

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Being Alone: Experiences of Isolation in the Imaginary Worlds of *His Dark Materials*

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Because of its apparently unlimited freedom both to play with material settings and to explore the human consequences, fantasy fiction seems an appropriate context in which to consider the relationship between being alone and feeling alone. In other words, to consider the extent to which isolation as a psychological experience is shaped by isolation in the physical sense. I hope this topic may be relevant to this special pandemic issue of *Literary Geographies*.

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Over several years now, for the department of international liberal arts at the Japanese university to which I am attached, each fall semester I have run a first-year seminar course designed to enhance basic academic English skills, which focuses on juvenile fantasy fiction and uses the first of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy as one of two major reading texts. Like the 'Narnia' chronicles of the Christian apologist C.S. Lewis, of which it is in many respects a deconstruction, Pullman's series of novels is founded on the idea of a multiplicity of parallel worlds. At the same time it represents at the philosophical level a Blakean critique of the dichotomization of body and soul typical in the Christian tradition, and at the psychological level a sustained analysis of the experience of sexual maturation. The reasons underlying this choice were partly personal: my bi-cultural kids belonged to the Harry Potter generation, fantasy literature seemed the magic potion for fostering both cognitive and linguistic development, and *His Dark Materials* was the first story that, in the throes of adolescence, *they* persuaded *me* to read with them rather than the other way around. This

autumn for the first time, due to the Covid19 pandemic, some of the domestic students will not be based in Tokyo while many of the overseas students will not be able to make it to Japan at all, so my first-year seminar course has to be conducted entirely online using a digital conferencing system. In revising the course materials and methods to face this new pedagogical challenge, I began to consider the characteristics of social interaction not only within the virtual classroom but also throughout the imaginary worlds of the novel that we would be reading and discussing together. While aware that the participants would be physically separated while studying together, I remembered from similar courses last semester that using a laptop camera at home occasionally brought alien beings, whether house-mates, family members, or domestic animals, into view or even into the conversation. I also recalled that Pullman's trilogy is preoccupied with the physiological and psychological complexities of the state of being 'alone': this term, in adjectival form, attributed to a human or humanized agent, and with the various senses of unaccompanied, single-handed, or solitary (*OED* A.1.a-c), occurs more than fifty times in the course of a narrative that, it should be noted, extends in total to not far short of 400,000 words.

Fantasy fiction not only represents an exemplary space for investigating literary geography, but also reflects interestingly our contemporary sense of what it means to be modern. In employing the apparently neutral phrase 'imaginary worlds', I am in fact trying to set up a dialectical position between the concepts of 'imagined worlds' and 'virtual worlds' promoted respectively by Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large* and by Michael Saler in *As If*. By the term 'imagined worlds' Appadurai intends not fictional spaces created by the literary imagination but socio-cultural landscapes 'constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe' via migrations *en masse* (Appadurai 1996: 32-33). Such formations are contemporary equivalents of the 'imagined communities' that Benedict Anderson described as generating a sense of affiliation to the nation-state during an earlier phase of modernity. Like Anderson, who singled out the media creations of print capitalism – (national) newspapers and (realist) novels – as crucial determinants of this new sense of community (Anderson 1983: 24-25), Appadurai sees his freshly 'imagined worlds' as facilitated by digital communications in a transnational media environment. While recognizing that Pullman's creations mimic 'imagined worlds' in serving to 'contest and sometimes even subvert' the established political and economic order (Appadurai 1996: 33), it would be rash to conflate the social and literary spheres by appropriating Appadurai's term here. On the other hand, though Saler sees fantasy as a broad category subsuming 'subgenres such as science fiction and the supernatural' (Saler 2012: 19) and intends his concept of 'virtual worlds' to refer precisely to works of narrative fiction, this is defined in such a way as to leave novels like Pullman's on the margins, if not exclude them entirely. Saler distinguishes earlier works of fantasy from the virtual worlds of the imagination that 'emerged at the turn of the century [...] to secure the marvels that a disenchanted modernity seemed to undermine, while remaining true to the tenets intellectuals ascribed to modernity at the time' (25-26). Moreover, he places a special importance on the roles of media franchising and fan involvement in creating the 'persistent and communal habitation' that 'transforms an imagined world [...] into a virtual world' (21). Yet, as we shall see, Pullman's writing, through its ideological

subversions – the trilogy notably features a vivid dramatization of the death of the Christian patriarchal deity and concludes with a clarion to build ‘The Republic of Heaven’ (Pullman 2007a: 518), seems to question the pleasures of re-enchantment. Moreover, though the series has already been adapted in full or part for stage, cinema, radio, and television, the author, perhaps to maintain ideological control in the face of aggressive neo-puritanism, has hitherto refused the economic benefits of large-scale franchising, while at the same time *His Dark Materials* has often resisted appropriation by fandom. So, ‘imaginary worlds’ then.

