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### Only in story a world : atheistic metanarrative in LeGuin, Pullman and Wolfe

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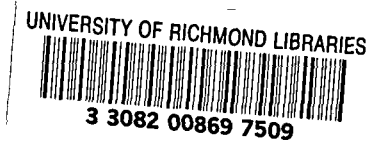
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Only in Story a World:  
A/theistic Metanarrative in Le Guin, Pullman and Wolfe

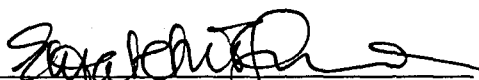
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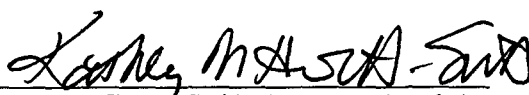
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The signatures below certify that with this essay Samuel Keyes has satisfied the thesis requirement for Honors in English.



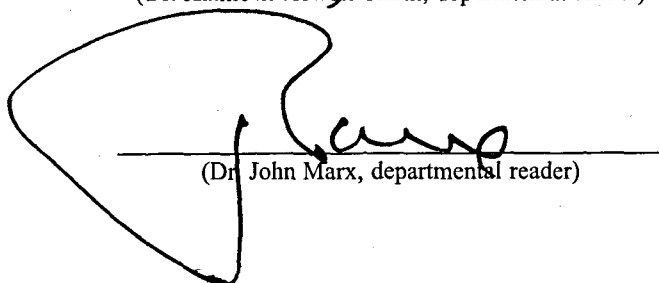
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(Dr. Robert Nelson, English honors coordinator)

Only in silence the word,  
 only in dark the light,  
 only in dying life:  
 bright the hawk's flight  
 on the empty sky.  
 —*The Creation of Éa*

Ursula K. Le Guin, Philip Pullman, and Gene Wolfe, despite their apparent ideological<sup>1</sup> as well as stylistic differences, all profoundly question the way modernity has divided knowledge, posing serious challenges to contemporary distinctions between religion, science and magic. Moreover, they share a common concern for the power of narrative to accomplish this critique.

In each of their multivolume fantasies, the differences between the categories of science and religion become meaningless. After such a deconstruction, the possibility of nihilism looms unless a new system of meaning surfaces. The move away from discrete areas of science and religion, therefore, in these works constitutes a move toward (or, perhaps, a return to) narrative as a new semiotic after previous semiotics have failed. I argue that their fictions resonate with the narrative concerns of Stanley Hauerwas by offerering narrative as a necessary means for making sense of the world. Along with Hauerwas they share an ethical concern for the necessity of story. As fantasies, these works all assume cosmological significance behind their stories; in each case, whole worlds are at stake. It matters, in other words, what happens. These fantasy stories present the radical ability of narrative to shape and reshape the fate of worlds.

While fiction in general may suggest ways to explore philosophical issues—knowledge and being—fantasy fiction tends to emphasize these concerns. Because fantasy is preeminently

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<sup>1</sup> One initial similarity between them is their openness about their personal beliefs. Le Guin is a philosophical Taoist, Pullman a secular humanist and Wolfe a Roman Catholic.

concerned with what is usually taken to be unreal, it draws attention to the real. Despite their habitual place in the realm of popular fiction, fantasy novels<sup>2</sup> such as those presented here are, I would argue, much more comfortable asking questions about epistemology and ontology than their counterparts in “realist” fiction. David Gooderham agrees in his description of the typical “high fantasy” work: “In these fantasies metaphysical, religious and moral issues are of central importance, and are realized, accessibly for young readers, through the construction of elaborate ‘secondary worlds’...within which great forces clash and the young or socially modest protagonists assume heroic proportions” (155). Michael Chabon, in a review of Pullman’s novels, says that by sequestering epic fantasies in a separate genre “we consign to the borderlands our most audacious retellings of what is arguably one of the two or three primal stories: the narrative of Innocence, Experience, and straddling the margin between them, the Fall” (2). These novels outwardly embody the interiorities of being human and living in the world. In this essay I take seriously the assumption that fantasy is not about escaping reality but about describing reality. In other words, these stories speak for themselves; I do not think that my metaphysical interpretation moves beyond the problems brought up explicitly in these texts.

In this thesis I do not presume to take into account the works of these authors on the whole, nor even exhaustively describe their intertextual relations, of which there are doubtless many. I will focus entirely on the way these novels explicitly and implicitly address the nature of religion, magic and science in their worlds, as well as their themes insofar as they relate to narrative.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Wolfe is not all fantasy, and Pullman largely revises the fantasy tradition (see Gooderham). The difficulty in placing these novels in a definite genre echoes their thematic concerns with categorization.

<sup>3</sup> Given the large number of texts involved, I have included brief plot summaries in an appendix rather than review each text as it comes up.

In the following sections on Le Guin, Pullman and Wolfe, I show how the categorization of science versus religion becomes nonsensical. The order of this movement from Le Guin to Pullman to Wolfe is purposeful.<sup>4</sup> Le Guin, the most traditional “fantasy” writer, introduces the problem by inventing priest-like wizards who provide an extended meditation on the relationship between language and reality. Le Guin’s revision and deconstruction of her own world—all for the sake of wholeness—leads into Pullman’s critique of the Church. He moves away from the Church for moral reasons; it is all for love. But, for Pullman, love comes through a revised concept of materialism. He draws religious conviction and redemption from a decidedly anti-religious narrative. In a more radical continuation of this idea, Wolfe explodes the whole division between the material and the spiritual.

At the end of Wolfe’s *New Sun* books, the main character denies the false alternatives of science and religion. Some kind of metanarrative—seemingly faith-based—seems inevitable. I have used the term “a/theistic” because the binary opposition between atheism and theism collapses. They are both forms of belief. They are both stories. But more importantly, the two concepts depend on one another. In the last section I begin by explicating this duality in terms of Le Guin’s emphasis on language. The final synthesis of the three authors comes from Hauerwas’ ethical theory of narrative. This allows their various concerns— wholeness, truth, love—to converge in a narrative epistemology that refuses to capitulate to an either-or ontology.

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<sup>4</sup> Scholars have established few links between the three. See Gooderham for brief associations between Le Guin and Pullman. Le Guin praises Wolfe on the cover of the *New Sun* books, so the connection between them seems natural.

## I. Epistemology in Magic, Science and Religion

### 1. Priestly Magic in Earthsea

My analysis of Le Guin's Earthsea books owes much to the article by Laura Comoletti and Michael Drout in *Children's Literature* 29, "How They Do Things with Words: Language, Power, Gender and the Priestly Wizards of Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea Books." Comoletti and Drout reveal the strong links between the wizards of Roke and the priests of medieval Europe, showing how both groups of powerful men use words to manipulate reality. I will consider Le Guin's concern with language and narrative later, though of course this is a somewhat arbitrary division, as Le Guin's linguistic focus pervades all her work. At this point I want to simply ask how the various categories of religion, science, and magic, in those terms, function in the Earthsea books. As I will show, and as others have already suggested<sup>5</sup>, these categories fall apart in Earthsea. Through linguistic and conceptual manipulation, Le Guin makes these terms in themselves, leaving the text open ground for a new theory of knowledge. Comoletti and Drout have shown the parallels between priests and wizards; the striking similarity between these groups collapses the difference between magic and religion. Priests perform magic. Wizards mediate between humanity and the Equilibrium.

The second book in Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea cycle, *The Tombs of Atuan*, offers a first real glimpse at the Kargish people; they, unlike the Hardic people of the Archipelago, have clear religious beliefs, one of which is the reincarnation of the soul. T.A. Shippey says that their cults "offer an escape, in particular, from the fear that haunts *A Wizard of Earthsea* and *The Farthest Shore*, the fear of exile to the dry lands of the dead. The Kargs do not believe that they will go

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<sup>5</sup> See Shippey, who draws attention to how the Earthsea books challenge modern (and therefore somewhat arbitrary) divisions between different kinds of knowledge. Donaldson further says that Le Guin operates as part of a tradition of fantasy literature that counters the epistemology of fundamentalism, which relies on clear distinctions between the otherworldly and the this-worldly.

there” (156). Shippey assumes that the Kargish belief is false: “the Kargs invented reincarnation as a protection,” he says, from the land of the dead, the “dry land” (161). His assumption is not unfounded; Ged goes to the land of the dead, so it must actually exist, but even from these “facts” one cannot with certainty draw the conclusion that the Kargish belief is misguided. As Ged suggests at the end of *Tombs*, the Kargish cult of the Nameless Ones is not “made-up,” though many of its forms and functions are without meaning. The Nameless Ones are real, though much of their power comes from the fact that people continue to fear them and worship them; one should not, then, quite so quickly dismiss the Kargish belief in reincarnation, despite the knowledge that it may contain false elements.

Even the most cursory reading of *The Other Wind* suggests a completely different description of the Kargish beliefs, one which is certainly incompatible with Shippey’s explanation, and perhaps even incompatible with Le Guin’s earlier description. Shippey writes, “Ged’s final insistence, however, is that human beings are indeed dual, as people have long thought, but not by being bodies and souls, rather bodies and names” (162). That sounds nice, and it may even hold water in the initial Earthsea trilogy, but *The Other Wind* suggests otherwise:

There they claimed part of that realm as their own. A timeless realm, where the self might be forever. But not in the body, as the dragons were. Only in spirit could men be there...So they made a wall which no living body could cross, neither man nor dragon. For they feared the anger of the dragons. And their arts of naming laid a great net of spells upon all the western lands, so that when the people of the islands die, they would come to the west beyond the west and live there in the spirit forever. (227-28)



This is a historical event described by the Master Patterner of Roke, but it was given earlier in a less detailed—and at the time, less reliable—form by the High Princess of the Kargs: “They live, and they can do their accursed sorceries, but they can’t die. Only their bodies die. The rest of them stays in a dark place and never gets reborn” (125). One notices the interchangeability of “self” and “spirit” in Azver’s statement, as well as Sesorakh’s hesitance to even name that part of the person that is “the rest of them.” Whether this is really any different from the “name” hardly matters; what does matter is that there *is* another part, and it is not simply a memory. The problem with Shippey’s description is not that he says the dead are “names” but that he says they are *not* spirit; Azver says that they are; but, of course, they are not—or at least all of these statements about the dead lead one to redefine what one means by “spirit” and “self.”

Ged, in *The Farthest Shore*, supports at least some aspects of a doctrine of reincarnation, though he stops short of that offered by the Kargs; speaking of Erreth-Akbe, he says, “There he is the earth and sunlight, the leaves of trees, the eagle’s flight. He is alive. And all who ever died, live; they are reborn, and have no end, nor will there ever be an end” (*FS* 180). This doxology leaves something to be desired: how this idealized rebirth can coexist with the afterlife known by Roke wizards. Tenar has serious reservations about their Dry Land: “But the afterlife Ged had told her of, where he said his people went, that changeless land of cold dust and shadow—was that any less dreary, any less terrible?” (*OW*, 88). *The Other Wind* reveals how it can coexist: through the greed of humanity. But other than extensive exposition on the matter, does this fifth novel in the cycle add something new? It does revise some of the assumptions that Shippey makes in his essay, but his essay does not necessarily reflect the original trilogy itself so much as it reflects the perspective of the mages of Roke.

