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*Moral Uncertainty  
and  
Contemporary Children's  
Fantasy Fiction*

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## *Abstract*

This thesis studies the interplay between mythos (story) and ethos (ethical character) in contemporary children's fantasy fiction. In recent decades, this relationship has been complicated by two contradictory, but related, ethical tendencies. Postmodernism characteristically resists unitary accounts of morality, celebrating pluralism. Within the last twenty years, however, there has been a groundswell of interest in rethinking ethics and retrieving values from endemic moral uncertainty, often referred to as an ethical turn. This thesis contends that children's fantasy fiction has evolved into a literature that creatively engages with this contradiction, simultaneously refusing moral certainties and demanding unflinching ethical values.

This evolution is explored by comparing a selection of children's fantasy fiction published from 1995 to 2012 with earlier exponents of this genre as well as other literary texts. The analysis is conducted through a framework of expanding ethical horizons, starting with a focus on personal contexts and then progressing to the social, political, and ideological. The thesis employs an inter-textual method. Ethical concepts are teased out by bringing literary texts into dialogue with each other and exploring links between them. Ideas from critical theory are then used to extend the trajectory of the ethical themes suggested by the fictions. Through this method, themes and texts are woven into an ethical narrative about children's fantasy.

This thesis approaches storytelling as a portal into the imagination where writers, readers and protagonists actively forge moral meaning. Traditionally, stories rich in symbol not only entertained their audiences, but also encapsulated their societies' moral values. When society is presented metaphorically, familiar assumptions are estranged, enabling readers to see the world anew and imaginatively reconstruct their worldviews. In recent children's fantasies, both child protagonists and child readers are required to be moral thinkers. This demonstrates a shift, not only in how ethical dilemmas are contended with today, but, by addressing children as ethical subjects, in how much moral agency is attributed to children.

Children's fantasy is a rich and layered genre particularly suited to engaging with contemporary ethical dilemmas and uncertainties. This thesis affirms its role in exploring ethical meaning and action and transmitting positive values in a climate of moral uncertainty. Emerging from this fiction, and incongruous to both postmodern consumerist society and postmodern suspicion of categorical moral imperatives, is an ethics of self-transcendent love.



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## **Introduction:** *Mythos Meets Ethos, The Ethical Character of Fantasy*

When my daughter was in her middle childhood years she began reading *Harry Potter*. I was aware of some controversy surrounding the series and decided to read it myself. Around this time I also read Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*. These books seemed markedly different from fantasies I read as a child; gone was the safe world mimicking an imaginary Edwardian nursery room from which protagonists set out on thrilling adventures, to return, at the end, to the warmth, food and security of home. These adventures were framed, like the picture of the "Dawn Treader" in C.S. Lewis's fantasy, and battles between good and evil took place within that frame. Moreover, good always won over evil as protagonists faced their clear moral duty to oppose evil with a good that was unquestionable.

The moral certainties that underpinned most of the fantasies I had read in the 1960s appeared to be absent from the fantasies I read in the early 2000s.<sup>1</sup> Harry Potter is mistreated in his home life and much more is at stake as his moral battle leaches threateningly into his real world. In *The Lord of the Rings*, which I read as a teenager, a dark menace shadows the adventuring hobbits, but their innate goodness sees them through peril to return to the Shire. In contrast, in Pullman's adolescent fantasy traditional markers of good and evil are uprooted, brutalities proliferate and there are no safe homes to which the traumatised child protagonists can return.

This research emerged from my curiosity as to how and why the characters and moral landscapes of fantasy appeared to have changed so much over one generation. These changes in emphasis suggested to me that the children's fantasy genre had evolved to reflect and address the ethical anxieties of our time, including the way we regard children as ethical subjects. For example, whereas writers of a previous generation seemed to regard moral right and duty as unambiguous categories, today's child heroes are cunning and sceptical of the adult world, and morality is often ambiguous. These changes, I suggest, have their roots in deeper social and philosophical concerns. Children's fantasy therefore seemed to me to be a particularly productive genre for understanding and addressing the ethical uncertainties of our generation.

This thesis argues that contemporary children's fantasy fiction reflects its society's shift from the premodern and modern past when morality was anchored in

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the books I read as a child had been written prior to 1960. My impression of the fantasies I read that were published in the late 1960s is that they were less morally secure. This might be seen to reflect the rising swell of change during this period, heralding the postmodern era.

greater religious and philosophical certainty to greater uncertainty in the postmodern present. Previous generations have likewise experienced profound upheavals, however, distinct anxieties, concerns and dilemmas arise from our unique historical context and it is with the points of difference and change that this research is concerned. My analysis is therefore not confined to contemporary fantasies, but compares narratives ranging from Chaucer to the present, noting links and disjunctures between them. Neither is it confined to either the fantasy genre or to an intended readership (children), but draws from an eclectic mix of literary sources that help illuminate ongoing ethical themes more clearly; the complex moral ideas thrown up by the fantasies have resonances with literature outside the children's fantasy genre. The children's fantasy writers I analyse here are all adults, and their works respond to and react against, consciously and unconsciously, a long literary history and tradition.

My argument depends on drawing out the ethos (ethical character) of children's fantasies.<sup>2</sup> I therefore focus primarily on the multiple and sometimes contradictory ethical meanings suggested by literary texts, bringing theory to my aid to strengthen and expand my ideas, leaning heavily on fantasy's literary, historic and philosophical contextualisation. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle use the metaphor of Frankenstein's monster created from assorted body parts to illustrate how Mary Shelley's novel was created out of the multiple texts that preceded it (228). By placing fantasy fiction within its broader social and literary context (examining disparate parts that comprise it) I hope to intensify the moral meanings suggested by the texts. For example, by placing *Hamlet* alongside *Harry Potter* I explore how both stories share a common theme of internal moral struggle in a time of changing worldviews but also how the protagonists' different ideological, cultural and political contexts determine their different possibilities for action. Paul Ricoeur refers to this contextualisation of a text as "pre-figuration".

My argument has four premises. First, the society in which we live today, especially in the cultural West, is postmodern, pluralistic, globalised and fragmented. The giants that used to uphold the foundations of society, religion and humanistic rationalism, have been severely maligned, eroding the basis of what were once commonly accepted social assumptions. Second, moral values have been destabilised in the wake of postmodern doubt. On top of this, historical events, especially the Holocaust and Hiroshima, sit in our collective conscience demanding an ethical response that seems to go further than previous understandings of ethics could take us. At the same time that

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<sup>2</sup> This differs from identifying the one true moral of the story. Ethos is the ethical character suggested by the text.

we are trying (often without much success) to make sense of our moral selves in the light of this history, scientific progress opens up uncharted ethical questions. The convergence of these factors makes unprecedented ethical demands of us today compounded by emerging concerns that postmodern pluralism leaves some important questions unanswered (as suggested by the recent academic turn towards moral values). Third, storytelling has, since earliest recorded history, created and reproduced the meanings that ensure cultural survival. Myths explain not only the origins of the world and humanity, but also the relationships of humans with each other and with their gods. Moral values are embedded in these relationships, values that underlie laws and allow societies to function. Stories, therefore, have the crucial function of transmitting societies' moral values to future generations. Fourth, fantasy fiction for children takes on the role that symbolic stories played historically, transmitting cultural values to the next generation. In today's society that demystifies myth, stories that mimic myth have great potential for moral education. This role, however, is problematised today by pervasive moral uncertainty. Furthermore, by refusing to be tethered to observable realities, the fantasy genre has a unique function of enabling us to see from a fresh perspective and to see further. Through the lens of the imaginative unreal, the real world gains a sharper focus enabling us to perceive realities to which we were previously blind.

The first chapter in this thesis discusses the premises undergirding its argument, outlined above: progressing from postmodern uncertainty to a contextualisation of postmodern ethics to the relationship between ethics and story and finally to the role of ethics in postmodern fantasy.

Chapters two to five examine specific children's fantasy texts, combining textual analysis with ethical criticism. The fantasies in this study are all "bestsellers", although I have not selected them for their popularity but have sought stories that offer interesting insights in their response to moral complexity and that illustrate the shifting horizons of contemporary children's fantasy fiction. They include British (Rowling, Stroud, Pullman), American (Le Guin, Ness), New Zealand (Knox) and Irish (Colfer) writers. My analysis expands progressively from an approach that looks inward into the human psyche for ethical meaning, to an ethics that encounters and takes account of others, to a view that looks further outwards to the wider society and political systems, and finally to the metaphysical realm where meanings of good and evil are locked in an ideological cosmic war. Thus this is a development from the most immediate and intimate (the inner self) to the most distant horizon (the metaphysical).

Chapter Two, "Shadows on the Landscape of the Soul: The Haunting of Hamlet to the Horcruxes of Harry Potter", discusses ethics and the individual. It is divided into three

main sections that share a common theme of the shadow: the shadow of the past, the shadow of the self and the shadow of death.

The first section, the shadow of the past, begins with the great literary hero of uncertainty, Hamlet. His uncertainty results from both ideological conflict and moral conflict and in these conflicts the past (represented by the Ghost) plays a crucial role. The shift from moral obligation conferred by the past (as in *Hamlet*) to moral responsibility developing from past personal experiences is traced through literary texts that span five centuries, culminating in the concept of a moral compass where past and future must line up to provide direction. Parallels are drawn between Hamlet and Harry Potter as both characters wrestle with moral uncertainty, but where Hamlet's relationship with the past exacerbates his uncertainty, for Harry the past illuminates the present by deepening his understanding and experience.

The second section, the shadow of the self, concentrates on nineteenth and twentieth century theories of evil within the individual. This is a modern approach to the concept of original sin in Christian theology, but the emphasis on sin gives way in this era to the "double" and Jung's "shadow". Ursula Le Guin's mid-twentieth century *Earthsea* children's fantasy series has a central theme of the shadow of the self. *Harry Potter* takes up the trope of the double with paired characters, the most obvious being Harry and Voldemort. However, in *Harry Potter* evil is not an innate shadow but is the shadow of a potential self and moral choice is pivotal in character formation.

The third section, the shadow of death, finds three themes of death common to literary texts from *Hamlet* to *Harry Potter*: the acceptance of mortality, death as a symbol of moral development and self-sacrifice for the good of the community. Freudian and Jungian psychology has over-written these ancient themes and they are secularised in Le Guin's and Rowling's fantasies. Rowling, however, attempts to draw together contradictory premodern, modern and postmodern ethical understandings, revealing, rather than disguising, the fragmentary nature of her own ethical narrative.

My argument then moves from morality as internal and personal to morality in relationships between people. The chapter "Beyond the Margins where Morality Meets the Monstrous Other" expands the idea of the monster (the shadow or double) within an individual to the monster as another. Moral agency is brought to the fore in this chapter, both the moral agency of child protagonists and of monstrous others. Earlier texts – especially Edith Nesbit's Edwardian stories of the psammead beginning with *Five Children and It* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* – are placed alongside contemporary fantasies written by Eoin Colfer (*Artemis Fowl*), Jonathan Stroud (the *Bartimaeus* trilogy) and Elizabeth Knox (the *Dreamhunter* duo) in order to map a shift in ideas about children as moral agents and also about ethical relationships with others. (As with *Hamlet*, these earlier

texts are mirrors of their time. While they reflect certain values and understandings of their respective societies, they also hold a mirror up to their contemporary readers inviting critique of their societies' blemishes and injustices.)

Views of moral responsibility in childhood are not stagnant but shift with the times. Nesbit's innocent child protagonists are juxtaposed with Colfer's very knowing protagonist, Artemis. The amorality of innocence in Nesbit's early twentieth century fantasy has become the amorality of experience in Colfer's early twenty-first century fantasy. This same knowing amorality is seen in Stroud's monster djinni, Bartimaeus. However, Stroud's protagonist's moral agency is compromised as he is alienated and a slave.

Monsters are a trope often representing social outsiders. They are faceless (or defaced), voiceless and nameless; they lack agency with which to make moral choices. Mary Shelley's monster is a warning to her society of, among other issues, monstrosities spawned by injustice, especially the injustice of alienation. This same theme is taken up in a re-writing of *Frankenstein* by Knox, but where the monster, instead of alienated, is embraced. This analysis is underpinned with the ethical philosophy of Levinas.

*Dreamhunter* also provides useful insights into the third horizon of ethics, that of social responsibility. In "Dreams of a Better World: Social Justice as Ethical Responsibility" the theme of the perpetuation of evil through social injustice is traced through *The Merchant of Venice*, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, George Macdonald's *Curdie* fantasy tales and Nesbit's *Psammead* stories to Knox's *Dreamhunter*, Rowling's *Harry Potter* and Ness's *Chaos Walking* series. The personal desire for revenge as a result of social injustice (as seen in *The Merchant of Venice*) engenders a complex intertwining of the personal and the political. This chapter argues that rather than a shift away from the issues raised by Shylock, the issues have multiplied in complexity and urgency. Deepening the necessity for moral agency in child protagonists, contemporary narratives do not exempt children and young adults from social and political action but instead place them in the vanguard of the action.

Political action is not morally clear cut. The postmodern fantasies discussed in this chapter explore the difficulty, and even impossibility, of knowing and following the right path to greater social justice. Utopian aspirations are juxtaposed with dystopian realities. Following Terry Eagleton's interpretation of Lacan's ethical framework, this chapter suggests that these fantasies grapple with the contradictions and inadequacies of pursuing justice through personal and emotional means (Lacan's Imaginary) or political and rational means (Lacan's Symbolic). The personal and political can only be reconciled by a confrontation with the Real of desire.

“When the Stars Threw Down Their Spears: Grand Narratives and War in Heaven” opens out my argument to the final horizon of ethics and ideology by contrasting Milton’s (premodern) *Paradise Lost* with C.S. Lewis’s (modern) *Chronicles of Narnia* and Philip Pullman’s (postmodern) *His Dark Materials*. This chapter, perhaps more than any other, demonstrates the moving tides of ethical belief. On the face of it, these three symbolic stories clearly illustrate a shift from the ideological certainty of religious thought towards the greater uncertainty of secular thought in the postmodern era. However, within this ebb and flow of belief, all three stories illustrate how ethics is both ensnared by ideology and resists it.

Specifically, this chapter analyses how the worldviews of Milton, Lewis and Pullman are in conflict in their depictions of authority, sin and the devil. It then goes on to argue that the ethical heart of both Lewis’s and Pullman’s narratives is entrusted to their young female protagonists and it is through these characters that we can perhaps best understand the ethical impulse of the stories. The enmeshment of ideology and ethics, I propose, is finally untangled through humour as dogma is put to the test through laughter.

Chapter Six, “Negative and Positive Capabilities: Ethics of Uncertainty”, discusses negative capability: the dominant ethical position, this thesis suggests, arising from all of these postmodern fantasy texts. The contradictions of ethical imperatives and seemingly irreconcilable moral uncertainties that characterise our time find a paradoxically solid yet shifting resolution in what I call “tentative certainty”. My position is in sympathy with Paul Ricoeur’s “attestation” – belief that must always be regarded with suspicion.

Paul Ricoeur’s narrative theory underlies this thesis, but I also draw extensively from John Wall’s interpretation of Ricoeurian ethics in *Moral Creativity: Paul Ricoeur and the Poetics of Possibility*, Terry Eagleton’s interpretation of Lacanian ethics in *Trouble With Strangers* and Richard Kearney’s ethical and narrative philosophy as advanced in several of his books and articles. Each chapter also highlights different theorists as these expanding horizons arise from disparate philosophical, psychological, scientific, sociological and theological theories. I discuss some of these theories as influences that have seeped into popular thought. My analysis is not concerned, however, with the theories as they are understood within their fields, but with how they have permeated ideas of good and evil as explored in literary texts.

Meanings of good and evil that emerge from my primary fantasy texts reproduce both traditional understandings of morality and postmodern tensions arising from moral uncertainties, producing creative responses to that uncertainty, indicating a way through and beyond it. I suggest that the central images of this journey are the precipice (negotiating the edge of the abyss of moral meaninglessness), the pond as a portal (narrative as a portal to moral creativity) and the paradox (answering moral riddles with incongruous truths).

The interplay between mythos (story) and ethos (ethical character) in children's fantasy fiction affirms the positive role that fantasy can play in developing moral character in its readers. Using symbol and metaphor to convey metaphysical truths and realities, fantasy steps beyond the known physical world of observable facts into unknown worlds, ordering the chaos of life and transmitting values. But most significantly, fantasy engages the considerable power of imagination to create rich ethical meanings.

My thesis is not motivated by moralistic outrage; in fact, contrary to my expectations, I am very heartened by the ethics championed by contemporary children's fantasy writers although moral attitudes have undoubtedly shifted since the 1960s. On the face of it, the irony and cynicism of such contemporary protagonists as Artemis (from Colfer's series) and Bartimaeus (from Stroud's trilogy) suggest ethical nihilism. These colourful, clever and knowing characters appeal to children today who, exposed to postmodern media, quickly lose their naïvete. But in these narratives, as in all the postmodern fantasies I have studied, apparent moral anarchy gives way to a bold and costly ethic: alterity, a response demanding self-transcendent love. This ethic is not new — it has ancient historical roots — but it has gained urgency, I believe, and is now considered appropriate for child readers.

## Chapter I

### *Postmodern Uncertainties and Narrative Other Worlds*

“At this point [in time], realism is perhaps the least adequate means of understanding or portraying the incredible realities of our existence,” says Ursula Le Guin to a postmodern world. The realities that make up our lives today are not unified but multiple, not whole but fragmented, not stable but shifting under our feet. This thesis endorses Le Guin’s position that the “hypothetical and improbable art” produced by “an improbable and unmanageable world” helps us understand its realities (1989 47).

This position has its opponents. Plato objects that works of the imagination undermine reason. He censures the poets because they form “idiosyncratic ‘images’” instead of “permanent ‘ideas’” of moral truth, creating “imaginative fantasies instead of true depictions of reality” (Wall, *Moral Creativity* 5). Much more recently, Richard Dawkins reported his intention to write a book warning children “against believing in ‘anti-scientific’ fairytales”. Discussing the possible dangers of bringing up children to believe in “spells and wizards, and er — magic wands and... things turning into other things”, he says:

It is unscientific; whether it has a pernicious effect, I do not know. Looking back on my own childhood, the fact that so many of the stories I read allowed the possibility of frogs turning into princes, whether that has a sort of insidious effect on rationality, I’m not sure. (Beckford and Khan)

The defence of fantasy made by a long string of writers<sup>3</sup> suggests that Plato and Dawkins are not alone in their criticism that fantastic stories are akin to superstition and potentially harmful.

Dawkins polarises scientific and what he calls “mythical thinking”. In creating a dualism between scientific and mythological thought, and privileging the scientific account because it is substantiated with empirical evidence, he appeals to commonsense agreement that science is true and fantasy is not true. (Jean-Francois Lyotard calls this legitimisation by “the rule of consensus”, xxiv). What I regard as Dawkins’s misunderstanding pinpoints the value and importance of stories: fantasy does not match up with observable reality, but it does not follow that there is no truth or reality in it. Stepping back from literal reality and truth opens up a space in which imagination (“mythical thinking”) can explore meanings of truth and reality not available to empirical enquiry. Where reasoned enquiry manipulates and observes the physical world and draws conclusions, imagination creates hypothetical worlds and introduces possibilities.

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<sup>3</sup> Just a few of the writers who defend fantasy, implying the presence of critics, include: Coleridge in the early nineteenth century, MacDonald in the late nineteenth century, Bettelheim, Tolkien and Lewis in the mid-twentieth century, Le Guin in the late twentieth century.

Imagination is crucial to any, including scientific, thinking that asks, “What if?” in its search for meaning.

Moreover, fantasy’s playful relationship with truth and reality accentuates the dualisms that plague Western thought and exploits their inherent tensions: truth versus untruth, reality versus imagination, fact versus fiction, and so on. Crossing the line into worlds where basic laws of nature are defied, it is situated opposite scientific observation and empirical research, but this neither discredits nor trivialises it. Instead it gnaws away at the dichotomy. A well-crafted story about a frog turning into a prince can evoke recognition of truth, unsettling and subverting the equivalency of truth with fact. This undermines the metanarrative of humanistic reason (sometimes referred to as “Rational Man”) — and may justify Dawkins’s nervousness of fantasy.

This thesis explores some contradictions thrown up by binary dualisms: unified self versus decentred subject, amoral actor versus moral agent, monstrous villain versus monstrous victim, God versus Lucifer, good versus evil. These contradictions challenge unified accounts of the world as told in metanarratives. Metanarratives, the great truths that are generally (consciously or unconsciously) accepted in society, including Christian and Enlightenment faiths, have, by and large, lost their narrative conviction, no longer explaining reality and truth to most people. This is not to say that metanarratives are dead, but that postmodern society is often suspicious of them.

Like any narrative, fantasy stories exist within literary, theoretical, sociological and historical contexts. Grand and less grand narratives precede them, and any moral tale they wish to tell will necessarily be entangled with these narrative contexts. With the decline of metanarratives, ethics founded on religion or humanism are precarious and consequently postmodern fantasy must negotiate the loosening of moral certainties. The increasing impact of postmodernism over the last fifty years, I argue, makes all the difference to the moral narratives that can be told today.

Postmodernism reveals two faces: comedy and tragedy. One is a carnivalesque celebration of multiplicity in place of binding dualities. The other is an empty mask of meaninglessness. Two children’s fantasy books, aimed at a much younger age than the books I am studying here, illustrate this doubling of postmodernism.

*Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak was first published in 1963, a time of transition. Security frames the story, but it peers into a world of nihilistic fantasies. Even literature for very young children reflects the spirit of its age. Max, a young child dressed in a wolfsuit, revolts against the established order, and enters a fantastic realm inhabited by wild monsters where he is crowned King of All Wild Things. He commands a Wild Rumpus, as far from domestic moral order as “almost over a year” away. Several pages illustrate the rampaging monsters. But from far away across the

world Max smells good things to eat, the safe world beckoning him home. He abdicates his reign returning to his hot supper provided by his mother, who “loved him best of all”. Max’s naughty behaviour becomes a carnivalesque adventure, but like the stories I read in the 1960s, he returns to domestic safety.

By contrast, Roald Dahl’s *Revolting Rhymes* (published in 1984) has no moral frame. Confronting the evil Wolf who has devoured Grandmamma, Miss Red Riding Hood, as a self-defending feminist, “whips a pistol from her knickers,/ She aims it at the creature’s head/ And bang bang bang,/ She shoots him dead”. Abandoning her “silly hood” for a “lovely furry Wolfskin coat”, she is a sheep in wolves’ clothing. This is playfully amusing, but disquieting. The story continues in a retelling of “The Three Little Pigs”. When Wolf, unable to blow down Pig’s house, decides to blow it up instead with dynamite, Pig phones Miss Hood for help. She confronts, and shoots, the evil Wolf. But:

Ah, Piglet, you must never trust  
Young ladies from the upper crust.  
For now, Miss Riding Hood, one notes,  
Not only has two wolfskin coats,  
But when she goes from place to place,  
She has a PIGSKIN TRAVELLING CASE.

