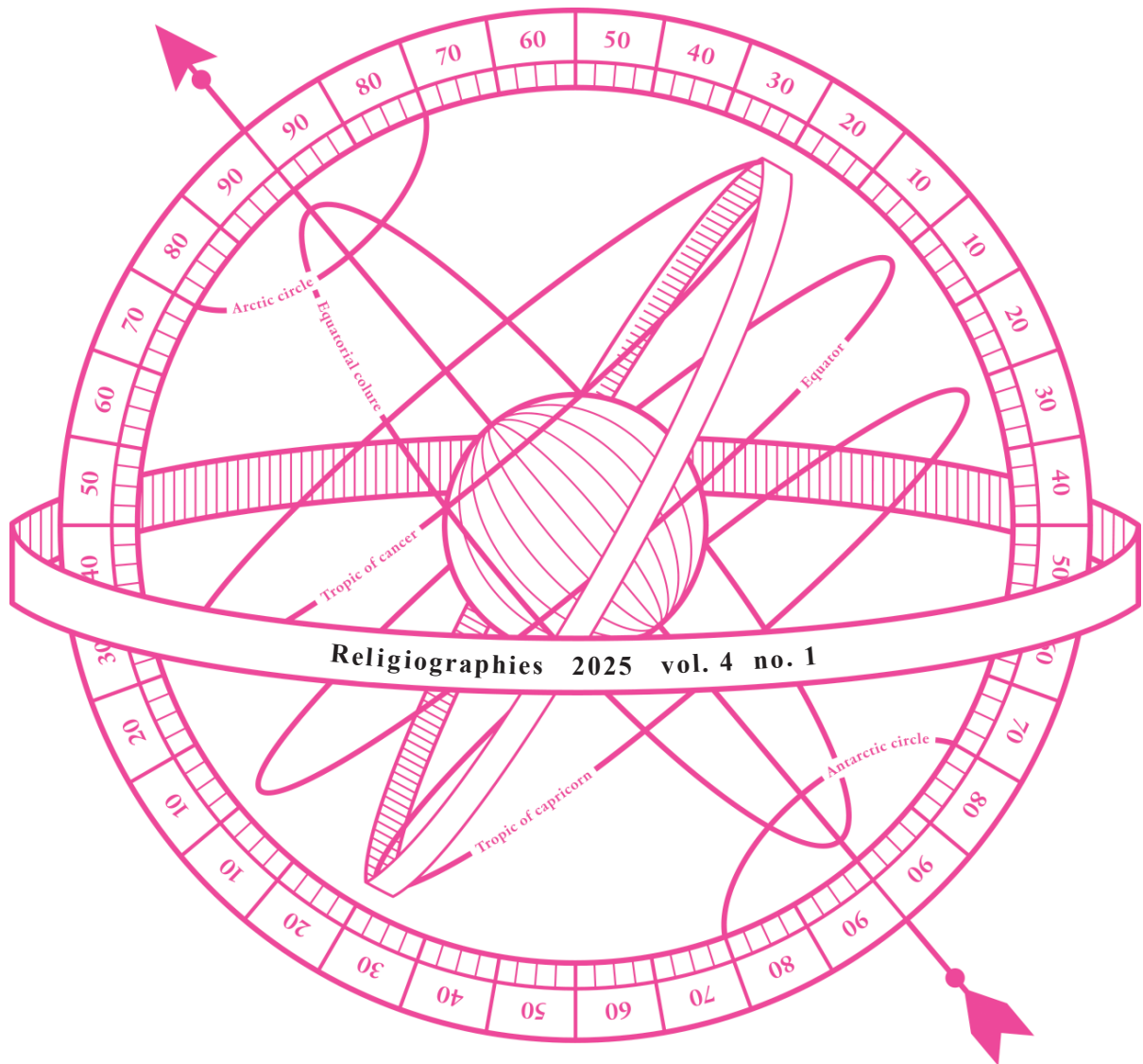


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# The Imaginal Geography of Philip Pullman's Novels

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## Abstract

This paper explores the “imaginal geography” of Philip Pullman’s two famous novel trilogies, *His Dark Materials* and *The Book of Dust*, especially the significance of the North, the North’s relationship to the East, and the South. The word “imaginal” is used in the sense coined by Henry Corbin. In the first half of this paper, I introduce *His Dark Materials* and, briefly, Pullman’s latest (unfinished) trilogy, *The Book of Dust*, which serves as both prequel and sequel to *His Dark Materials*. To appreciate the significance of the correlation between the North and the East, I argue, we need to look to Corbin’s short book, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, and his redefinition of “orient,” and “orientation,” and even “orientalism.” In the second half of the paper, I turn briefly to the imaginal South, to the Mediterranean city of Citāgazze, and the “subtle knife” (which lends its name to the second novel of *His Dark Materials*). The technology of the subtle knife is revealed to be something of a sin against the nature of reality itself, threatening the integrity of the universe. The South is not quite the scene of *original* sin, but of a subsequent sin, the sin of human hubris.