The most substantial conclusion of Shippey's essay is this: "[S]he is...an iconoclast, a myth-breaker not a myth-maker. She rejects resurrection and eternal life; she refutes 'cathartic' and 'intellectualist' versions of anthropology alike" (163). For Shippey, this means a rejection not only of religious myth but also of scientific myth. In addition to its contribution to the story of Earthsea, *The Other Wind* provides an explicit narrative about this kind of myth-breaking. If, before, Le Guin has only suggested the potential for revolution in Earthsea, in her latest book she actualizes it by literally deconstructing her own world.

One need not rely on *The Other Wind* and its changes to the Earthsea universe in order to consider the place of religion in Le Guin. Though the Kargs are the only explicitly religious people, the people of the other islands are not free from all religious life. *The Farthest Shore's* main problem—the unraveling of magic in the world—stems from an essentially religious problem: people desiring eternal life. Arren and Sparrowhawk leave Lorbanery with its mad dyer, Sopli, who whispers to Arren, in horror, that Sparrowhawk, unlike normal people, wants to die:

“He wants to get to the secret place. But I don't know why. He doesn't want...He doesn't believe in ...the promise.”

“What promise?”

Sopli glanced up at him sharply, something of his ruined manhood in his eyes; but Arren's will was stronger. He answered very low, “You know. Life. Eternal life.” (100)

This scene is striking because of its overt parody of Christian soteriology. The point of Christianity is a promise of eternal life. Le Guin paints that promise here as a hollow promise, clutched by one with “ruined manhood in his eyes.” She questions any religion that offers a way

out, a way to avoid the necessity of death. Cob's role in *The Farthest Shore* is that of a false prophet, luring in followers who succumb to his new doctrines. *Tehanu* shows the remaining influence of his cult; Aspen, the wizard of the lord of Re Albi, clearly follows Cob's teaching, using his magery for personal gain.

Cob's offer of a way out is dangerous because it confuses the identity of things. The quest for eternal life is by definition impossible; there are too many overlapping concepts. Cob's idea of "eternal life" is more accurately "eternal self." Life, in the way Ged describes it—as an unbroken chain of the natural world—is always eternal, and it includes death. Death is never an end, but a separation: "His death did not diminish life. Nor did it diminish him. He is there—*there*, not here! Here is nothing, dust and shadows. There, he is the earth and sunlight, the leaves of trees, the eagle's flight" (180). The parts of life which once made up a self will separate and move to other parts of life. This inability to describe things as they are shows up in Cob's final conversation with Ged:

"What is life, Cob?"

"Power."

"What is love?"

"Power," the blind man repeated heavily, hunching up his shoulders.

"What is light?"

"Darkness!" (179)

In a universe where naming is everything, Cob's responses here attempt to unravel everything. Of course, Le Guin has established a dualism between light and darkness—yin and yang—but neither she nor her philosophical Taoism would argue that the one *is* the other; they are interdependent, in what Robert Galbreath labels "the *coincidentia oppositorum* of alchemy," but they

remain distinct (Galbreath 264). This is the necessary tension that seems to be required for anything to make sense in Earthsea. The kind of religious escapism that Cob offers seeks either to resolve that tension with a monistic claim—light is darkness—or to deny interdependence, as the masculine wizards of Earthsea do to the feminine.

These are the primary experiences with religion in Earthsea: the stated religion of the Kargs, and the unstated but religiously charged experience of Cob and his followers. Le Guin takes for granted that both of these leave something to be desired. But she does not discount all religion. When they leave Lorbanery, Arren quarrels with Ged: “But this—this is beyond reason!” (93). Ged replies, “It is beyond all reason. We go where reason will not take us. Will you come, or will you not?” (93). This movement beyond reason, to which Ged invites Arren, parallels the invitation that Cob offers to those he calls. The difference seems to be that Ged willingly abandons reason; Cob, however, clings to it, attempting to use it to achieve his ends. Ged knows that his insistence on reason is what prevented Cob from a thorough, organic understanding of life and death.

So far, all one can say is that Le Guin wants something beyond reason to describe the way things are. Religion does not accomplish this description; in fact, it seems not to exist in the Archipelago. Comoletti and Drout do show it to be more prevalent than one would imagine at first glance. The wizards of Roke travel around like medieval clerics, performing magic (i.e., the sacraments) in exchange for hospitality (Comoletti 114). Indeed, they do more than perform sacraments; the wizards of Earthsea behave as parish priests (Ged’s first job in *A Wizard of Earthsea*), hermits (Ogion), monks (the school of Roke), and even as personal advisors for aristocrats (Aspen in *Tehanu*). Ogion exhibits the mage’s tendency to speak in conundrums and aphorisms. His speech is always pastoral: “When you know the fourfoil in all its seasons root

and leaf and flower, by sight and scent and seed, then you may learn its true name, knowing its being: which is more than its use. What, after all, is the use of you? or of myself? Is Gont Mountain useful, or the Open Sea?...To hear, one must be silent” (*WE* 17-18). The context is unmistakable. Ged is Ogion’s spiritual disciple, a catechumen or a novice. While Ogion may or may not share similar observations with those not directly under his guidance, his behavior, combined with the similar behavior of the Masters of Roke, suggests that a mage assumes as part of his duty the guidance of others in the ways of the Equilibrium.

The Equilibrium is thus the assumed religious system of the Archipelago. It has its structures and hierarchies which easily parallel traditional Christianity. These structures are not, however, beyond question. Comoletti and Drout argue that Le Guin herself successfully critiques that hierarchy in *Tehanu*. Yet the basic idea of Equilibrium does remain in the later novels. It is clearly the driving force behind the actions taken in *The Other Wind*; the tearing down of the wall of the dry land is a restoration of Equilibrium. The main point that *The Other Wind* makes is therefore that Equilibrium does not mean simply the status quo; it means something more radical.<sup>6</sup> It means something that must be actively supported. The end of *The Other Wind* triumphantly describes the movement from division to wholeness, from bondage to freedom. And the text consistently suggests that this is a *good* thing. On the last page Tenar starts quoting a song, “O my joy, be free...” (246). *The Farthest Shore* gives some explication to this qualitative evaluation:

“But my lord, what you speak of surely is different from this—”

“Why? Because I am a good man?” That coldness of steel, of the falcon’s eye, was in Sparrowhawk’s look again. “What is a good man, Arren? Is a good

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<sup>6</sup> This contrasts with Manlove’s argument that Le Guin’s Earthsea books celebrates things as they are (“Conservatism in the Fantasy of Le Guin”). Of course, Manlove had not seen the publication of the last few Earthsea books.

man one who would not do evil, who would not open a door to the darkness, who has no darkness in him? Look again lad. Look a little farther; you will need what you learn, to go where you must go. (137)

A “good man,” according to Ged, is not someone who has no darkness in him but who is whole. This summarizes the main theme of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, where Ged journeys across the world fleeing a shadow only to realize that the shadow was a part of himself.<sup>7</sup>

This quest for wholeness underscores the pursuit of wizardry and thereby the pursuit of knowledge in Earthsea. I have already argued that the wizards of Earthsea are priest-figures; Shippey argues that they are also scientists: “A mage, then, is knowledgeable, like a scientist; but his knowledge needs to be combined with personal genius, a quality we tend to ascribe to artists. And unlike both, his skill (or art, or science) has some close relationship with an awareness of ethics—something we expect, not of a priest perhaps, but of a saint” (150). Earthsea’s magic combines all of our notions of ethics, spirituality, science, and art. Shippey further writes, “For the mage’s art depends on seeing things as they are, and not as they are wanted. It is not anthropocentric” (152).

How can mages, or anyone, claim to see anything as it really is? Le Guin here directly engages the epistemological questions of modern European philosophy. Not only do mages make these kind of radical claims to understanding, they make them with little or no effort; they do not rigorously systematize their doubt to uphold certainty. Mages, despite their connections with medieval priests, are far from Western. Taoism sees little value in certainty. Doubt will always flourish. True, Earthsea’s epistemology is not anthropocentric, but if it does focus on seeing things “as they are,” the concept of seeing “things as they are” must not be taken as the Western concept of “things as they are.” Truth, in Le Guin, is always dynamic. One does not

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<sup>7</sup> See Bailey for an explication of this union in Jungian terms.

simply “discover” Being through intense study. The mages know that they are part of what they investigate. The idea of being is the mantra of the mages of Roke, but underlying it is the equally compelling proverb, “*Rules change in the Reaches*” (WE 160). The changes in *The Farthest Shore* and *The Other Wind* substantiate this claim. It is true that the mage’s art is not anthropocentric, but it is also true that it *is* anthropocentric. The division between humanity and nature is false, and Le Guin has made it her project to deconstruct these kinds of divisions.

## 2. *Pullman’s Scientific Church*

If Le Guin’s project starts with magic to describe science and art tempered by an ethics of wholeness, Pullman begins with a more negative description of an unethical religion controlled by quests for scientific progress. But Pullman’s science is not our science. Like Le Guin he blurs the distinction between science and magic. The context of this amalgamation is the Church.

David Gooderham points out that Pullman’s use of explicitly religious terminology sets him apart from most other fantasists (155). Of course, religious ideas are not alien to fantasy literature, but traditionally they undergo a “metaphorical transposition into the landscape, beings and activities of the secondary worlds of the fantasies” (156). Pullman finds no difficulty talking about God, the Church, religious leaders, or traditional doctrines in those terms.

*The Amber Spyglass* is the first book of *His Dark Materials* to give detailed exposition about the structure of the Kingdom of Heaven. Before the entrance of Balthamos and Baruch, all one knows are the mysterious operations of the Church; the true nature of the Authority—that is, of God—is clouded in the same way that his mountain shrine hides itself. When Will discovers that his angelic companions know the reality and history of the Kingdom, he demands to hear of it and receives this explanation:

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. He was an angel like ourselves—the first angel, true, the most powerful, but he was formed of Dust as we are, and Dust 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. 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. We serve her still. And the Authority still reigns in the Kingdom, and Metatron is his Regent. (28)

One may question the authority of these angels to speak so definitively, if not for the doubt they place in themselves later (concerning their ability to be heard by Lord Asriel), for the questions that arise from within this explanation: if the angels acknowledge that the Authority was before all other angels, how can they so easily dismiss his claim that he created them? Probably the simplest answer is that they began to routinely observe the formation and emergence of angels apart from the Authority; also, elsewhere in *The Amber Spyglass* one gets a view of the Authority himself as an “impression of terrifying decrepitude, of a face sunken in wrinkles, of trembling hands, and of a mumbling mouth and rheumy eyes” (354). This is not the picture of the powerful figure he makes himself out to be; indeed, when he finally perishes, he has not even a semblance of intelligence, much less divine creative will (366).