There is no moral frame to the story and we are left with the “bite” promised on the cover, illustrated as two terrified children held in the embrace of a Wolf who is reading them the story. His eyes are red, his tongue and teeth protrude. Are they deliciously terrified of the story or is the terror, and danger, real? Is a hot supper waiting for them, or the Wolf, at the end? Dissolving parameters and playing with reversals, uncertainties and ironies characterise postmodernism. It is a carnival without closure.

Colin Manlove refers to postmodern fantasy as “an annihilating gale of fears” (199). This is one of postmodernism’s faces. Miss Red Riding Hood is nasty and there is no justice for Pig. Lyotard describes postmodernism as a “crisis of narratives” and proposes the necessity for an account of justice not dependent on consensus (xxiii, 68). Amidst the uncertainty of narrative crisis, to answer the need for a narrative of moral certainty (justice) is to answer a paradox.

An answer is suggested in a murky pond at Auschwitz. An early 1970s television series, *The Ascent of Man*, overviewed the history of scientific ideas. The presenter and writer of the series, J. Bronowski, describes scientific knowledge as “an unending adventure at the edge of uncertainty”, a space of imagination. Breaking down the opposition between science and narrative, he takes the viewer to Auschwitz, a place where both scientific and moral certainties came to grief. He stands beside a shallow pond where the ashes of victims of Hitler’s Final Solution were discarded. He tells us the tragedy that this pond represents was caused by arrogance, by hubris, by the certainty of dogma. He then wades into it. We see photos of the victims; each face telling a unique

story. Bronowski pleads with his audience to take note, to doubt dogmas and certainties and to keep the human face before us. Science turns toward personal story, and story to moral judgement. Echoing myth, he says, “This is what men do when they aspire to the knowledge of gods” (374).

Although Bronowski’s series was made forty years ago, his concerns resonate throughout my thesis. Confronting an abyss of moral horror, Bronowski retrieves narratives and infuses them with meaning that is ethical. Where metanarratives fail justice, personal narratives demand it. Faces not facts propel us to justice; stories have ethical power. Moreover, Bronowski’s certainty of the ethical imperative of uncertainty is a contradiction. Where dualistic thinking divides concepts (and people) into oppositions, narratives can provoke us to entertain contradictions, incongruity and paradoxes. With one foot on the precipice of uncertainty and the other in the narrative pond where ethical meaning is pondered, fantasy fiction embraces paradox.

In this chapter I expand on themes of postmodern and moral uncertainty (raised by Bronowski’s concerns), and the imaginative power of fantasy to create ethical meaning (answering Dawkins’s criticism). The four sections elaborate my four premises: the uncertainty of the postmodern world; the crisis of ethics in postmodernity; the power of story to create meaning; fantasy fiction as an ethical voice.

## **The “Incredible Realities” of our Time**

Ursula Le Guin, quoted above, suggests that our era consists of “incredible realities”. In this section I look at different analyses of the postmodern era to ascertain what distinguishes it, why its realities are incredible and how these realities impact on ethics. I will veer a long way from children’s fantasy fiction, but will finally concur with Le Guin: “The fantasist... may be talking as seriously as any sociologist — and a good deal more directly — about human life as it is lived, as it might be lived, and as it ought to be lived” (47). A common theme emerges: the postmodern world is in crisis, even collapse. For Lyotard it is a crisis of narrative truth; for Roger Scruton it is of culture; for Zygmunt Bauman of a cohesive society; for Jean Baudrillard of reality. Many disparate areas of postmodern crisis and disintegration are well-analysed in literature, some of which I take up in other chapters; but of most interest to me is how they impact on ethics, and through ethics, on children’s fantasy.

Lyotard’s metaphor of grand narratives has itself become a well-read and influential narrative. Lyotard defines modernity as “[legitimising] itself with reference to a metadiscourse... making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative” (qtd. in Olsen 11). Both premodernism and modernism, Lance Olsen asserts, “appealed to a metanarrative

that bound the universe together, a metatext that told The Story about knowledge and culture — in the medieval world the metatext was God; in the neoclassical, Reason, and so on” (11-12). John Stephens defines metanarratives as “the implicit and usually invisible strategies, systems, and assumptions which operate globally in a society to order knowledge and experience” and describes their function as “maintaining conformity to socially determined and approved patterns of behaviour” (3-4).

Impressionism, a modernist movement, blurred the “line of certainty”. Postmodernism, incredulous of metanarratives, goes further, argues Olsen (7, 11, 12). It is not that these familiar old stories have ceased to exist, says Fredric Jameson, they persist as “buried master-narratives” in our “political unconscious” (xii). Whereas modernism retrieved meaning and coherence, postmodernism, Olsen suggests, “can no longer find any response adequate to the situation in which it finds itself... the ultimate denaturalisation of the planet and a deep belief in the imminent end of humanity... a universe under physical and metaphysical erasure” (8). These words are bleak. But while postmodernism’s deconstructive side is “a radical scepticism of the capability of language to respond to the universe”, contained within it is the possibility that “all is *not* lost — or, more accurately, all *is* lost, and therein lies the delight” (9).<sup>4</sup> Irony and indecision about meaning are postmodern responses: “a willingness to live with uncertainty, to tolerate and... welcome a world seen as random and multiple, even, at times absurd” (Alan Wilde, qtd. in Olsen 11). Metanarratives are glue holding society together; disbelief (or radical scepticism) dissolves the glue resulting in a “crisis of narratives”: the “postmodern condition”. This, asserts Olsen, has two outcomes: despair and delight.

Roger Scruton analyses the crisis of culture. In the eighteenth century, according to Herder, culture was shared, homogenous, communal life, the “flow of moral energy that holds society intact” (qtd. in Scruton, *Modern Culture* 1). Scruton argues that a common culture “is an instrument of social cohesion”, offering social membership (108), and social life requires ethical life “if one generation is to care for the next” (109). However, by the late nineteenth century the communal sense of culture had been eroded and modernism with its subjective individualism emerged. Scruton describes postmodernism as a “culture of repudiation”, devaluing social reproduction via the traditional channels of art and religion. “At the heart of its institutions... is a void where the old and believing community should be” (113). Moreover, the vacuity of consumerism is “eating away at the very heart of social life... by putting everything...

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<sup>4</sup> Science, Olsen says, accords with this view: “Quark physics... seems to indicate that the building blocks of the universe hold an element of freeplay within themselves, whimsy, and even the idea of fictionality” (10-11).

on sale” (51). Scruton’s description of postmodern culture is conservative, looking back to a time when “high culture” was valued.

Bauman argues that social cohesion is in crisis. Where the “radical optimism” of progress was a hallmark of humanism, relentless, inescapable change is a hallmark of postmodernity; change that is dystopian and fatalistic (*Liquid World* 10). Bauman uses the metaphor of “tremors” and “existential quakes”, to describe our society: “The ground on which our life prospects are presumed to rest is admittedly shaky” (10). A shifting, moving, fluid world is an uncertain world; we are inundated with risk-laden choices and we need to evaluate and act “under conditions of endemic uncertainty” (4). This is a “‘liquid modern’ world” of future uncertainty, frailty of social position and existential insecurity (77).

Reality itself is interrogated in Jean Baudrillard’s analysis of postmodernity. In the world of the simulacrum there is no truth or reality, everything is an endless play of signs signifying nothing at heart. “It is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them”, says Baudrillard (172). In postmodern culture an image bears no relation to reality but is its own pure simulacrum (173). It is impossible to rediscover “an absolute level of the real” (180).

In the 1950s Richard Hoggart described the working class as “the great big illusionless majority”; disillusioned, wary of being “taken in” or duped. Constant vigilance against being deceived (or ripped off) destroys idealism: “...in matters inviting any form of genuine belief, there sounds an echo from a bottomless unbelief” (278).<sup>5</sup> Today scepticism infects all social classes and is probably even more profound with growing wealth and materialism. Consumers are almost, but not quite, immune from advertising’s deliberate deceptions where the only imperative is to sell products and make profits and where value is the ability to trade in the free market economy. Eighteenth century communal culture, described by Herder, has been replaced by an individualistic and alienating consumer culture, a culture and economy based on the image as described by Baudrillard.

Advertising is increasingly sophisticated and manipulative, cheating reality. Our defence against manipulators out to get our money, our approval, our votes is to “see through” them, to be knowing and disbelieving. Kim Hill, in a radio interview about popular culture with a Dunedin-based writer, Roi Colbert, reinforces this point:

Kim: *What everything is conspiring to prove to us, not only the cheap meretricious American Idol, but the Eurovision with its block voting and*

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<sup>5</sup> Working class ideological cynicism appears in George MacDonald’s nineteenth century and C.S. Lewis’s mid-twentieth century fantasies. Both MacDonald’s cynical miners, described in chapter 4, and Lewis’s dwarves in *The Last Battle* suggest that exploitation breeds cynicism.

*the Dove advertisement with its cheaty touch-ups, nothing is true, nothing is real.*

Roi: *The age I've got to now I just distrust everything...*

Kim: *So you never have your faith shattered because you haven't got any.*

Roi: *That's right. I have unshattered faith.*

Kim: *You do have unshattered faith. Well, you don't have any faith. Isn't that more to the point?*

Roi: *Yes, yes. You're right.*

This cynical attitude is the only rational way to approach the market place, the media, the entertainment industry, politics; nothing should be taken at face value because nothing is true or real. Image is everything, and advertising sells unreal images. “The ideal fantasy is perfectly realised and perfectly unreal — an imaginary object that leaves nothing to the imagination. Advertisements trade in such objects, and they float in the background of modern life, a chorus of disconsolate ghosts” (Scruton 52).<sup>6</sup>

Advertising convinces us that “nothing is true, nothing is real”. A self-defensive response to its ubiquitous deception is to be “knowing” and “cool”, hiding naïve attitudes behind a mask of irony and clever double-talk. “The cheerful ‘card’... is... a hollow little man clinging to a mask”, said Hoggart sixty years ago (226). Masks, actors, images and ghosts aptly describe the unreality of postmodern consumer society. Image is celebrated but very transient. As Bauman expresses it: “Time flows on, and the trick is to keep pace with the waves. If you don't want to sink, keep surfing, and that means changing your wardrobe, your furnishings, your wallpaper, your look, your habits — in short, yourself — as often as you can manage it” (104). Anything, including ourselves, can be presented seductively, marketed and sold as a profitable commodity.

Seduction is enigmatic, a secret that has no hidden reality or meaning. “Seduction is that which extracts meaning from discourse and detracts it from its truth” (Baudrillard 152). It is slippery, a play of images and appearances, with nothing at its heart. The seductive image is illusory; even a story of human suffering, for example, is reducible to a desirable commodity.<sup>7</sup>

To seduce is to weaken... to falter. We seduce with weakness... we enact this weakness, and through it seduction derives its power.

We seduce with our death, with our vulnerability, and with the void that haunts us. The secret is to know how to make use of death, in the absence of the gaze, in the absence of gesture, in the absence of knowledge, or in the absence of meaning.

...Seduction... makes a game of [weakness], with its own rules. (165)

To make a commodity of personal weakness therefore becomes a form of seduction. Exploiting weakness is to seduce, and be seduced, by tragedy and death: “the

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<sup>6</sup> Scruton does not use “fantasy” here to refer to a fictional genre but to advertising images.

<sup>7</sup> Augusten Burrough's memoirs, *Dry*, about his battle with alcoholism is promoted on the cover as “uber-cool”.

meaninglessness that is the sudden charm of seduction” (166). If this is problematic, it is not within the scope of the advertising industry to question it because “we live in nonsense, and if simulation is its disenchanting form, seduction is its enchanted form” (167). As Kim Hill says, “everything is conspiring to prove to us... nothing is real”.

The four accounts of postmodernism are stark, but indicate why Le Guin may call our era one of “incredible realities”. Lyotard’s analysis erodes truth narratives, Scruton sees the destruction of culture, Bauman the breakdown of society and Baudrillard the demise of reality. Bauman describes the “kaleidoscope-like twinkle and glimmer” of the city that is “a bane and a curse” (89). It attracts with excitement and novelty and repulses with a gaping hole beneath its glittering mask. The world of the simulacrum is a world of shadowy appearances, a “chorus of disconsolate ghosts” (Scruton 52), of spectres of inadequacy and elusive phantoms, of “the frightening ghost of uncertainty” (Bauman 58, 65, 85), of empty masks. The glitzy carnival resembles the “danse macabre”, a dance of masked images that are in fact death. Olsen points out that postmodernism also liberates us, granting the freedom of possibilities.

Bauman wonders whether the lasting likeness of the postmodern condition will be autonomy and freedom or the bane of fear and crushing, undefined responsibility (*Fragments* 8). The ambivalence, or hesitation, over these two possibilities exemplifies two faces of the age of uncertainty.

### ***A Comedy of Carnivals; a Tragedy of Tricksters***

The gap between what is apparent and what is real goes beyond advertising. Wayne Booth, writing in the early 1960s, says that literary audiences have been “thrown off balance by a barrage of ironic works”. With experience:

readers became more and more sensitive about their oversights and suspicious of all claims to reliability... we now look for distance [between author and narrator] everywhere. We have been caught once too often. (*Rhetoric* 366-367)

Being “caught out”, not recognising the gap between appearance and reality (in literature and elsewhere), and the naivete it “shows up”, makes a “fool” of us as the Fool (also referred to as “Clown”) makes a fool of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. Malvolio cannot see through false appearances, accepting things at face value. In order not to become a naive fool we may become an ironic Fool, whose intentions are obscure. The Fool is knowing, sophisticated and sceptical, surfing on the edge of the wave, and never wears his heart on his designer sleeve. Similarly, the gap is stretched between public faces and personal uncertainties. Gullibility is weakness; it is to believe what is professed to be true, even to believe that truth is possible. In Booth’s words, “Clarity and simplicity are suspect; irony reigns supreme” (372).

Radical scepticism is a guard against a battering of lies and half-truths, a web of doctored signifiers called “spin”. The Fool says, “A sentence is but a cheveril glove to a good wit: how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward!” The repartee here between the Fool and Viola is full of wit (in both senses). But as Viola says in response to the Fool (although she herself is implicated in false appearances), “they that dally nicely with words may quickly make them wanton” (III.1.14-19). There are, she suggests, ethical implications to deceptions, inversions and verbal play.

Shakespeare allows the carnivalesque inversions to run their course; this is a comedy. Pompous Malvolio is brought low and Olivia falls in love with Viola. But ultimately Olivia’s moral judgement calls the ironic Fool, clever and disinterested, to account for his actions. In a play that plays with false appearances and deceptions, Olivia declares that Malvolio has been “most notoriously abused” (V.1.376). Whether or not we agree with her, his humiliation, and her judgement of it, places a moral boundary around the carnival.

If Shakespeare were a postmodern writer, the fool Malvolio would not be reinstated into his former role, and the Fool, ironic, unknowable, with a fluid identity, would not relinquish his carnival crown and sceptre. A self constructed out of half-truths, acting a part as the Fool does, or a self as a commodity, even a self as image or mask covering a void, is a self suffering from what Bauman calls “existential uncertainty” and it gives birth to “the most harrowing contemporary fears” (*Liquid Times* 92). In Bauman’s analysis this is a result of social alienation from what he refers to as “negative globalisation”, but I think existential uncertainty reaches deeper than the breakdown of society; it is also a personal breakdown of meaning and values.

I have already illustrated the two faces of postmodernism with Sendak’s and Dahl’s picture books. Olsen identifies “a deep ambivalence with their own premises” at the heart of postmodern fantasies; “an oscillation at least and a contradiction at most” between affirming deconstructive free play and a nostalgic dread of “pure freedom” that dreams of some limits (3, 4). Where carnival is associated with comic reversals and freedom (Sendak’s Max), malevolent tricksters (Dahl’s Miss Hood) can invert comedy to tragedy. This theme is embedded in Margaret Mahy’s adolescent fantasy in which three tricksters, the Carnival brothers, challenge and destroy the security of family life.

*The Tricksters* was first published in 1986. It belongs to a decade that overturned many of the restrictions and certainties of the past; the height of the postmodern era of turning tables and changes to the weft and warp of society. Old moral “standards” collapsed under a deluge of legal and social reforms. *The Tricksters* belongs to the uncanny subgenre of fantasy where the realism of the story is fractured, not by entry to another world that is real to the story, but by the intrusion of another reality that may or

may not be fantastic. Whether certain episodes occur in the imagination of the protagonist, Harry, or are supernatural intrusions is unanswered.

The Carnival brothers break into Harry's family's life while on their Christmas holiday at the beach. The carnival is a prevailing motif throughout the story: from the seasonal reversal of a traditional English winter Christmas festival to a Southern hemisphere summer, to the uncanny appearance of the brothers who are, and are not, the ghost of a boy who drowned at the beach decades earlier and haunts the holiday house, to the gender reversal of Harry (a girl) into the male personalities of the brothers. The brothers are also connected with a fictional character Harry has invented to express her sexual fantasies. Belen is a monster of myth — part-man, part-bird — a monster who devours women with “thrilling violations” (121). Mahy's story contains the carnival, finally, but leaves swells of uncertainty in its wake.

Mahy's world is a deeply uncertain world, one in which old comfortable certainties have corroded and decayed. The parents, (apparently) the solid centre of the (apparently) happy family, threaten to fall apart. Naomi, the mother, is disconcerted by the Carnivals and their “circus act”, as Jack, the father, describes it. Begging her to allow them to stay, and seeing her relent, Ovid (the most articulate brother) declares, “Tolerance triumphs!” “. . .while Naomi's mouth hung open uncertainly”. Naomi “looked startled and uncertain, as if something had been tossed around over her head and then thrown away before she could even be sure of what it was” (212). Naomi is the moral heart of the family, but has been thrown off centre by Jack's fathering of a child to his daughter's friend. Something has been discarded and she is only subliminally aware of it. Naomi's profound uncertainty mimics, I believe, the moral uncertainty of her — and her author's — world, while Ovid's declaration that “tolerance triumphs” is a moral code that leaves some important questions unanswered. Uncertainty also pervades the sense of time in the novel as the present collapses into the past (187) and the past haunts the present (290). Harry's childhood is falling away from her and she is uncertain how to become a woman. Reality and fiction blur; Harry is a writer who conjures the Carnival ghosts out of her words (254). Events are never entirely what they seem and people are not how they appear, disguised by fancy dress (239) or “made up” by other people (241). Meaning is dislocated. When his wife says that this may be a meaningful Christmas, Jack exclaims, “what a terrible word! . . .Forget ‘meaningful’. I don't expect anything to mean anything any more” (130).

Carnavalesque disruptions are connected with the imagination and the imagination is connected to magic. As Harry has reached into the depths of the sea and grasped the dead Teddy's hand, pulling him out of a submerged cave in the form of the Carnival brothers, she has “squeezed not just a hand but her whole self between the lines

of her book and found space for wild and sweeping games, magical acts” (254-255). Harry confesses that she likes to destroy equilibrium and destroys the fragile balance of the family, plunging them over the precipice into chaos. Mahy twists riddles and false appearances into the fabric of her fantasy. A fancy dress party is enacted on the edge of the sea, described as a “magic land” (239). At the party Ovid Carnival describes himself as a riddle (250) and one of the characters, describing the past and its impact on the future says, “Old riddles are like splinters. They work their own way out because they want to be answered” (253).

Amoral aliens haunt postmodern culture. The Carnival brothers have come from the sea and are ghostly visitors with no moral code. After Hadfield Carnival attempts to rape Harry, she hears the brothers discuss what happened. “Harry was completely disarmed by their lack of shame. The night-time act, threatening and dangerous, lost its reality under such flippant treatment” (139). Like the Fool in *Twelfth Night*, whose ridicule of Malvolio is humorous but cruel, carnivalesque amorality slips slickly over the fine line drawn between tragedy and comedy.

Postmodern fantasy, with its fluidity of language and experience, is literature’s deconstruction refusing synthesis and meaning, says Olsen. Similarly, Rosemary Jackson argues that the gap between the sign and the possibility of a “‘real’, absolute signified” is a “major defining feature of the fantastic” (38). This gap “dramatises the impossibility of arriving at definitive meaning, or absolute ‘reality’” (41). Both Olsen and Jackson are writing about adult fantasy but *The Tricksters* likewise resists both meaning and synthesis. It belongs to a fluid world: the sea is the backdrop of the novel.

Olsen describes fantasy as “radical scepticism and hesitation” but suggests that “alongside the deconstructive impulse surfaces another, a humanistic longing, a humane despair”. “Alongside the freedom of freeplay there arises a nostalgia for the universe of compensation and redemption... where the self is coherent and language can say” (117). This analysis that juxtaposes freedom (carnival) with loss (tragedy) was, like *The Tricksters* and Jackson’s book, written in the 1980s. The two impulses, one towards a carnival that allows closure and meaning and the other towards a carnival without closure, endlessly deferring meaning, recur in children’s fantasy narratives today — but with an important difference. The closure of a moral frame is no longer a nostalgic longing; its loss is generally accepted. There is no return to reassuring metanarratives, or looking back at past culture and society. Reality is still a puzzle; uncertainty bleeds over the edges of the canvas. Instead, as I argue in my final chapter, ethos is a magical light conjured from inner conviction that illuminates the protagonists’ faltering steps.

## A Moral Life of Continuous Uncertainty

Postmodernism, I have suggested, goes further than destabilising truth and reality, it demolishes their traditional foundations. The perspectives I discussed in the last section — narrative truth, culture, social cohesion and reality — throw up important questions with regards to ethics. In this section I concentrate on ethics to deepen my analysis of moral uncertainty and its relationship with contemporary children's fantasy fiction.

Postmodern society is perched, precariously, on the edge of uncertainty. "Moral life is a life of continuous uncertainty," says Bauman (*Fragments* 287). Lyotard suggests we must retrieve justice from postmodern deconstruction, but in the face of endemic uncertainty, what ethics can be retrieved? "Where," he asks, "after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?" The efficiency that drives power structures provides "no relevance for judging what is true or just" (xxv). "Consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value. But justice as a value is neither outmoded nor suspect. We must therefore arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus" (68). This is Lyotard's conclusion in *The Postmodern Condition*; he does not, however, suggest ways we can retrieve an "idea and practice of justice" from political expediency or the variability of popular opinion. It remains a crucial question.