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This paper explores what I am calling the “imaginal geography” of Philip Pullman’s two famous novel trilogies, *His Dark Materials* and *The Book of Dust*, especially the significance of the North, the North’s relationship to the East, and the South.<sup>1</sup> As I explain below, I am using the word “imaginal” in the sense coined by the scholar of Islam and comparative philosopher Henry Corbin. In the first half of this paper, I introduce *His Dark Materials* and, briefly, Pullman’s latest (unfinished) trilogy, *The Book of Dust*, which serves as both prequel and sequel to *His Dark Materials*. This first part focuses on the imaginal North; that is, the northern realm in that alternate world to which we are introduced in *Northern Lights* (also known as *The Golden Compass*), the first novel of *His Dark Materials*. It is a realm of armored polar bears, warring clans of witches, political intrigue reminiscent of the “Great Game,” secret experiments of a diabolical church, and most importantly, the *aurora borealis* or Northern Lights themselves, which prove to be a porous portal to other worlds. This North, however, is very much correlated to the East, as evidenced in Pullman’s latest novel, *The Secret Commonwealth*, second in the unfinished *The Book of Dust* trilogy. To appreciate the significance of the correlation between the North and the East, I argue, we need to look to Henry Corbin’s short book, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, and his redefinition of “orient,” and “orientation,” and even “orientalism.” But even as Corbin helps us appreciate Pullman’s imaginal geography of the North and East, and the notion of the self as a unity-in-duality, it is important to register that Pullman, especially in his latest novel, *The Secret Commonwealth*, explores the theme of the self’s alienation from itself in a manner that seems to go beyond Corbin, and might hint at the influence of Carl Jung.

In the second half of the paper, I turn briefly to the imaginal South, to the Mediterranean city of Citàgazze, and the “subtle knife” (which lends its name to the second novel of *His Dark Materials*) forged there by a group of philosophers who unwittingly unleashed a power that threatens consciousness across all worlds. Every time the subtle knife cuts a portal between one world and another, it creates a shadowy being called a “spectre,” made almost of anti-matter, which feeds on Dust. Even as the heroes of *His Dark Materials* defeat the Authority and thwart the Magesterium’s diabolical aims, the “spectres” remain a wound on the conscious cosmos, whose only suture is to close all portals between worlds. The South, then, is the source of this spectral wound, and plays an imaginal counterpart to the North.

### The Imaginal North

Philip Pullman’s first and much-celebrated trilogy is *His Dark Materials*: it tells the story of a young girl named Lyra Belacqua, living in a world (we come to learn) that is adjacent to our own. She is at the center of a struggle for liberation, for freedom of thought and the expansion of consciousness—for her own world and for others—against the forces of a dying deity called the “Authority” and his minions, especially a repressive church called the “Magesterium.” *His Dark Materials* consists of three novels: *Northern Lights* (1995), *The Subtle Knife* (1997), and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000). The trilogy introduces

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All references to *His Dark Materials* are from the 2011 Everyman’s Library edition (London, UK). *The Book of Dust* includes *La Belle Sauvage* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017) and *The Secret Commonwealth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019). This paper combines two shorter papers I gave at two conferences hosted at the Giorgio Cini Foundation in Venice: the first was entitled “The Eranos Experience: Spirituality and the Arts in a Comparative Perspective”; the second was entitled “Occultural Transfers Between North and South.” I would like to thank the organizers of both conferences for the opportunity to develop this idea on both occasions, and the editors of *Religiographies* for the opportunity to publish them together as one article.

Lyra at a very particular time in her life, on the cusp of puberty, which becomes significant for the plot.

The second trilogy, *The Book of Dust*, is underway but incomplete—two of the three novels have been released. The first, *La Belle Sauvage* (2017), is set earlier than the original *His Dark Materials* trilogy, when Lyra is only an infant. The second, *The Secret Commonwealth* (2019), is set later, when she is an undergraduate at Oxford. The third has yet to appear. Once again Lyra finds herself in a struggle against the Magesterium, and yet it is not entirely clear from *The Secret Commonwealth* what forces exactly are arrayed against her, and why, and what are the stakes, for her own world, or for others.

In Lyra's world, everyone has a "daemon"; that is, an externalized second self—fully conscious and articulate—and the two of them together constitute a single person, a kind of "unity-in-duality," or what Corbin will call a *unus-ambo*.<sup>2</sup> A daemon is almost always the opposite gender of the human, and it can shapeshift among different animal forms until a child reaches puberty, at which point it settles into its permanent, theriomorphic form. A human and daemon are not thought to be separable; they typically can only stand to be a few yards apart from each other. But, in fact, the forced splitting of a human and his or her daemon, or a human's own excruciating separation and alienation from his or her daemon, becomes a major theme in both trilogies.

The range of themes and figures across the two trilogies reads like an encyclopedia of western esotericism: the daemon or *daimôn* as a second self; the importance of symbols and the faculty of imagination; a repressive ecclesial structure stifling *gnosis* and crushing dissent; a world, or indeed, many worlds—porous to each other—inhabited by angels and aliens, shamans and alchemists, witch clans and at least one cowboy; an imaginal geography in which the far North and the East are mysteriously and mystically aligned; psychedelic visions and Persianate poems; animate worlds and a "secret commonwealth" in which some animals, and also fairies and fey folk, and even rivers and other natural bodies, reveal themselves to be fully conscious persons, characters in a drama that includes but is not exhausted by our mortal, human selves—all of this playing out against the backdrop of a cosmic battle over a mysterious kind of matter called "Dust," which holds the key to mind in the universe.

Pullman's first novel was published in the UK in 1995 with the title, *Northern Lights*; a US edition followed the next year with the title, *The Golden Compass*. The new title has come to overshadow the original: witness the 2007 film, *The Golden Compass*. As best as I can surmise, the shift in title anticipated the second and third novels in the series, so that all three of them named an important and specific artifact in each story: the golden compass, the subtle knife, and the amber spyglass. But as we will see, something crucial was lost in this translation from (British) English to (American) English.