For what reason is God called first “Authority”? This is really only an English variation of many more traditional names of God beginning in “El” which means, similarly, powerful



one.<sup>8</sup> This literal name also suggests a more literal reading of other similar names, like Satan, which means simply “Adversary.” This literalist onomastic takes away an element of mystery from the use of “God” as a proper noun by replacing it with a substantive adjective. The consistent usage of this terminology also supports the theme, of this passage at least, of revealing things for what they truly are. Will’s notion of “God” is abstract and mystical, whether or not he believes in God; but Balthamos and Baruch want to demystify God, showing that he can be easily understood. This mystification of a simple explanation is what implicitly keeps the Church alive; the leaders of the Church do not know the truth about the Authority, just as they do not know the truth about the afterlife.

The next problem is what this explanation of the Kingdom means, what it says by extension about other cosmogonies, cosmologies, and religious philosophies. Obviously the most pressing critique that the angels offer deconstructs the Christian creation story. God is not an uncreated substance who created matter; rather, matter created him. In the beginning was matter. But this explanation does not simply discredit the Christian myth, it discredits the idea of creation itself, of any true genesis. One may say, in the beginning was matter, but really one must say, in the beginning there was not beginning, only matter. This is little more than a dramatic presentation of materialism; but it seems to me that Pullman’s critique is not centered so much on matter versus spirit as it is on the idea of a genesis. As Stanley Hauerwas says, creation is an eschatological claim.<sup>9</sup> Genesis implies telos. The main thrust of the angels’ explanation of the universe is that the notions of beginning and end are insubstantial. The title of

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<sup>8</sup> I find it interesting that he includes “Yahweh” in this list of names, because while the others all center on “authority,” Yahweh is centered on “being.” Further, it is worth considering the names that Pullman does not include here, such as the variations around “El” qualified by another attribute: comforter, redeemer, etc. Gooderham notes the absence of any Eastern deities, arguing that their presence would not support Pullman’s very specific goal of combating Western conceptions of deity (164).

<sup>9</sup> This was one of Hauerwas’ mantras during an address at the November 2003 *Image* conference in Seattle.

the chapter “Authority’s End” reifies this by contrasting the notion that God *is* the beginning and the end to the reality that God *has* a beginning and an end.

The claim of materialism poses interesting problems. Generally, from a religious perspective, “materialism” is entirely negative. Theologians routinely criticize the limited scope of a materialist worldview; G.K. Chesterton, in *Orthodoxy*, suggests that materialism leads to madness. One of the characters in Gene Wolfe’s *Book of the New Sun* associates materialism with ignorance (see below). These perspectives critique materialism as an illegitimate constraint on reality.

But by reading theological materialism in *His Dark Materials*, one need not accept all these negative assertions, even on religious grounds. I have said that Pullman does not appear to value a battle between matter and spirit; this is not only because he reorients the debate to creation (which must always concern both matter and spirit), but also because his concept of materialism is wholly different from the kind of materialism that Chesterton and others criticize. The difference is that materialism in this classic sense is not so much positive materialism as it is anti-spiritualism. Materialism is a kind of polemic against the supernatural, against the inexplicable, and in favor of a hyper-scientific rationalism that finds just as much pleasure, if not more, in stating what is *not* as in stating what *is*. The materialism of *His Dark Materials*—and one must note the title’s allusion to the problem of matter—does not rely on what it is against. It is an argument *for* matter, and it does not seem to care whether there is anything else.

The matter of *His Dark Materials* is not the cold, lifeless matter of an anti-supernatural naturalism. Pullman here may be said to use a “natural supernaturalism” in his appropriation of religious or spiritual metaphor in his consideration of matter.<sup>10</sup> The most telling example of this comes directly from Dr. Malone, whose scientific curiosity comes to replace her faith in God.

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<sup>10</sup> I use the term after M.H. Abrams’ book of the same name.

She says that what she missed about God was the sense of connectedness in the universe. “And then had come the discovery of the Shadows and her journey into another world, and now this vivid night, and it was plain that everything *was* throbbing with purpose and meaning...” (AS 401). Initially her loss of faith signaled a loss of meaning and purpose in the universe, but Dr. Malone comes to find this same kind of meaning through her scientific work. There is a catch in the passage, though: “...but she was cut off from it. And it was impossible to find a connection, because there was no God.” This feeling of despair ends shortly, for she discovers the massive flood of Dust leaving the world and makes this observation:

Matter *loved* Dust. It didn't want to see it go. That was the meaning of this night, and it was Mary's meaning, too.

Had she thought that there was no meaning in life, no purpose, when God had gone? Yes, she had thought that.

“Well, there is now,” she said aloud, and again, louder: “There is now!” (404)

This concept of love that Mary Malone finds so compelling is native to the language of Christian theology. And in this experience, which is not unlike a conversion experience, there are echoes of her first entrance into the convent—based on love of God—and of her departure from it—based on human love. In this scene matter acquires exactly what critics of materialism usually say that it lacks. Pullman's materialism is a materialism of love; it brands those things that are usually placed in the territory of the immaterial: love, meaning, purpose, hope.

In a strange reversal, the Church of Lyra's world appropriates what, in the modern age, are traditionally secular disciplines, ideas, and mechanisms. The “experimental theology” of Lyra's world parallels the science of our world, differently named. In the description of Jordan College, the narrator notes that “It was important to keep the chapel up to date, because Jordan

College had no rival, either in Europe or in New France, as a center of experimental theology” (GC 31). The College chapel serves as a kind of laboratory, and one assumes that there is no separate faculty of natural sciences. Lyra’s thoughts on these subjects are all the reader has at this point: “She had formed the notion that it was concerned with magic, with the movements of the stars and planets, with tiny particles of matter, but that was guesswork. Probably the stars had daemons just as humans did, and experimental theology involved talking to them” (31). In the modern western era the conjunction of these ideas strikes one as bizarre: philosophy, physics, astronomy, divination, all wrapped into one. But of course a medieval scholar would find nothing strange about this list, because he has not yet separated his knowledge into discrete disciplines or into “sacred” and “secular.” Perhaps he would consider his own work to be generally “secular,” but that would only be because he is not a priest.

In Lyra’s world, even this final distinction falls apart: priests *are* scientists. Indeed, for a long time *His Dark Materials* shows very little that is “religious” in a normal sense: there is no one worshipping, no one praying; there is no talk of communion or baptism.<sup>11</sup> One only hears of confession late in the narrative when Father Gomez seeks preemptive absolution for murder. Though many of its names are the same, the religious hierarchy of Lyra’s world differs considerably from the recognizable forms of the Roman Catholic tradition today:

Ever since Pope John Calvin had moved the seat of the Papacy to Geneva and set up the Consistorial Court of Discipline, the Church’s power over every aspect of life had been absolute. The Papacy itself had been abolished after Calvin’s death, and a tangle of courts, colleges, and councils, collectively known as the Magisterium, had grown up in its place. These agencies were not always united; sometimes a bitter rivalry grew up between them. For a large part of the previous

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<sup>11</sup> Gooderham also picks up on the absence of many religious traditions amidst all of the *language* of religion.

century, the most powerful had been the College of Bishops, but in recent years the Consistorial Court of Discipline had taken its place as the most active and most feared of all the Church's bodies. (*GC* 27)

That first historical gloss—that John Calvin was Pope—delineates some of the differences between the Church in Lyra's world and the modern Roman Catholic Church. The real Calvin, when in the city-state of Geneva, caused a new emphasis on ecclesiastical discipline: "The strong lay involvement in governing congregations through the consistories was to become one of the hallmarks of the Reformed churches..." (Grell 241). Calvin insisted on cooperation between lay and clergy and between secular and religious authorities to regulate all areas of life, both public and private.

Calvin was perhaps not the dogmatic schismatic one might make him out to be. He was part of a French "Circle of Reformers" who read both Luther and Erasmus; they were considered religious liberals, encouraging religious tolerance within France. Calvin's violent presence in Geneva was not his original desire; on two occasions he accepted the government's call to help administer the city (Ganoczy 235). Nor is it so bizarre to imagine Calvin as pope. One may picture him denouncing the pope as antichrist, but his views were actually more complex. According to Calvin, "the possibility remained open that the ministry of Peter, once renewed according to its original purpose, could take over a legitimate ministry to the worldwide *communio ecclesiarum*" (Ganoczy 239). In Lyra's world, then, Calvin historically accomplished this stated desire.

Lyra's Church reflects Calvin's use of universal ecclesiastical discipline. And the eventual movement from the monarchic papacy to the more complex, oligarchic Magisterium, reflects Calvin's system of church governance in Geneva. Further, Calvin's lay education in

France was highly motivated by the emerging modern sciences (unlike another major reformer, Luther, whose training was monastic); the appropriation of science by the church follows from Calvin's papacy. Calvin's basis for knowledge assumed that humanity could overcome error in reason through the revelation of the Holy Spirit in scripture; thus he believed that his religious ideas could be explicated scientifically (Ganozcy 237). In this sense the Church in *The Golden Comapass* is both more modern and more protestant than the Roman Catholic Church in this world.

But while Pullman's Church encompasses many of the hierarchies, forms and ideals of modernity, it remains profoundly premodern in its basic understanding of science and religion precisely because it does not observe a distinction between science and religion. Calvin's disciplinary methods seem to have both encouraged further scientific advance within the Church and quashed scientific work outside the Church. "Science" in *His Dark Materials* always resists categorization as the independent search for knowledge. Since Calvin's Papacy, nothing is independent of the Church. The Magisterium in its confused, web-like organization, covers every part of life. The word "magisterium" itself conveys multiple notions; "magister" is master but also "teacher," and "magistrate" comes from the same word but connotes more of a governing figure; and from an aural perspective "magisterium" sounds very much like "magnum mysterium"—great mystery. Part of its power lies in its ineffability; because it is undefined its reach must be infinite. Indeed one cannot imagine a place untouched by this Church, so one cannot conceive of knowledge gained outside its power.

### 3. *Sacramental Science in Urth*

The pervasive mystery of Pullman's Church leads well into the innumerable mysteries of Gene Wolfe's opus.<sup>12</sup> He similarly presents vast landscapes and institutions which lie forever above the grasp of human comprehension. Moreover, *The Book of the New Sun* and its sequel, *The Urth of the New Sun*, bring up regularly the question of religion, its relationship to science and, to the extent that there may be such a thing, magic. There is never any systematic exposition of religious structures in the Commonwealth, but it appears to resemble medieval Catholicism—various orders of priests, monks, nuns, all accompanied by an elaborate ritual structure.<sup>13</sup> The only thing it does not have is a pope or other central authority figure. In the Appendix to *Claw of the Conciliator*, Wolfe makes this explicit:

The *religious* are almost as enigmatic as the god they serve, a god that appears fundamentally solar, but not Apollonian. (Because the Conciliator is given a Claw, one is tempted to make the easy association of the eagle of Jove with the sun; it is perhaps too pat.) Like the Roman Catholic clergy of our own day, they appear to be members of various orders, but unlike them they seem subject to no uniting authority. At times there is something suggestive of Hinduism about them, despite their obvious monotheism. The Pelerines, who play a larger part in the manuscripts than any other holy community, are clearly a sisterhood of priestesses, accompanied (as such a roving group would have to be in their place and time) by armed male servants. (412)

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<sup>12</sup> Andre-Driussi's *Lexicon Urthus*, a giant tribute to Wolfe's arcane vocabulary and allusion, suggests the magnitude of the fog surrounding the New Sun books. Clute argued that Wolfe's work tends to require a great deal of deciphering before one even attempts interpretation.