Bauman sees ethics as inevitably founded on uncertainty. Uncertainty is "a permanent condition of life... it is the very soil in which the moral self takes root and grows". Like Lyotard he is concerned about political fickleness. Lurching from issue to issue, government responses tend to be "fragmentary, episodic and inconsequential" and political "commitments are until further notice, and eternal rights are as mortal as eternity itself has become" (*Fragments* 282). "We now seem to require an entirely new brand of ethics", he says, that takes account of a vast chain of consequences; and a new categorical imperative: "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life" (280). Therefore, guided by a cautious "principle of uncertainty", ethics is a political task demanding "more autonomy for *individual* moral selves and more vigorous sharing of *collective* responsibilities" (286). Permanent uncertainty is wedded to moral responsibility that is unconditional and infinite (287). Ethical values are reinstated on a contradiction.

Likewise Janet Wolff suggests that morality can only be based on uncertainty. "The challenge for moral and political philosophers today is to establish a new discourse of value without a foundation in certainties or universals" (5). The way toward this is to take "principled positions" in response to "the paralysing effects of postmodernism's 'refusal of hierarchy and certainty'" (Squires qtd. 22). "Principled positions" are not absolute, but emerge from shared communal life. "Rather than defending absolute or

essential moralities and political values, postcritical thought focuses on the emergence and development of shared discourses of value in the context of community” (23).

Conversely, Scruton asserts the importance of redemption from “cultural uncertainty”. “We no longer know what to do or what to feel; the meaninglessness of our world is a projection of our numbness towards it” (134). Knowing what to do and how to feel is the basis of virtue, an ethical vision imparted by art and religion, providing “emotional certainty” which is the foundation of social life (15). Although Scruton concedes there are probably no actual grounds for certainty, we still need the consolation that imagination provides because “consolation from imaginary things is not an imaginary consolation” (18). “High culture” (art with serious intentions) offers us a vision of a “higher life” and shows us the passage “from emotional isolation to full and answerable membership” (135). Communicating our ethical obligations has traditionally been the task of religion and art, but when the gods die, art must take over the role. I return to Scruton’s proposition in my conclusion because, although I disagree with many of his points, and I am sure he would banish children’s fantasy fiction from the elite circles of “high culture”, aspects of his argument provide useful footholds for thought.

Peter Barry, writing of Baudrillard, pushes his radical scepticism that dislocates sign and reality to ethical judgement. Questioning how one can then respond to suffering, he says, “without a belief in some of the concepts which postmodernism undercuts — history, reality, and truth, for instance — we may well find ourselves in some pretty repulsive company” (89-90). The trickster walks a fine line between comedy and tragedy.

Ethics is enacted by individuals in the social sphere, unsteadily positioned between inner ethical conviction and social behaviour. To quote Bauman:

More than two centuries after the Enlightenment promise to legislate for an ethical and humane society, we are left, each of us, with our own individual conscience and sentiment of responsibility as the only resource with which to struggle to make life more moral than it is. And yet we find this resource depleted and squeezed by the unholy alliance of tremendous forces. (*Fragments* 278)

The uncertainty of ethics today is both individual and social. The dilemma of postmodernism is whether any personal or communal ethical certainties can be retrieved or if the conditions of our diverse, globalised society render all moral certainties obsolete. Lyotard suggests that consensus is not a reliable process for upholding important values like justice. Premodern philosophy accepted absolute markers for morality; Enlightenment philosophers founded moral truth on reason and human nature. If religion, humanism, rationalism and science are crumbling edifices then ethics is also on shaky ground. I am not convinced that Wolff, Bauman or Scruton provide an approach to ethics that answers Lyotard’s proposition that we need “an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus”. An ethics of shared communal life (Wolff), collective

responsibility (Bauman) or artistically-inspired ideals (Scruton) does not transcend the shared discourses of the majority nor ensure justice, as history forcefully demonstrates.

### *Accounts of Good and Evil*

Accounts of moral uncertainty have not sprung up in a vacuum and they cannot be easily dismissed. In this section I will briefly provide some historical context for postmodern moral uncertainty.

Many ancient mythologies recount the origin of good and evil. Today we are inclined to explain morality through psychology, biology or sociology. Rooted in humanism, these disciplines refer to “functional” or “normal” behaviours, or “dysfunction” or “sociopathology”. Myth, on the other hand, usually explains good and evil as a metaphysical struggle, extending beyond human causes but implicating humans within it. Some religious traditions assert the supremacy of an ultimate good at enmity with evil, explaining evil as originating in freedom of choice (for example, religions in the Judaic tradition). Other traditions assert a primeval and radical conflict between good and evil, light and darkness, where neither has supremacy (for example, Persian Manichean dualism).

Ethical philosophy is more concerned with why we should and how we can be moral than how ethics originated. It is well beyond my scope to delve much into ethical philosophy although many “common-sense” ideas about ethics have filtered into popular thinking from philosophical origins. Sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, these ideas infiltrate children’s fiction. To illuminate how the writers negotiate moral uncertainty in their fantasies, in subsequent chapters I sometimes refer to ethical philosophy. These ideas have arisen as a part of ongoing, over centuries, even millennia, debate. To contextualise ethical philosophy I lean heavily on philosophers writing about other philosophers or literary critics reading philosophers. Sometimes I engage with philosophers’ writings directly.

Theorising ethics goes much further back into ancient history than the Greeks (the Hebrew Ten Commandments are still considered to be foundational to ethics in some sections of society) but Plato and Aristotle analysed the fundamental question “Why be moral?” Plato believed that virtues like justice have a perfect “form” that we perceive in shadow; genuine knowledge of perfect Good is therefore available to us and exists independently of human choice (Stangroom 14). In answer to the question, “Why should I be moral?” Plato replies that traditional virtues are aspects of underlying psychic harmony within individuals, so that practising virtue is the best life for humans, a happy and flourishing one (Honderich 587). Aristotle argued that the good life is an ethical goal, arising from friendship (Stangroom 18) and happiness is the ultimate end of human

action (Honderich 587). Character mimics behaviour which forms habits; how we repeatedly act makes all the difference to who we are ('Moral Virtue' 27).<sup>8</sup> Greek philosophy influenced Christianity, and through the Middle Ages until the Enlightenment a blend of Greek and Christian ethics dominated, the natural world (including the moral world) based on foundational God-given laws and principles. Morality was certain and fixed, contained within the law of God.<sup>9</sup>

The Enlightenment produced moral philosophy grounded entirely in nature. Disagreement arose over whether morality is motivated by self-love or benevolence. Hobbes, advocating self-interest, argued that "all human passions are manifestations of the desire for good for oneself" necessitating a social contract backed by political authority (Honderich 588). Conversely, Clarke advocated the ethical certainty of "universal benevolence, to promote the welfare and happiness" of all (qtd. in Honderich 588). Many other thinkers likewise disputed Hobbes's assumptions about human nature. Hume's key concept was "sympathy": the capacity to share others' feelings guiding moral judgements (589). Bentham's utilitarianism argued that increasing or diminishing general happiness is the criterion for justice.

Kant opposed both ethics based on natural inclinations (sympathy) and teleological ethics (utilitarianism). He is probably best known, in his contribution to ethics, for his Categorical Imperatives: "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" and "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only" (qtd. in Rachels 115). This last imperative most directly counters utilitarianism; people are never a means to end but have basic moral rights (Honderich 589). Kant asserts the moral certainty of duty based in reason.

Morality founded on the certainty of essential goodness, or God, to morality founded on the certainty of reason and human nature was a radical shift in the Enlightenment. Nineteenth century philosophers reacted against reason as the basis for moral certainty: Hegel viewed ethics as essentially a social phenomenon (590), and Nietzsche went further still to suggest that there is no such thing as "morality" — only different moralities. These philosophies, along with acceptance of scientific verifiability and behaviourism (questioning any moral meaning intrinsic to life), strongly influenced twentieth century thinking. Existentialism asserts individual authenticity which "arises from the abyss of nothing", that is, the anticipation of death; "an impassioned freedom

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<sup>8</sup> The influence of Plato's ethics is apparent in Lewis's *Narnia* series and of Aristotle's in the philosophy of Dumbledore in *Harry Potter*.

<sup>9</sup> This belief explicitly underpins Milton's *Paradise Lost* (which I discuss in Chapter 5) in which good and evil are polarised and take on personal forms in the Son and the devil.

towards death” says Heidegger (qtd. 260). For both Heidegger and Sartre “Radical Freedom” is rooted in nothingness (628). Turgenev invented the term “ethical nihilism”: “[t]he extreme view that there is no justification for values and, in particular, no justification for morality” (623). Relativism argues that morality is socially specific — there can therefore be no absolute criteria for moral judgement generally accepting that tolerance is the moral virtue (758). Recent influential French ethical philosophy has grown out of existentialism and Hegel’s phenomenology and takes account of historical atrocities. Levinas, for example, argues that ethics must be based on alterity, an encounter with the transcendent Other (481).

Wall suggests that there are four philosophical perspectives that cause tensions in ethical theory: ontological (“a creative self in history”, for example, virtue ethics); teleological (looking towards a goal or purpose, an ethics of consequences, for example, utilitarianism); deontological (an ethics of obligation and responsibility, from the word “dei” which means “one must”, for example, Kantian and rights ethics); practical (concerned with systems of social power, for example, Marxist ethics) (19). While each of these perspectives has disputes with the other perspectives, they also contain internal inconsistencies that demand resolutions.

Ethical philosophy today is therefore splintered into strong contradictory arguments. A “common-sense philosophy” of everyday life probably appropriates aspects of many of these: existentialism (we need to be true to ourselves), relativism (we need to be tolerant of others), logical positivism (behaviours need to be modified into acceptable channels — especially in the case of criminals and children), rights theories (we all have certain inalienable rights), virtue ethics (it is important to be a well-meaning person, doing good to others and living productively), utilitarianism (we distribute benefits so they can be enjoyed by the maximum number of people, or we remove the rights of a few to ensure the protection of many). While more extreme philosophical arguments such as nihilism or alterity are less widely subscribed to, they find their way into our thinking through art and popular culture, burrowing down into the nest of contradictory ethical beliefs. These contradictions inevitably provide an unsteady and inconclusive base for ethical judgements.

I have referred to “ethics” and “morality” — both loaded words in their common use. Even in academic writing either of these words can be used, pejoratively, to refer to repressive, legalistic judgement. Both words have their roots in “customs”: “ethics” derives from Greek from which we also get “ethos” and “morality” from Latin, from which we also get “mores” (Singer 5). Ethics commonly means the rules or principles that guide a group’s actions or the “the systematic study of reasoning about how we ought to act”. Morality usually refers to guiding rules and principles (4). Influenced by

convention, I generally use “ethics” to refer to structured thinking about right and wrong and “morality” to the everyday practice of making ethical decisions — neither is pejorative. Occasionally I refer to a repressive moral regime as “moralism”.

Francis Spufford, in his autobiographical account of reading, says that while engrossed in the pages of a book, the world made moral sense, but when he turned back to the real world, “evil would revert to being an unsolved problem” (18). “Evil” in the real world remains an unsolved problem, I believe: the evil outside us, but even more the evil within. Would our convictions stand inviolable against overwhelming political and social wrongs?

Existentialism, from Kierkegaard, through Heidegger, to Sartre, acknowledges the abyss—nothingness at the core of life, death, annihilation, the nothing that is (or the nothing that is nothing) — we must face to find our authentic selves. This theme emerges in different forms: the gaping hole of trauma, of death, of alienation, the abyss of meaninglessness, the hungry gap of unfilled and insatiable desire, negation, absence, the mocking gap between appearance and intention in irony. It is also the ugly human abyss of tyranny and cruelty. Plausible accounts of ethics need to acknowledge this abyss that used to be called “hell” or “evil” or was personified as a devil — although a black hole may be a more acceptable metaphor than hell.

Bronowski’s image of a murky pond that tells a tragic story is powerful. Uncertainty can be a hell, but certainty can create hell. Uncertainty for Bronowski is hesitation, silence and a gap. It is deference, humility and willingness to listen. Uncertainty takes us to a precipice on the edge of hell and also into a pond where hell is remembered. Carnavalesque postmodern uncertainty has two faces, as does moral uncertainty: one negative and the other positive. Paradoxically, Bronowski pleads with utter conviction and persuasion — with what appears to be absolute certainty — that we, his audience, should keep uncertainty before us and be intolerant of intolerance. Hepburn writes:

It has sometimes been said that moral relativism gives special support to toleration as a moral attitude to codes which diverge from one’s own. Paradoxically, however, if that were accepted as a universal (and universally morally approvable) attitude, it would contradict the relativism which disallows any universally authoritative principles! (in Honderich 758).

Paradoxes are often found under the surface of a problem. Logic struggles with paradox, demanding clarity and transparency. But ponds are also portals, as this scene from Bronowski’s series suggests, showing us the photos of individual victims; we can only grasp the significance of this tragedy by seeing each face as a unique narrative. The pond is a portal and the portal is story.

## **Narrative: A Portal to Another World**

In *The Magician's Nephew*, C.S. Lewis describes a wood between the worlds. It is a peaceful place where nothing ever happens; it is the interface between worlds. In the wood, the portals to these worlds are small ponds into which characters jump, wearing an appropriate magic ring. Imagination is a silent waiting wood and the ponds are stories and the meanings we create out of them. Sometimes we jump into a story but find that we are splashing in a shallow puddle — the story doesn't engage our imagination and our reflection is therefore shallow. But sometimes we can plunge deep into the story and find a whole magical and moral world of meaning and, having found it, we return transformed.

### ***In the Beginning, Once Upon a Time...***

From earliest history, myths have provided a sense of community and transmitted shared cultural meanings. Myths express “our defining drive to make a metaphor, to “tell a story”, a drive that continues to characterise the human species”; they deal with “the cultural and collective inner life of the human quest for self-identity” (Leeming vi). Through story the outer (social) and inner (personal) worlds meet. Myths express deep cultural anxieties and ask metaphysical questions. Functioning simultaneously as entertainment and education, stories instil traditional wisdom by shared imaginative participation. Individuals walk alongside heroes and heroines in foreign landscapes learning invaluable life-lessons along the way.

Humans seem to have an insatiable need to impose order on the chaos of the world. While science searches for physical order, stories construct psychological and social order. Through narrative random events are given shape and a meaning that is larger than we are. Mythologist William Doty explains Aristotle's use of “mythos” as “that most important of dramatic elements, “plot”, the significant arrangement of events” (Leeming vi). The plotting of events, both reconstructed (in histories) and imagined (in stories), weights them with symbolic significance and meaning. Threads of universal themes are woven into their fabrication which is why stories can outlive the societies that produced them.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Kearney develops this idea, suggesting that translating nature into narrative transforms biological life into human life. Stories mimic human life; plots, with their beginning, middle and end, follow the sequence of birth, life and death. But stories also transcend the finality of death in their re-telling, echoing the on-going cycle of generations: life that gives birth to new life before it dies. The life narrative is repeated over and over as the story is re-told (*Stories* 3).

Poetry, Aristotle says, “is more philosophical and serious than history. Poetry describes the universal, whereas history deals with particulars” (*Poetics* 9). Myths often blur the distinction between true and untrue, telling not only historical stories, but also “telling stories” in the childish sense, making them up, pretending they are real. “Telling stories” has moral implications, suggesting pretence, untruths and exaggerations. “Telling stories” is intentional lying and this seems to be Plato’s objection to them. (Dawkins’s objection is educative rather than moral.) Making up stories about people who have never lived and events that have never happened seems to be a universal phenomenon; not only are stories universal, but Aristotle suggests (elevating them above true histories) their themes transcend time and space. The themes of Homer still speak eloquently today; while cultural values and attitudes have radically changed, the characters’ responses to ethical dilemmas are deeply familiar. These emotional resonances (that surprise us when they leap out of ancient texts) transmit values at the level of meaning and can be difficult to extricate from the story (although literary critics try).

Stories both reproduce (existing) and produce (new) social values. Values are most reliably transmitted, I suggest, when embedded in stories. Stories awaken the imagination and emotions together and readers/ listeners of stories are opened up to receive the moral meanings that stories evoke.

Ethical experiences of good and evil need to be felt upon the pulse of shared emotions. The horrible must *strike* the audience as horrible. It must provoke us to *identify* and *empathise* with the victims. And this requires an act of moral — because morally outraged and scandalised — *imagining*. (Kearney, *Poetics* 253)

Art invokes moral power through imagination. The power of story expands the known world, travelling into regions where dragons dwell. Moral judgements can be honed more acutely through imaginatively battling — or flying — with metaphorical dragons than through rational analysis.

All stories exhibit the author’s “implied judgements about how to live and what to believe about how to live”, says Wayne Booth.

[W]e are at least partially constructed, in our most fundamental moral character, by... the stories we have really listened to. Their authors built their stories by creating characters, characters exhibiting an ethos that could be thought of as a collection of virtues and vices, presented as admirable or contemptible. (“Ethical Turn” 19)

Stories persuade by their emotional force. Raimond Gaita argues that, unlike our rational acceptance of scientific theory, we accept moral advice through the “voice” or manner in which morality is conveyed: “what is said is not extractable from the manner of its disclosure. In matters of value we often learn by being moved” (*Good and Evil*

268). If moral responsiveness — being moved, and being willing to be moved — is intrinsic to moral education, then story and ethics are closely bound together.

Imaginary stories influence real people, shaping their ethos (ethical character) — but only if they glean personal meaning from them. Rather than passive recipients of stories, readers are active participants, responding emotionally, critically and creatively. Stories have been used historically to influence and educate for good and evil, but their educational success is never assured. Stories work subtly, through pleasure and desires — pleasure in a well-told story and desires that are aroused by, and usually (but not inevitably) become aligned with, the characters in the story. Plots develop through life-defining choices which readers judge. Active moral judgement is practised imaginatively as we enter through the portal of story — but can be fraught, especially in contemporary narratives, where lines between “good” and “bad” are frequently smudged.

### ***The “Great Secret Space” Between the Pages***

The intersection of story and reality — how stories shape us — is difficult, perhaps impossible, to ascertain empirically. Dawkins worries about the possible pernicious effect of fantasy on children’s rational thought. I have claimed that mythos (story) and ethos (ethical character as it is revealed through choice) are tightly linked and that as stories awaken readers’ imaginations they are moved, provoking them to use and develop their critical and ethical judgement. To substantiate that claim I will turn to readers’ accounts of how story entangles itself with reality and shapes ethical lives.

Replying to the Dawkins interview, Philip Pullman suggests that to ascertain the effect of fantasy on children we “just have to trust what people tell us”. If they confirm that stories have “nourished their imagination and helped shape their moral understanding” then we have to accept that. He predicts that stories can enhance both language competency and other intellectual competencies “including science”, whereas children who are deprived of stories are “not likely to flourish at all” (“Dawkins” 13). This position is affirmed in *Bleak House*. In Dickens’s novel, not only are stories essential for children’s flourishing, but their deprivation is a form of abuse that counters evolution. The house of Smallweed “discarded all amusements, discountenanced all story-books, fairy tales, fictions, and fables, and banished all levities whatsoever”. The monstrosities spawned by this story-less regime are mercilessly described as “complete little men and women... observed to bear a likeness to old monkeys with something depressing on their minds” (333). One such child “never owned a doll, never heard of Cinderella, never played any game... She seemed like an animal of another species... It is very doubtful whether Judy knows how to laugh” (335). The reader is torn between laughing (the reader knows how to laugh) and pitying the girl (she has, after all, been

raised with shocking neglect). Deformed by the denial of her imagination, she has regressed into a pre-human state, failing to evolve from biological to human life. Imagination, Dickens whispers subliminally to us, is the higher life, not sterile rationalism. Cinderella's fairy godmother's wand really does transform us — into thinking, feeling, creative people.

Dickens associates stories with pleasure. Pleasure is central to stories; when they are shared stories are an intimate experience, whereas solitary reading is an inward pleasure. Alberto Manguel describes his childhood reading of stories as a “*comprehensive joy*” (150). Pullman describes travelling with his heroes in “that great secret space opening up between my mind and the pages”. Rather than believing they were real, “I was *pretending* they were real in order to enjoy being with them in imagination” (10).

Imaginative and moral development are inter-linked, Pullman claims. Acting out stories “of heroism and sacrifice” he built “patterns of behaviour and expectation” into his moral understanding. “I might fall short if ever I was really called on, but at least I'd know what was the right thing to do”. He wanted to “be in the story” as himself, “but a better myself” (6-8). But reading took Pullman even deeper. He felt “private and secret” about his “dear friends”, the Moomin fantasy family, feeling “nothing less than love” for them; something he barely understood (10). Loving fictional characters to this extent seems to confuse real and unreal worlds. But Pullman denies confusion; his imagination invested meaning into the characters and he fiercely guarded the privacy of his imaginary world. He was, as Gaita expresses it, moved by the story.

Francis Spufford refers to reading as his “inward autobiography”:

[T]he words we take into our selves help to shape us. They help form the questions we think are worth asking; they shift around the boundaries of the sayable inside us...; their potent images... dart new bridges into being between our conscious and unconscious minds, between what we know, and the knowledge we cannot examine by thinking. They build and stretch and build again the chambers of our imagination. (21-22)

Marshall Gregory even claims he was “mostly raised by the stories [he] read” (4). Stories “were richer in ideas and feelings” than his relationships in real life offered (5).

[A] life steeped in stories opens wide the door of our minds and hearts, mostly without our thinking much about it, to an infiltration of potential influence that moment by moment and story by story feels very slight, but that cumulatively and incrementally contributes powerfully to the formation of human souls. (22)

Stories unlock, invade and release our imaginations into other possible worlds.

Anna Quindlen reiterates these ideas and makes a connection with her moral development:

In books I have travelled, not only to other worlds, but into my own. I learned who I was and who I wanted to be, what I might aspire to, and

what I might dare to dream about my world and myself. More powerfully and persuasively than from the 'shalt nots' of the Ten Commandments, I learned the difference between good and evil, right and wrong. (6)

Reading is a process of taking "the measure of ourselves" (13), a deeply internal work forged in silence. This imaginative work is a bridge between an (unreal) story and (real) ethical character.

Children and adolescents actively search for meaning in stories. Bruno Bettelheim says of his adolescent reading, "I wanted books which would suggest how the horrors of the world at large could be rectified, rather than merely escape from such horrors"; books that would fill his need to "help me form my own judgements" (*Recollections* 104). Forming judgements about, and responses to, the world with all its contradictions is a hidden work that is crucial to shaping ethical character and determining how we live in society. It is probably justifiable, then, to treat stories with suspicion, as disruptive and potentially dangerous, penetrating our inner beings and nestling inside us seductively and companionably, filling our subterranean emptiness with meanings.