*Northern Lights* begins in Lyra's Oxford—the Oxford of *her* world, not ours—where she has lived since infancy as a special charge of Jordan College (probably named after Giordano Bruno). In the second chapter, entitled "The Idea of North," Lyra hides in a cabinet and overhears a private presentation by her uncle, Lord Asriel, whom she later learns is in fact her father. He has just returned from an expedi-

2

Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, trans. Nancy Pearson (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1978), 7. Originally published as *L'Homme de lumière dans le soufisme iranien* (Paris: Librairie de Médicis, 1971).

tion to the far North and is sharing the fruits of his research with his colleagues. Asriel was far enough north as to be surrounded by the *aurora borealis*, or Northern Lights. He aims to show his colleagues what is beyond this play of light, what is visible to our eyes of fire and not our eyes of flesh.<sup>3</sup> He shows them a pair of photographs of two different scenes, the second photograph of each scene is done with a new filter (or an emulsion) he has devised. The first photograph is of his manservant standing bathed in moonlight; in the second photo, with the new filter applied, however, “the man had altogether changed: he was bathed in light, and a fountain of glowing particles seemed to be streaming from his upraised hand.”

“That light,” said the Chaplain, “is it going up or coming down?”

“It’s coming down,” said Lord Asriel, “but it isn’t light. It’s Dust.”<sup>4</sup>

With the mention of “Dust,” a tense hush falls over the assembled experts. All talk of “Dust” is illicit: dismissed by some as a fiction of theoretical physics, and regarded by others as a dangerous heresy, this alleged particle, or field, cannot be spoken of under the Magisterium’s strict prohibition.

Nevertheless, despite his colleagues’ intrigued unease, Asriel persists, and shows them a third and fourth photograph, the same scene but again in two filters. The third photo is of the Northern Lights, what Pullman describes as “Streams and veils of light hung like curtains, looped and festooned on invisible hooks hundreds of miles high or blowing out sideways in the stream of some unimaginable wind.”<sup>5</sup> The fourth is of the same scene, but “in the middle of the Aurora, high above the bleak landscape, Lyra could see something solid . . . As she gazed, her wonder grew, because there in the sky was the unmistakable outline of a city: towers, domes, walls . . . buildings and streets, suspended in the air! She nearly gasped with wonder.”<sup>6</sup> Two things should be highlighted in this opening episode: first, that in the far North one can more easily see that there exists a source of illumination above and beyond our earthly sun, a particle or field called “Dust” that (we will come to learn) settles on matter and conveys on it something like mind or consciousness; second, that in the far North one can see that the boundary between this world and others is thin, indeed perhaps porous.

In the final chapter of *Northern Lights*, entitled “Bridge to the Stars,” after a series of battles and daring rescues in the far North, Lyra and her friend Roger find refuge with her father Lord Asriel in the remote and frigid wastes. But Asriel has different, and sinister plans, of which they know not. In the dead of night, he kidnaps Roger and uses technology developed by the Magisterium to sever the boy from his daemon. The severing or “scission” releases an enormous burst of energy, which energy he harnesses to create a bridge between his world and the other. He crosses that bridge, content to sacrifice a child’s life in search of the secret of Dust. Lyra catches up to him too late and watches this unfold, unable to save her friend; she and her daemon Panteleimon decide to follow her father, in hopes of discovering the se-

3

This is an allusion to Henry Corbin’s late essay, “Eyes of Flesh and Eyes of Fire: Science and Gnosis,” *Material for Thought* 8 (1980): 5–10. Originally given in June 1978 as the opening address at the Université St. Jean de Jerusalem.

4

Pullman, *Northern Lights*, 24.

5

Pullman, 25.

6

Pullman, 26.



cret of Dust themselves, and to prevent him from doing further harm.

I detect a deep resonance between Pullman's treatment of the North and the writings of Henry Corbin, and of other authors associated with Eranos, including Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Gershom Scholem. I speak of "resonance" rather than "influence" because I have not been able to confirm which, if any, authors associated with Eranos Pullman is known to have read. Novelists are often rather coy about their influences—they prefer to show rather than tell, and literary influences tend to suffuse their storytelling. In Pullman's own, limited self-reporting, there is no obvious evidence that he read authors associated with Eranos. The closest contenders are those "adjacent" to Eranos: he mentions books such as Hans Jonas's *The Gnostic Religion* or Frances Yates's *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*.<sup>7</sup> And yet Pullman's two connected trilogies, for which he is most famous, resonate deeply with Eranos, and specifically with the work of Henry Corbin.

I do suspect there is more than resonance, and that Pullman was influenced by Corbin when writing *Northern Lights*. Much of the drama of *His Dark Materials* circles around a mystical North in a world that is revealed to be adjacent to our own, familiar, and yet fantastical. But what do I mean by labeling Pullman's novels and their geography "imaginal"? In a famous essay entitled "*Mundus Imaginalis*, or The Imaginary and the Imaginal," Corbin coined the term *imaginal* as an alternative to *imaginary*. The latter is the realm of fiction, of fantasy—in a word, unreal.<sup>8</sup> For Corbin, however, the *imaginal* realm, or *mundus imaginalis*, is very much real—more real, in fact, than our "physical sensory world." He coined the Latin phrase *mundus imaginalis* to name the visionary realm of the soul and the subtle body, which he believed that medieval esoteric Islamic texts, especially in the *ishraqi* or "illuminationist" tradition (which he also labels "theosophy"), sought to initiate readers into, guided along the way by a kind of second self, or an angelic counterpart (what I have called the "divine double").<sup>9</sup> If the world of sense perception purports to be our consensual reality, then that consensus is false. The sensory world is only one of three, according to this tradition. Above the sensory is the suprasensory "imaginal" world, and above that is "the universe of pure archangelic Intelligences." And "to these three universes correspond three organs of knowledge: the senses, the imagination, and the intellect, a triad to which corresponds the triad of anthropology: body, soul, and spirit."<sup>10</sup> The *imaginal* world, therefore, is quite real, and the imagination is understood as the faculty of perception that allows us to see, know, and navigate this level of reality. Corbin devotes most of his time and energy to this intermediate world, between the senses and the intellect, because he is convinced that the *imaginal* is the world we have lost contact with, and imagination the faculty that we have left to wither. Without it, we cannot ascend beyond our sensory flatland, cannot come to know ourselves as ever more divine and doubled, and so cannot come to know the intellect, or spirit, which is to say divine mind or consciousness.

