'How long is it? Oh, it's a long one, that's good.'

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**T:** There are different belief-systems, and different religions. All religions have their key figures, respected figures, and I would like to know your opinion about how much an artist or an author should respect or should take responsibility for how he or she represents the key figures of other belief-systems, for instance God, or Jesus, or Moses, for instance... Now I'm thinking of the tragic consequences of the caricatures of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, in January [2015]. Probably you know...

**P:** Yeah.

**T:** ...what happened. Because the freedom of speech and the freedom of religion sometimes clash, and...

**P:** Yes. Freedom of speech is something very important and we should treasure it, because we have not had it for very long in human history, and it's quite *rare* in the world. Most human societies have always tried to forbid certain ways of talking, especially certain ways of talking about the divine, and in some parts of the world today you can be put to death if you say something that the priests or the imams don't like. But it's something that's very important, this freedom of speech. It's very rare and very precious, and we should use it responsibly, and make sure that we look after it.

**T:** And do you think that you as an artist should respect the old taboos of other religions?

**P:** [Whispering] Erm... yeah....

**T:** Or how much should you respect it?

**P:** How much... Well... Well, one of the questions that one has to ask and answer is, "What do I need to say at this point?" If I need, for the sake of the story, if I need to say that Mohammed used to steal sheep and was a rapist, then I say it. Do I really need to say that? *Charlie Hebdo*, of course, they have freedom to draw whatever cartoons they liked, but of these cartoons weren't very *good*, they weren't very *funny*, and weren't very *interesting*, and very good. Was it worth dying for that? Well, probably it was, but it's a very difficult one. It's a very difficult one.

**T:** But it might not be their fault, I mean the drawers of *Charlie Hebdo*, but the religious fundamentalists who...

**P:** Well, the fundamentalists are *always* wrong.

**T:** Yeah.

**P:** Always wrong. Very-very wrong. Religious fundamentalists, scientific fundamentalists, or any sort of fundamentalists. Always wrong. They're wrong because they think there is one answer, whereas, in fact, there are five answers, there are ten answers. There are a thousand answers. There are a thousand ways of thinking, and a thousand ways of representing people, and a thousand

opinions, and... and... While we live in a society that allows all those different opinions to be expressed, we must protect that, and we must look after it, and we must realize how valuable and how rare it is.

**T:** Okay. The next question considers the freedom of speech and the freedom of religion, and the religious tolerance in general. Have you seen any sign that the liberal democracy is in danger now in Europe?

**P:** I think it's always in danger. Because the temptation to be sure about something is a very strong temptation; a temptation to listen to people with one single answer: "God is great, you must obey God." And it's tempting to do that, because it means people don't have to think any more. And people don't like thinking generally; it's difficult, and it's painful, and it's contradictory, and you don't let... And you end up by being puzzled and worried. It's much easier to be *told* what to think and what to feel. So it's always a danger, and we must always be wary, we must always look out for it.

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**T:** Here is a quotation from *The Amber Spyglass*, when William and Lyra realize that they love each other and the Fall happens, somehow. You wrote that they became "the true image of what human beings always could be, once they have come into their inheritance."<sup>[5]</sup> What kind of inheritance? With wisdom, or...

**P:** Yeah.

**T:** The gift of the rebel angels?

**P:** It's a true understanding of things. You can call it wisdom, or you can call it understanding, or you can call it a realization, something. It's a state of full consciousness, instead of partial consciousness.

**T:** Hmm. There is an American iconologist, William J. Thomas Mitchell, who wrote about John Milton and *Paradise Lost*, and he writes that God makes man of his own image out of desire not to be alone, and man has desires of his own, and for this reason, he asks for a mate to love him in turn, and in this way, desire generates image, and image generates desire.<sup>[6]</sup> Somehow in parallel with matter loving matter.

**P:** Okay.

**T:** And God knows that he is producing a creature who will be able to produce other things, he will be able to produce other images. And this is why eating from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge was forbidden.<sup>[7]</sup> For this image-like thing, there is another quotation from you, that "the truest way for the creatures to become what they could truly be."<sup>[8]</sup> "What they could truly be," well, I think it is not a reference to any kind of God in this way [depicted above]. I mean to resemblance, or image of any...