Spufford likens reading to an addiction, an attempt to fill a need, a "hungry gap" (11). Like Marshall, he had a troubled childhood that he escaped by reading. Where Spufford's gaping hole was opened up by childhood trauma, for Kearney "the gaping hole" is existential uncertainty. Stories were invented, he claims:

to fill "the gaping hole within us, to assuage our fear and dread, to try to give answers to the great unanswerable questions of existence: Who are we? Where do we come from?... In seeking to provide responses to such unfathomable conundrums — both physical and metaphysical — the great tales and legends gave not only relief from everyday darkness but also pleasure and enchantment. (*Stories* 6-7)

Stories therefore address real "fear and dread" but also bewitch and delight us with their tales from another world, a world that is, however, familiar and mimics our own. The sure knowledge of our mortality is overlaid with a narrative's pleasure as that which is distant (the hero's adventures), and that which is close (our own experience of life) meet face-to-face. In fiction, "[l]ife conflicts with something that is not life", says Virginia Woolf (107). If fiction simply reflects life, she argues, it would have very limited interest; good fiction transcends the particular life with its "integrity"; "the conviction that [the novelist] gives one that this is the truth" (108). Stories "describe the universal" (as Aristotle claimed). Moreover, nature has provided us with an "inner light" by which to judge the story's integrity. "When one... sees it come to life one exclaims in rapture, But this is what I have always felt and known and desired!" (108-109). And so the story does not die with the hero, or in closing the book, but is reborn in the reader's rapturous recognition of the universal contained within the particular.

Stories therefore evoke a creative response.

The common reader... is guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of whole... He never ceases, as he reads, to run up some rickety and ramshackle fabric... (11)

Woolf's tone is self-effacing but she identifies what I believe is a key concept in reading: running up "some rickety and ramshackle fabric" to create a whole. Stories conjure a world, but the common, creative reader rebuilds their world. Gregory Maguire describes this in his fantasy story, *What-the-Dickens*.

From whatever realm of faerie [the original Tooth Fairy] had blundered, she had to make herself up anew in this new world. So she listened hard [to the story]. And she began to evolve, because stories work their magic that way. They build conviction and erode conviction in equal measure. (114-115)

Fiction allows readers to enter an imagined world which reconstructs the real world. "[N]arrative, rather than referring to 'reality', may in fact create or constitute it, as when 'fiction' creates a 'world' of its own", Bruner says (13).<sup>11</sup> Kearney explains mimesis as "...a creative redescription of the world such that hidden patterns and hitherto unexplored meanings can unfold". Mimesis "is essentially tied to mythos" which is "the transformative plotting of scattered events into a new paradigm" (12).<sup>12</sup> The relationships between real and unreal, reader and story, particular and universal are not tidy equations but a cauldron into which are thrown odds and ends of narrative fragments and which sometimes yields the alchemist's gold. In this case, gold is the reader's creation of ethical meaning and transformed ethos.

Even the most banal stories open a gap between immediate experience and their redescription of the world. In this gap, Pullman's "great secret space" or Lewis's wood between the worlds, the imagination works at making sense of the story, judging characters and creating possible ethical meanings.

[W]hile narrative imagination enables us to empathise with those characters in the story who act and suffer, it also provides us with a certain aesthetic distance from which to view the events unfolding, thereby discerning 'the hidden cause of things'.... It is this curious conflation of empathy and detachment which produces in us... the double vision necessary for a journey beyond the closed ego towards other possibilities of being. (Kearney 12)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jerome Bruner suggests that both understanding and creating story are instinctual: "narrative comprehension is among the earliest powers of mind to appear in the young child and among the most widely used forms of organising human experience" (9). Storytelling gives random events a form and structure - a plot - and invites interpretation, or "hermeneutic composability" (Bruner 7).

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricoeur calls this "the synthesis of the heterogeneous" (qtd. in Kearney 12).

<sup>13</sup> Kearney is writing here about catharsis. The scale of real tragedy can be overwhelming to the point of being unutterable. Storytelling contains the random cruelty of tragedy within a narrative frame with the promise of an end; not necessarily a happy end but an end to the tragedy as it is

“Double vision”, simultaneously seeing the real and unreal, close and distant, goes by various names in literary analysis; its smallest unit is metaphor.<sup>14</sup> “Other possibilities of being” are what John Wall refers to as “moral creativity” or “the poetics of possibility” (*Moral Creativity*). This goes much further than recognising the universal in the particular, or the real in the unreal. Narratives rub against us as we walk, empathetically, in the shoes of the protagonist, blistering our feet, demanding that we accommodate ourselves to the story’s fit. But even while we are deeply engaged with the protagonist, we retain the (critical) distance of our own perspective, and it is in the gap between the story and where we sit that we actively transform our inner lives.

### ***Near and Far: Creating Personal Meaning from a Distant Text***

I have argued that postmodernism has bestowed on us a crisis of ethical meaning. Furthermore, various theorists have posited the impossibility of establishing any authoritative (including ethical) meanings in texts.<sup>15</sup> Based on adults’ accounts of their childhood reading, in the last section I suggested that imaginative and emotional engagement with stories create moral meaning for readers. In this section I will develop my argument further, claiming that moral meaning is not simply personal and idiosyncratic (although it is these things) but that texts have an ethical character, or ethos. While I accept that there is no authoritative moral interpretation of a text, I suggest that attentive readings indicate moral pathways for thought opened up by the text’s ethos. In this section I draw from the theoretical perspective of Paul Ricoeur: phenomenological hermeneutics.

Phenomenology developed out of a search for certainty in the post-World War One period, and is akin to Descartes establishing reality and truth through a method of doubt. Husserl argued that while the independent existence of things is always uncertain, we are certain how we experience them. Experience is never passively received but is actively constituted; realities are mediated by how they appear to us (Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 48). Or, as the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* puts it, “Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view”.

Phenomenological hermeneutics neither excavates a correct meaning from the text nor accepts the validity of multiple interpretations. Instead, it looks for signposts or

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told. In this way story tries to make sense of the world, not always good sense, but it provides a meaning.

<sup>14</sup> Philip Pullman calls it “negative capability” in *His Dark Materials*.

<sup>15</sup> Deconstruction highlights the arbitrary relationship between language and meaning. Theorists such as Stanley Fish and Roland Barthes cut the text free from any inherent authorial intention of meaning.

indications in the text that enable the community of interpreters to explore the territory the text maps out, deciphering suggested codes, while keeping the integrity of the text intact. Meaning is multi-faceted, held together within the narrative arc; a patterning that suggests a picture. Readers bring their own experiences to the process of interpreting what they have read in a process that is a productive engagement between the text and the reader in which the reader ultimately re-describes the world.

According to Ricoeur, “Discourse refers back to its speaker at the same time that it refers back to the world”. It “refers backwards and forwards, to a speaker and to a world” (*Ricoeur Reader* 6). The interaction between the world and the text and the text and the reader and the reader and the world is central to Ricoeur’s hermeneutics. Reading has the power to transfigure, the (real) world by redescribing the world through the work of the imagination: “literature is written discourse with the capacity to redescribe the world for its readers” (8).

Interpretation is an on-going process: “there can be no valid claim to definitive meaning of the text, for this claim would kill the text, would remove it from the [interpretative] process and render it consumed and empty” (11). Interpretation is a “dynamic dialectic” between the “distanciation of the text” and the “appropriation of the reader” (8). Distanciation is the foreign territory of a text as it is encountered by a reader. Appropriation is a reader’s response to the text, drawing closer to that which is foreign, and making meaning out of that which is encountered. The reader “stands alone” with the “otherness” of the text, “as a different and disturbing view of the world” (11). The work of appropriation is motivated by the desire to “make the world over in terms that are meaningful” (11). There is therefore tension or struggle between distanciation and appropriation. One of the aims of hermeneutics “is to struggle against cultural distance” (57). Interpretation makes “one’s *own* what was initially *alien*” (58).

Meaningful interpretation, while it does not try to unlock the true meaning of the text, does follow a path indicated by the text. “To interpret... is to appropriate here and now the intention of the text... to interpret is to follow the path of thought opened up by the text, to place oneself en route towards the orient of the text” (17). Authorial intention is present in the meanings of the text but is not authoritative, instead indicating a direction towards which thought might travel. “[T]he intended meaning of the text is not essentially the presumed intention of the author... but rather what the text means for whoever complies with its injunction”, that is, “directions which it opens up for thought” (60). In travelling, it is possible that the reader may travel further than the author; the reader is not limited by the world of the author. “To understand an author better than he understood himself” reaches beyond an author’s limited horizon (96). This is in line with

George MacDonald's assertion: "your meaning [the reader's] may be superior to mine [the author's]" (2).

The end of the interpretative journey is appropriation. It is the end of the process, the "anchorage of the arch [of the hermeneutic bridge] in the ground of lived experience" (63). The reader lays aside his or her own self-consciousness, becoming an "imaginary me" created by fiction and participating in the poetic universe (94). (This echoes Pullman's "I wanted to be in the story, and remain myself, but a better myself," quoted above.) The ego divests itself of itself in reading, loses or relinquishes itself, in order to become another, to be altered, by appropriation (95). Appropriation does not therefore create a text in the reader's own image, but allows a creative process to work on and in the reader. "Appropriation is not a remaking of the text in our own perspective, but rather a response to the text that can become a commentary rooted in self-understanding" (30). This path leads to greater self-understanding in the reader: "...the interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself" (57).

Prefiguration is Ricoeur's "common ground of language and culture" (28). Fictive conventions provide a "community of meaning" that precedes reading (141). Symbols can function as rules, or gestures, for interpreting behaviour or action in literature as they can in real life. As I have already discussed, in an inversion of mimesis as an imitation of reality in art, life has a narrative quality: "we speak of a life story as though life were a story in search of a narrator", says Ricoeur (142). Prefiguration is the narrative background (the setting) we bring to our reading. Texts cannot be isolated from their context, from the society that gave them language and a heritage; a society entangled in relationships of power.

Configuration is the work of fiction in its entirety. Through the formation of patterns and themes, a plot "construes significant wholes out of scattered events" (106). The translation of parts into wholes is a reflective "configuring act" arising from the "productive imagination" (146). However, the narrative text stands alone, acquiring a "semantic autonomy". It is severed from the author's intention, from the reception of its original audience and from the "socio-cultural conditions of its genesis", achieving a "triple autonomy" (143). But it does not stand alone as an orphan or an island; it is surrounded by inter-textuality, a chain of texts, part of a universe. Whereas the interior of the text, its configuration, refers only to itself, its context (its author, audience and socio-cultural origins) is exterior to, or prefigures, it.

I am particularly interested in intertextuality; fantasy fictions constantly re-write other fantasies, literary texts, traditional fairytales, religious texts and mythologies. They also re-write ideas, ideologies and ethics.

[A] text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God), but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. (Barthes 170)

No author of meaning has final authority; texts are part of a great literary continent, a genealogy of literature. I therefore draw deeply from the wealth of this literary heritage in my analysis, often juxtaposing texts from diverse genres or historical contexts.

Refiguration is the "actualisation" or application of the text by a critical reader. This work of interpretation is of most concern to literary analysis and is integral to my argument. Refiguration "marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader. It is the intersection of the world unfolded by fiction and the world wherein actual action unfolds" (148). Fiction mediates between the real and the unreal world and so has the potential to work subversively in the real world. While we approach literature with the "pre-judgement that the real is the given" and that fiction is merely imaginary, we also approach it as Pandora's box, locked up, but with the potential to break out "as subversion, [turning] against the moral and social order... fiction is precisely what makes language that 'supreme danger'..." (148). Fiction dances between received paradigms (norms and conventions) and deviant gaps.

The meaning of a text is constituted by the response of readers (150). The threshold separating the text (configuration) and its meaning (refiguration) is "only crossed when the world of the text is confronted by the world of the reader". Texts only fully acquire meaning "at the intersection of the world projected by the text and the life-world of the reader" (26). Ricoeur stresses the impact of fiction on the real world. "[Works] of literature ceaselessly make and remake our world of action" (150). Rather than constructing a dualism between the real and unreal, fact and fantasy, meaning creates a bridge, or completes a circle; it "begins in life, is invested in the text, then returns to life" (151).

This interplay between fiction and reality recreates the world. We bring the world to the text and the text to the world and in the work of imagination we find meaning that impinges on our lived world. In following a story we "actualise it by reading it" (151), that is, we make it real. When authors playfully defigure the world it is then our work to supply what is missing, that is, we configure it as surrogate authors.

The aim of this approach to literary criticism is to redescribe the world because "the only form of truth we have is self-truth on an inter-subjective level" (28). This approach lies at the heart of my analysis. Through the process of paying careful attention to the text that is distant from me while drawing near to it as it gains subjective meaning through appropriation, I endeavour to arrive at a meaningful analysis of ethos in fantasy.

This thesis therefore shares my (personal) readings of texts and the ethical meanings that I find indicated in them.<sup>16</sup> That is, my (configured) narrative refigures meanings of morality that children's fantasies and other texts (fiction and non-fiction) have opened up to me, sign-posting moral directions the texts might encourage us to follow. Thus we can go beyond the absurdity of meaninglessness to the bridge-building work of discussing ethical meaning meaningfully.

## **Metaphors and Meanings: Morality and Fantasy Fiction**

I started this chapter by juxtaposing the (empirical) real and (fantastic) unreal. In this section I will discuss how fantasy, rather than opposing reality, is entwined with it and with the creation of meaning, especially moral meaning. I will then discuss how children's fantasy has negotiated ethics within its historical context.

### ***Metaphors and Meanings: Understanding the Universe by Reading the Signs***

Narratives, I suggest, are portals into other worlds where possibilities and meaning are formed; they not only produce meanings, but shift meanings. From early childhood, through fables and fairytales:

we teach our children to cope with a world too large and chaotic for them to comprehend. A world that seems, at times, too random. Too indifferent... the religions of the world will do the same for you... They're brother and sister, really: children's fables and religious parables. (Lamb 237)

Both myth and fantasy favour symbolic or metaphorical truth and fictional reality over literal truth and reality. In this section I examine how fantasy reverses literal truth and reality to help comprehend a chaotic moral world.

In *A History of Reading*, Alberto Manguel suggests that reading signs is a universal human activity; no society can exist without reading: "reading is at the beginning of the social contract". From reading musical notation to reading the marks on the shell of a tortoise, people constantly decipher and translate signs (of others, of the gods). Readers "must attribute meaning to a system of signs, and then decipher it. We all read ourselves and the world around us in order to glimpse what and where we are. We read to understand..." (7). Some cultures, especially in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, have gone even further to conceive of the whole natural world as a text, written by God,

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<sup>16</sup> This approach is, I believe, the one that the writers of the personal narratives of childhood reading share. By exploring their own personal experiences of reading in the public forum of published narrative they attempt to reach towards a broader understanding of how reading might influence us all.

to be read by us: “the key to understanding the universe lies in our ability to read these properly and master their combination” (8).

Scruton argues that the human ability to think symbolically (as evident in language) is the basis of morality.

[T]he higher emotions [for example, indignation, remorse, gratitude, shame, pride and self-esteem] — those on which our lives as moral beings most critically depend — are available only to those who can live and think in symbols. (*Philosophy* 65)

Beyond the need to represent abstract concepts symbolically in language, sometimes complex ideas (including, especially, moral ideas) are untangled best by representing them metaphorically or embedding them in a story. This is, I think, particularly true for children. Bettelheim argues in *Uses of Enchantment* that the “‘truth’ of fairy stories is the truth of our imaginations” (117). An imagination rich in fantasy is healthy: “the total personality, in order to be able to deal with the task of living, needs to be backed up by a rich fantasy combined with firm consciousness and a clear grasp of reality” (118). Children explore, and come to understand, the anxieties of their world in the images and metaphors that fantasy provides and to deprive them of this increases anxiety (119). Bettelheim bases these assertions on his therapeutic work with disturbed children. He goes as far as to say, “without fantasies to give us hope, we do not have the strength to meet the adversities of life” (121).

Signs stand in for something else, a signifier representing a signified. Symbolic language, primarily metaphor, in the literary arts is the skill of superimposing imagery onto meanings, sometimes making surprising connections. Ideas are embedded in intricate layers of cultural symbols and nuances. Any poet or fantasy writer deprived of metaphor is silenced; it is the tool with which they craft the world. Metaphor, like fantasy, is not a direct representation but is fluid and open to interpretation.

Metaphor demands active imaginative work by the reader, and when a familiar concept or a world is broken down, recreated and seen afresh in imagination it enters the realm of possibility for better or worse. Metaphor has “the extraordinary power of redescribing reality”, says Ricoeur (*Reader* 84). In making the completely foreign familiar through re-figuration metaphor has a parallel in all fiction but especially with fantasy.

Emphasising the transforming and re-constructing work of metaphor, Ricoeur refers to the tension in stories as the rub between the real and the unreal, whereas in metaphor tension is the rub between two disparate concepts. Readers “appropriate” texts in the desire to “make the world over in terms that are meaningful” (11) and they appropriate metaphors in the same way. Our imagined worlds are often more comprehensible than our chaotic lived experience of the world. Metaphor, like story,

therefore “participates in the invention of meaning” (123). Metaphor demands active participation from the reader to create meaning, the “grasping of similarities” out of apparent nonsense, producing “a kind of sudden insight” (79).

Insight, seeing differently, seeing afresh, being enlightened, are metaphors for the way metaphor works on us. J.R.R Tolkien, also using this metaphor of sight for fantasy, says that making the familiar unfamiliar transforms our vision of it; it helps us to look at our world afresh (74, 75). Insight, a work of the imagination, is “an attempt to capture the universe in a web of abridged signs” says Max Black (132), not as a reduplication, but as a “creative rendering” of reality (133). The tension of a previous incompatibility is resolved in a “new compatibility” (125). Metaphorical writing therefore “makes possible the net gain of new meaning” (Ricoeur 7).

Black suggests that metaphor not only produces new meaning but may have “deviant implications”, facilitating shifts in meaning; “no doubt”, he says, “metaphors are dangerous” (47). The juxtaposition of previously unrelated words — which carry particular nuances and meanings—provokes us to not only perceive things differently but can shift reality as we perceive it. This subversive function of metaphor is akin to the subversive power of fantasy.

Fantasy is metaphor writ large. However, Jackson argues that fantasy is not metaphor but “oxymoron, a figure of speech which holds together contradictions and sustains them in an impossible unity, without progressing towards synthesis” (21). Both metaphors and oxymorons juxtapose incompatible words to displace meaning, but while an oxymoron leaves us with its ironic bite, metaphor invites us to resolve the incongruity in a synthesis of new meaning. Fantasy invents new worlds, worlds that are created within a reader’s active imagination. As we move about in these new fictitious worlds we see the similarities and resemblances with our “real” world as well as the differences. If the fantasy works well, the tension between our recognition and misrecognition of the “real” world in the new world (held in “impossible unity”) will crumple but also reconstruct our perception of the real world, reaching towards deeper levels of meaning in our understanding of reality. And it is one of the most endearing qualities of metaphor and fantasy that all this serious intellectual work of collapsing and rebuilding worlds is playfully fun.

### ***Lies, Truth and Fantasy Tales: the Genre of the Unreal***

Olsen pushes fantasy beyond the work of metaphor into the area of belief.

The language of the fantastic text takes the figurative literally. It refuses to take itself as poetry, which uses the figurative figuratively... Instead of taking the word as metaphor, it takes the word as equation. In this way, the *as if* clause drops out of fantastic language. (21)

Referring to engagement with fantastic characters, Coleridge coined the phrase “willing suspension of disbelief” that allows “shadows of imagination” to be transformed, through their “semblance of truth”, into “poetic faith” (*Biographia Literaria* Chp 14). The phrase is frequently aired in writing about fantasy. We suspend disbelief, I suggest, not just when we read, but whenever our imaginations are at work creating a hypothetical world, in the rich and fertile wood between worlds. The gap, or suspension, between belief and disbelief is a creative gap of possibility. It is where the “as if” of metaphor merges into a tentative and temporary “I believe in”. (I think this is what Olsen means when he says that the “as if” clause drops out of fantastic language.) If the truth of the imagination seems real enough, it merges back into the real world where its proposition is accepted “as if” it were true and real. Although imagination “spins” truth and reality this process is fundamentally different from “spin”: “truths” (lies) are not spun to manipulate others and deceive ourselves, but to discover yet deeper truths that are personal and nourishing. Instead of the unwilling suspension of belief (cynicism) that is demanded from the danse macabre — a glittering mask that poses as reality but obscures its own meaninglessness — fantasy’s unreality is overt, flaunting magic, but unmasked reveals meaning. I return to this idea in my conclusion when I discuss “negative capability”, a tentative certainty amidst uncertainty, as an ethic for today.

The fantasy genre is particularly prone to binary divisions: real versus unreal, truth versus falsehood, reason versus imagination, good versus evil and so on. Asserting a dichotomy between real and unreal worlds is central to fantasy; unlike realist fiction, it does not mimic the real world. Jules Zanger proposes that there is no confusion over matching fantasy with reality; we know fantastic histories are not real and that its characters never lived. In this sense fantasy is an honest genre and wears no masks. Reality, says Zanger, is the “foil against which fantasy defines itself”. The “special delight” of fantasy is in the tension between the “base line of reality” and its denial (226). “The fantastic must be so close to the real that you almost have to believe in it” (Dostoevsky qtd. in Jackson 27). Simultaneously close and far off, it exists in a “symbiotic relationship with reality”, leaning on it but at the same time “commenting on it, criticising it, and illuminating it” (Zanger 227). Jackson argues, moreover, that fantasy interrogates reality “by offering a problematic re-presentation of an empirically ‘real’ world” (37). Turning to Todorov, she asserts that fantasy’s defining feature is “...an uncertainty as to the nature of the ‘real’, a problematization... of the ‘seen’ and ‘known’ (in a culture which declares ‘seeing is believing’)” (48, 49). The tension between reality and fantasy reveals:

stress points at which the real world chafes the writer and reader, and chafing, generates the imaginative alternative, as grains of sand generate the baroque pearl. (Zanger, 227)

“Pearls”, imaginative interpretations of the text, are formed from tensions between binaries, shifting reality.

In fantasy the dichotomy between truth and non-truth becomes a paradox, redefining truth not primarily as observation and verification but seeing through to what is not immediately apparent. Ursula Le Guin states baldly, “fantasy is true, of course”.