But still, why should I label Pullman's novelistic world(s) and its geography "imaginal"? After all, aren't these novels *fiction*? And so shouldn't we think of his novelistic world and its peculiar geography as *imaginary* rather than *imaginal*? The copyright page of his novels

7

The 2011 Everyman's Library edition of *His Dark Materials* includes a Chronology of Pullman's "Life and Works," "Historical Background," and "Literary Influences." Pullman is the author of the Chronology, and on p. xxiv he says that in 1966 he read Yates's book and in 1969 Jonas's book.

8

In order to preserve the reality of the "imaginal," Corbin is often dismissive of literary fiction, labeling it fantasy, unreal, "imaginary" rather than "imaginal." Obviously, there is a vast literature on the theory of fiction. See, for example, James E. Miller Jr., ed., *Theory of Fiction: Henry James* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1972).

9

Charles M. Stang, *Our Divine Double* (Harvard: University Press, 2016).

10

Henry Corbin, "Mundus Imaginalis, or The Imaginary and the Imaginal," in *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995), 8. Originally published as "Mundus imaginalis ou l'imaginaire et l'imaginal," *Cahiers internationaux du symbolisme* 6 (1964): 3–26. Reprinted in *Face de Dieu, face de l'homme: Herméneutique et soufisme* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983).

include this very clear statement: "This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously." Is this a statement put forward by Pullman, or his publisher's lawyers? In any case, I might concede the point if it were only *Northern Lights*. That novel takes place entirely in Lyra's world, which the reader is led to believe is fantasy: yes, Lyra's world is very much *like* our world (it has an Oxford, for example), but it appears to be an *alternate* reality, which is to say, not really *real* at all, but a tall tale. At the beginning of *The Subtle Knife*, however, we come to understand that what we thought was a safely fictional world, Lyra's, is in fact adjacent to, and accessible from, our own. The effect of this is to call our world into question: is our consensual reality real? Are there other realities equally real? What do we mean by "real" anyway? And, finally, what is gained by learning of, and navigating through, those other realities? I submit that Pullman's novels function as imaginal fiction in so far as they draw the reader out from his or her sensory flatland, and into these other worlds, where we find all the enchanted peoples and places, flora and fauna, that we have banished from our own. They function to reintroduce us to a reenchanting world of the soul, and to encourage us to embark on an adventure into the imaginal, much as Lyra does. Perhaps all fiction functions imaginally, but Pullman's seems almost to insist on doing so.

So much for my case for understanding Pullman's novels as imaginal fiction. But what about my more specific focus, namely the imaginal *geography* in these novels? The four cardinal directions seem to have peculiar significance, which cuts across the different worlds. And here too I suspect the influence of Corbin, and the tradition for which he presumes to speak. Corbin understands himself as a kind of initiate into the Persian *ishraqi* or "illuminationist" tradition, associated most obviously with Suhrawardi (1154–1191), a tradition which quite literally "orients" itself to a mystical East that is not in the geographical East. To be an *ishraqi* is to journey toward and into that mystical East, led by a succession of guides who are understood as ever more transcendent dimensions of oneself. This is, in brief, Corbin's theory of the angel.<sup>11</sup> These guides appear in various guises, and they have been named differently in different traditions: Zoroastrianism, Platonism, Hermeticism, Manichaeism, and Gnosticism—to name those traditions that most drew Corbin's attention. I have treated some of these in my own book, *Our Divine Double*, including the Platonic tradition and its various interpretations of Socrates's guide, his *daimôn* or daemon.

Suhrawardi's redefinition of the East allows for interesting ambiguities and reversals. The terms "oriental" and "occidental" come to refer, first and foremost, not to a person's geographical position, but to their position relative to this mystical East and its calling. So, there can be many so-called geographical "Easterners" among Suhrawardi's contemporaries, for example, who are in fact "Westerners" when it comes to their existential orientation: they have turned away from the true source of light. And of course, there can be "Westerners" who are in fact "Easterners," occidentals who are rightly oriented to that source. The Arabic term *mustashriq* means literally "one who turns to the East," and is the common name for a European "orientalist"; that is, an alleged expert in the languages and civilizations of the East—

which is to say, those that are east of Europe. No doubt, Corbin was a *mustashriq* in this sense. But the ambiguity in what constitutes the “East” allows Corbin to lay claim to the other meaning of *mustashriq*: while he is geographically occidental, he is an *existentially* oriental.

The theme of a mystical East and the illumination it offers is evident throughout Corbin’s writings. In *The Man of Light*, however, he explains how this mystical East also includes the North, indeed the far North. And that is where it bears on Pullman’s novels. In Corbin’s view, to turn East, to heed the call of the suprasensory sun, is to recognize one’s own transcendental dimension, personified and effected by a series of guides or heavenly counterparts. This awakens what he calls the “vertical” or the “polar dimension” of the human, raising him out of the flatland of the four cardinal directions.<sup>12</sup> Just as the East is bivalent, so too the North: it names one of the four cardinal directions, of course, but more importantly, it names a fundamental orientation “up” and even “out” of the horizontal field, the flatland.