**P:** Well, it's like a baby bird. When a baby bird is very young, it's just hatched, it can't see, it can't fly, hasn't got any feathers. Little by little, as the mother feeds the bird, it grows, it becomes stronger, it's got wings. I see this happening in my barn at home with the swallows. I love watching them. And the little swallows sit at the edge of the nest, and they're very frightened, and one day they just jump and they can fly. It's becoming what it could be. So it's the difference between childhood and adulthood.

**T:** Yes.

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**P:** Or, in William Blake's terms, it's the difference between innocence and experience.

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**T:** To highlight an aspect of the Republic of Heaven, I say that for a religious person the social ethics, the sense of social community, and the sense of wonder, awe, and mystery are a kind of complete package, which is provided by religious organizations, for instance, by the Church. And for a non-religious person, there's a distinction between social ethics and a sense of social community, and also a sense of wonder and awe. So these are two different concepts. But, however, for me, it seems that the Republic of Heaven rather embodies this kind of complete package.

**P:** I hope it does. Yeah.

**T:** So it seems that it's a kind of religious concept. Altogether.

**P:** Yes. Yes. The only difference being that I don't feel that God is necessary. In every other respect, you should say this is a religious idea.

**T:** And would you separate morality from religiosity? From religious institutions?

**P:** No, I wouldn't separate morality from anything. Morality is *inherent* in every human interaction. There's a good way of doing things, which involves a consideration for the other person, for the other person's well-being, or happiness, or whatever, and that's different from an interaction which doesn't take any account of those things. We could treat each other well, or we can treat each other badly.

**T:** Mmhmm.

**P:** I couldn't... There's... Morality is all over the place. It's the school of morals. That we learn to empathize.

**T:** Yes, so I can say that the religious impulse is something that is inherent in us but we have to learn moral values.

**P:** We do have to learn morality, yes. We learn it in all sorts of ways. We learn by example, by seeing someone, a parent or grandparent, who is kind and good. We learn it from fiction. You see examples of people behaving cruelly, and certainly other people suffer for it. We empathize with the hero, who is moral. There are all sorts of ways of learning morality, but a lot of them involve stories of one sort or another. So as I mentioned this before: Jesus, a great moral teacher, his most successful method of teaching morality was stories, was parables.

**T:** [Laughing] Yeah.

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**T:** One of the criteria of the Republic of Heaven is the enjoyment of our material life.

**P:** Yeah.

**T:** And it occurred to me that if we have only one world to live in, does it mean that we have only one body to live in, and we have to be careful... I mean we have to look after this body, to lead a healthy life-style, for instance...

**P:** Yes. But I was... I wouldn't say it's an inevitable consequence from reading *His Dark Materials* that you will stop smoking.

**T:** [Laughing] Yeah.

**P:** It's fine: if you want to stop smoking, you'll stop. But I would never say you won't go to heaven unless you stop smoking. It's not simple. No, that's too simple.

**T:** Yes, it's obvious. Our bodies [are] also material and... but [we can] say enjoying material pleasures are sometimes opposed to preserving the health of our body.

**P:** Well, I think that's wrong. Completely disagree with the renunciation of the body, the *hatred* of the body which you find in various Christians, especially Christian saints. They left the world and they went to live in a cave, or they lived on top of a pillar or something and they had a miserable life. No, I don't agree with that. The world is a good place. Drinking's good. Even smoking can be good.

**T:** Hedonism is not the better option.

**P:** Well, hedonism is just looking one aspect of everything and making that one thing the world. The world is too interesting and too important to be hedonistic. That would be like if you only wanted to eat cheese or something.

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**P:** Metatron is a figure in Jewish angelic mythology.

**T:** And he is also called Enoch, and he was the favourite of God who...

**P:** That's right.

**T:** ... raised him up, and for this reason, that the Biblical Enoch was the favourite of God, is it the reason why Metatron is such a negative character in the trilogy?