It isn't factual, but it's true. Children know that. Adults know it too, and that is precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy. They know that its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phony, unnecessary and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living. They are afraid of dragons because they are afraid of freedom... Normal children do not confuse reality and fantasy — they confuse them much less often than we adults do (as a certain great fantasist pointed out in a story called ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’). (*Why are Americans Afraid of Dragons?*)

Le Guin concludes that we must learn to distinguish facts from truth.

It is important to note that fantastic stories like “The Emperor’s New Clothes” never try to represent one particular truth. They are not allegories with a one-to-one relationship between symbol and meaning. Le Guin implies that the boy can perceive (factual) reality better than the self-deceived adults. I suggest that the boy does not only see, naively, the bare fact that the invisible clothes do not exist, but that he also, in his innocence and honesty, sees through the Emperor’s clothes; that is, through layers of (ideological) deceit and (social) falseness built up over the years of an adult’s life. But clothes do not symbolise ideology; I extracted that interpretation from my twenty-first century context. The story, as with all good fantasy, is fertile ground for producing different meanings.

“What is the *use* of fantasy?” Le Guin asks. Her “truest answer” is “...to give you pleasure and delight” (34). Her “next-to-truest answer” is: “to deepen your understanding” (35). The distinguishing attributes of the fantasy genre attest to its disconnect with the real world; fantasy (unlike science fiction) could never happen. While we consciously know these stories are untrue, something often rings true in them. Beyond entertainment, diversion, emotional gratification, “the real goal of the marvellous journey is the total exploration of universal reality”, says Pierre Mabilie.

The “misrule” of fantasy “permits ‘ultimate questions’ about social order, or metaphysical riddles to life’s purpose” (Jackson 15). Fantasy, like the carnival, is “life turned inside out” (Bakhtin, qtd. in Jackson 15). This disruption to reality enables fantasy to fulfil its “proper function”: to transform the world (Sartre in Jackson 17, 18).

George MacDonald, who influenced both Tolkien and Lewis, wrote that “A genuine work of art must mean many things; the truer its art, the more things it will

mean” (3). Art, and fantasy art especially, by breaking with objective reality, splinters into multiple truths, realities and meanings; it is polysemic. This splintering creates gaps through which we can glimpse, but not touch, the wonder in life. Lewis suggests that reading can provide “profound experiences... not acceptable in any other form” (*On Stories*101). Humans grasp for a nebulous state (perhaps happiness) beyond their reach. Lewis links this experience to story.

If the author’s plot is only... a net of time and event ... is life much more?... Art... may be expected to do what life cannot do: but so it has done. The bird has escaped us. But it was at least entangled in the net for several chapters. We saw it close and enjoyed the plumage. How many ‘real lives’ have nets that can do as much? (105).

Uncertain, but desired, meaning is entangled in plot. MacDonald likens reading a story to listening to a sonata; there is a commonly identified theme within it, but many different, elusive meanings.

A fairytale, a sonata, a gathering storm, a limitless night, seizes you and sweeps you away: do you begin at once to wrestle with it and ask whence its power over you, whither it is carrying you?... The greatest forces lie in the region of the uncomprehended. (4)

Simone Weil claims that great writers have the power to awaken us, from the illusions and lies of everyday life, to the truth, “the actual density of the real” (qtd. in Buckland 106). “Discerning the real,” says Corinne Buckland, “is the proper work of the moral imagination, and it is the supreme irony that fantasy fiction is a powerful aid to achieving this” (106). Likewise, MacDonald says that one of the best things we can do for another is to “wake things up that are in him... to make him think things for himself” (4). Awakening ideas and meanings is the inherent power of story.

Tolkien discusses fantasy in terms of language, power and enchantment. Playing with language and destabilising fixed representational meanings allows us to see what had been hidden (52). Both Ursula Le Guin and J.K. Rowling likewise acknowledge the power of language to uncover truth in their fantasies. Intriguingly, the power of language is not fanciful. In her autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, Helen Keller describes how, before she had language, she experienced only “wordless sensations”. Language “awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!” (12). In naming concepts like love, “invisible lines stretched between my spirit and the spirit of others” (16). Language gave her “new sight” with which to perceive the world (12).

Flights of imaginative speculation are needed to find the language to re-frame a worldview or grasp mysteries even in the empirical real world. Einstein said, “When I consider myself and my methods of thought, I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy meant more to me than my talent for absorbing positive knowledge” (qtd. in Mahy “Notes” 326). Margaret Mahy, like Le Guin a matriarch of children’s fantasy, goes on to say:

perhaps one of fantasy's functions is to pinpoint and define areas in our understanding that might initially be seen as impossibility but which give liberty to human speculation... [T]he imaginative fantasy of certain scientific statements... somehow projects the thinker into new, and possibly provable, speculations. As the speculation is tested and moves towards becoming what we describe as truth, it also becomes something from which we derive fulfilment — something to which we may have something like a passionate, even a poetic, response. (326)

Many of the above writers describe wonder and delight as a response to fantasy. Bettelheim suggests that the themes of fairytales create meaning for children grappling with the complexities of growing up and making sense of the world; its motifs “are experienced as wondrous... Fairy tales enrich the child's life and give it an enchanted quality just because he does not quite know how the stories have worked their wonder on him” (*Uses of Enchantment* 19). Lucie Armitt describes fantasy as the construction of narratives “to explain the utterly inexplicable” within ourselves. For children, the types of questions raised by fantasy narratives: “(What do we most fear?... Who are we? What will become of us...?)” loom largest (3-4). Armitt and Bettelheim both frame the quest for understanding as an internal quest.

In *The Child and the Shadow*, Le Guin suggests that fantasies, myths and fairytales speak to:

the unknown depths in me... they speak... in the *language* of the unconscious... they work the way music does: they... go straight to the thoughts that lie too deep to utter... They are profoundly meaningful, and usable — practical — in terms of ethics; of insight; of growth. (62)

For Le Guin, fantasy is the appropriate medium to communicate unconscious depths and mysteries of the inner self.

Fantasy is the language of the inner self... I personally find it the appropriate language in which to tell stories... [But I have] behind me the authority of a very great poet, who put it much more boldly, ‘The great instrument of moral good,’ said Shelley, ‘is the imagination’. (70)

### ***“The great instrument of moral good”***

Fantasy fiction rides the waves of time, adapting to its changing social context. My thesis contends that the ethos of fantasy fiction has shifted over time. In the fluid, shifting postmodern world, a time of moral uncertainty, can the fantastic imagination still function as a “great instrument of moral good”? In this section I place my argument within the context of other analyses of children's fantasy fiction. These analyses explore its historical development (especially as described by Colin Manlove in *From Alice to Harry Potter*), the tensions between this genre and postmodernity (discussed by John Stephens and Robyn McCallum in *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture*) and its relationship with ethics in today's world (in Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Marek Oziewicz's *Towards or Back to Human Values?*).

“Stories... are the most potent means by which perceptions, values and attitudes are transmitted from one generation to the next”, says Margery Hourihan (1). Children’s literature has long been valued — and criticised — for its morally educative value. In 1672 Janeway said, “a work of imaginative literature can be as important to a child’s future as any exclusively didactic or devotional text” (qtd. in Grenby 4). The dominant theme of most late eighteenth century moral tales was “to be good is to renounce one’s childhood”, promoting behaviours that were prudent and rational (Grenby 70, 71). By the mid-nineteenth century childhood innocence and the importance of imagination gained ground alongside a renaissance of fairytales. With fairytales’ strict magical rules and clear rewards, “anxious Victorians... welcomed a genre founded not just on the imagination but on moral certainties” (Manlove 13, 18). Under the burgeoning influence of evangelical Christianity, virtue was to be found within and awakened by moral tales (Grenby 81). It was in this period, when prevailing attitudes and beliefs about childhood were shifting, that children’s fantasy was born. Its two conflicting impulses, to instruct (morality) and to amuse (imagination), had to be negotiated. Imagination gained dominance and was sometimes expressed in sheer nonsense (Manlove 18). This bias towards amusement rather than education continued in the first half of the twentieth century, the child increasingly gaining a central role (Manlove 198). Anxieties about war and changing views about childhood and innocence reflected in the fantasies: retreat into the pastoral idyll was threatened. After World War Two, the “second golden age” of children’s literature was born, looking to the future (82, 86). By the 1960s, old values were being replaced with new freedoms and an “identity crisis for our civilisation” (99). Magic became more uncertain in character, and good and evil more ambiguous. Generally 1960s fantasy was “no longer based on moral growth, which presupposes responsibility for one’s actions” (107). The end of the 1960s heralded:

a world increasingly without the bearings once given by parents and society, where children must form their own values... Not surprisingly this is a world often riddled with insecurity... but it is also one founded on a much more unbiased and fluid idea of reality. (116)

Fantasy protagonists in the 1970s were frequently outsiders, struggling with identity (117). Tricksters rather than heroes defeated chaos and death. Rules no longer held things together and power was often equated with evil. Like *The Tricksters*, fantasy from the 1980s “left teasingly indefinite” relationships between fiction and reality, playfully propounding “that there is no settled reality or truth anywhere” (154). They confronted “the realm of no meaning... the possibility that the world is hollow at the core and ultimately meaningless” (163).

In a chapter titled “Frightened of the Dark”, Manlove discusses fantasies of the 1990s which overlaps with the period I am studying. This period is characterised by the

breakdown of intimate relationships, insecurity and terror, he suggests (173). Characters are “fabrications, self-inventions, that can easily disintegrate”; identity is fragile (175). They are child-centred, but the children, no longer frolicking “in a happy enclosure of adult assurance”, are exposed to “an annihilating gale of fears” (199). “There is a sense of things being out of control... the supernatural... is simply a random irruption of malignity” (200). Since the 1950s, argues Manlove, fantasy has gained psychological and moral complexity and lost its certainty (201).

This overview and analysis of fantasy’s history usefully places contemporary fantasy into an historical context and provides background for my discussion of an historical shift. It highlights the changing nature of fiction and how it grapples with — reflecting and responding to — dominant themes, including moral themes, of its times, revealing continuities and discontinuities. Other writers are less pessimistic than Manlove.

John Stephens describes consciousness as fragmentary, experience as ambiguous, truth as relative and instinctual drives as irrational in the postmodern era. There are no universal referents or uncontested codes of values. This “has generally proved anathema to children’s literature”, he says (21). Humanist ideals (the “Western metaethic”) are embedded in children’s literature, including moral judgements resting within an ethical dimension (7). These are presented “as natural human values which reflect the world as it is” (18). Stephens’s argument highlights a tension in children’s fantasy between making allowances for a juvenile readership and responding to today’s world. The uncertainty of the fluid postmodern world does, inevitably, impact on children’s literature, however. Rod McGillis describes postmodern children’s literature as characterised by the deconstructive free play “of a mind making its way through the tangle of an ungrounded, decentred world” (167).

Carnival is an apt metaphor for both postmodernism and fantasy. Carnavalesque “moments of reversal” are common in the free play of most fantasies, like the wild rumpus in *Where the Wild Things Are* (although they may be more menacing). “Carnival in children’s literature is grounded in a playfulness... express[ing] opposition to authoritarianism and seriousness”, says Stephens (qtd. in Elick 467). Its carnivalesque characteristics allow escape from social constraints but incorporate “a safe return to social normality”; gently mock and reverse socially received ideas, privilege weakness over strength; subvert authority, “received paradigms of behaviour and morality” (467). Carnival inverts the adult/ child power relationship. Catherine Elick, discussing Bakhtin’s analysis, suggests that the carnival expresses “permanent revolution, and culture as a battleground where marginal characters endlessly undermine all centres” (Bakhtin, qtd. in Elick 454). The “mock crowning and decrowning of the carnival king”

instates the powerless child as powerful monarch (455). (Max wears a crown and carries a sceptre while still wearing his wolfsuit.) Subversive, parodic and playful re-writing of fairytales is common. Roles are reversed and costumes changed: wolves can be innocent and sheep can be wolves in sheep's clothing. Most of these tales are a carnival of cross-dressing characters, a fairytale fancydress, that returns to the safety of warm dinner, love and moral parameters. However, there is always a danger that a Wild Rumpus becomes a reign of terror — Miss Hood with her pistol illustrates this. At the site of children's literature, where real children are acquiring beliefs and values, these questions become urgent and some recent writers suggest that we are in the process of a paradigm shift back to ethics.

As far back as the 1940s fantasy fiction was responding to “Western culture's stifling materialism”, says Marek Oziewicz (63). From the 1960s, each decade made the crisis of Western culture more apparent. However:

Concomitant with the falling of the centre [of Western culture] was a growing conviction that the whole process, painful as it was, may also be appreciated as indicating the possibility of a renewal and change in our conceptual schemes and worldviews, in other words: a paradigm change. (63)

He quotes Chad Walsh who wrote, in 1974: “a genuine change of consciousness is taking place before our bewildered eyes” — a change characterised by re-evaluations of “who we are as persons, of how we feel about others, and of what is our relationship to the world at large” (64). Joseph Campbell (in the 1980s) and Laurence Jaffe (in 1999) both assert the need for a new myth, or worldview, that “bridges the gap between science and religion” (67). Whether or not Campbell and Jaffe are right that we need a new myth to span the gap that postmodernism has torn open, they raise the important point that religious, humanist and scientific paradigms that previously supported society have collapsed, breaking open the ground to reveal a chasm of uncertainty.

Oziewicz argues that the present paradigm shift reasserts, or re-imagines, human values in the postmodern world. The voices proclaiming cultural crisis — occasional voices in the early and mid- twentieth century — gained force and urgency in the 1960s. Following the trail of literary criticism, he suggests that the theoretical era of the 1960s to the 1980s preceded an emerging interest in ethics in literary theory. Historically, Oziewicz suggests, there have been two major streams of concern in fantasy criticism. The first he refers to as “Transcendental”, that is, the search for ultimate meanings of human life: “the desire for transcendence, for grasping the moral order of the universe, and for living an ethically fulfilling life” (7). This stream includes many of the older theorists like Chesterton and Tolkien, and is an assertion of values like love, wonder, true humanity, mystery; in its contemporary form it is “confrontation with the deepest kind

of reality” set against a consumerist, achievement-obsessed culture of “frenetic activities and judgemental processes” (Thorne, qtd. in Oziewicz 9). The second stream views fantasy as a literature of subversion, a position argued by Rosemary Jackson and Jack Zipes. Oziewicz asserts, “Fantasy, I am convinced, lies in the mainstream of the present paradigm shift and helps to bring about a radical change in our mode of perceiving reality... [T]hrough its subversion of a generally accepted materialistic worldview, [fantasy] can move only towards or back to human values” (11). Oziewicz concludes that understanding how fantasy both embodies values (holds or conserves them) and searches for them (looking for change and new ethical possibilities) is a way to “elevate the genre” (14).

Melody and Richard Briggs assert that “Children’s fantasy literature has struck a chord in today’s world” (30) filling the gap of meaning left by the fall of religion and science. Fantasy springs from that gap, “mirroring the needs of our modern culture”, and also has “its part to play in filling that gap”, they claim (31). In postmodern fantasies reality is negotiated, and “the delight is in the play of possibilities, and to pose a question is better than to work toward answering it” (35, 36). Fantastic stories are neither “overarching myths nor... spiritual authorities. Rather, fantasy narratives are paradigms of possibility” (42). They explore beyond the empirical boundaries imposed by the scientific- rational worldview, filling the gap left by the marginalisation of religion with “alternative realities whose systems of meaning offer... guidance without demanding allegiance” (43). Fantasy, then, is a moral guide rather than a moral authority as religion once was. It invites us to do the work of forming our own moral judgements and values on an individual level.

This idea is developed further by Le Guin.

Immature people crave and demand moral certainty: This is bad, this is good. Kids and adolescents struggle to find a sure moral foothold in this bewildering world; they long to feel they’re on the winning side, or at least a member of the team. To them, heroic fantasy may offer a vision of moral clarity. Unfortunately, the pretended Battle Between (unquestioned) Good and (unexamined) Evil obscures instead of clarifying, serving as a mere excuse for violence — as brainless, useless, and base as aggressive war in the real world... Fantasy is a literature particularly useful for embodying and examining the real difference between good and evil. (*The Child and the Shadow* 70)

She then paraphrases the quote from Shelley above: “Imagination is the instrument of ethics”. It would seem that Le Guin embraces moral uncertainty, but she concludes that fantasy embodies and examines the real difference between good and evil, implying that there is an essential, though obscured, dividing line between them. Moreover, imagination is the instrument of ethics, serving an ethical purpose as a musical instrument serves the music played on it. Is she not saying that if we exercise our imaginations well

enough we may come to a deeper, more profound, more accurate understanding of ethics? Searching, even craving, for moral certainty is something to which deeply serious and mature people may succumb, albeit critically, thoughtfully and imaginatively. The search for moral certainty within moral uncertainty is a paradox, or an impossible unity, at the heart of postmodern fantasy and thought.

Mariusz Marszalski takes this idea further, and closer to my own concerns in his discussion of the intersection of chaos, order, morality and fantasy. Basing his analysis of fantasy on scientific theory he states that, “The theory of chaos is applicable to dynamically changing systems. It holds that the behaviour of such systems is characterised by fluctuations, instability, complexity of choices, and limited predictability” (212). Chaos theory surfaced in the 1960s, replacing belief in the mathematical certainty of the material world, a universe “governed by the eternal laws of celestial mechanics” (215). This shift from certain universal laws to chaos theory echoes the shift from belief in a transcendental signifier to existential uncertainty. As Marszalski argues, the ground-shifting tremors of chaos theory (as of postmodern uncertainty) have moral implications which are worried over in fantasy fiction: “the moral appeal of [fantasy] is ambiguous,” he says.

Young reader have to negotiate it, distilling it from the puzzling picture of a world inhabited by fantasy heroes but governed by the science of indeterminacy. In such a universe free will seems to be mere illusion, things seem to simply happen and human lives are subject to chance. In consequence, morality appears to be an illusion as well: the issues of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ remain relative in the face of the laws of quantum physics, for in the world of chaos order and disorder, good and evil smoothly transform into their opposites. (218)

The “seeing through” of postmodern scepticism is contained in an image of a mask stripped off to reveal nothing. In “The Emperor’s New Clothes”, the child “sees through” pretence to what is real, that is an actual body, a naked form. The question facing children’s fantasy writers is whether there is any moral reality to “see through” to, or are moral values part of the chaos of the abyss of meaninglessness?

Marszalski concludes his analysis, referring to Roger Zelazny’s *Chronicles of Amber*:

though the world presented might suggest a dire reality where moral values have been at best made relative if not denied altogether, most of [the] protagonists provide a positive counterbalance. Tossed about by the waves of chaos as they are, they display an indomitable desire for an order, even if it were temporary, provisional or elusive... [The writer] ultimately sticks to traditional moral values despite the overwhelming pressure of the unquestionably valid stochastic reality, and in this way seems to affirm that value-consciousness is one of those elementary things which makes human life worthwhile. (218)

These literary critics indicate the direction of this thesis. On the basis of the contemporary fantasies I have studied, I agree with Marszalski that amidst chaos traditional moral values are resurrected in these stories. However, concentrating on the ethos of the fantasies, my analysis is concerned with the many and finely nuanced pathways these stories take towards moral values. I demonstrate that this is not a simple reactionary return to the safety of known ethical frameworks but a thoughtful engagement with contemporary issues. Moving through the expanding horizons from the personal to the ideological, I show that these fantasies take us much further than a return to the same; they are a quest for a morality that is meaningful in today's complex world.

The postmodern world, characterised by fluidity and existential uncertainty, is embroiled in contradictions and ambiguities which are often not just accepted but celebrated in fiction. Clear-cut moral judgements are problematic in postmodern society, breeding moral uncertainty. Postmodern fantasies navigate these labyrinthine postmodern complexities, responding to the ethical paradoxes that postmodernism has bequeathed to us, exploring the path to meaning in the face of meaninglessness.

## Chapter II

### *Shadows on the Landscape of the Soul: The Haunting of Hamlet to the Horcruxes of Harry Potter*

I have argued that postmodernism has spawned moral uncertainty. Moral uncertainty is not exclusively a postmodern phenomenon, however. Literature's great tragic figure, Hamlet, is characterised by his moral uncertainty. His indecision is an internal struggle; he wrestles with inner shadows.

Personal evil in the guise of a shadow self haunts fiction. Self-consciousness, and conscience, are mirrors that reveal, like the Mirror of Erised in Harry Potter, the "deepest, most desperate desires of our hearts" (*Philosopher* 156-157). The motif of a mirror that reveals a shadow self recurs throughout literature. Gertrude, when faced with her reflection, says, "Thou turnest mine eyes into my very soul,/ And there I see such black and grained spots/ As will not leave their tinct" (*Hamlet*, III.4. 90-93). When Dr Jekyll looks into the mirror he sees his morally divided self.

Even as good shone upon the countenance of one [Dr Jekyll], evil was written broadly and plainly on the face of the other [Mr Hyde]... And yet when I looked upon that ugly idol in the glass, I was conscious of no repugnance, rather of a leap of welcome. This, too, was myself. (Stevenson 59)

Dorian Gray looks at "this mirror of his soul" that "had been like a conscience to him" (Wilde 166) and Ged, from *The Wizard of Earthsea*, faces his shadow.

In silence, man and shadow met face to face, and stopped... Ged reached out his hands... and took hold of his shadow, of the black self that reached out to him. (Le Guin, *Wizard* 164)

These extracts show a progression of ideas that reflect their different historical eras, but all have a common thread: evil lurks within.

Drawing on well-known past narratives, in this chapter I first discuss the ethical meanings that seem to be embedded within them, especially as they relate to the past. This discussion is about the prefiguration of the texts themselves and of the characters within the texts; their historical and social contexts. Furthermore, it demonstrates how Rowling's *Harry Potter* series is prefigured in literature.

In the next section I concentrate on two recent fantasy series: Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*. I look at how they configure moral meaning, drawing on the Jungian concept of the shadow. In the final section I refer back to the texts in the first section, bringing them together with Le Guin and Rowling and focus on continuities and discontinuities in the themes of desire and death. In doing so I interpret (refigure) meanings of morality that are thrown up by the texts.

## The Shadow of the Past

Hamlet's ambivalent relationship with the past highlights the crippling, and ultimately destructive, moral uncertainty that links the play back to contemporary children's fantasy fiction. *Hamlet*, I believe, portrays the predicament of strong but conflicting ideological certainties that coincide turbulently within Hamlet, causing unresolved moral tensions. This reflects, in reverse image, *Harry Potter* where no strong ideological certainties underpin society and Harry must look within for moral certainty. This indicates a radical paradigm shift in moral thought from the early seventeenth century to today.