<sup>13</sup> This relationship is made more clear in Wolfe's *Book of the Long Sun*, where the contrived state religion of the *whorl* is modeled after the religion of Typhon's kingdom. The *whorl's* religion very closely resembles Catholic liturgy, down to the constant use of "the sign of addition." Even the apparent polytheism only echoes the cult of saints in Catholic tradition.

The Autarch probably plays a central role in Severian's day, as he reveals in *Citadel of the Autarch* during one of his anachronistic interludes: the day before Severian leaves Urth he participates in "a solemn religious ceremony" of the highest order of "Assimilation," in which he and others enter an anti-gravitational field and represent planets and suns (349).<sup>14</sup>

Whatever the religious structures, their similarity to contemporary ones is only superficial; and perhaps that is all they are supposed to be, or all they are known to be. It is possible that much of the "meaning" of these rituals has been long forgotten, just as the mythology of the Hieros is largely forgotten on Urth. In the following scene from *Urth of the New Sun*, Apheta, a Hierogrammate larva, speaks with Severian about the religious significance of these races:

"Severian, do you know the meaning of that word you used? Of Hierogrammate?"

I told her that someone had once told me it designated those who recorded the rescripts of the Increate.

"So much is correct." She paused again. "Possibly we are too much in awe. Thos.. whom we do not name, the cognates I spoke of, evoke such feelings still, though of all their works only the Hierogrammates remain...." (138)

Apheta's suggestion that "we are too much in awe" points to the remaining feeling and reverence (including a kind of religious feeling) for a certain concept, or a certain word—which is not named—even though evidence for the actual existence of it has long passed. The point that "the cognates...evoke such feelings still" resonates with the "natural supernaturalism" that I pointed out in Pullman; the forms and customs (or, more generally, signs) of these "cognates" are still

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<sup>14</sup> The elaborate floating ceremony has striking parallels to Philip Pullman's concept of "experimental theology" in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy. In this scene in the House Absolute, religious rite seems much more like a physics laboratory or an astronaut training ground—which it very well may be, since Severian is about to enter space.



used, but only to evoke certain “feelings”—for the signs themselves are no longer (or perhaps they never were) anything but signifiers; they point to nothing beyond themselves, but in doing so they bring up ghosts of the formerly signified. In a different sense, though, it is always perfectly clear (at least to Apheta and, presumably, the other Hierogrammates) that there is no signified; they represent the self-conscious, ironical use of past signifiers for no purpose or meaning. Apheta’s speech here suggests, then, that many of the religious structures in the Commonwealth share this role of “evoking feeling,” whether or not they actually stand for anything.<sup>15</sup>

*Weighing the materialist thesis*

Peter Wright’s controversial article in *Foundation* takes further a critique of Commonwealth religion, pointing to Severian’s identity as the Conciliator and the shaping of humanity by the Hierogrammates as evidence for the absurdity of the whole system; he insists, “Within the text, Wolfe is implying that his universe is such a void of spirituality and morality, of human purpose, that *homo sapiens* requires myth structures to protect its collective sanity” (18). According to Wright, the whole scenario can be drastically reduced to a simple, manipulative racial relationship:

The people of the Commonwealth are so distanced from the reality of their universe by their need for a transcendental relevance, made all the more acute by the impending death of the sun, that they cannot apprehend straightforward biological relationships except through the imposed veils of superstition,

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<sup>15</sup> Again, *The Book of the Long Sun* deals with this problem too. The entire religion is based on this use of sign and structure to evoke feeling and meet psychological need. But even within the system there is deception, for one of the gods of Mainframe (Pas, who is a computer imprint of Typhon’s memory) has been “deleted”—i.e., killed; yet, knowing this, the chief augurs continue sacrificing to him in public.

personified by soothsayers, and organised religious dogma, represented by a belief in the Pancreator. (19)

Wright, in this article, clings to materialism, and he appears to be attempting a reasoned, even scientific, interpretation of the *Book*, based on varied anthropological and psychological criticism. Later in the article he confirms this: “Importantly, Urth’s fall is the result of entropy rather than sin. Hence, its need for redemption is not spiritual but physical, demonstrating that the central theme of the text, the rebirth of the sun, is based upon science rather than metaphysics” (32).

One wants, from the text, to reply to Wright as Ava does to Severian in *Citadel*: “You’re a materialist, like all ignorant people. But your materialism doesn’t make materialism true. Don’t you know that?” (253). But this would be as unfortunately reductive as Wright’s thesis itself. The base of my arguments here, and, I think, the central flaw in Wright’s, is that in reading Wolfe’s novel it is impossible to limit oneself to an either-or division such as that between material and immaterial (spiritual). Wright seems to think that his biological and psychological account of the New Sun precludes any transcendental account. He argues (and argues well) that Severian’s notions of transcendence are flawed and merely speculative. But this questioning of perceived reality stems from the sort of broad epistemological critique that Famulimus, Barbatus and Ossipago instigate when Severian first meets them, and as such it cannot artificially end at another perceived reality which could be just as arbitrary, just as contrived, however scientific it may seem. Demythologization, however much it deconstructs, is *productive*, because it produces another text out of the original, which is a text nonetheless (there cannot be an ultimately meaningful ur-text). Wright simply replaces one metanarrative with another.

Therefore, *even if* the biological manipulation of the Hierogrammates is true, there is still potential for transcendence, because however many times one deconstructs myth, myth remains; I will argue that this transcendence can only be found if one moves beyond the notion that transcendence is something *other than* everything else in the phenomenal world. The distinctions between *natural/supernatural* and *sacred/secular* must disappear. Along with these dualisms is the more significant historical division between reason and revelation, or between grace and nature.<sup>16</sup> These too have no lasting place in *New Sun*; on the contrary, the disillusionment of these dualisms is one of the primary themes of the text. Master Ash performs it for Severian in *Citadel*: “The distinction you mention no longer holds. Religion and science have always been matters of faith in something. It is the same something. You are yourself what you call a man of science, so I talk of science to you. If Mannea were here with her priestesses, I would talk differently” (288).

#### *About knowledge*

“Science” in the *New Sun* books tends to mean what it does in Romance languages; for example, a debate about whether or not psychology is a true “science” has never existed in French, because the same word, *science*, is applied to any kind of study; there is no illusion of something purely objective—or if there is, it inhabits not the word itself but other realms of discourse. The distinction between “hard” and “soft” sciences is blurred in *New Sun*; indeed, science is equated with its Latin etymology, which is “knowing.” And as such it is not distinguishable from religion, as Master Ash implied, or, as Merryn says, from magic: “There is no magic. There is only knowledge, more or less hidden” (CC 404). There are few people

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<sup>16</sup> Attacking these dualisms as “modern corruptions” is one of the larger goals of the Radical Orthodoxy school led by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward. I do not have time/space to directly engage their work in this essay, but their suggestion that theology must frame all sciences (in the broadest sense) waits significantly in the background.

depicted as actual “scientists” in *New Sun*. The man in the company of Vodalus, who tends Severian’s wounds, seeks knowledge that “perhaps no one has ever possessed,” which is why eating the dead serves him little purpose. He then gives a speech questioning basic human assumptions: “Here is light. You will say that it is not a living entity, but you miss the point that it is more, not less. Without occupying space, it fills the universe. It nourishes everything, yet itself feeds upon destruction. We claim to control it, but does it not perhaps cultivate us as a source of food?” (CA 342). He is a doctor, indeed; but he also has a propensity for metaphysics, and a disposition to relentlessly question paradigmatic preconceptions. He acknowledges that to seek the truth may mean to turn everything upside down. Another scientist, Baldanders, experiments upon himself in typical mad scientist fashion. He more closely resembles a modern scientist in his disavowal of the supernatural; he refuses to keep the Claw, calling it a “monument to superstition,” then he criticizes Severian’s religious belief: “*You* are mad. You with your fantasies of theurgy” (SL 182,186). If Wright’s thesis is correct, Baldanders, the mad scientist, is indeed one of the more sane characters in the Book, because he denies transcendence and sees it as a human fantasy to answer certain psychological needs. He, like Wright, would seem to argue for “science” over and above, and ultimately disconnected from, “metaphysics.”

The Cumaean, however, intratextually answers him by returning to the linguistic question I raised about “science,” here offering a similar semiotic critique:

“Words are symbols. Merryn chooses to delimit magic as that which does not exist...and so it does not exist. If you choose to call what we are about to do here magic, then magic lives while we do it. In ancient days, in a land far off, there stood two empires, divided by mountains. One dressed its soldiers in yellow, the

other in green. For a hundred generations they struggled. I see that the man with you knows the tale.”

“And after a hundred generations,” I said, “an eremite came among them and counseled the emperor of the yellow army to dress his men in green, and the master of the green army that he should clothe it in yellow. But the battle continued as before.” (CC 405)

In the case of “magic,” the Cumaean suggests an epistemology which rejects the notion that there are things outside of human perception of them (phenomena)—or that, if there are such things, we can have any access to them: if we say “something” does not exist, it does not exist because in calling it “something” its nonexistence is inherent in its definition; “magic” is only a word used to describe something perceived and is not necessarily a thing in itself. She describes this epistemology in semiotic terms, saying, in effect, there is no end to the semiotic chain, no interpretation outside interpretation. The story she mentions from the brown book reinforces this notion; the armies wear colors—signs—and cannot exit their green/yellow paradigm. In any case the Cumaean’s observation reflects the later statement by Master Ash that “science” and “religion” are the same; they seem to have the same assumptions about the abilities of language to manipulate the world—not the world that *is*, void of context, but the world that people inhabit. This critique suggests that the dichotomy Baldanders makes between “science” and “superstition” is arbitrary; that is to say, he cannot criticize “superstition” without deconstructing his own notion of “science,” because in creating such a dichotomy he is enslaved by it: he can say that green is better than yellow, but he forgets that they both exist because he names them.

*A close reading: the Claw*

The narrative impulse of *The Book of the New Sun* finds itself primarily in the minute object known as the Claw of the Conciliator, and the Claw is the most visible symbol in the book of the science/religion problem. This is Baldanders' "monument to superstition." Though Severian, the narrator, has reason to leave his guild in the Citadel and journey to Thrax, the main reason that he leaves his home city of Nessus is to find the order of the Pelerines in order to return the Claw to them. He says, even before he has the Claw, "So I became, in appearance at least, a pilgrim bound for some vague northern shrine. Have I said that time turns our lies into truths?" (ST 111). This enigmatic relationship between truth and falsehood—that is, the question of human knowledge of the world—is one of the central concerns of the entire *New Sun* cycle, as we have already seen, and the Claw itself reifies this question, as Vodalus suggests in *Claw of the Conciliator*: "It is beyond value, which means it is worthless. You and I are men of sense" (270). Vodalus' claim of "sense" rings somewhat false to Severian, who writes in response, "Despite his words, there was a tinge of fear in his voice." Fear of what? Vodalus implies that he does not fear the Claw itself but the "rabble" who "believe it to be sacred," and who would think him a desecrator if he were to harm it, as well as his mysterious "masters," who are probably Erebus and Abaia—yet Erebus and Abaia would not think him a desecrator but a traitor, because possession of the Claw would mean sympathy with their enemy, the Conciliator. Therefore even the disillusioned response, the response which denies a transcendental nature of the Claw, retains the sense in which it is a paradox; the opposition of Abaia/rabble neatly parallels that of "beyond worth"/ "worthless."