Three quotes from the very first pages of *The Man of Light* give a sense of Corbin’s imaginal geography, and also his distinctive, almost initiatory prose:

This suprasensory, mystical Orient, the place of the Origin and of the Return, object of the eternal Quest, is at the heavenly pole; it is the Pole, at the extreme north, so far off that it is the threshold of the dimension “beyond.” . . . The *Orient* sought by the mystic, the Orient that cannot be located on our maps, is in the direction of the *north*, beyond the north. Only an ascensional progress can lead toward this cosmic north chosen as a point of orientation.<sup>13</sup>

. . . to find again the northern dimension with its symbolic power, capable of opening the threshold of the beyond. This is the North which was “lost” when, by a revolution of the human presence, a revolution of the mode of presence in the world, the Earth was “lost in the heavens.” “To lose sight of the North” means no longer to be able to distinguish between heaven and hell, angel and devil, light and shadow, unconsciousness and transconsciousness. A presence lacking a vertical dimension is reduced to seeking the meaning of history by arbitrarily imposing the terms of reference, powerless to grasp forms in the upward direction, powerless to sense the motionless upward impulse of the pointed arch, but expert at superimposing absurd parallelepipeds.<sup>14</sup>

In our turn, let us pause to consider what a light can signify which is neither eastern nor western, the northern light: mid-night sun, blaze of the aurora borealis. It is no longer a question of day succeeding night, nor night, day. Daylight breaks in the middle of the night and turns into day a night which is still there but which is a Night of light. *Et nox illuminatio mea in deliciis meis*.<sup>15</sup> This already suggests the possibility of an innovation in philosophical anthropology: the need to situate and interpret in an entirely new way the opposition between East and West,

12  
Corbin, *The Man of Light*, 7.

13  
Corbin, 2.

14  
Corbin, 3

15  
Psalm 138:11 (Vulgate): “And night shall be my light in my pleasures.”



Light and Darkness, in order finally to discover the full and unforeseen significance of the northern light, and consequently of Nordic man, the man who “is at the north,” or who is going toward the north because he has come from the north.<sup>16</sup>

16  
Corbin, *The Man of Light*, 4.

How does this imaginal geography help us better understand the episode from Pullman’s *Northern Lights*? On the surface of Pullman’s narrative, it is the geographical North that serves as the point of access to the “beyond”; literally, the *aurora borealis* or Northern Lights. But the “beyond” to which Asriel creates a bridge is itself ambiguous: is it that other world, that city, glimpsed through the special filter? Or is the “beyond” rather the Dust that somehow makes possible the consciousness permeating this world *and* that, a source of illumination beyond both worlds’ suns? Asriel tips his hand at the end, when he says, “Look at that light up there: that’s the sun of another world! Feel the warmth of it on your skin, now!” Although Asriel is after the secret of Dust, he fixates on that other world and its sun—although it is just one of many—and thereby, I suggest, fails to become what Corbin will call a “man of the north.” In other words, when presented with the prospect, Asriel grasps too quickly at the reality of another world, without recognizing that it is, like this one, just another world with its own four cardinal directions. He goes on, in subsequent novels, to travel to that other world, and many others besides, ostensibly in search of Dust’s secrets, and to do battle with the Authority and the Magesterium. But the question is whether his adventures bring him any closer to his “transcendent,” “vertical,” or truly “polar” dimensions. Does he ever, as Corbin would put it, activate the angelic function of his being?

According to Corbin, to embark on an Eastern adventure, to become an *ishraqi* or indeed a “man of the north” requires cultivating a new relationship with oneself, specifically with the other than is also oneself—that figure of the guide, who is you guiding yourself from some higher plane. In Pullman’s stories, to be in search of Dust also opens you up to a transformed relationship with oneself. In Lyra’s world this translates to a transformed relationship with one’s own daemon, or indeed a transformation of one’s own daemon. The very fact that Asriel is willing to sacrifice a boy and his daemon to pursue his own megalomaniacal quest suggests that he is on a wayward path. To have a daemon in Lyra’s world is no achievement: everyone has one. When, in the next novel, her world opens onto our own, we come to learn that we of this world also have daemons: they’re just invisible and internal. But because everyone has a daemon, one’s relationship with it can be as horizontal as anything else, as flat as a map. So, the promise, and the peril, held out to Lyra and her daemon is this: what transformations are they willing to suffer in so that they might continue their journey to the far North, the “beyond,” to awaken themselves, or to activate in themselves their angelic function?

In the climax of *His Dark Materials*, in the third novel, *The Amber Spyglass*, Lyra delivers on her promise to rescue her friend Roger from the land of the dead. In Lyra’s world, when someone dies, his or her daemon winks out of existence in an instant, and that person’s soul is conveyed to the land of the dead. The same in fact happens in our world. We come to learn that this is by the design of the Authority,

that this ancient and aging deity—who is more like a geriatric Gnostic demiurge—established this bleak prison for all the worlds’ dead, but we are not told exactly why. Lyra doesn’t much care why; she simply wants to rescue Roger. But she discovers that in order to cross over into the land of the dead to free him, she must leave her daemon behind on the shores of the River Styx. She does so, but it is an excruciating experience for them both. In the end, Lyra succeeds in liberating not only her friend Roger but also the souls of all the dead of all the worlds of all times. She quite literally harrows hell. When the souls are freed from their imprisonment into a star-filled night sky, they each dissolve into Dust in an ecstatic release. It turns out that Genesis 3:19 is right: “You are dust and to dust you shall return.” But in this story, it is the deity—or at least the entity pretending to be God, the Authority—who has prevented this natural reversion of Dust to Dust, of minded matter back to minded matter, in order to keep dead souls sequestered, imprisoned. In other words, the Authority disrupts the cyclical flow of Dust throughout the universe.