Hamlet the character and *Hamlet* the play are characterised by profound uncertainty. Hamlet falls between the cracks of the pre-modern and the modern worlds, a figure who stands alone in the world and is troubled by existential anxiety. The burden of obligation demands of him a task that is at odds with his moral inclination to such a degree that he ponders his own death; but even this he cannot contemplate without a conflicted personal philosophy.

What is at stake [in *Hamlet*] is more than a multiplicity of answers. The opposing positions challenge each other, clashing and sending shock waves through the play... a young man from Wittenberg, with a distinctly Protestant temperament, is haunted by a distinctly Catholic ghost. (Greenblatt 240)

The changing and conflicting ideologies in *Hamlet* are a reflection of the time in which it was written. England's Protestant present clashed with its Catholic past, now reviled and outlawed, but also, fifty years on, regarded with some nostalgia for its reassuring beliefs and practices. This was compounded by the Renaissance's rediscovery of the classical age; Protestant England had a "whole, weird, tangled cultural inheritance, the mingling of folk beliefs, classical mythology, and Catholic doctrine" (199).

Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* in the year his father died. "[I]n 1601 the Protestant playwright was haunted by the spirit of his Catholic father pleading for suffrages to relieve his soul from the pains of Purgatory", says Stephen Greenblatt (249). Suffrages reflected a very human anxiety about being remembered, an anxiety that is found in *Hamlet*. Shakespeare stood between a conflicting past and present. This is played out in *Hamlet*, a play that is haunted by the shadow of the past.

*Hamlet* explores the impact of the past and moral uncertainty of an individual. Much of the uncertainty in the play revolves around the character of the enigmatic Ghost — is it the spirit of the dead king as it claims and Hamlet sometimes believes, or is it an "illusion" as Horatio suggests, or is it a devil usurping the likeness of the king? Divided opinions about the Ghost mirror the diverse moralities of the early seventeenth century. Jan Blits suggests that old Hamlet, Hamlet, Horatio and Claudius represent these

different and conflicting moralities. (Ghostly) pagan virtue and classical notions of nobility emphasise pride, anger, ambition and action; Christian virtue, opposing revenge, emphasises humility, forgiveness, lowliness and patience; philosophical Stoic virtue emphasises acceptance of the vicissitudes of fortune and “the radical inwardness of the soul” to create its own internal virtue and happiness (5). Stoicism demands the detachment of an actor to a role played; fate gives duties that are to be performed or acted out — “this drama of human life, wherein we are assigned the parts we are to play” (Seneca qtd. in Blits 39). The Stoic, and Hamlet’s, “identification of actions with playacting serves to deny the moral significance of actions as such” (55). The individual simultaneously situated as actor and spectator re-emerges in postmodern narratives, problematising moral choice.

Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy highlights his internal ideological conflict and resulting uncertainty over how to act. Posing his question as one of nobility of mind, he contrasts the noble pagan warrior of action with the Christian’s and the Stoic’s patient endurance. Then, contemplating suicide, he wonders if opposing and ending the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” is a noble action (as the Stoics believed) or a damned one (as the Christians believed). Reason cannot answer the dilemma because the unknown (the possibility of hell) cannot be factored into rational debate. Hamlet’s dilemma consists, therefore, of complex internal judgements on competing ideologies — ideologies with very different moral imperatives for action. “The arena in which good struggled against evil was now less frequently the halls of heaven or the pit of hell than it was the human heart” (Russell 184-185). This is why *Hamlet* is often described as a modern tragedy; the struggle between good and evil is internal. The uneasy, even turbulent, confluence of conflicting philosophical and religious ideologies springs from the turmoil and uncertainty of changing and clashing ideologies in Shakespeare’s society — and reverberates, I believe, in our own. Reaching an impasse, Hamlet remains in moral uncertainty.

Hamlet’s intolerable uncertainty is symbolised by madness — a madness that is both feigned and genuine. Genuine madness is an abyss; Hamlet feigns his madness on the slippery brink of the abyss. His madness is an act, in which he detaches himself from his actions and their moral significance, as actors are not morally responsible for the actions of the roles they play. Hamlet alludes to this when he asks for Laertes’s forgiveness: “Was’t Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet. If Hamlet from himself be ta’en away, And when he’s not himself does wrong Laertes, Then Hamlet does it not” (V.2.227-230). The irrational madness that Hamlet acts out is, however, the opposite of rational Stoical playacting; rather than accept fate, he rages against it.

Hamlet's ideological dilemma is compounded by his personal past. While resisting his past, he is at the same time haunted by it. The same speech that begins "Rest, rest, perturbed spirit!" in addressing the Ghost, ends "The time is out of joint. O, cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right!" (I.5.188). Hamlet curses both his birth and his duty. Like Ophelia, he finds the way of honour and obedience to paternal commands a "steep and thorny way" (I.3.48). Hamlet vents his contempt for the past on Polonius: "These tedious old fools!" he says (II.2.218). But soon after, when protesting against children who have changed the good fortunes of the players, Hamlet says, "their writers do them wrong to make them exclaim against their own succession" (II.2.350). Sandwiched between the past and the future, Hamlet recognises that there is no future without a past. Thus past and present become enmeshed, the past overshadowing the present, its ramifications carrying on to the future. Again, this is a central theme in postmodern fantasies.

Hamlet resolves his dilemma — his living between the past and future — where many fantasy heroes do, in a grave. He encounters the past not as the (public) burden of duty but as (personal) memories of loving relationships. (This remembrance is what the Ghost begs of Hamlet but deprives him of by demanding revenge.) In the iconic scene in which Hamlet holds Yorick's skull, recalling Yorick's life and his love for Hamlet, there is no trace of madness. "Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him, Horatio," is a lament, a connection with the past that is based in relationship. Hamlet's meditation on death that follows this lament is interrupted by the appearance of the funeral party bearing Ophelia's body. Hamlet, although here in the company of the king whom he wishes to deceive, is stripped of all pretense of madness as he then laments Ophelia: "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers/ Could not with all their quantity of love/ Make up my sum" (V.1.266). Although both the king and queen pronounce him mad, this speech is one of Hamlet's most sane, and in his subsequent conversation with Horatio he has lost the uncertainty, and its madness, that has tormented him throughout the play. When the innocent die, as Ophelia has, Hamlet sees clearly that the chain of cause and effects of Claudius's evil will multiply. "And is't not to be damned/ To let this canker of our nature come/ To further evil?" he asks Horatio (V.2. 68 – 70). Personal loss translates into public and political ethical action. It is not for the past (revenge) but for the future (to prevent further evil) that Hamlet finds a secure foothold of moral certainty and sheds his madness. The conflicting moral demands that he has inherited, and that have shackled him to madness (moral uncertainty), are broken, liberating an authentic self whose moral judgement is internalised.

Hamlet dies in a duel. However, it is not his enemy, Claudius, he duels, but Laertes, saying that he will be a foil to set off Laertes's brilliance. He is inadvertently a

lethal foil; both Laertes and Hamlet falling victim to Claudius's venomous cunning. Hamlet succeeds in killing Claudius but, guilty of murder as he is, dies himself. There is a parallel in this final scene of *Hamlet* with *Harry Potter*: Harry duels finally with his enemy, Voldemort. Because Harry is not Hamlet, but a child hero for children, Harry merely disarms rather than kills Voldemort and the venomous cunning of Voldemort commanding his deathly wand rebounds upon himself, killing him.

The past is an important theme for Rowling. The fantasy world refers back in time: spells are drawn from Latin, the wizarding world is a blend of medieval, Renaissance, Gothic, Victorian and modern, and much of the narrative is taken up with histories — of characters, places, even objects. But Harry's relationship with the past is fundamentally different from Hamlet's. Although, like Hamlet, Harry is plagued with uncertainty, his father has been murdered, and the task falls on Harry to destroy the murderer, the past does not confer obligations to those who have died, instead understanding the past illuminates the present. Uncovering personal histories to provide insights into character is a modern preoccupation; backstories are given little attention in *Hamlet*.

While the past does not confer obligations on Harry, a prophecy (the past speaking to the future) does, or seems to. In *The Order of the Phoenix* Harry learns, via a prophecy uttered by the ghostly form of Professor Trelawny ("a pearly-white figure with hugely magnified eyes") (709), that he is linked with Voldemort, that neither can live while the other survives and that one will inevitably kill the other (744). However, Dumbledore takes care to explain to Harry that, in Harry's words, he is not "dragged into the arena to face a battle to the death" (Half-blood 479) but that the free actions of Voldemort have created the conditions for the fulfilment of the prophecy. "Of course you've got to [try to kill Voldemort]!" exclaims Dumbledore. "But not because of the prophecy! But because you, yourself, will never rest until you've tried! We both know it!... you are free to chose your own way, quite free to turn your back on the prophecy!" (478, 479). Harry, thinking of those he loves whom Voldemort has killed and of "all the terrible deeds he knew Lord Voldemort had done" knows that, free from compulsion, he wants Voldemort "finished" and that he wants to do it (478).

This scene illustrates an important difference between Hamlet's predicament and Harry's. The ghostly Professor Trelawny provides a directive for the future in the same way that the Ghost of Hamlet's father does, but whereas Hamlet is caught in a moral trap — damned if he acts, damned if he doesn't — it is clearly spelled out to Harry by his surrogate father that he has a choice. Autonomy is a value that is highly regarded both in *Harry Potter* and in society today. Harry chooses to use his autonomy for social good, but his choice is an internal one free from religious, institutional or societal obligations;

Harry must do what Harry thinks is best. A maxim that expresses the heart of modernism and encapsulates Harry's autonomy, "to thine own self be true" (I.3.78), belongs to a speech made up of paradoxes by the "tedious old fool", Polonius. This counsel to his son, in the form of a blessing rather than curse, is in opposition to the Ghost's demands, juxtaposing pre-modern and modern views of the self.

Harry is born into a world of neither proscribed social duties nor overt ideologies. There is no religion or church and moral law is minimal. (Rowling condenses Wizarding Law into three illegal curses: thou shalt not coerce another, thou shalt not inflict pain upon another, thou shalt not kill another.) Morality is not found in external systems but within individuals. The Dursleys, Harry's first surrogate parents are morally destitute, representing narcissistic consumerism, and are contrasted with the world of Hogwarts under Dumbledore's benevolent moral authority. But Hogwarts without Dumbledore's leadership is vulnerable to moral collapse. When sinister Dolores Umbridge takes over from Dumbledore, she immediately sets about replacing his liberal authority with ridiculously long lists of prohibitions. Rowling implies that unless they protect basic human rights, rules are bureaucratic, dictatorial and even malevolent.

Dumbledore represents Harry's moral certainty and his death presents Harry with a moral vacuum. Dumbledore has seen Harry through triumphs and griefs, guiding him through life-threatening situations, mentoring him in moral decision-making. After Dumbledore's death, Auntie Muriel casts aspersions on Dumbledore's character, pointing to suspicious events in his past, and Harry reels under the shock. As Harry learns more of Dumbledore's history, his silence seems like a betrayal. "Some inner certainty crashed down inside him... He had trusted Dumbledore, believed him the embodiment of goodness and wisdom. All was ashes..." (*Hallows* 293). In an age and society where morality has no external markers, Dumbledore has been Harry's moral paragon. Harry must now contend with the knowledge that his paragon was human and morally flawed. Without a moral guide, yardstick, or compass, Harry flounders, losing interest in the task Dumbledore has left him (to destroy the horcruxes, the splinters of Voldemort's soul) and becoming instead obsessed with the Deathly Hallows. Harry's moral uncertainty takes him to the edge of despair and erodes his resolve to act.

Like Hamlet, Harry finds his way to moral certainty at the grave of an innocent victim of his enemy. Dobby the house-elf has rescued Harry and his friends from Voldemort's clutches and died in the process. Harry digs Dobby a grave, and as he does so:

he no longer burned with that weird, obsessive longing [for the Hallows]. Loss and fear had snuffed it out: he felt as though he had been slapped awake again. (387)

He hears “the authority in his own voice, the conviction, the sense of purpose” as he plans his next action (390), determined to trust Dumbledore and continue his task of destroying Voldemort (391). From this point in the narrative, Harry is resolute. When challenged by Aberforth, Dumbledore’s brother, about whether Dumbledore told Harry the whole truth,

[Harry] did not want to express the doubts and uncertainties about Dumbledore that had riddled him for months now. He had made his choice while he dug Dobby’s grave; he had decided to continue along the winding, dangerous path indicated for him by Albus Dumbledore, to accept that he had not been told everything that he wanted to know, but simply to trust. (454)

Harry continues to trust even when he learns that he must sacrifice his life to end Voldemort’s — a crucial detail Dumbledore omitted to tell him. Mirroring Hamlet, he chooses to end the spread of malignant evil. As he walks toward death, the ghosts of his dead parents and friends walk beside him, talking with him and comforting him. His father’s words are, “We are... so proud of you” (560). Harry has fulfilled the moral responsibility placed on him by Dumbledore and hears not only the ghost of his father praise him but, later, Dumbledore as well. This is in line with Rowling’s philosophy that relationships are primary and that love conquers even death in the form of the grief we suffer and the memories we carry. In brutal contrast, Hamlet’s father’s ghost chides Hamlet for his inaction, and it is flights of angels that sing him to his rest. The spiritual world has involved Hamlet in schemes of evil; it is the spiritual world that accompanies him in death.

### *A Moral Compass*

Moral uncertainty is resolved in *Harry Potter* by finding internal moral direction; Harry takes his present bearings by looking towards a better future and trusting loving past and present relationships. Love is not just the good end but it is also the means; the destination and the map and the compass. A “moral compass” is a phrase in common usage but of unknown origin and presupposes constant, unchanging poles of North and South as a sextant depends on an “ever-fixed mark that is never shaken” — a star or stars. Presupposing a moral polarity of good and evil, with love as a fixed moral mark, as Rowling implies and Shakespeare asserts, however, is problematic in postmodern culture where we are adrift, cut loose from the grand narratives that anchored us to the certainties of the past.

In a different fictional world from *Harry Potter*, a twenty-first century character, Liam Pennywell, wakes in a hospital bed with no memory of how he came to be there. Anne Tyler’s novel, *Noah’s Compass*, describes being adrift in a world of shifting reference points. Liam discusses the story of Noah’s Ark with his young grandson who

wonders how the ark was powered. Liam explains that it didn't need power as it wasn't going anywhere.

‘Not going anywhere!’

‘There was nowhere *to* go. He was just trying to stay afloat. He was just bobbing up and down, so he didn't need a compass, or a rudder, or a sextant...’

‘What's a sextant?’

‘I believe its something that figures out directions by the stars. But Noah didn't need to figure out directions, because the whole world was under water and it made no difference.’ (219–220)

A world under water, a world washed clean of its memories, a world afloat, is a world without directions, maps or compasses. Maps require the plotting of journeys taken, a past and a history. The journey is a central motif in fantasy fiction, and journeys entail a continuous path from past, to present and onto the future. Even when a boat sails into the unknown, as the “Dawn Treader” does in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, or Ged does in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, a map and a log are kept of the voyage — a narrative that provides co-ordinates.

Memory is crucial in constituting the self as a moral being. When Liam wakes up in hospital he is told that he was assaulted in his bedroom but the incident has been erased from his memory. He is deeply troubled by this.

Something had happened, something significant, and he couldn't say how he'd comported himself. He didn't know if he'd been calm, or terrified, or angry. He didn't know if he'd acted cowardly or heroic. (26)

Liam suggests that his actions reflect his inner moral self and the absence of memory leaves a gap, an uncertainty about his character. Self-consciousness divides the self simultaneously into an actor and a spectator. Memory allows us to step back from our actions and replay them, watching and judging ourselves in a moral mirror darkly. Judging past actions, as Liam would like to and as Gertrude does, provokes guilt, shame, remorse, or reprieve from those feelings, and enables self-correction. In this way the past is carried into the present, through memory, to shape moral conscience. The amnesia Liam experiences mimics a more generalised amnesia as his stepmother attempts to read his palm to predict his future. The “gnarly line of his scar” on his left palm as a result of the accident obscures his “whole entire past” (204). (Like Harry he has no conscious memory of the violence done to him but he is permanently marked by it.) But, protests Liam:

‘We just want to know about my future.’

‘Oh, you can't read one without the other,’ Esther Jo told him. ‘They're intermingled. They bounce off each other. That's what amateurs fail to understand.’ (205)

Liam doesn't hold to the past, he “had never been the type to dwell on bygones. He believed in moving on” (26).

The motif of the scar is an important one. It is the visible mark of a past trauma, a mark on the skin in the present that refers back to the past. Oedipus bears the scar of his parents' defiance of fate and their subsequent rejection of him as an infant, and he is consequently marked by his past, though ignorant of what has happened. While scars are usually associated with memory of the injurious event, in the case of Liam, as with Harry and Oedipus (and in cases of severe psychological damage), there is an absence of memory, "an actual gap... a hole in his mind" (26). Where the trauma has occurred in infancy, as with Oedipus and Harry, and the past (that is, knowledge of parentage and inheritance) has been lost, the scar becomes a key to identity and self-discovery. Harry's scar continues to connect him back to the trauma of his parents' murder, the frequent physical sensation of it prickling reconnects him to his parents' murderer. It is also the outward sign that he is one of Voldemort's seven horcruxes. Scars are symbols that we can never simply leave the past behind us but that the past, the present and the future are "intermingled", bouncing off each other, inextricably linked. In the stories of both Oedipus and Harry, scarring has occurred in the attempt to thwart a prophecy and to cheat fate. The prophecies then become self-fulfilling — not because they are passively accepted but because they are actively resisted.

*Noah's Compass* suggests that Liam is wrong — the past can never be let go and "moved on" from. The past provides one point of reference for a moral compass; memories, narratives, ideologies and histories cannot be discarded but, lined up with hopes and ideals for the future, enable the journey forward. Liam, remembering his past, finally accepts his influence on, and responsibility for, past events, and understands that to heal his relationship with his daughter he must acknowledge, and ask forgiveness for, his past failings. This, Tyler suggests, is how we find moral direction. The ethical importance of memory is a recurring theme in postmodern fantasy and one I will return to.

*Harry Potter* does not engage with postmodern moral uncertainty in the same way that *Noah's Compass* does. In Rowling's world good and evil are polarised: Harry's good versus Voldemort's evil. However, this is not entirely true. Good and evil are not set up in a pre-existing universal binary opposition, Harry and Dumbledore do not represent God and Voldemort is not the devil. Rather, Rowling examines the problem of human evil, familiar to us in narratives of our collective and personal past, and searches for a response to evil that has meaning in a postmodern world. She does not appeal to, or even assume acceptance of, traditional ideologies, religions or philosophies. This is primarily a story about the journey of the soul, a hero's troubled journey through moral ambiguities and uncertainties, to moral certainty and action. It stands within the tradition of moral allegories of the soul like Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, but has also

incorporated into its ethos insights of twentieth century psychology and popular philosophy. If we reach the end of Harry's journey (and it has been a very long one) without grasping what has the power to defeat Voldemort's evil (and the evil of our own souls), we are exceptionally inattentive readers. Even Voldemort can chant his downfall as a refrain: "Is it love again?" he jeers just before he dies (*Hallows* 592). But Harry depends as much on his cunning, courage and understanding of the past as he does on the power of love in his final duel with Voldemort. Harry's moral compass is much like Lyra's alethiometer in Pullman's *Northern Lights*; it is a complex instrument that depends on a good amount of intuition to read it correctly.

### ***Sin to Psychopathology: the Problem of Evil***

The theme of an individual's guilt for wrongdoing is one that has continued in narratives from before Hamlet through to postmodern literature. The terminology has changed, as have the theories attached to this theme, but its concern remains with evil within. In *Hamlet* the soul is either sinful or redeemed; Bunyan, seven decades later, allegorises a pilgrimage from sin to redemption; Dickens, more than one hundred and fifty years later, emphasises moral development; whereas postmodern writers draw on understandings of science, psychology, sociology and merge them with older, more traditional approaches to the problem of evil.

When Hamlet confronts Gertrude in her chamber to show her the mirror of her soul, it is not any generalised evil he refers to but the specific sins of lust and unfaithfulness. He begs her to confront her "rank corruption", confess herself to heaven and "Repent what's past" (III.4.149-151). Likewise Hamlet will not kill Claudius when he finds him praying, arguing to himself that he will not be revenged if Claudius dies when his soul is "purged... fit and seasoned for his passage" (III.3.84-86). Hamlet does not linger to hear the rest of Claudius's monologue — if he had he may have acted differently. Claudius concludes, "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. Words without thoughts never to heaven go" (III.4.97-98), indicating that Claudius does not have the proper will to repent; his soul has not been purged of sin. The concepts of sin ("corruption"), repentance and atonement (being purged) do not have much currency today but underlie much of the drama of *Hamlet*.

One of the great allegories of the journey, or pilgrimage, of the soul is John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (first published in 1678). It is an overtly Christian allegory, Bunyan was a Puritan preacher, and is complete with biblical texts and unambiguous symbolism. It is a forerunner to fantasy fiction with popular "folk-tale elements in its structure" (Ousby 781), and its "imagery has exerted a considerable influence over the entire subgenre of Quest fantasy" (Clute and Grant 762). It is narrated

as a dream, and this dream-like quality, entering and exploring the inner world, is a mark of fantasy. In his introduction, George Bernard Shaw recounts Bunyan saying, on reaching the end of the journey,

‘Tho’ with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been to arrive where I am. My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get them.’ (qtd. in Bunyan 9, 10)

This is the implied epilogue of all fantasy; that we should “read” the moral lessons of the hero into our own internal ethical journeys.

*The Pilgrim’s Progress* opens with a man “clothed in rags... and a great burden upon his back” (25). The pilgrim (named Christian) carries the burden of his sin (53), perhaps meaning here the guilt of past failures and violations of law, or perhaps the genetically endowed moral deformity known as “original sin” in traditional Christian theology (Metzger and Coogan 696). In either meaning of the word, “sin” is the burden of the past; either the burden of our own personal history or a burden inherited from our ancestors. The allegory, in the form of a pilgrimage, is the inner life of a Christian, reflecting the Protestant concern for individuals to find their own personal salvation before God. The work of grace for those following Luther (and Protestant Puritans like Bunyan) is an internal moral work — the pursuit of a righteous life, one free from the burden of sin.

The concept of sin (although not the word itself) has evolved through rationalism, humanism and psychology, but both aspects of the word (that is, guilt for personal past failures and an inherited moral flaw) have made their own pilgrimage through fantasy literature. Ghosts are useful symbols representing both aspects of the concept of “sin”.