*The Golden Compass*, the first volume of the trilogy, is set entirely in the world of the adolescent female protagonist Lyra – ‘a universe like ours, but different in many ways’ (Pullman 2007b: x), the second *The Subtle Knife* begins in the world of the adolescent male protagonist Will – ‘the universe we know’ (ibid.), while the remainder of that novel and the whole of the third, *The Amber Spyglass*, move between not only these two similar worlds but also among a diverse multitude of others. Both children quickly acquire the ambiguous status of nomadic pseudo-orphans. Though the trilogy opens and closes in Lyra’s Oxford, it firmly resists the consolations of the ‘home/away/home’ structure commonly found in children’s literature (Nodelman 1992: 192-93). The factors that distinguish Lyra’s world from our’s, with surprising consequences at the surface level of detail, are fundamentally three: first, historically, that the Protestant Reformation has failed to take place and thus Western belief and knowledge systems are still under the control of a unified Church; second, economically, that contemporary geopolitical conflicts center not on the oil fields of the Middle East but on the coal and gas mines of the Far North (the original British title of the first volume was *Northern Lights*); and third, biologically, that there exist a number of advanced life forms unknown to our science. These, notably, are fierce ice bears with technological and linguistic capacities, female flying witches living close to nature with life-spans measured in centuries, both dwelling in the Far North, and, most pervasively, dæmons, *alter egos* in animal form that accompany all human beings from birth to death. The dæmon is typically of the opposite sex from the human, and their relationship is one of intense warmth and intimacy throughout childhood, when the dæmon is able to change its physical nature at will until taking on the fixed form of a particular species at the time of puberty. The experience of being alone in the imaginary universe of *His Dark Materials* is rendered far stranger and richer not only because of the increasingly alien settings but also due to the prominence of these humanized agents.

The maturing of Lyra’s relationship with her own dæmon Pantalaimon is stimulated in particular by the close encounters during the course of her exotic adventures with beings that cannot share such constant companionship. As she leaves England and travels towards the frozen north, Lyra forms a strange but fast allegiance to Iorek, an exile from the chivalric kingdom of the armoured ice bears. As she gazes at the solitary creature, she recognizes that, like all such bears: ‘He had no dæmon. He was alone, always alone. She felt such a stir of pity and gentleness for him that she almost reached out to touch his matted pelt’ (Pullman 2007c: 196). As the two begin to converse intimately, Lyra gradually comes to understand that Iorek’s suit of armour, which is self-manufactured and essential to his identity as a warrior, functions as an existential equivalent of the human’s dæmon. Further north, Lyra is befriended by Serafina, the queen of a clan of witches. The witches in Lyra’s world also possess dæmons,

but have the uncanny ability to separate themselves by vast distances from their lifelong companions. Indeed, Lyra's initial meeting is not with the witch queen herself but with her goose daemon Kaisa, whose solitary arrival after flying across the night sky illuminated by the *aurora borealis* fills the young girl 'with sickly fear' (185). It is only much later in the narrative that we learn how this can be. Serafina herself explains to Pantalaimon that the ability to separate results from a fearsome initiation ritual: 'There's a region of our north land, a desolate, abominable place [...] To become a witch, a girl must cross it alone and leave her dæmon behind. You know the suffering they must undergo. But having done it, they find that their dæmons were not severed [...] they are still one whole being; but now they can roam free, and go to far places and see strange things and bring back knowledge.' (Pullman 2007a: 472-73). Yet further north, Lyra experiences an even more traumatic moment of sickly fear when she comes face to face with a human child of around her own age who has in fact been severed from his dæmon. This not by accident but as part of an experimental program sponsored by the Church, and implemented by the woman who Lyra has recently learned is her mother, to test whether such an operation can prevent the onset of sexual desires seen as the source of original sin. When she encounters Tony cowering in a drying shed, 'clutching a piece of fish to him as Lyra was clutching Pantalaimon, with her left hand, hard, against her heart; but that was all he had, a piece of dried fish; because he had no dæmon at all' (Pullman 2007b: 213), the girl has to 'go out of the shed and sit down by herself in the snow, except that of course she wasn't by herself, she was never by herself' (214). Shortly after Lyra herself comes agonizingly close to sharing Tony's fate, but in escaping commits herself to leading the fight against such dehumanizing atrocity.