Eventually the Authority is killed, along with his second in command, Metatron (formerly the human Enoch), and the Dust of the dead is returned to the universe. And ultimately, Lyra is reunited with Pan-teleimon. Lyra’s separation from Pan, and her alienation from him, are seemingly resolved at the end of *His Dark Materials*. But this dynamic returns as a major theme in the latest novel, *The Secret Commonwealth*, where it is wed to a new geography, centered not on the far North but on the Near East. Lyra, now an undergraduate at Oxford, is at odds with herself, quite literally: she and Pan are barely speaking, and they can now separate from each other at will without pain, unlike almost anyone else. They find themselves once again in the crosshairs of the Magisterium, who despite having had their deity killed, are just as committed to the suppression of Dust as ever. At stake in this iteration of the cosmic conflict are roses, more specifically rose oil from the Near East. It seems that, like the photo filter Lord Asriel used to reveal Dust’s existence to his colleagues, there is another, ancient practice originating somewhere in the Near East whereby rose oil delivered into the eye as droplets enable one to see Dust. Lyra embarks on her own oriental adventure, traveling east by way of Smyrna all the way to Syria, and far beyond. She and others, friends and foes, are drawn eastward by a scattering of clues and rumors suggesting that the secrets of the rose oil, and so of Dust, are to be found in a remote eastern desert called the Karamakan, wherein lies a mysterious, moving fortress where daemons are not permitted to enter. There is rumored to be a city on the edge of this desert, with a place called the Blue Hotel, where the daemons of those brave enough to seek out this desert fortress and its secrets wait patiently for the return of their human halves.

All of this would seem to amount to a kind of “orientalist” turn in Pullman. Suddenly Lyra is pulled into the orbit of the Near East, and the landscape is painted in a decidedly nineteenth-century, European orientalist palette. Pullman’s more recent, orientalist turn also resonates deeply with Corbin’s same imaginal geography, in which North and East are aligned not as cardinal directions but as existential orientations. Further resonance includes the fact that some of the clues Lyra and her friends and foes are following up come from a medieval epic

poem, written in Tajik, called *Jahan and Rukhsana*. This poem is quite obviously some kind of variation on Farid Uddin 'Attar's classical Persian epic poem, *The Conference of the Birds*. In fact, the protagonists of the fictional poem are guided by the king of the birds, the "Simurgh" (as Pullman transliterates the Persian). In 'Attar's famous poem, the birds of the world set out in search of the legendary Simorgh, and with it the source of their own identity. The birds undergo incredible hardships on this journey, and eventually only thirty survive. As the recent translator of the poem into English, Sholeh Wolpé, explains: "In the end the birds learn that they themselves are the Simorgh; the name 'Simorgh' in Persian means thirty (si) birds (morgh). They eventually come to understand that the majesty of that Beloved is like the sun that can be seen reflected in a mirror. Yet, whoever looks into that mirror will also behold his or her own image."<sup>17</sup>

With the addition of the Tajik epic poem and the character of the Simorgh, Pullman seems almost to tip his hand—and we see Corbin among the face cards. In summary, we have an imaginal geography of the far North, aligned with an imaginal geography of the Near East. That's pure Corbin. In both directions, Lyra finds herself quite literally peering into the secret of Dust, the source of our own individual consciousness and all consciousness across worlds. This seems very close to Corbin's notion of the "suprasensory sun," the transcendent light that orients the *ishraqi* tradition he spent his career translating and promoting. Lyra finds herself in a Gnostic plotline, where a pretender god and his church work to suppress *gnosis*; she is part of an esoteric order—a secret society—which fights against the exoteric church, on behalf of Dust and *gnosis*. As far as I know, Corbin never embraced the Gnostic myth of an ignorant and malevolent demiurge-deity, responsible for the creation and maintenance of our world prison. Rather, he tended to regard our imprisonment and ignorance as the fault of our own limitations in consciousness, aided and abetted by exoteric religion, be it Christian or Islamic. So here too Pullman's story seems to line up with Corbin. And in Pullman's story, the plot hinges on our relationship to ourselves; that is, to our daemons, who although they are none other than us, remain strangely mysterious to us, and even to themselves. In Corbin, the entire ascensional metaphysics is built around an anthropology of the heavenly twin, divine counterpart, or alter-ego—the "divine double."

And yet here is where Pullman seems to chart a different course. In both trilogies, but especially in the latest novel, it seems that Lyra's gnostic quest requires her to suffer successive separations and alienations from herself; that is, from her daemon. Corbin thought we are already separated and alienated from ourselves, and that what we most need is to establish contact with our divine doubles, our interior guides. Once we do so, he presents the path as one of ever ascending assimilations to our higher selves, like links in a chain reaching all the way to the birth of the first divine person from the dark depths of the impersonal source. But Pullman seems to be exploring an even darker and perhaps more fundamental question, one not easily reflected in Corbin's writings: what does self-alienation have to do with the path of *gnosis*? Do we have to lose ourselves—and not just our ancillary selves, but our fundamental selves—do we have to lose ourselves to

find *gnosis*? And with *gnosis*, will we be permanently lost to ourselves, or will we find our way back to a new, or wiser, unity-in-duality?