Dickens’s *The Christmas Carol* (written in 1843) is an intermediary in the shift from seventeenth century Christian thought to the prevailing sociological and psychological ideas today that explain evil as a consequence of past, usually childhood, abuse. Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his deceased partner, Marley, who is fettered with the chains he forged in life, “link by link, yard by yard” and girded of his own free will (25). The chains bind Marley within himself and to his self-interest in life; his eternal regret is that he cannot in death “make amends for one’s life’s opportunities misused” (26). Here, in Victorian England, we see an emphasis placed on the sins of omission; social sins. Scrooge is then visited in turn by the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future. The Ghost of Christmas Past shows Scrooge “the shadows of things that have been” (35). Scrooge sobs over his lonely childhood, “his poor forgotten self as he had used to be” (36). The adult Scrooge pities him, and in pitying him, begins to open his heart to those who suffer in his more recent memories (37). Scrooge’s moral regression

is pursued into his present where he sees the consequences of his lack of compassion. The Ghost of Christmas Future, is a foreshadow: “the shadow of things that have not happened, but will happen in the time before us”. Scrooge recognises the interconnectedness of the past, present and future: “Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead... But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change” (87). When the Ghost confronts Scrooge with his death, Scrooge begs for a reprieve from certain future events and a new opportunity to act charitably towards others. “ ‘I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach’,” cries Scrooge (88). Like Tyler, Dickens makes the past and the future the poles of his moral compass.

While the concept of sin is etched faintly into Dickens’s narrative, in the foreground the roles of past choices (personal responsibility) and past environmental factors (social influences) vie for dominance. Moral responsibility is still a contested issue. Are we autonomous and fully responsible for our actions, or are we the products of our past, including our genes and environment, and is freedom therefore an illusion? This debate is aired in *Noah’s Compass*. Liam’s assailant is arrested and his mother begs Liam to be a character witness for her son. Liam is aghast at the request, but the mother persists.

‘I realize you’ve got reason to be mad at him, but you don’t know his whole story. This is a good, kind, good-hearted, kindhearted boy we’re talking about. Only he’s the product of a broken home and his father is a shit-head, and in school he had dyslexia which gave him low self-esteem. Plus I think he might be bi-polar, or whatchamacallit, ADD. So okay, all I’m asking is a second chance for him, right?’ (240)

Liam, however, has studied ethical philosophy. “He could quote entire passages from the Stoics — in the original Greek, if need be” (26). He, stoically, accepts the “vicissitudes of fortune” and feels better when he contemplates the futility of life (210). He happily shoulders responsibility for his own life, “moving on” and putting the past behind him, believing, as he does, that while we cannot influence what life throws at us (fate), we can choose our response to it (247). While the mother argues that her son is essentially good (whatever that means) but is the victim of his genes and upbringing and cannot therefore be held accountable for his violent actions, Liam is with the Stoics.

The first *Harry Potter* book tries to reconcile these two conflicting positions. The sorting hat ceremony divides students by their innate (inherited) abilities but also by their choices. It scrutinises Harry, identifying courage, intelligence, talent and a thirst to prove himself. Harry interrupts the process by thinking, “Not Slytherin, not Slytherin” (*Philosopher* 90, 91). The hat continues to assess and interrogate him.

‘Are you sure? You could be great, you know, it’s all there in your head, and Slytherin will help you on your way to greatness, no doubt about that — no? Well, if you’re sure — better be GRYFFINDOR!’ (91)

Harry is troubled by the sorting hat’s uncertainty. “So I should be in Slytherin,” he says to Dumbledore “desperately” (*Secrets* 245). But Dumbledore replies that Harry knows why he was put in Gryffindor. “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities” (245). And very near the end of the story we overhear Dumbledore tell Snape, “You know, I sometimes think we Sort too soon” (*Hallows* 545), implying that Snape, a Slytherin, has a Gryffindor’s great courage. Harry describes Snape to his son as “probably the bravest man I ever knew” (*Hallows* 607).

Close parallels are drawn between Harry, Tom Riddle and Severus Snape. They are three lonely, emotionally scarred boys, “the abandoned boys” (*Hallows* 558), for whom Hogwarts becomes a refuge. In these three characters with their parallel backgrounds, Rowling addresses the problem raised by Tyler — why some people do evil things. The past, she suggests, is a key to moral character.

There are two key episodes that highlight the importance of the past and memory in *Harry Potter*. In *The Half-Blood Prince*, Dumbledore is dying and has limited time to hand over his knowledge of the task to Harry. He uses it to share memories with Harry. Harry is impatient.

‘Sir... is it important to know all this about Voldemort’s past?’ [he asks.]  
‘Very important, I think,’ said Dumbledore.  
‘And it... it’s got something to do with the prophecy?’  
‘It has everything to do with the prophecy.’ (*Half-Blood* 203)

Knowing a person’s past is essential to understanding a person. Explaining the horcruxes to Harry, Dumbledore reminds Harry that he has spent the past “many years” discovering as much as he can about Voldemort, he has “trawled back through Voldemort’s past” (472). This knowledge helps him to predict that Voldemort has divided his soul into six horcruxes, that the objects he has chosen are significant “trophies... with a powerful magical history” (471), that they are hidden in places significant to him and it also allows him to anticipate where the hiding places are. This is the knowledge Harry is equipped with as he inherits the task of destroying the horcruxes.

The second key episode abruptly interrupts the narrative flow. In the midst of a fast-paced and emotionally charged battle scene, Harry is bequeathed Snape’s memories. Snape is, I think, the most interesting character in *Harry Potter*. His moral ambiguity is sustained over all seven books; his hatred of Harry and Sirius, two unambiguous heroes, marks him as a villain. A whole chapter is devoted to his memories through which Harry discovers that Snape has spent the past eight years working to protect Harry from Voldemort, motivated by his love for Lily, Harry’s dead mother. While everyone living believes that Snape betrayed the Order of the Phoenix and murdered Dumbledore, the

memories reveal him as loyal both to Dumbledore and to Dumbledore's task. Co-mingled hatred of Harry's father and love for his mother explain Snape's deeply ambivalent attitude towards Harry; his loyalty to Dumbledore and his love for Lily compel him to act in Harry's defence. Finally, armed with Snape's memories, Harry can defeat Voldemort. Although Voldemort brandishes the "Elder wand, the Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny", believing that by murdering Snape (defeating him) the power of the wand has passed to him, Harry points out that Snape didn't defeat Dumbledore. Instead, the unwitting but true master of the wand was Draco Malfoy who disarmed Dumbledore before his death, but who has subsequently been disarmed by Harry. All this rather convoluted passing on of power, as revealed in Snape's and Harry's memories, allows Harry to duel confidently with Voldemort and ensures that Voldemort's killing curse rebounds upon himself, leaving Harry free from the taint of murder. If Harry had not had access to Snape's memories he would not have understood this crucial technicality that enables him not only to defeat his foe, but to do so without tarnishing his moral character.

Conversely, Harry experiences Dumbledore's silence on his past failings as a betrayal. Hermione defends Dumbledore, pointing out that his subsequent actions prove a change of heart, but Harry's disillusionment with Dumbledore deeply challenges his trust in him. Dumbledore, he says, asked for blind trust without himself trusting Harry enough to tell him the "whole truth" (295). Knowledge of the burdens of another's past (including guilt and shame) makes them vulnerable; it is a chink in their personal power and Harry is right to assert that Dumbledore did not fully trust him.

The characters of Harry, Snape and Tom Riddle explore the relationship between history and destiny, a central theme of *Hamlet* and one that continues to pose a moral dilemma today. By contrasting their characters and their choices, Rowling makes her own position clear, reflecting contemporary ideas. These boys are all damaged by their troubled childhoods. Harry uses the petty cruelties and more serious unkindness inflicted on him by the Dursleys to refine his sense of right and wrong. His past experiences as a victim become a point of empathy with other victims — even a snake. Watching a boa constrictor at the zoo, he feels sorry for it in its imprisonment — "It was worse than having a cupboard as a bedroom" (*Philosopher* 25). When Draco tells Harry he shouldn't "go making friends with the wrong sort" and that he can help him there, Harry retorts that he can tell the wrong sort for himself (81); Draco reminds him strongly of Dudley (60). His experience of being bullied has given him a hatred of bullying rather than a desire to bully; he values kindness and friendship and despises snobbery. His empathy, capacity for love and friendship and humility are what Dumbledore later refers to as "his deepest nature... like his mother's" (*Hallows* 549) and his "good heart" (577). We are not sure whether Harry has inherited those virtues from his mother, absorbed them in the

first eighteen months of his life, or created his own moral character — but I think we are led to believe that all three together have formed him.

Tom Riddle, brought up in an orphanage, has never, as far as we know, been abused. It was “a grim place in which to grow up” but the orphans “looked reasonably well-cared-for” (*Half-blood* 251). What he undoubtedly has lacked, however, is attachment to a loving parental figure. He was rejected (along with his mother) by his father, and his mother, in despair, chooses death “in spite of a son who needed her” (*Half-blood* 246). She names him, connecting him to his inherited past, after his father and her father (both proud, cruel, cold-hearted men). The matron of the orphanage describes him as “funny... odd... he scares the other children... a bully” (250). In contrast to Harry’s delight at being offered a place at Hogwarts, Tom is sceptical and cool. When he learns, however, that Hogwarts is a school of magic, he flushes with excitement, and reveals how he can make animals do what he wants them to and hurt people who annoy him (254); Harry’s unwitting acts of magic have been in self-defence (*Philosopher* 47). When Hagrid tells Harry he is a wizard, Harry, wondering why he has then been bullied all his remembered life, says, “I think there must be some mistake. I don’t think I can be a wizard” (47). Tom, in contrast, says, “I knew I was different... I knew I was special. Always, I knew there was something” (*Half-blood* 254). The eleven-year-old Tom Riddle is a chilling character; Dumbledore observes, “he was already using magic against other people, to frighten, to punish, to control... his obvious instincts [were] for cruelty, secrecy and domination” (259). Dumbledore does not, however, comment on Tom’s (mistaken) assumption that, as magic would have saved his mother from death, she could not have been a witch (257). (Voldemort craves not only power over others but immortality.) Dumbledore notes that he has never had a friend, nor ever wanted one (260) and he rejects Dumbledore as a surrogate father-figure, unlike Harry who responds warmly to any kind-hearted friendship he is offered. Tom overtly plays by the rules (unlike Harry), but despises the moral law that Harry embraces.

While understanding Voldemort’s past gives Dumbledore insight into his motives and actions, Rowling’s attitude to the origins of his evil is not entirely clear. Has he inherited a disposition to evil through his genes from his cold-hearted and cruel forebears? Has his mother in abandoning her son and choosing death over life scarred him irreparably? Has lack of attachment to a caring parent figure in his infancy caused him to become emotionally detached and cold? Or is he alone responsible for his moral choices, has he chosen to become a psychopath? The origins of behaviour and choice remains unexplained within the series reflecting a wider confusion and continuing debate in society over the role of genetics or environment in determining behaviour.

Severus Snape is secretive and sinister. He is the hero dressed in the black billowing robes of a villain. He is often likened to a bat, a creature of darkness, a hidden creature. He hides his memories from Harry when required to teach him occlumency (*Phoenix* 471). He is at the heart of the mystery story of *Harry Potter* and it is only at the very end that we know where his loyalties lay all along, significantly, when we have access to his memories and his past. Knowing his past, we know the moral character of the man.

Like Harry and Tom, Severus had a troubled childhood. His clothes, mismatched and badly-fitting, are an indication that he is neither privileged nor well-cared for. Unlike Tom, who is tall and handsome, he is “sallow, small, stringy” (*Hallows* 532) and he lives at an undesirable address. He watches Lily play with “undisguised greed”. As their friendship develops (and Severus is “greedy” for her friendship), Lily enquires after his family, asking him if they are still arguing (535). This is the only glimpse we have of his unhappy home life. He resents Petunia, and she him, and he, deliberately or not, hurts her (magically). He is taunted and teased by James and Sirius, in much the same way that Draco taunts Ron about his family’s poverty — but his humiliation is more profound and public. Separated from Lily by the Sorting (she is in Gryffindor), he is also separated from that which is good in him, the narrative suggests. He falls into the company of other Slytherins who are “creepy” and practise Dark Magic (540), although he is still determined that Lily is his best friend. Lily, however, rejects him: “you’ve chosen your way, I’ve chosen mine”, she tells him.

Lily, however, is wrong. His love for Lily is not (or not exclusively) sexual desire as Voldemort mistakenly believes (to his ultimate destruction), and is stronger than his desire for inclusion and friendship (with the Death Eaters), stronger than his jealousy of James, and even stronger than his love for his own life (544). When put to the test, it is a disinterested love and compels him to protect Harry in spite of the antipathy he feels towards James’s son. He forgives Lily although she cannot find it in her heart to forgive him — resulting in her death. He represents Rowling’s ethos: his choice to remain loyal to love, and to do whatever he can to honour that love, reveals the goodness in him (545).

## **The Shadow of the Self**

The demonic is, like the divine, something within the human mind, not something out there... (Frye 93)  
The demonic and the divine are no longer external entities but belong to the internal world of the self that harbours both. We are no longer haunted by ghosts, but by ourselves: “the term ‘double’ does tend to imply a malign or seductive relationship

between a surface personality and a submerged aspect of that personality which haunts the surface self” (Clute and Grant 855). Doubling is both of psychological and literary interest. Carl Jung says, “Unfortunately there can be no doubt that man is, on the whole, less good than he imagines himself or wants to be. Everyone carries a shadow” (“Shadow” 131). Many contemporary fantasies for children have also embraced the concept of a divided, contradictory self, both divine and demonic, at war within itself. Sometimes it is between the bestial id and the conscience of the superego, sometimes between the self and its shadow, and sometimes in the form of a doppelganger, or a double. But it is nearly always a moral tussle between good and evil; the paradox of two opposing forces that have to be united to create a whole, authentic self. Ursula Le Guin’s *Earthsea* series and J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* both explore the shadow territories.

While the doppelganger slunk into literature in the nineteenth century (Clute and Grant 285), the idea of an internal battle between the savage and “civilised man” raging within individuals is much older. Mary Midgley, writing of Plato, says that he was the first Greek to separate the gods as good (the divine) from the Beast Within (the demonic — or at least bestial).

His serious view is that evil is something alien to the soul; something Other, the debasing effect of matter seeping in through the instinctive nature. This treacherous element clearly cannot be anything properly human... but a dreadful composite monster combining all the vices: in short, the Beast Within, whose only opponent is the Rational Soul. (43)

As Midgley points out, if the source of evil is in our animal natures then it is a contest against evil that we cannot win. Evil is an inseparable part of us, an animal instinct. Joe Grixiti suggests that this idea remains prevalent today.

The belief that human beings are rotten at the core, and that there is a beast within us which causes us to commit evils that our rational selves blush to think of, holds very wide currency in the popular imagination. (86)

If evil has its genesis in humans, if the devils are within, then independently existing devils and monsters of supernatural origin can be quietly killed off. This idea proved attractive to materialist scientists and was taken up by psychology, adapted by Freud into the instinctual Id repressed into the unconscious and by Jung into the shadow. In this early twentieth century psychology, exposing the hidden polarity and contradiction within the self has a moral dimension.

The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognising the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge. (Jung, “Depth Psychology” P.14)

*A Wizard of Earthsea*, the first story in Ursula Le Guin’s *Earthsea* fantasy series, was first published in 1968 and is heavily influenced by Jungian psychology. The tone

of the opening sentences evokes an epic myth; it is a landscape on which wizards roam. Ged, a promising young wizard, conjures in ignorance, but also in injured pride, “a shapeless clot of shadow darker than the darkness” (30). He is rebuked by his mentor, Ogion: “Have you never thought how danger must surround power as shadow does light... every word, every act of our Art is said and done either for good, or for evil” (31). But even though Ged loves and respects Ogion, and yearns to wander with him and learn to be silent, he is torn by opposing cravings, “the wish for glory, the will to act” (32).

That the shadow is the central theme of the story is reinforced by the name of the ship in which Ged sails to the school of wizards: *Shadow*. Even as he enters the school, “a shadow followed him in at his heels” (40). At the school, a fellow-wizard, Jasper, wounds his pride. But “Ged’s pride would not be slighted or condescended to” and he swears that he will prove “how great his power really was — some day” (46) — and that he will humiliate Jasper. “He would not let the fellow stand there looking down at him, graceful, disdainful, hateful” (49). Ged fails to see “the danger, the darkness” he is fostering in his rivalry with Jasper.

Mistakenly Ged assumes that premonitions of shadows are merely shadows of ignorance. Knowledge, he believes, will dispel these: reason can overcome the darkness of superstition. In his full power as Wizard, he “need fear nothing in the world, nothing at all” (58) — but he is dangerously wrong. His craving for glory and action, together with his pride, disturb a deep half-conscious reaction to Jasper’s taunting of his inferiority, and he rises to the challenge to prove himself and raise a spirit from the dead. Ged is filled with confidence as he proves his power, heedless of his master’s warning that danger surrounds power (63). He holds the weight of darkness before it splits apart, “a ripping open of the fabric of the world”.

And through the ... breach clambered something like a clot of black shadow, quick and hideous, and it leaped straight out at Ged’s face. (63, 64)

It is like a “black beast, the size of a young child” (64). The shadow flees, but in banishing it and saving Ged, the Archmage sacrifices his life (65). The splitting of the world symbolises the splitting of Ged’s self and is linked with death.

Ged, scarred and broken, gradually heals physically (66), but remains psychically damaged. The new Archmage tells him he is in danger of becoming a “puppet doing the will of that evil shadow... Evil, it wills to work evil through you... It is the shadow of your arrogance, the shadow of your ignorance, the shadow you cast,” he tells Ged (67, 68). Although it is the shadow of Ged’s wounded pride and ambition (which are surely morally neutral in themselves), Le Guin has given it the form of a “black beast” and called it “evil”.

When Ged is finally mature and humble enough, his task is to “hunt down the evil, follow his terror to its source” (136). This is a journey inwards, into his psychological depths, in the same way that Tenar must explore the subterranean labyrinth to its inner core in the second book in the series. When Ged finally confronts the evil, his shadow, it comes to him in the shape of people in his past, people who reflect, or upon whom he has endowed, his own faults; in psychoanalytic terms, “projections”. “Projections change the world into the replica of one’s own unknown face”, says Jung (“Shadow”). At last it takes the form of something bestial.

In silence, man and shadow met face to face, and stopped.

Aloud and clearly, breaking that old silence, Ged spoke the shadow’s name, and in the same moment the shadow spoke without lips or tongue, saying the same word: ‘Ged.’ And the two voices were one voice.

Ged reached out his hands, dropping his staff, and took hold of his shadow, or the black self that reached out to him. Light and darkness met, and joined, and were one. (164)

Slowly regaining strength, Ged says, “...look it is done. It is over.’ He laughed. ‘The wound is healed,’ he said, ‘I am whole, I am free’” (165).

The sad truth is that man’s real life consists of a complex of inexorable opposites — day and night, birth and death, happiness and misery, good and evil. We are not even sure that one will prevail against the other, that good will overcome evil, or joy defeat pain. Life is a battleground. It always has been, and always will be; and if it were not so, existence would come to an end. (Jung, *Symbols* 85)

In Jungian psychology, the Shadow is the dark side of paired “inexorable opposites” residing within each person: night, death, misery, evil, pain. Life is a battle, not against external forces, but against an inner enemy, resembling a coup rather than a siege. The Shadow “is a motif... well known to mythology... [and] represents first and foremost the personal unconscious” (Jung, “Shadow”). It is “the menacing power that lies fettered in each of us”, says Jung (*Basic Writings* 78), a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, “for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognising the dark aspects of the personality as present and real” (112).

“The dark aspects of the personality” in Le Guin’s novel are Ged’s arrogance, pride, ignorance, impatience, desire for glory and his hatred. These are the repressed or hidden characteristics that are “painful or regrettable”, or, implied by Le Guin’s description, bestial, and belong to his “negative ego-personality” (Jung, *Integration* 173). It is only after he has loosed his shadow and suffered severe wounding that scars him, accepting responsibility for the Archmage’s death, that he is prepared to learn humility, patience, servitude and wisdom. Through a landscape filled with symbols (Jungian rather than Bunyan’s Christian symbols) he becomes increasingly self-aware until he confronts his unconscious in the form of a dark shadow, faces it and names it with his own name.

He then unites his “black self” with the light of his conscious ego-personality. “The hero’s main feat is to overcome the monster of darkness: it is the long-hoped-for and expected triumph of consciousness over the unconscious,” says Jung (284).

The Shadow resembles Bunyan’s burden of sin.

We carry our past with us, to wit, the primitive and inferior man with his desires and emotions, and it is only with an enormous effort that we can detach ourselves from this burden. (Jung *Answer*)

As in Christian doctrine, the shadow both precedes us (original sin) and follows us (the burden of our own guilt). But Jung’s view of inherited evil is more severe than the Christian one. Our moral culpability is by reason of our shared humanity bearing “unaltered and indelibly within me the capacity and inclination” to evil (*Undiscovered Self* 96). It is of “gigantic proportions” that the Church’s concept of original sin does not fully appreciate: “The case is far graver and is grossly underestimated” declares Jung (95). Reconciliation of the self is available in Jung’s theory, but there is no atonement for guilt or divine forgiveness as there is in Christian doctrine.

Despite Jung’s view that evil within is of “gigantic proportions”, he is not fatalistic. The unconscious, although seething with unbearable repressed evil, is not, itself, evil. It “contains all aspects of human nature — light and dark, beautiful and ugly, good and evil, profound and silly” (*Symbols* 103). By “exploring our own souls” we gain self-knowledge through both the world of images (as in dreams) and understanding our instincts; it is our attitude towards “these forces” that determines whether they will be for us “construction or catastrophe” (*Undiscovered Self* 107). It takes humility to recognise the shadow within, “the modesty we need in order to acknowledge imperfection” (104), requiring our acceptance of weakness and dependency. The moral project is therefore to integrate, or reconcile, the dark side of our personality with the conscious mind. “For Jung, the supreme value, the goal towards which the individual’s psychological development was tending, was that of integration or wholeness” (Storr 59). This, as I have already described, is the task that God finally accomplishes, and it brings him relief, joy and wholeness. This is also, I believe, a central theme in *Harry Potter* although there it has a different twist.