In almost every encounter the Claw is a contradiction in physical form. Severian finds the Claw after Baldanders has tossed it from his castle, and he discovers it in a new form, not disguised by the gem coat:

I cannot say how it is possible for an object in itself black to give light, but this did. It might have been carved in jet, so dark it was and so highly polished; yet it shone, a claw as long as the last joint of my smallest finger, cruelly hooked and needle-pointed, the reality of that dark core at the heart of the gem, which must have been no more than a container for it, a lipsanoteca or pyx. (SL 199)

Two contradictions immediately come out of this passage: an essentially dark object which gives light, and a “cruelly hooked,” sharp object which brings healing—for it turns out that the Claw really is a claw. Towards the end of his narrative Severian points out another contrast in the object; while others have called the Claw’s radiance warm, Severian himself feels it as cold (CA 382). It would, however, be simplistic to label these things as truly contradictory. Severian describes the temperature sensation as a result of the possibility that the power of the Claw might be drawn from himself; this scenario suggests a reading of the black/light description as well, for the Claw seems black because light is leaving it. Thinking in this vein leads one to relate the Claw to Severian’s mission in *Urth of the New Sun*, where he must save Urth by destroying it; he especially acknowledges this mission when he and Apheta speak about his being “a torturer to save the world” (161). Indeed, Wolfe himself has suggested that a savior inevitably causes pain (McCaffery 346). This difficult truth, as *Urth of the New Sun* makes clear, is one of the central themes of the story: “When one must actually judge, as Tzadkiel does, he finds he cannot be just to one without being unjust to another” (160). Apheta makes this observation to Severian,

echoing a deconstructionist (Derridean) interpretation of interpretation (here read: judgment) which says that all judgment/interpretation is inevitably violent (unjust).

If the Claw is a crystallization (at first, seemingly, literally) of that idea, or of reversal in general, then investigation of the Claw may reveal nuances of these difficult relationships between opposing forces. As I have already suggested, contradiction is really an insufficient way to describe the Claw's attributes, primarily because when one starts using the idea of contradiction, one must acknowledge its opposite; along these lines, C.N. Manlove has argued that in the New Sun books, "nothing finally has boundaries or limits: just as one thing may mean all things, so it may be them" (18). This idea of limitlessness goes along with my thesis that the New Sun novels fight the limits between reason and revelation; the Claw fits well with this theme, for it cannot be pragmatically described using the customary dichotomies between the natural and the supernatural. It stands for the fact that to define it in such categories would be to destroy it.

After Severian recovers the Claw from outside Baldanders' castle at Lake Diuturna, he writes, "I came to understand that I should never reach any real knowledge of the tiny thing I held" (*SL* 200). When he says "real knowledge" he implies a certain skepticism of *any* knowledge, as when he writes at the end of the book, "Did I in fact know? What is meant by *know*, in an appropriate sense?" (*CA* 382). Here he follows closely his previous conversation with Baldanders and the Hierodules; in that scene they question his ability to make any claim on the Claw, revealing all of his "knowledge" about the Claw to be speculation: all he knew (and even that, of course, is debatable) was that he found the gem in his sabretache, just as Baldanders found it in his drawer (*SL* 182). All that the reader knows of the Claw comes through Severian,



and it is most difficult to discern whether Severian's scrupulous observation is based on what he has actually seen or his later interpretation of it.

So what we know of the Claw is all hearsay. The intratextual background suggests that the Claw is a relic, passed down by the Pelerine order of monials, and thought to have been originally in the hands of the legendary figure called the Conciliator. Agia says, speaking to Severian, "It isn't a real claw—it's said to be a gem. You must have heard of it. I don't understand why it's called the Claw, and I doubt that those priestesses do themselves" (*ST* 118). Severian thinks that the Claw emits light and heals. But all evidence besides Severian's testimony is circumstantial. No character ever confirms for himself or herself, directly, the power of the Claw perceived by Severian; inevitably they see something different. Certainly they see *something*, as did the prisoners in the Vincula in Thrax: "The Claw fascinated them as a lantern by night does the deer of the forest; they stood motionless, their mouths open, their raddled, bared faces uplifted, their shadows behind them as sharp as silhouettes cut in metal and dark as fuligin" (*SL* 68). The problem is that Severian has no sure foundation for his claim that it was the Claw that fascinated them; he says, "No prisoner, I think, saw *me*," but his statement proves its own inadequacy, for he is not in their place, and he does not know what they saw; perhaps *he* was what they saw, and not the Claw. In fact the scene in the jacal in Thrax lends support to that possibility, for when the sick girl wakes up, she asks, "Who are you in those bright clothes?" (*SL* 48). Apparently she does not notice the Claw, but Severian.

Having called into question the nature of what the Claw does, one might go further back and, following the critique of the Hierodules, reject any certainty that what Severian holds is the Claw of the Conciliator. Famulimus, Barbatus and Ossipago never say that it is the Claw, they only examine it as a curious object: "'Very beautiful,' he said. 'And most interesting, though it

cannot have performed the feats ascribed to it” (182). They then examine his knowledge of the object, revealing even his belief that it is the Claw to be speculation. His claims about it are no more valid than any other.

But perhaps that is good enough. If one inhabits a paradigm where noncontradiction is not the foundation of knowledge or reason, one does not need to worry about all the conflicting accounts. Though Severian has restored his Claw to the altar of the Pelerines, after he becomes Autarch he discovers another claw on the beach, one that is part of a plant he has seen before in the Sand Garden. What follows is this meditation and doxology:

Might it not be that we came to the unfinished garden so that the Claw, flying as it were against the wind of Time, might make its farewell? The idea is absurd. But then, all ideas are absurd.

What struck me on the beach and it struck me indeed, so that I staggered as at a blow—was that if the Eternal Principle had rested in that curved thorn I had carried about my neck across so many leagues, and if it now rested in the new thorn (perhaps the same thorn) I had only now put there, then it might rest in anything, and in fact probably did rest in everything, in every thorn on every bush, in every drop of water in the sea. The thorn was a sacred Claw because all thorns were sacred Claws; the sand in my boots was sacred sand because it came from a beach of sacred sand. The cenobites treasured up the relics of the sannyasins because the sannyasins had approached the Pancreator. But everything had approached and even touched the Pancreator, because everything had dropped from his hand. Everything was a relic. All the world was a relic. I drew off my

boots, that had traveled with me so far, and threw them into the waves that I might not walk shod on holy ground. (CA 367)

It seems that Severian has overcome his inability to know anything about the Claw; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, not that he has overcome—for that inability still exists—but that he has moved beyond it because it no longer matters. Still, how does he go from saying “all ideas are absurd” to making sweeping statements about the universe? In some sense these statements all deconstruct themselves; firstly in that they are all absurd, secondly in the reality that we have seen and that we will see in relation to the Hierodules and their plans (what Master Malrubius calls “the key to the universe”). But I am not ready to toss aside Severian’s leap of faith here; for if knowledge and the universe really are as pluralistic as the Hierodules have suggested, even an absolute statement such as Severian makes here must be heeded. Perhaps it is *because* all ideas are absurd that Severian can make such claims.

Further, this is not the only time such meditations crop up in the narrative; take, for example, Severian’s thoughts while riding with the boat people on Lake Diuturna:

I did not believe in Oannes or fear him. But I knew, I thought, whence he came—I knew that there is an all-pervasive power in the universe of which every other is the shadow. I knew that in the last analysis my conception of that power was as laughable (and as serious) as Oannes. I knew that the Claw was his, and I felt it was only of the Claw that I knew that, only of the Claw among all the altars and vestments of the world. (SL 169)

Here Severian admits to his final lack of understanding, but he paints the Claw in a different light, describing it not as an end in itself but as a means, something which has pointed him to a higher understanding. He also distinguishes it from “all the altars and vestments of the world,”

the symbols of the Commonwealth's religious order; though he has seen very much religion, it is only this object—which, at a glance, seems not religious at all<sup>17</sup>—that actually points to something transcendent. And that makes sense, particularly in light of the blur between religion and science that runs from the Cumaean to Master Ash. In the “Sand Garden” scene Severian verbalizes the lack of boundary between the sacred and the secular, or the temporal and the transcendent. He takes his speculation on Lake Diuturna further. The Claw is not a temporal/material object which allows one to enter eternity; rather, through the lens it provides, *everything* becomes eternal, transcendental, so that distinctions no longer hold.

### *Re-interpreting the Claw*

So. Again, what is the Claw? One can accept that it is not in fact the Claw, and that Severian has delusions, or one can take the Claw with all its mystical associations, or one can do both, or neither. I would suggest that the Claw, in addition to being a symbol of the contradictions and the reversals at a larger narrative level, points beyond even the classification of such things as paradoxical. The Claw is (like) a relic of its own nonexistence; Severian's most substantial moments of clarity about the Claw all point to his growing doubt that the Claw is even the Claw, but his revelation of his own “laughable conception” only continually pushes him to seek more conceptions. The Claw is important because it may not be the Claw; perhaps there never was a Claw. The possibility for nonexistence opens wide the equally indeterminate possibility of existence; one cannot really have the one without the other; indeed, it makes no sense to talk about only one. Severian decides to embrace these “contradictions” just as he embraces, in *Urth of the New Sun*, his role as savior-destroyer.

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<sup>17</sup> For this reason those in the lazaret in *Citadel* doubt its authenticity; Miles seems to think that if it were really a religious relic it would have writing on it (231).

But *Urth of the New Sun* describes further phenomena of the Claw which are only hinted at in *The Book of the New Sun*. Dorcas says,

Severian, when you brought the uhlan back to life it was because the Claw twisted time for him to the point at which he still lived. When you half healed your friend's wounds, it was because it bent the moment to one when they would be nearly healed. And when you fell into the fen in the Garden of Endless Sleep, it must have touched me or nearly touched me, and for me it became the time in which I had lived, so that I lived again. (SL 60)

*The Urth of the New Sun* picks up this idea that the Claw and/or Severian himself may be able to manipulate time. In fact much of *Urth* consists of Severian moving through different time periods long before his reign as Autarch. He arrives on Urth in the time of Typhon's reign and becomes the Conciliator, eventually escaping Typhon to go to his own time and see the end of Urth; finally he goes further back and becomes Apu-Punchau before returning to the new Urth—Ushas. When Severian reveals in his narrative that he is the Conciliator, he also reveals the actual origin of the Claw: himself. He gives it to the guards who accompany him outside of Typhon's fortress, saying that it is soaked in his own blood. The Claw is, then, entirely associated with Severian, and in a circular fashion. He gives the Claw to the men because he knows what it is and he knows what it will become; but he knows these things only because he was born in a future when he had given it to the men in the past.