The answers to these questions must wait on the appearance of the final installment of the second trilogy, and what happens in the end to Lyra and Pan. But in the meantime, I am left wondering if there are other important face cards in Pullman's hand. There are other figures in the Eranos orbit who might be one of these face cards, and who might help us better understand Pullman's novelistic exploration of self-alienation and *gnosis*. I suspect that it is Carl Jung himself, who casts a rather long shadow over the whole of Eranos's history. Pullman does not list Jung as a formative influence, but that doesn't mean much. Many people do not admit to their formative influences, and especially when it is Jung.

### The Imaginal South

While I do believe the imaginal geography of Pullman's novels includes all four of the cardinal directions, I have focused on the North and the East, because that is very prominent in the novels, and in Corbin's writings.<sup>18</sup> I would like to turn now, more briefly, to the significance of the South, and in particular of one very important southern site: the city of Cittàgazze, a city presumably somewhere on the Mediterranean, whose guild of philosophers invented the "subtle knife" that allowed them to create fateful portals between worlds. Can we unpack this southern axis and make sense of it in light of the North? How does the southern Mediterranean figure in *His Dark Materials*, and how does it interact with the imaginal North?

The second novel of *His Dark Materials*, called *The Subtle Knife*, begins not in Lyra's Oxford, but in the Oxford of our world. It follows the course of a young adolescent named Will, who accidentally kills a mysterious intruder in his house, and flees the scene only to find a shimmering, barely visible portal from his world into another. Desperate, he steps through the portal, and finds himself in a largely abandoned city on a seashore. There, he meets Lyra and her daemon Panteleimon. Will is from our world so he doesn't have a daemon, or at least he thinks he doesn't, so he's rather surprised to meet Lyra and her shape-shifting second self. Together they come to learn that the seaside city they are in is called Cittàgazze, or "city of magpies," which is quite obviously meant to correspond to some Italian city on the Mediterranean Sea. It is the very city that Lord Asriel and Lyra could see through the thin membrane between the worlds at their north pole, at their Northern Lights, at the very end of the first novel. When Asriel split Roger from his demon, thereby killing him, he released enough energy to blow a hole through that thin membrane and to cross between his world to that of Cittàgazze. Lyra followed on his heels, and by seeming coincidence Will entered into that world too, just days after her.

For a moment, though, we should highlight the axis of North and South. In Lyra's world, the North opens on to the South of the other world—the portal of the *aurora borealis* in her North delivers her into the South of Cittàgazze. While of course there is plenty further south of the Italian coastline, for the purposes of these novels it is the

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I cannot attempt here a full treatment of the four cardinal directions, which would also necessitate, of course, an interpretation of the significance of the West. This would require, among other things, a reading of the character of Lee Scoresby, a New Dane who grew up in the country of Texas.

extreme south: no scene takes place further south than Cittàgazze. To understand why, we have to learn more about this southern city. It is largely abandoned, or at least abandoned by adults. Lyra and Will notice that the city's only population are roving bands of children. They come to learn that this city is haunted by what are called "spectres," shadowy ghosts that feed on post-pubescent humans, consuming their souls and leaving them to die as mindless husks. It is a particularly horrible way to meet one's end, to have one's soul eaten by a spectre. To pre-pubescent children, the spectres are harmless and invisible; to adults they appear as shimmers in the air and light: "In some lights they were hardly there at all, just visible as a drifting quality in the light, a rhythmic evanescence, like veils of transparency turning before a mirror."<sup>19</sup>

At the center of Cittàgazze stands a lonely tower called the "Torre degli angeli," the Tower of the Angels. Again, they come to learn that the tower was once the home of a guild of philosophers, who managed to create a legendary tool and weapon called "the subtle knife." The adjective "subtle" derives from the Latin *subtilis*, which refers to a finely woven thread, and by extension something exceedingly "fine," "thin," or "slender."<sup>20</sup> The Latin in turn translates the Greek *leptomerês*, a compound word that means "composed of small particles." It is the word that Aristotle used to describe some pre-Socratic views of the soul; he writes, "[there are] those who maintain that the soul is a subtle kind of body (*sôma ti leptomerês*)," indeed "the subtlest (*leptomerestaton*) and most nearly incorporeal (*asômatôtaton*) of all kinds of body."<sup>21</sup> Aristotle's remarks about the soul as a subtle body helped launch the Western discourse of the subtle body, the genealogy of which has recently been traced by Simon Cox.<sup>22</sup>

The knife has two subtle edges, one of which can slice through the fabric of reality and create portals from one world to another; the other of which can cut through any substance. Lyra and Will come to learn that they have to find and recover the subtle knife. In doing so, they learn that at any given time there is a single bearer of the knife, someone who is destined to wield it, and to find his successor. In their efforts to recover the knife from within the bowels of the Tower of the Angels, where its last bearer is being held captive, Will discovers that he is in fact the next bearer of the subtle knife, and thus that his finding a portal to this world is hardly a coincidence. He is apparently destined to wield it, but to what purpose?

Will is taught how to use the subtle knife by the aged bearer whom he and Lyra rescue. He teaches Will how to find the seams in the fabric of reality, to work the blade into the space between atoms, and thus to open portals between worlds. He and Lyra use this powerful tool to move between realms, on the heels of Lyra's father, working independently of him to bring down the tyrannical power of the false deity, the Authority, and his enforcers, the Magisterium, but also some witch clans, bands of angels, and other malevolent forces from across the universe. They *think* their mission is simply to bring down the Authority, and to release the souls he has held captive in the underworld for millennia. And they do so, with the help of many others, and with the help of the subtle knife, whose power the Magisterium wishes to wield.