Despite or indeed because of these harrowing experiences, by the end of the first volume, faced with the prospect of crossing over into an unknown world to continue the fight against what the Church stands for, deprived of adult mentors such as Iorek and Serafina, and without even her travelling companion Roger who has just died at the hands of the man she now knows to be her father, the girl and her dæmon have little hesitation. Though Lyra points out that they would 'be alone' on the new venture, Pan responds, 'Just us, then. Don't matter. We're not alone, anyway; not like....', and the girl immediately understands the unspoken reference to Tony and the '*poor lost dæmons*' left after the Church's vile experiments (Pullman 2007b: 398-99). Once in this alien space, the first being that Lyra encounters is Will, who has also just crossed over from his own world. As fiercely independent as Lyra – he has had to take on the role of looking after his disturbed mother since his father disappeared on an Arctic expedition – Will lacks Lyra's brimming self-confidence. Strangely this time Lyra shows little fear on discovering that Will has no soul-companion, quickly concluding: 'You *have* got a dæmon. [...] Inside you. [...] You wouldn't be human else. You'd be ... half dead. We seen a kid with his dæmon cut away. You en't like that. Even if you don't know you've got a dæmon, you have [...] your dæmon en't *separate* from you. It's you. A part of you.' The boy can say nothing, and only stares at 'the skinny pale-eyed girl with her black rat dæmon now sitting in her arms' feeling 'profoundly alone' (Pullman 2007c: 25). Thereafter, apart from a painful period of separation recounted in the early chapters of *The Amber Spyglass* when she is kidnapped by her mother, Lyra's path ahead lies with Will. The most difficult stage of their

dangerous journey together is when they set themselves the task of visiting the nether world to liberate the souls of the deceased, with those of Will's father and Lyra's friend Roger among the *dæmonless* multitudes. Only when they are at the jetty on the stagnant shore of the lake that must be crossed to reach 'the land of the dead' does Lyra, with Pan 'shaking inside her shirt, against her bare flesh, his fur needing her warmth' (Pullman 2007a: 281) come to understand that it will be impossible for her *dæmon* to accompany her further. As they are about to embark, the girl stares 'back again at the foul and dismal shore, [...] and thought of her dear Pan waiting there alone, her heart's companion, watching her disappear into the mist' and descends 'into a storm of weeping' (282). Meanwhile, Will, at first engaged in 'watching her anxiously' (281), himself begins to experience precisely the same emotions of unbearable separation and loss, realizing that 'whatever his *dæmon* was, she, too, was left behind', so that, not for the first or the last time, the two anguished children see 'their own expression on the other's face' (285-86).

Unlike that typical in Saler's 'virtual worlds', the *dénouement* of Pullman's narrative is of a complexity to match the long journey towards it. It is only when, having opened an exit from the land of the dead, they embark on their final quest to recover her soul-companion that Lyra and Will discover that his has now taken on an external form and that their *dæmons* have shared the desolation together. Moreover, like the young witch's through the initiation ritual, the two now too have the ability to 'roam free'. Even after the young couple have tracked them down in the most idyllic, romantic landscape described throughout the trilogy, where the silence is only broken by 'the trickle of the stream, and the occasional rustle of leaves high up in a little curl of breeze', the two *dæmons* resist a reconciliation and remain hidden from view: 'There was no sign of the *dæmon* shadows anywhere. They were completely alone.' (Pullman 2007a: 465). Lyra and Will begin to enjoy the novelty of exploring 'by themselves [...] speaking little, eager to be alone with each other' (481), and their comradeship changes imperceptibly into passion. This is the moment, representing another sense of being alone together, when their *daemons* settle in the fixed animal forms that they will retain for life and reveal themselves finally to the young couple. But the joy of this reunion is short-lived, and the reader is denied a simply happy ending. Unlike in Appadurai's thought, ecology seems to be the enemy of multi-culturalism in Pullman's imaginary universe. Lyra and Will are devastated to learn that every window opened to allow passage between the parallel worlds needs to be closed again to save the ecosystem, and that neither will be able to dwell permanently in the world of the other without mortal consequences ('we have to build the Republic of Heaven where we are, because for us there is no elsewhere', 363). Lyra is the first to reconcile herself to this destiny and accepts it with a simple 'Yes ... alone', while Will at this word again feels 'a great wave of rage and despair [...] All his life he'd been alone, and now he must be alone again, and this infinitely precious blessing that had come to him must be taken away almost at once' (493). The only consolation is that, before parting, the lovers find a romantic spot, 'a wooden seat under a spreading, low-branched tree' (507), in the Botanic Gardens opposite Magdalen College, that exists in identical form in both their Oxfords, and agree as long as they live to go there once a year, at midday on Midsummer Day, to be alone together in their now forever separated worlds.

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Those who know the trilogy well will miss much here – major characters like Farder Coram, Lee Scoresby and Mary Malone, technological devices like the golden compass, subtle knife, and amber spyglass, ethnic groups like the gyptians, *mulefa*, and Gallivespians, and ethical concepts like the conscious elementary particles known in different worlds as Dust, or Shadows, or *sraf*. Yet no map can be as detailed as the territory it represents. If nothing else, this essay may serve to remind us that simply entering the virtual spaces created in works of the literary imagination can serve as welcome relief from the exigencies of our lives under the pandemic. But more, that engaging with imaginary worlds of fantasy fiction such as Pullman's trilogy may represent not so much escape from feeling alone, as therapy deriving from re-considering the nature of being alone. And finally, for those concerned that my seminar course might constitute anti-Christian propaganda, I should note that the other parallel universe fiction that we will be studying together in isolation, is one of C.S. Lewis's seven 'Narnia' novels. But that, as they say, is another story ...

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