What *Urth* also shows is the Claw's healing abilities outside the Claw and in Severian himself. One way of directly linking Severian's healing and Claw's healing can be found in this passage in *Urth*: "Now I saw Herena's withered arm not as a permanent deformity (as I had always seen such things before), but as an error to be righted with a few strokes of the brush"

(200). Back in *Shadow of the Torturer*, Dorcas describes what happened when the avern leaf fell out of Severian: “Then it fell away. I don't know how to describe it. It was as though everything I had seen had been *wrong*. But it wasn't wrong—I remember what I saw. You got up again, and you looked...I don't know. As if you were lost, or some part of you was far away”

(171). In both of these situations, that which is about to be healed is described as an error—something to be easily corrected, as Severian says, “with a few strokes of the brush.” And it is in this simple manner that he heals Herena; he writes, “I touched Herena’s shoulder, and reality itself was clay to be smoothed and stretched” (*Urth* 200). This kind of manipulation of reality implies the same concept of twisting that Dorcas notes in the Claw. Severian can manipulate time, space, and matter, and he can also travel the Corridors of Time. He first travels in this way when he escapes from Typhon’s men: “Another leveled his weapon. To escape it, I stepped from the rain-swept rock into a new place” (*Urth* 281). He finds himself beside the stream that runs from one universe (Yesod) to another (Briah), and by moving up or down the stream he can enter various points of Urth’s history.

### *Re-interpreting transcendence*

If, then, the Claw’s power is only from Severian because Severian is the Conciliator, doesn’t the religious system in the Commonwealth disintegrate? In some sense, of course, it must. There can be no illusion that Severian is Christ, or that he has any but metaphorical connection with him, and the reverence given to the Conciliator seems unwarranted when the reader knows the entire history of the man. But the disintegration of the bases of religious structures on Urth does not unavoidably lead to the disintegration of any transcendence. In fact, Severian’s identity as the Conciliator finally reinforces the possibility of it, for this identity is just as contradictory as his earlier statement about all the world being a relic. Just as the absurdity of

all statements leads to an absolute statement about matter, so the disintegration of the basis of religious belief on Urth leads to a statement of faith—that is to say, neither actually *leads* at all, at least in a horizontal sense; rather they appeal to something above themselves because they were never meant to stand alone anyway. A materialist insistence on the utter disillusion of transcendence at this point need not follow; one can return to the way the Cumaean talked about language: if our way of describing something fails, it only means our way of describing something fails.

In the final scenes of *Urth of the New Sun*, Severian has one last interview with the Hierodules Famulimus, Barbatus and Ossipago. Here he reveals to a small extent his own perception of the power that enables him to bring the White Fountain:

Once I believed you three were gods, and then that the Hierarchs were still greater gods. So the autochthons believed me a god, and feared I would plunge into the western sea leaving them in night with winter always. But only the Increate is God, kindling reality and blowing it out. All the rest of us, even Tzadkiel, can only wield the forces he's created. (353)

One interpretation of this statement would force it to continue. Why stop? If all of these early beliefs in gods proved false, why does Severian persist in his belief in the Increate? Perhaps Peter Wright and others would offer such a reading, pointing out, perhaps correctly, Severian's continuing inability to make judgments about what he has experienced. This is, I should say, as legitimate an interpretation as any other, and it leaves us with the choice, which amounts to little more than belief, as to whether or not Severian's belief matters. However, the fact that one must *believe* one way or the other suggests that it does, or at least that it *may*—it cannot be wholly discounted. What I would like to highlight in Severian's speech is not his persistent belief, but

his statement that “[we] can only wield the forces he’s created.” This statement offers a very pragmatic view of existence, a restatement of the basic existential (or creational) quandary which cannot essentially be reduced; here, George Steiner describes it:

Today, mathematical models proclaim access to the origins of the present universe. Molecular biology may have in reach an unraveling of the thread whose beginning is that of life. Nothing in these prodigious conjectures disarms, let alone elucidates, the fact that the world is when it might not have been. The core of our human identity is nothing more or less than the fitful apprehension of the radically inexplicable presence, facticity and perceptible substantiality of the created. It is; we are. This is the rudimentary grammar of the unfathomable.

(201)

It is because of this irreducibility—which the Claw symbolizes—that Severian clings to theistic belief. It is because of this that he *must* believe in something—or believe in nothing—because there is no answer in anything but belief.

If one takes Severian’s observations about the temporal/transcendent seriously, one must consider Severian’s apotheosis in relation to them. Just as the Claw did not depend on being *really* the Claw to be holy, so does the Conciliator not have to be *really* the Conciliator.

All this could hinge on the responses that the Hierodules give Severian when he asks whether or not he is a ghost:

“Am I an eidolon? A ghost?” I looked at my hands, hoping to be reassured by their solidity. They were shaking: to quiet them I had to jam them against my thighs.



Barbatus said, “What you call eidolons are not ghosts, but beings maintained in existence by some external source of energy. What you call matter is all, in actuality, merely bound energy. The only difference is that some is held in material form by its own energy.”

At that moment I wanted to cry more than I have ever wanted anything in my life. “Actuality? You think there’s really any actuality?”...

“You speak of what is real, Severian; thus do you hold to what is real still. A moment since we spoke of him who makes. Among your folk the simple call him God, and you, the lettered, name him Increate. What were you ever but his eidolon?” (*Urth* 355)

Barbatus’s explanation of eidolons is simple Einsteinian physics ( $e=mc^2$ ). But he labels his explanation the “actual” explanation, causing Severian to question him. Barbatus answers him in much the same way that Master Ash did; he uses the language he does because that is what Severian finds appropriate—“thus do you hold to what is real still.” Barbatus therefore in a certain way affirms Severian’s incredulous objection to “actuality,” continuing on the path of Einstein to suggest relativity.

What keeps coming up in this interpretation of the relationships between the material and the immaterial is the necessity of its multiplicity. Severian mentions one of the brown book’s stories on interpretation in *Shadow of the Torturer*; there are at least three meanings for everything: the practical meaning, the soothsayers’ meaning, and the transsubstantial meaning (190). The second meaning suggests how something is connected to the larger world; the last is the theological meaning—similar to Severian’s observation in the Sand Garden—that everything expresses the will of the Pancreator. Dorcas says that the first meaning—that of “real grass, and

a real cow”—is the most difficult to grasp. Thus when Barbatus critiques Severian’s notion of the real, he does not mean to imply that “there is nothing real” (or just, “there is nothing” as a nihilist); he is not denying physicality in favor of the immaterial; rather he favors their relativity (and note again that I say relativity, not arbitrariness). Manlove says, “In one sense the book asks us what it is to be meaningful” (19). That question is naturally part of the thematic concerns over the nature of the real, and as such it cannot be wholly answered, just as Barbatus suggests the nature of the real cannot be defined. Just as theologians have attempted “negative theology,” perhaps *New Sun* moves towards a negative ontology, never allowing any positive definition.<sup>18</sup>

The lack of definitive boundaries rejects the notion of discrete categories of any sort, including those primary ones active in the narrative: natural/supernatural, reason/revelation, material/immaterial, temporal/transcendent. Despite all this rejection, I would not wish to characterize Wolfe or *New Sun* as wholly negative, or even primarily so; the work does, however, devote substantial effort to clearing the air of preconceptions. Once these categories are excluded, the space of interpretation is wide open, and though in that case it would be imprudent to suggest a *certain* reading including transcendence, it would be equally absurd to suggest one that denies transcendence, for these categories do not exist; or, as the Cumaean suggests, they do nothing but classify reality in linguistic terms and thus cannot claim to be accurate. G.K. Chesterton, writing about the supernatural, says, “You reject the peasant’s story about the ghost either because the man is a peasant or because the story is a ghost story. That is, you either deny the main principle of democracy, or you affirm the main principle of materialism—the abstract impossibility of miracle. You have a perfect right to do so; but in that

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<sup>18</sup> Manlove’s article tends to this reading as well: “And the identity of a thing is not fixed: it depends on a multitude of perspectives and observations” (16). Also: “Wolfe maintains the ambiguity, the uncertainty of boundaries, and thus heightens the mystery” (19).

case you are the dogmatist” (159). Wolfe’s opus holds a position of openness and non-dogmatism about the universe; but it can only hold a position by not holding it at all.

## II. The Narrative Turn

### 1. *Le Guin's Emphasis on Language*

Le Guin uses words to convey her dissatisfaction with conventional divisions between science, religion and magic. Of course she uses words; she is a writer. But there is always more in Le Guin. Her concern with language is evident throughout the Earthsea books. Language is the foundation of the whole world, not simply of the magical system. For the wizardry used on Roke and elsewhere relies on a kind of primordial relationship between words and meanings. This is a world where the name of the rose and the rose really are the same thing. Earthsea's Old Speech is "profoundly anti-Saussurian" (Comoletti 119). There is no division between the signifier and the signified.

By contrast the Kargish culture provides a broken semiotic; in a fashion reminiscent of the hollow rituals performed for the Hieros in Wolfe's *Urth*, the priestesses of Atuan speak and dance with meaningless forms to gods with no names. Tenar, the One Priestess, becomes known as Arha—the Eaten One—to suggest her namelessness as the representative of incomprehensible powers. The meaninglessness of Kargish religion leads its adherents to doubt and beyond: "Kossil had no true worship in her heart of the Nameless Ones or of the gods. She held nothing sacred but power. The Emperor of the Kargad Lands now held the power, and therefore he was indeed a godking in her eyes, and she would serve him well" (*TA* 54). Kossil exemplifies the enslavement to power that results, according to Comoletti and Drout, from the lack of connection between the signifier and the signified and the subsequent inability to differentiate between good and evil (122). This moral dilemma comes up again in *The Farthest Shore*; the universal decline of society in the Western isles follows Cob's movement to sever the relationship between the signifier and the signified. People become simply "signifiers that, circularly, refer only to other

signifiers” (Comoletti 124). The failure of an implied semiotic contract, in these cases, has broad implications beyond mere language. Life itself is threatened, because, as the woman Akaren screams on Lorbanery, “Now they all know my secret name, my true name, and there are no secrets, and there is no truth, and there is no death—death—death!” (*FS* 85).

The pursuit of wholeness runs through Le Guin’s extended meditation on language. The wholeness necessary in the signifier/signified relationship parallels the need for wholeness in the world of the dead in *The Other Wind*, as well as the search for human wholeness—male and female—present in *Tehanu*. Comoletti and Drout argue that Le Guin uses *Tehanu* to challenge the anti-Equilibrium masculine leadership of Roke; lack of wholeness always seems to lead to abuse of power (124).

Le Guin’s need for wholeness and intrinsic meaning in language betrays a deeper concern with the power of narrative. Though in some ways she demythologizes the structures of her world—the false hierarchies and traditions of Roke—this demythologization relies on a deeper return to myth. She cannot deconstruct the prevailing metanarrative of Roke without appealing to another, if more satisfying, metanarrative: Segoy’s simultaneous creation of word and world and the eternal dualism of the Equilibrium (the Tao). The excerpt from *The Creation of Éa* that Le Guin quotes before each Earthsea book perpetually recalls this underlying story. Just as there is only word in silence, so is there only signified with a signifier. A signified-world needs a signifier-story.