**P:** Yeah.

**T:** Okay. [Laughing] It was obvious.

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**T:** A key impression of mine was your innovation that death is represented as a joyful event. There's, for instance, Yambe-Akka, the witches' goddess and, you know, the happy annihilation of the souls in the wide open space.

**P:** That's right.

**T:** And why is it so happy? Why is it so positive, possibly?

**P:** It's inevitable. It comes to us all. I wanted to find a way of dramatizing the idea that it could be seen, noticed, tragic and hopeless and horrible... But there's a joyful culmination for the end of everything. That's all, I think.

**T:** So maybe I can say that representing death as a kind of joy or positive event, it's a kind of acceptance of the cycle of life that we are born, we live, and then we die. And we can do nothing to prevent it.

**P:** That's right.

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**T:** The North turns up as a mysterious place, full of secrets, and a place where secrets are revealed.

**P:** Yes.

**T:** And why did you choose North, as such a place, and why not...?

**P:** I didn't choose it, it just happened to me. I always felt an attraction towards the ice and the snow, and the six month of darkness. They're mysterious and they're exciting, and the idea of the Northern Aurora is thrilling to me. I've never seen the Aurora. It is because I love all that, all that list of associations, that list of things that are summed up for me by the idea of the North. I'm just attracted to that, that's all.



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**T:** And would you like to go to the North once to experience...?

**P:** I don't like travelling.

**T:** Oh.

**P:** I'd rather go to the library.

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**T:** The ending of the trilogy is sad. You know, William and Lyra have to return to their own world, where they were born, because of their daemons. Do you think it could be somehow related to current political situations about (im)migration and cosmopolitanism?

**P:** I don't think so. I don't think so. It had to, the ending had to be sad. A happy ending would not have worked. I tried to come up with one. I tried to have them being together forever, but it didn't work. It wasn't strong enough. It's a much stronger book because they have to part. It becomes tragic.

**T:** So the aim was not to have a happy ending. And the idea that every character has to go back to the place where he or she was born, it means that it was just a pretext for this ending?

**P:** Probably.

**T:** Uh-huh.

**P:** Probably. It's not that I wanted the end to be sad. It's I felt that the ending had to be sad. I felt from the beginning that the ending would be a moment of great, great sadness. Great *love*... but of great sadness as well. There's nothing I could do about that. That's where the book had to go.

**T:** Okay. But, I mean, anyway, apart from *His Dark Materials*, I suppose you have no problem with migration, or someone moving into another country to live there.

**P:** None at all. None at all. We should welcome people who are in trouble, who are seeking asylum or something like that. Of course we should.

**T:** It's our duty to help others.

**P:** Yeah.

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**T:** Is there anything that you would change now in *His Dark Materials*, apart from Mrs. Coulter's hair colour?

**P:** If I could go back, I would take a little more time. I'd take another six months to write *The Amber Spyglass*. I felt in a hurry, there were readers pressuring me, publishers pressuring me, I felt in a hurry when I wrote *The Amber Spyglass*. I'd like to go back and re-write it, I'd try to tighten the structure a little. But I wouldn't change anything.

**T:** Were there some details?

**P:** Just one or a few details. But nothing major in the story. I think the story is the way I wanted it to go.

**T:** And would you give me some examples of what you would change if you could go back in time?

**P:** Oh, I can't, it's too long ago.

**T:** I see. Thank you for answering *all* of my questions. I'm grateful to you for your kindness and patience.

Having signed copies of the first book of *His Dark Materials* trilogy, and let me take a few photos of him, Philip Pullman gladly accepted my gift, a bottle of home-made Hungarian brandy, 'pálinka,' which, he wrote me later, he found delicious.

#### Notes

5. Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass* (New York: Laurel-Leaf, 2000), 421.
6. W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 57-58.
7. See Chapter 1, "Vital Signs / Cloning Terror," in Mitchell, *What Do...*, 5-27.
8. Tony Watkins, "Interview with Philip Pullman (from 2004)," *TonyWatkins.uk*, 7 September 2009. Accessed on 10 February 2016, <http://www.tonywatkins.co.uk/media/literature/interview-with-philip-pullman-from-2004/>.