What they come to learn, however, is that the Authority is not the

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Pullman, *The Subtle Knife*, 462.

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Probably, originally, "woven fine," from *sub* ("under") + *têla* ("a web"), from *texere* ("to weave").

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*De Anima* I.5 409a 34. Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1429.

22

Simon Cox, *The Subtle Body: A Genealogy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022). See also my review of Cox's book, "What is the Subtle Body?" *Harvard Theological Review* 116, no. 2 (2023): 302–15.



only problem plaguing the universe. The spectres that haunt Cittàgazze appear in other worlds as well; they are a threat not only to one world, but to all worlds. Why, and what does that have to do with the subtle knife, with Cittàgazze, and with the imaginal South? They come to learn that it is the subtle knife itself that is responsible for the spectres. Every time the knife cuts a door from one world to another, it creates a shadow, a being of dark matter, who feeds on Dust, the elusive and mysterious substance that gives consciousness to reality. If the door is left open, as the philosophers of Cittàgazze have often done so as to facilitate movement between worlds, then the spectres too can move between worlds, and threaten conscious life everywhere. Cittàgazze is rife with spectres because over the centuries the philosophers of that city abused the subtle knife, cutting holes indiscriminately between worlds, stealing wisdom and wealth from other realms, but by doing so unleashing a parasitic nihilism on those worlds, and their own, that they could not stop. Lyra and Will happen into Cittàgazze shortly after Lord Asriel blew a hole through the membrane between his world and that of Cittàgazze, and in so doing released a new horde of spectres on the city. The adults of Cittàgazze had to flee to the surrounding countryside, desperate to escape the spectres who suddenly descended on them *en masse*.

When in the final novel of the first trilogy, *The Amber Spyglass*, Lord Asriel leads his army against those of the Authority and prevails, ridding the universe of this false god, and when Lyra succeeds in freeing all the souls trapped in the Authority's cruel underworld, still the universe suffers from a wound that must be healed, and that wound is the thousand cuts the subtle knife has made in the fabric of reality, the myriad doorways between worlds. The tragic end of this triumphal trilogy is that Will must now close all those thousands of doors, and finally shatter the subtle knife so no new doors may be opened. The price for the salvation of the universe is the separation of the worlds, and the separation of everyone into their respective worlds. Will cannot stay in Lyra's world, nor she in his. Either would soon die in the other's world, and so even though their loving union has undone the sin of Adam and Eve, in the end of *His Dark Materials* they are forced to say goodbye forever, and to live always with the memory of the other and the other's world.

What, then, is the significance of the imaginal North and South in Pullman's novels? If the far North reveals that there is a mysterious substance called Dust, and that there are other worlds than our own, then it also reveals that the presumption to cross between worlds, even in pursuit of Dust, is the business of murderous and ambitious men such as Lyra's father Lord Asriel. But Asriel's method of crossing from one world to another is revealed to be crude compared to what his southern counterparts had devised, the philosophers of Cittàgazze. The technology of the subtle knife is finally revealed to be something of a sin, by which I mean not an offense against the Authority or Magisterium, but a sin against the nature of reality itself, threatening the integrity of the universe. The South is not quite the scene of *original* sin, but of a subsequent sin, the sin of human hubris perhaps.

The subtle knife of the South bears a proper name from the North, Æsahættr, which we are told means "God-destroyer." Not surprisingly,

with a name like that, both sides of the war of the worlds want to have it. But it is not the subtle knife that finally kills the Authority. After all, the Authority is not really God, but just a Gnostic demiurge, a powerful being posturing as God, demanding worship and fealty. The “God” that the knife actually threatens to destroy is not the Authority, but the divine consciousness that pervades the universe, Dust itself. It is as if the North knew that all along, encoded in the legendary name *Æsahættr*.

It is perhaps tempting to read the conclusion of *His Dark Materials* as a warning against technology, in which case the subtle knife is something like Oppenheimer’s bomb, a Promethean innovation that threatens the integrity of our world. But I wish to propose, tentatively and in conclusion, a different lesson. I wonder if the lesson instead might be a certain skepticism of, or even warning against, esotericism more broadly. The novels are rife with esoteric tools and practices, which allow the characters to alter their states of consciousness, perception, embodiment—in the protagonists’ case all in the seemingly noble pursuit of Dust, and the defense of freedom and consciousness in the universe. But what if the real occult lesson of these novels is that there are some thresholds that are not to be crossed, some secrets that are not to be pursued? What if the free pursuit of consciousness in fact threatens consciousness? What if the universe requires us, in the end, to live in our own separate worlds, even when we know that there are others? What if the universe requires that we leave certain questions open, as questions, even when we know there are answers to be found, somewhere. If so, it is a cruel lesson for Lyra and Will, who, saving harrowed hell and having saved the universe from the Authority and the spectres, must part ways and live forever apart from the other. Or if not cruel a truth, at least a cold truth, a cold northern truth issued to southern esotericism.

What comes of this cold closure remains to be seen. Will it remain so forever? Will Lyra and Will only dream of each other, as the memory of their cosmic triumph and tragedy fades in their aging minds? Or will Dust reveal another way, an unthought opening between worlds that can answer to their love? While there are perhaps a few hints of such an opening in the latest novel, *The Secret Commonwealth*, we will have to wait on the third and final installment of *The Book of Dust* for answers, and more importantly, for further and even final orientation in this adventure in the imaginal.