## 2. Hauerwas’ *Emphasis on Narrative*

Before attempting to relate the above authors and texts to the work of Stanley Hauerwas, I will briefly outline the main parts of his argument for narrative. Hauerwas views story as the

shaping force behind any community, religious or not. In his short essay, “Reforming Christian Social Ethics: Ten Theses,” Hauerwas outlines his alternative account of ethics based on “the recognition of the narrative structure of Christian convictions for the life of the church” (111).

He argues polemically against a perceived loss of narrative in modern society:

Liberalism, in its many forms and versions, presupposes that society can be organized without any narrative that is commonly held to be true. As a result it tempts us to believe that freedom and rationality are independent of narrative—that is, we are free to the extent that we have no story. Liberalism is, therefore, particularly pernicious to the extent it prevents us from understanding how deeply we are captured by its account of existence. (114)

Of course, Hauerwas does not think that one can have just *any* story. His later interventions in his previous writings address this problem, arguing that “the emphasis on narrative is unintelligible abstracted from the ecclesial context” (152). In other words, we only know that we need narrative because of the Church.

That said, Hauerwas’ emphasis on narrative continues to have significance beyond his own convictions in the Christian Church; in one of his earlier essays he writes, “I assume that Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and other religious ethicists will also wish to claim some specificity for their own position” (166). I do not intend therefore to engage Hauerwas on whether or not one needs the Christian story prior to story; rather, I will examine his notion of the primacy of narrative in light of the moral and social concerns of Le Guin, Pullman and Wolfe.

In an explication of Richard Adams’ *Watership Down*, Hauerwas points out more concretely—through the story of a warren of rabbits—what happens when a community loses narrative:

We lose the skill of recognizing what danger is and where it lies. Deception becomes the breeding ground for injustice, since the necessity to hide the dangers of our world make it impossible to confront those aspects of our social order that impose unequal burdens on others... Good and just societies require a narrative, therefore, that helps them know the truth about existence and fight the constant temptation to self-deception. (178)

This “truth about existence,” Hauerwas elaborates, is that existence itself is a gift (144). We must acknowledge that we are not in control of anything. He points to the story of the Tower of Babel as an example of humans refusing to acknowledge this truth: “It is not technology that is the problem but the assumption that God’s creatures can name themselves—ensuring that all who come after will have to acknowledge their existence” (144).

Earthsea’s problems stem from the same refusal to name reality for what it is—radically uncertain and dynamic. Indeed, for Le Guin, wholeness includes not only the end result (the unification of worlds or the equilibrium of gender) but the process. The history matters.<sup>19</sup> That is why the characters in *The Other Wind* spend so much time learning about the past before they try to correct its mistakes. The wizard’s goal of naming things “as they are” includes a description of things “as they were” and “as they may be.”

### 3. *Necessary Stories in Pullman and Wolfe*

Pullman shares the concern for truthfulness/wholeness evident in Le Guin and Hauerwas. When Lyra and Will make their trip to the world of the dead in *The Amber Spyglass*, they meet an army of harpies who feed on the misery of the dead. At their first encounter they allow Lyra to tell them a story, but they find it unsatisfactory because it was “lies and fantasies” (284).

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<sup>19</sup> Le Guin and Hauerwas are clearly both indebted to Hegel here.

Later, Lyra responds to the request of the dead to tell stories about the living world; the harpies listen to these stories without complaint. Tialys asks why they listened, and their response reiterates the novel's basic concern with truth and illusion:

“Because it was true,” said No-Name. “Because she spoke the truth. Because it was nourishing. Because it was feeding us. Because we couldn't help it. Because it was true. Because we had no idea that there was anything but wickedness. Because it brought us news of the world and the sun and the wind and the rain. Because it was true.” (284)

The stylistic change is interesting; No-Name speaks like a classical orator, using an anaphoric repetition of “because” and a circular crescendo with a polysyndetic final litany, all of which serves to emphasize the enormous shift that has happened at the level of the story and the development of Lyra. No-Name says three times, “Because it was true,” showing the completion of Lyra's growth into truthful maturity; the three claims of truth parallel the earlier repetition of “*Liar! Liar! Liar!*” which makes a pun on Lyra's name (261).

Truthfulness turns out to be redemptive for everyone else, too, because telling the truth is the way that the ghosts of future generations will be led out of the land of the dead, according to the deal that Tialys and Salmakia broker with No-Name and the other harpies. But truthfulness remains a choice, and one with consequences:

“And we have the right to refuse to guide them if they lie, or if they hold anything back, or if they have nothing to tell us. If they live in the world, they *should* see and touch and hear and learn things. We shall make an exception for infants who have not had time to learn anything, but otherwise, if they come down here bringing nothing, we shall not guide them out.” (285)



It is difficult to ignore the parallels that this scenario has with at least some understandings of the Christian afterlife. The most notable similarity is the idea that infants cannot be held accountable for their own salvation, but that adults must prove themselves worthy. The story seems to trust this idea that the harpies will be “fair,” as Salmakia soon agrees, but neither Lyra, Will, nor the two Gallivespians seem to understand the degree of authority they have given to the harpies. If, beforehand, there was no truth in the concepts of “heaven” and “hell,” or any kind of judgment, now Lyra and her company have created it. The harpies may save those whose stories please them—by leading them to true death; and damn those whose stories displease them—by abandoning them to unnatural separation.

Initially the harpies do not appear to desire such an arbitrary judgment. Truth is good enough for them, and they do not seem to care very much about the story itself. So one could say that, presumably, everyone is capable of satisfying their demand, no matter what kind of life they have lived, as long as they have lived. But their final caveat leaves this question unresolved: “they *should* see and touch and hear and learn things.” Their emphasis and use of “should”—which has unavoidable moral connotations—implies that though people *should* experience these things there is always the chance, always the choice, that they will not.

According to the harpies, then, there is a moral dimension, a kind of evil, in the absence of narrative. Those who have no narrative become equivalent to the damned. This clearly echoes Hauerwas’ philosophy in several ways:

We live in a world of powers that are not our creation and we become determined by them when we lack the ability to recognize and name them. The Christian story teaches us to regard truthfulness more as a gift than a possession and thus requires that we be willing to face both the possibilities and threats a stranger

represents. Such a commitment is the necessary condition for preventing our history from becoming our fate. (Hauerwas 113)

The harpies similarly treat truthfulness as a gift; it is the gift that makes their lives worthwhile. It is their payment for eternal service to humanity. Truthfulness is a gift precisely *because* it is not necessary, because the individuals passing through do have the option of falsehood. Moreover, the harpies suggest this idea of “powers that are not our creation.” Even if they came into being as a result of the Authority, the Authority is no more; there is a lack of perceivable hierarchy; there is seemingly no one in control.

Story is then the way the harpies and the dead cope with this lack of control. They have acknowledged their powerlessness in the universe as well as the inadequacy of a single power structure—that is, the Church—to name their existence. Pullman’s Church fails in the end due to its denial of narrative. Like the Kargish culture in Earthsea, the people of Lyra’s world (and others) are enslaved to power because they lack narrative, because they have not been given a chance to tell their stories.

Wolfe also suggests the goodness of these stories through Severian, his narrator. Severian’s whole opus is a monument to the idea that stories must be told; his attributes as an unreliable narrator do not undermine the power of his story or even its truth. He writes,

I have no way of knowing whether you, who eventually will read this record, like stories or not. If you do not, no doubt you have turned these pages without attention. I confess that I love them. Indeed, it often seems to me that of all the good things in the world, the only ones humanity can claim for itself are stories and music; the rest, mercy, beauty, sleep, clean water and hot food...are all the work of the Increate. Thus, stories are small things indeed in the scheme of the

universe, but it is hard not to love best what is our own—hard for me, at least.

(CA 258)

Severian's love of stories surfaces repeatedly in the novels. Many chapters are devoted to telling stories that he has heard and that he tells himself or reads in the Brown Book (which he takes with him from the library of the Citadel). One of the more interesting incidents in *Citadel* is a story contest between three men vying for the hand of one woman, Foila. She agrees to marry whoever tells the best story.

My earlier comments on Wolfe suggested that the New Sun books negotiate the relationship between competing metanarratives—materialist, theological, nihilist, monist, etc. Having proven that the language of science or religion is meaningless *in itself*, Wolfe places narrative as the mediation of meaning. There are no alternatives to story. As Severian writes above, stories are one of the only good things that “humanity can claim for itself.” While various characters within the book attempt to demythologize the world, they, like Wright, only replace the old mythology with their own mythology.

Gooderham says that Pullman does the same thing. In his use of explicit religious language, Pullman's goal is “radically to reinterpret or demythologize—if not exorcise” Christian concepts (Gooderham 156). Just as Le Guin insists on giving things their proper names, Pullman properly names the Church.<sup>20</sup> He does this out of a desire for truth, which means replacing the old, deluded stories with a more honest account (Gooderham 161). This “more honest” story, though, is still a story. Gooderham calls it a “new myth” based on “the oriental conception of absorption into ‘the All’” (162). I concur with Gooderham here; Pullman is far from honest, because even though he wants to be free from mythology he only gives us another,

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<sup>20</sup> Of course, as Gooderham argues, the problem is that Pullman's Church is *not* the real Church; he is, after all, writing fantasy. Gooderham thinks this veil of realism distorts Pullman's narrative.

albeit nonchristian, mythology. The agreement with the harpies reifies the new myth; the harpies usher in a *new* paradigm for the afterlife, but it is most certainly still a paradigm. Pullman's own emphasis on narrative partly deconstructs his critique of the Church; when he highlights stories as the only thing left, as the only thing that humans have, he cannot legitimately deny the Christian story as somehow, *a priori*, wrong. The problem with Pullman's Church is that it refuses to acknowledge its existence in narrative terms; Pullman's demythologization and immediate remythologization errs in the same way by refusing to name itself for what it is.

#### 4. *A Both-And Conclusion*

Pullman's new myth is not very pleasant for its characters. Despite the eventual mythic emphasis on oneness with the universe, Lyra and Will are cursed with alienation from one another. The model of adulthood in the novels, Mary Malone, is significantly single (Gooderham 171). Each is left to his own because each must tell his own story. In his fear of universality, Pullman's emphasis on story tends to extreme individualism. In Hauerwas' terms, these characters are alienated from true freedom because they deny the possibility of holding any story in common, because they deny that their new mythology is a mythology.

Le Guin and Wolfe are both more conscious about the results of their stories. They demythologize demythologization. There is no getting around grand narratives as the basis for understanding humanity in the world. They purposefully appeal to metanarrative in an attempt to be truthful, to avoid the abuse of power that comes from denying narrative. This new truthfulness, which arises from the deconstruction of modern science and religion, is narrative in character because it is not a possession or a progression of knowledge. It is a gift from moment to moment. Pullman's harpies acknowledge that. Will, in *The Amber Spyglass*, learns, "We

have to build the republic of heaven where we are, because for us there is no elsewhere” (325). I am arguing that Wolfe and Le Guin take this statement seriously: “where we are” is in a story, and they want us to make the best of it.

What do we give up when we give up stories? Only our humanity. If stories are all that we have for ourselves, we risk losing ourselves by denying them. Stories reinforce the reality that existence is optional, being human is optional. The New Sun books are full of animal-men who gave up their humanity to live the easier existence of animals. Severian’s revelation about “actuality”—that his existence is impossible without another, echoes Hauerwas’ notion of existence as gift. We are all idols to the extent that we cannot call ourselves into being.

The duality present in all of these novels, brought out more distinctly by Hauerwas’ narrative ethics, shows how an either-or metanarrative based on noncontradiction fails to account fully for the truth of existence and the truth of the human story. But I must emphasize that this denial does not leave us with a reduction of narrative to poststructuralist “play” based on the assumption that there is no truth or finality in anything. These authors transcend that understanding, offering a more radical interpretation of truth. As the meaning-systems of religion and science fail, this interpretation acknowledges that all such systems fail; it does not therefore pose narrative as a replacement. Rather, through narrative—and through a *felix culpa* like Pullman’s—it suggests that we embrace this failure as something essentially human and primordially good.

This acceptance of a “happy fault” echoes the drive for wholeness present in Le Guin and Wolfe. The savior is always also a destroyer. The parts are only true because of the whole. These novels defy their generic categorization as “fantasy” because they argue, in effect, that without fantasy there is no reality. Narratives deconstruct our pretensions about ourselves, but

they also enlighten us to our true natures. A both-and epistemology of truth is not a sentimental, relativistic argument for the equal validity of all narratives; it is an argument for both their validity and their invalidity. It says that the true cannot exist without the false. Unless we understand the possibility of our non-being—revealed to us in narrative form—we cannot understand that we are.

## Appendix: Plot summaries

### 1. *Le Guin's Earthsea books*

**General setting:** Earthsea, as the name suggests, is a large group of islands, including the Archipelago and its inner islands (Havnor, O, Roke, Enlad, Ēa, Gont, etc.) and four Reaches named for the four compass points. To the northeast of the Archipelago lie the Kargad Lands, a separate empire with light-skinned people and a different religious system.

*A Wizard of Earthsea.* Sparrowhawk, whose true name is Ged, first becomes apprentice to the mage Ogion before moving from Gont to the school of wizardry on Roke. In an arrogant show of magic he releases a shadow into the world; he spends the bulk of the novel either fleeing or chasing this shadow before confronting it far out in the Reaches and naming it as himself.

*The Tombs of Atuan.* Tenar, taken from her parents shortly after birth, becomes Arha, the Eaten One, the perpetually reincarnated One Priestess of The Place. She is the highest religious authority in the Kargad Lands, regulating the worship of the Nameless Ones. Ged comes to Atuan and meets her in the Labrynth underneath The Place; he befriends her and gives her back her true name. They return to Havnor with the missing half of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, which was hidden in the Labrynth. The uniting of the Ring brings hope for a new time of peace in the Archipelago.

*The Farthest Shore.* Ged, now Archmage, sets out with a young prince, Arren (Lebannen), to discover why magic has stopped working in the world. Mages everywhere are losing their power. After going to the far West Reach, where dragons roam freely, they locate the trouble in the Dry Land—the land of the dead. A wizard, Cob, in attempting immortality, has harmed the natural balance of the world. They return from the Dry Land on the back of Kalessin—the Eldest dragon. Lebannen becomes king, but Ged lost his power in the Dry Land.

*Tehanu.* Tenar now lives on Gont as a widow, many years after coming to the Archipelago from Atuan. She adopts a young child horribly scarred in a fire and names her Tehanu. Ged returns to Gont on Kalessin's back, exhausted and no longer a mage. They attempt to start anew in the old house of their former master Ogion, but a local wizard, and the patriarchal political system, interfere. The end of the novel reveals Tehanu to be both dragon and human, and Kalessin, the Eldest, calls her daughter.

*The Other Wind.* Dramatic changes happen in Earthsea. Tenar, Tehanu and another shapeshifter, Irian, meet King Lebannen in Havnor to seek peace with increasingly restless dragons. Through contact with a Kargish princess and the Master Patterner—who is also a Karg—they reinterpret the whole history of life and death in the islands. The Dry Land is shown to be a place stolen from the dragons by mages in an attempt at immortality. All those involved work together to tear down the wall of the Dry Land and mend the world.

### 2. *Pullman's His Dark Materials Trilogy*

**General setting:** Our world and parallel worlds.

*The Golden Compass.* Lyra (along with her daemon, Pantalaimon), who grew up in Oxford, becomes aware of who her parents are: Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter. She leaves Oxford under Mrs. Coulter's tutelage but discovers her involvement in the Oblation Board—a group which kidnaps children and uses them for experiments with Dust. Lyra escapes and joins a group of gyptians who travel north to rescue their children. They also seek Lord Asriel, imprisoned in Svalbard with the armored bears. At the end of the novel Lyra unwittingly betrays her friend Roger to her father Lord Asriel. He uses the power produced at severing Roger from his daemon to open a portal to another world.

*The Subtle Knife.* Will, a boy from our world, stumbles through a hole in his universe into Cittàgazze, where he meets Lyra. They explore the world haunted by specters and populated only by children. The Church reveals its true obsession with Lyra: she is prophesied to be the new Eve. Their quest is to rid the world of Dust—the presumed physical residue of original sin. Meanwhile Lyra and Will return to our world and with the alethiometer's help meet Mary Malone, a theoretical physicist interested in what she calls “shadows”—Dust. A man in Oxford steals Lyra's alethiometer and demands the Knife in return. Lyra and Will return to Ci'gazze to find the Knife from the Tower in the middle of town. Will becomes the bearer of the knife that cuts doors between worlds. In the end of the novel, Lyra is captured by Mrs. Coulter and Will sets out to find her.

*The Amber Spyglass.* The novel begins with Mrs. Coulter keeping Lyra in a trance in a distant cave. Lyra dreams about her friend Roger in the world of the dead. Will searches for Lyra with two angels, Baruch and Balthamos. Mary Malone explores a new world. The Church plots to kill her and Lyra. Iorek, Will and Balthamos, and two Gallivespian spies sent by Lord Asriel rescue Lyra from Mrs. Coulter. Will breaks the Knife, but after repairing it Lyra and Will decide to search for the world of the dead to find Roger. When they arrive they discover they must part with their daemons. They strike a deal with the harpies and lead the dead out of their prison, where they rejoin the matter of the universe. Elsewhere, in Lord Asriel's battle, the Authority comes to an end, and Mrs. Coulter and Lord Asriel together deceive and kill Metatron, the Regent of Heaven. Lyra and Will go to the world Mary Malone discovered and finally discover their adolescence and their devotion to one another. They also find their daemons again. At the end Will must close all of the holes left between worlds from the Knife, as it is the only way to preserve Dust and keep the universes alive. Lyra and Will must each return to their own world.

### 3. *Wolfe's New Sun books*

General setting: Far future Earth (Urth). The sun is dying. Ancient, decaying empire somewhat reminiscent of the Byzantine era. Mostly set in what is assumed to be South America.

*The Shadow of the Torturer.* Severian grows up in the Torturer's Guild in the Citadel of Nessus. He is a citizen of the Commonwealth, ruled by the Autarch (the Commonwealth is at perpetual war with the Ascians to the north). As a youth he saves the life of a revolutionary leader, Vodalus, whose company is known for eating human flesh to gain knowledge. Thecla, an aristocrat, comes under his care in the Citadel, and out of loyalty to Vodalus, he allows her an



easy death rather than her prescribed excruciation. He is banished from the Citadel and given an assignment as the Lictor of Thrax, to the far North. Through the rest of the novel he wanders in the city of Nessus, meeting a shopkeeper, Agia, whose brother challenges him to a duel. Severian also first encounters Baldanders, a giant, and Dr. Talos, his physician. Dorcas appears mysteriously in the Botanical Gardens.

*The Claw of the Conciliator.* Leaving Nessus, Severian seeks to return the Claw of the Conciliator to the Pelerine Order. He travels with a man named Jonas and performs executions along the way. They find Vodalus' band of outlaws and agree to join them. They participate in the forbidden feast, eating the flesh of the recently departed Thecla. Severian acquires her memory and Thecla from this point constantly speaks in his consciousness. Eventually Severian and Jonas come to the grounds of the House Absolute, the seat of the Autarch, where they find Baldanders, Dr. Talos and their band just in time to perform a play, "Eschatology and Genesis." After leaving the House Absolute, Severian, Dorcas and Jolenta meet the Cumaean, Merryn and Hildegrin at the Stone Town. They perform a strange ceremony, calling up the spirit of Apu-Punchau.

*The Sword of the Lictor.* The novel begins with Severian and Dorcas settled into his position as the chief Lictor of Thrax. Severian gives mercy to one victim and must thus flee town. Dorcas refuses to go with him; having realized the Claw resurrected her, she goes to discover her former life. Severian travels in the mountains for many days and meets a family with a child named Severian. After an alzado kills the rest of the family, Severian and the child continue together. They reach the abandoned town and mountain where the old Autarch, Typhon, ruled. Typhon tries to steal the Claw from Severian, but Severian manages to kill Typhon. Severian then aids a group of villagers of Lake Diuturna in a fight against their lord, who turns out to be Baldanders.

*The Citadel of the Autarch.* Severian proceeds north, still in search of the Pelerines. He meets a dead soldier whom the Claw revives. They proceed together, very ill, to a lazaret run by the Pelerines. While recovering Severian finally tries to return the Claw, but the sisters do not believe him. They send him on a journey to Master Ash, whom he then loses. Finally Severian joins a group of soldiers and spends some time fighting in the Ascian war. The Autarch finds him there, and they are all captured by Vodalus' band and turned over to the Ascians. By eating the forebrain of the existing Autarch (who is "Legion"), Severian becomes the new Autarch (and the old) before he escapes captivity. He learns from Father Inire, his chief advisor, and the Hierodules, aliens, that he must be the Epitome of Urth, and that he will be judged to see whether Urth is worthy to receive a new sun. He takes a flyer to the mouth of the river and journeys North to Nessus by boat as he comes to grips with his power. The novel ends as he prepares for the journey to be tested.

*The Urth of the New Sun.* Severian travels aboard the spacecraft *Tzadkiel* to the higher universe, Yesod, where the Hierogrammates, the masters of the Hierodules, will judge him. Eventually he is deemed worthy and he returns to Urth. He finds that he can travel the Corridors of Time, and he travels throughout the history of Urth, performing various miracles. It turns out that Severian is both the Conciliator and Apu-Punchau. He witnesses the moment when the New Sun comes, flooding the planet. At the end of the book Severian is a new god in the age of Ushas, which is Urth after the New Sun has come.

## Works Cited

In referencing the primary texts I have used the following abbreviations:

*AS: The Amber Spyglass*  
*CA: Citadel of the Autarch*  
*CC: Claw of the Conciliator*  
*FS: The Farthest Shore*  
*GC: The Golden Compass*  
*OW: The Other Wind*  
*SL: Sword of the Lictor*  
*SN: The Subtle Knife*  
*ST: Shadow of the Torturer*  
*TA: The Tombs of Atuan*  
*Urth: Urth of the New Sun*  
*WE: A Wizard of Earthsea*

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