### ***The Double***

Over ten years after Le Guin published *The Wizard of Earthsea*, Jung’s theories also found their way into the highly popular science-fiction movie, *Star Wars*. (George Lucas was strongly influenced by Joseph Campbell, who followed and expanded on Jung’s psychology.) The much quoted, and much parodied, revelation, “I am your father”, spoken to an aghast hero, Luke, by his arch-enemy, Darth Vader, changes the confrontation fundamentally. The moral opponent is no longer alien, separate and

“other”, but is an intimate relation. “The unconscious is the mother of consciousness,” says Jung (*Meaning of Individuation*).<sup>17</sup>

However, Darth Vader is not Luke’s shadow in the Jungian sense. Like Hamlet’s father’s ghost he represents the past and he is paired with Luke, representing a potential self. Le Guin discusses this pairing as it occurs in *Lord of the Rings* in her article “The Child and the Shadow”. She contrasts elves with orcs, Aragorn with the Black Rider, Gandalf with Saruman, Frodo with Gollum (68). These doubles are characters in their own right unlike Ged’s shadow; they have independent literary existences. This doubling or pairing is found in *Harry Potter* and reflects a slightly different philosophy of good and evil, one in which the double is not a shadow self but a potential self, one we can choose not to become.

There are a number of paired characters in the *Harry Potter* series, characters that mirror or reverse each other in various ways, the most obvious being Harry and Voldemort. Some of the less obvious characters also show how Rowling uses the light/dark binary between (and within) her characters to illustrate her moral vision.

Prior to the seventh and final book, Dumbledore is presented as an eccentric, very powerful, kindly and wise mentor and father or grandfather-figure to Harry. He has the habit of uttering pithy words of wisdom, undoubtedly summing up the author’s beliefs. When Harry trashes his office in grief and anger, Dumbledore serenely says, “By all means continue destroying my possessions... I daresay I have too many” (*Phoenix* 727). There is something other-worldly about him, a Gandalf or a Christ, mysterious and unknowable. But from the second chapter of the seventh book, Dumbledore’s reputation is questioned and only a few chapters later, he falls under the shadow of suspicion of murdering his sister (*Hallows* 131). Dumbledore’s omission to tell Harry certain key personal facts feel, to Harry, “tantamount to a lie” (132). While Harry is able to reluctantly accept this, about halfway through the novel, he is forced to concede that Dumbledore was not “the embodiment of goodness and wisdom” he had believed him to be (293). It is not until near the end of the book that Harry and the reader are finally allowed an inside reconstruction of the events, removing the shadow hanging over Dumbledore (in terms of an actual crime) and placing it within him. This shadow plagued him throughout his life and eventually caused his death.

The most damning evidence against Dumbledore is a letter he wrote at the age of seventeen to his friend, Grindelwald, and is quoted in Rita Skeeter’s biography, “The

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<sup>17</sup> Jungian theory has permeated popular thought to the extent that before the final *Harry Potter* book was published, when conjecture was running amok, it was frequently and flippantly asserted that Voldemort – or perhaps Snape - was Harry’s real father.

Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore”. The letter discusses wizard dominance over Muggles and their right to rule them “For their own good” (291). “Yes,” writes Dumbledore, “we have been given power and yes, that power gives us the right to rule... We seize control FOR THE GREATER GOOD” (291). (This utilitarian philosophy is echoed towards the end of the book when Aberforth insinuates that Dumbledore intends to sacrifice Harry “for the greater good”. Harry replies, answering Kant’s objection, that sometimes the greater good does take priority over the individual.) Grindelwald, who was to become a Most Dangerous Dark Wizard, reminiscent of Hitler, and a tyrant second only to Voldemort, meets Dumbledore in a “legendary duel” many years later and is defeated (292). He is then imprisoned in Nurmengard, a prison he himself had built with the slogan “For the Greater Good” carved over the entrance. Voldemort murders him in the present of Harry’s narrative (382).

Dumbledore admits that he has learned that he cannot be trusted with power; it is his weakness (575). He has therefore refused political power and chosen to remain a headmaster in self-recognition of that weakness. He retains his magical power but uses it for good rather than self-aggrandisement. Grindelwald represents the dark side of Dumbledore’s lust for power, the side he has defeated and imprisoned, although not slain. This shadow exerts control over him when he puts on the Resurrection Stone ring that would allow him to see his dead family from whom he craves forgiveness, but he overestimates his power. When Snape questions why he would put on a cursed ring, one that will devour his life, Dumbledore replies that he “was a fool. Sorely tempted...” (546). The love of power is itself cursed and Dumbledore, although having faced his weakness, as Ged faces his shadow, is finally destroyed by it.

When Harry faces Voldemort in their final confrontation, Voldemort jeers at Harry, “Dumbledore’s favourite solution, love, which he claimed conquered death, though love did not stop him falling from the Tower and breaking like an old waxwork” (592). What Voldemort does not understand is that love indeed saved Dumbledore, years earlier. When Aberforth, Dumbledore’s brother, narrates to Harry and his friends the events surrounding his sister’s death, and the subsequent flight of Grindelwald, he concludes bitterly, “‘And Albus was free, wasn’t he? Free of the burden of his sister...’ ‘He was never free,’ said Harry” (457). Harry then describes Dumbledore’s burden of guilt when he recalled those events: “...it was torture to him, if you’d seen him then, you wouldn’t say he was free” (458). The “torture” of seeing his brother in pain and his sister killed is the internal anguish of love, an anguish that subdued the menacing evil of Dumbledore’s shadow; love saved him from his evil potential. Recognising with abhorrence his potential for evil in his double, Grindelwald, Dumbledore instead embraces a desire for good that is stronger than evil.

Sirius Black and Severus Snape are an interesting pairing in that one is not the shadow of the other, but they each reflect the other's shadow. Unlike other pairings where the characters duel,<sup>18</sup> Sirius and Severus are required by Dumbledore to shake hands.

Very slowly — but still glaring at each other as though each wished the other nothing but ill — Sirius and Snape moved towards each other, and shook hands. They let go extremely quickly. (*Goblet* 618)

The truce is tentative, violence lies just under the surface of their relationship. While the narrative sympathy is with Sirius because it follows Harry's viewpoint, there are enough clues about the weaknesses and strengths of both characters for the reader not to be surprised when Severus is revealed, at the end, as a moral hero. Although Snape is a believable shadow, dressed in black, greasy-haired, prejudiced, and harshly unjust in his treatment of Harry, and while Sirius is a believable hero, the long-lost, handsome and loving godfather restored to Harry, they mirror each other in a much more complex way than a simple good/evil dualism. In the same scene that we are introduced to Sirius as Harry's godfather we hear the story of how Sirius's dark sense of practical joking leads to Snape's near transformation into a werewolf (261). Snape bears, in Lupin's words, a "schoolboy grudge" against Sirius for this (*Prisoner* 263), and Sirius shows no remorse for his action. Snape "breathes" at Sirius, "Vengeance is very sweet", but Sirius "snarls" in reply, "The joke's on you again, Severus" (264). Sirius's arrogance, love of heroics, his taste for dark practical jokes and his lack of empathy reacts with Severus's jealousy, desire for revenge, unforgiveness and nastiness (most especially seen directed against Harry) to produce a toxic brew of mutual loathing. While neither character directly causes the other's death, their shadow characteristics contribute to the circumstances that lead to Sirius's death. It is also interesting to note that Sirius's loyalty and friendship/love are for Harry's father, whereas Severus's loyalty and friendship/love are for Harry's mother. Both sacrifice their lives defending Harry.

Voldemort is neither Harry's father nor his shadow. They function in moral opposition to each other as archetypes of good and evil although there are very obvious parallels between them. Harry has many characteristics of the archetypal hero mentioned by Joseph Henderson: a humble birth, early superhuman qualities, a rapid rise to prominence and a triumphant struggle with evil. Harry departs from the archetype here — he neither over-reaches in pride nor dies — although he does offer up his life (110). As a representative of human "good", Harry has many positive qualities, foremost amongst them being his loyalty, his courage, his humility and his ability to empathise

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<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note which characters duel. For example, Molly Weasley and Bellatrix duel: both characters represent female passionate love, Molly for her family and Bellatrix for Voldemort. Molly fights in defense of her daughter, Bellatrix attacks the girls out of devotion to Voldemort. Gilderoy Lockhart and Snape also duel: neither are how they appear; Gilderoy's suavity covers greedy self-interest, Snape's unattractiveness disguises self-denying loyalty.

with others — Dumbledore suggests he has inherited his mother’s “deepest nature” (*Hallows* 549); he also speaks of Harry remaining “pure of heart” despite his sufferings (*Half-blood* 478). He is also impulsive and often stubborn, but these characteristics are not “evil”, merely flaws. Harry is guided by his desire to do what is right (which he judges for himself) rather than self-interest. He is indifferent to status or wealth (as seen in his exchange with Malfoy in the first book) and imposed restrictions or rules (a trait deeply irritating to Snape). His sense of human decency seems to provide him with an internal moral compass. Voldemort on the other hand is the archetypal villain, so deformed by his lust for power and immortality that he has become inhumanly serpentine in appearance. He is the shadow side of human nature: cruel, selfish, ruled and ruling by fear. Harry bears the scar that marks him not only as the boy who lived, but connected to Voldemort, like the indelible Death Eaters’ Dark Mark. He also carries a piece of Voldemort’s soul within him, the seventh horcrux Voldemort did not intend to make.

After accepting the inevitability of death, Harry faces Voldemort unarmed, and Voldemort slays him with a curse. He arrives in a peaceful place between life and death where he hears “something that flapped, flailed and struggled. It was a pitiful noise, yet also slightly indecent”. He feels he is eavesdropping on “something furtive, shameful” (*Hallows* 565).

He recoiled. He had spotted the thing that was making the noises. It had the form of a small, naked child, curled on the ground, its skin raw and rough, flayed-looking, and it lay shuddering under a seat where it had been left, unwanted, stuffed out of sight, struggling for breath.

He was afraid of it. Small and fragile though it was, he did not want to approach it... He felt like a coward. He ought to comfort it, but it repulsed him. (566)

In terms of the narrative, the abused child is the last residue of Voldemort’s split soul that entered Harry when Voldemort killed his mother, but this isn’t stated explicitly; the child is unnamed. I think the child is meant to remain ambiguous; although it is undoubtedly the infant Voldemort, and possibly the repressed potential for good in him, it may also be the infant Harry, neglected and unloved at the Dursley’s; his “furtive, shameful” past, his Shadow and his potential for evil.

In this in-between place, like a railway station with no trains, a place of waiting and transition, Harry meets Dumbledore.

‘I let him kill me,’ said Harry... ‘So the part of his soul that was in me... has it gone?’

‘Oh, yes!’ said Dumbledore. ‘Yes, he destroyed it. Your soul is whole, and completely your own, Harry.’ (567)

The theme of a soul that is whole is important in Harry Potter. Voldemort, in order to gain immortality, has deliberately split his soul, “an act of violation” accomplished by “the supreme act of evil. By committing murder. Killing rips the soul apart” (*Half-blood*

465). Splitting the soul is a violation against nature, an act of evil in itself, and accomplished by acts of evil. It opposes integration of the soul, the ultimate goal of psychological development. In Jungian theory, the soul is split between conscious and unconscious; for Rowling, the split is a violent rip caused by consciously choosing evil, alienating Voldemort from himself. Moreover, Voldemort has not split his soul in half (light and dark) but into seven; his is a splintered self. Dumbledore tells Harry that Voldemort could never understand “the incomparable power of a soul that is untarnished and whole” (*Half-blood* 478). As for Le Guin, an integrated soul is an ethical accomplishment.

“[T]he storytelling impulse is, and always has been, a desire for a certain ‘unity of life’,” says Kearney (*On Stories* 4). “In our own postmodern era of fragmentation and fracture... narrative provides us with one of our most viable forms of identity”. John Donne uses the metaphor of the “scattered leaves” of life narratives in his “Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions” (XVII). While Donne writes of these pages being gathered and united by the Author, in postmodern theory the authorial self is not only split between the unconscious shadow and the conscious ego, but is a fragmented self, a writer but also the written upon and written over, an untidy collection of incomplete story-lines, contradictory and full of “white space”. This is what Wall refers to as “our own inevitable self-fragmentation”.

Narrative wholeness is an impossible horizon, imaginable only ultimately in myth, challenging us to constantly exceed all we know, calling us beyond our own inevitable self-fragmentation. (*Moral Creativity* 99)

Self-fragmentation is inevitable because we are not all-seeing authors who can create narrative completeness, but even so we should aspire towards completeness, suggests Wall. Voldemort does not pursue narrative wholeness, but tears himself into seven selves. One of these selves is an adolescent diary, an unreliable and malevolent narrative, that deceives its readers; first Ginny and then Harry. Likewise, when, after Dumbledore’s death, the truth of Dumbledore is questioned, Harry can only access unreliable narratives. These take the form of personal verbal reminiscences told to Harry at a wedding, the malicious book “The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore”, and Aberforth’s and Snape’s narrated memories. Dumbledore’s moral character is demolished and reconstructed according to the storyteller. Much later Harry hears “the truth”: Dumbledore’s self-narrative.

Rowling tries to reconcile a split soul with a fragmented self, and an innate shadow with her strong belief in personal responsibility. Choosing evil is self-mutilation, splitting our souls, she suggests, but simultaneously we are multiple selves playing different parts and appearances are often deceptive. Narrative wholeness can be a lie, but

truths may be found in the narrative. While she portrays complexity of moral character in Dumbledore, Snape and Sirius, in Harry and Voldemort she polarises good and evil, thus straddling the discourses of Jungian psychology (which embraces the shadow) and Christianity (which seeks to separate and overcome the shadow of sin). Disparate theoretical narratives are therefore not bound up together in one volume (or in Rowling's case, seven volumes) but are scattered leaves; no one theory can answer the problem of evil or the perplexing motivation for disinterested good. The sorting hat — assessing what we have inherited, genetically and environmentally — can never determine who we will become. It is we who write the narrative, sifting through lies, contradictions, complexities and uncertainties until we can piece together a tentative truth of our ethical identity. This is the postmodern tension of moral agency which I develop in the next chapter.

## **The Shadow of Death**

Only birth can conquer death — the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new. (Campbell 16)

The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. (*Hallows* 269)

The narrative of death and rebirth is inscribed not only in mythology, but also in the cyclic patterns of the natural world, the seasonal dying of autumn, giving way to the rebirth of spring. Natural birth, and natural death, the relentless progression of human history, have become symbols of psychic or spiritual experience. Giving up the past, that which is known and safe, to enable future possibilities, that which is unknown and therefore terrifying, is not only essential for personal or psychological development but also for social functioning and change. One of the central festivals celebrated today in Western cultures is the Easter remembrance of death and resurrection; even though obscured by rabbits and chocolate, the post-Christian world has a lingering memory of a Grand Narrative that has this central theme at its core. It is no surprise, then, that the incomprehensible paradox of death and rebirth is at the heart of contemporary fantasy fiction.

I have identified three main aspects of the theme of death in the fantasy series I am studying. These include the individual's acceptance of their mortality; death as a symbol of moral development, both passing from one stage to another but, more significantly, atoning for evil; and self-sacrifice for the good of the wider community. These are not new themes and are present in ancient narratives, but they have been overlaid with much more recent explanations of, especially, human psychology.

Bettelheim, writing from a psychoanalytic perspective about traditional fairytales, says, “If there is a central theme to the wide variety of fairytales, it is that of rebirth to a higher plane” (*Uses of Enchantment* 179).

Many fairy-tale heroes, at a crucial point in their development, fall into a deep sleep or are reborn. Each reawakening or rebirth symbolises the reaching of a higher stage of maturity and understanding. It is one of the fairytale’s ways to stimulate the wish for higher meaning in life: deeper consciousness, more self-knowledge, and greater maturity. (214)

In the maturation process, death and rebirth are seasonal and ongoing. The death of the hero symbolises his or her failure and lack of maturity to master the task that he or she has undertaken (180). Campbell, also writing from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, describes how death and rebirth are ritualised in social practice in many traditional societies: “the traditional rites of passage used to teach the individual to die to the past and be reborn to the future” (15). Individuals, in these rituals, divested themselves of the past and resigned, or submitted, themselves to a social identity, a vocation.

Beyond the maturation process, and especially the giving up of childhood for adulthood, Campbell sees a further significance in the symbol of death and rebirth in mythology. The hero, he suggests, has “self-achieved submission” which is the “primary virtue” (16).

[I]t is by means of our own victories, if we are not regenerated, that the work of Nemesis is wrought: doom breaks from the shell of our very virtue... When our day is come for the victory of death, death closes in; there is nothing we can do, except be crucified — and resurrected; dismembered totally, and then reborn. (16)

Death (of the ego) involves discovery and assimilation of one’s opposite (one’s “own unsuspected self”). The hero “must put aside his pride, his virtue, beauty, and life, and bow or submit to the absolutely intolerable. Then he finds that he and his opposite are not differing species, but one flesh” (108). This death process, a psychological or spiritual death, gives birth to a profound humility in the hero, enabling the hero to return to society in an altered or transfigured state.

### ***Narratives of Death***

Bettelheim and Campbell analyse traditional narratives of the past and discuss how death and rebirth in these narratives provide symbols that throw light on important psychoanalytic understandings. These understandings can also be read into contemporary fantasy narratives, especially in the self-consciously Jungian *Earthsea* series from the 1960s and 1970s, already in part discussed. I will now return to the literary narratives I discussed earlier in this section to see how death is used to illuminate the theoretical foundations and moral assumptions at work in these texts.

In Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* sin is a burden that the protagonist, Christian, bears on his back. It is the burden of the past, of his own moral flaws and failings, but also of his inherited tendency to wrongdoing. He leaves his home and begins his pilgrimage motivated by distress over his inevitable death. He tells Evangelist that he is "condemned to die, and after that to come to judgement; and I find that I am not willing to do the first, nor able to do the second" (26).

Then said Evangelist, Why not willing to die, since this life is attended with so many evils? The man answered, Because I fear this burden that is upon my back will sink me lower than the grave... (26)

Travelling the way Evangelist has directed him, he comes to a highway. Christian runs up the highway "but not without difficulty, because of the load on his back" (52).

He ran thus till he came to a place somewhat ascending; and upon that place stood a Cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a Sepulchre. So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up with the Cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do, till it came to the mouth of the Sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more. (53)

The symbols here, of a cross and a sepulchre, are unambiguous symbols of death. For Christian to be liberated from his "burden" he must face the death he has so feared, his own symbolic death, and in facing it, his guilt is "loosed from off his shoulders". This scene is full of Christian images of self-sacrificial death, resurrection and redemption which Campbell argues is a theme of "self-achieved submission" and is the "primary virtue" — a theme that is central to much fantasy fiction.<sup>19</sup>

*Hamlet* also follows this theme. Meditating on death in the graveyard scene, Hamlet reflects on the reality of bodily decay — Yorick is returned to dust, and all that remains of him is an inanimate skull. There is true grief in Hamlet's speech as he recalls the past, starkly contrasting with the play-acting he has consistently assumed up until this point: "And now how abhorred in my imagination it is. My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft." Hamlet is literally face to face — or face to skull — with death here, standing beside, even in, the grave, and with his own inevitable future. Then, when confronting Ophelia's death, his ironic, mocking black humour again gives way to genuine emotion and affection. This is the death of Hamlet's future, taken from the abstract idea to the concrete body: Ophelia should have been his bride — in marriage he is reproducing and carrying on his line. The Queen obliquely echoes this theme in choosing the metaphor of a female dove waiting for the hatching of her eggs when referring to Hamlet's stillness after the storm of his madness has passed

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<sup>19</sup> I am deliberately reading – perhaps misreading - this passage along Jungian lines. According to Christian theology, Christian's confrontation with the cross is a confrontation with the crucified Christ which redeems him from his sin. I will reintroduce the theme of confrontation with death, reading it as a confrontation with the Real, in later chapters.

(V.I.282). In the next scene, recounting the plot against his life by Claudius, Hamlet tells Horatio “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will” (V.2.10-11). He has accepted his mortality and chosen his fate, including his role to “quit” Claudius with his arm. Furthermore, it is his moral obligation to his society to overthrow Claudius. Having faced death, not only Yorick’s and Ophelia’s, but his own inevitable death, Hamlet dies symbolically to his own future, submitting both to Fate and his moral obligation to halt “further evil”.

There is also, I believe, a further dimension to the theme of death in Hamlet. Hamlet has faced and accepted his mortality. He has also accepted his fate, vocation or moral obligation to destroy the “canker” or decay of human nature (contrasted with the decay of bodies) from multiplying in greater evil. In this sense he is laying down his life for the social and political good of his country.

That the shadow of the past is resolved in the acceptance of mortality, and therefore, in the valuing of life, is the main, and rather laboured, theme of *A Christmas Carol*.

‘Ghost of the Future!’ [Scrooge] exclaimed, ‘I fear you more than any spectre I have seen. But I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be a better man than I was, I am prepared to bear your company, and do it with a thankful heart.’ (75)

The “good” that the spectre does for Scrooge is to show him a grave with Scrooge’s name on the stone; confronted with it, Scrooge’s resolution to lead “an altered life” is strengthened and he pleads for his fate to be reversed (88). Between the time of Shakespeare and the time of Dickens, however, fate has come to mean the foreshadowing “of certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead” (87). In the intervening years the discourse of humanism gained ascendancy, with the human will triumphing over the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”. Evil, in nineteenth century humanism, is contained within a knowable, rational self, and should therefore be overcome with reason and doses of sentimentality. However, it is also the era when the evil double emerged, acknowledging the unknowable, irrational self and foreshadowing Freud’s unconscious. Hamlet’s complexity, I think, resonates more closely with today’s uncertainties about the virtue of reason and the dark unknown of our collective and individual unconscious.

Liam finds psychological redemption when he faces his first wife’s death and recognises the inadequacy of his Stoical philosophy of life in dealing with the trauma of her suicide. (Like Hamlet at Ophelia’s grave, facing her death he must face his partial responsibility for it — the burden of “sin” — and face his own ego “death”.) He also faces the inadequacy of reason in his relationships with others, especially his daughter, and humbles himself, negating his own understanding, to ask her forgiveness for his actions.

### *The Subterranean Labyrinth and the Valley of the Shadow of Death*

In *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ged, in “naming the shadow of his death with his own name” makes himself whole; he becomes:

a man: who, knowing his whole true self, cannot be possessed by any power other than himself, and whose life therefore is lived for life’s sake and never in the service of ruin, or pain, or hatred, or the dark. (166)

The “shadow of death” is his shadow, the depths of his unconscious, and in facing and owning it, his life takes on ethical meaning. It is only in dying, the story goes on to tell us, that there is life.

Le Guin continues her exploration of this theme in *The Tombs of Atuan*. Her protagonist, a young woman this time, has been symbolically sacrificed to, or “eaten” by, “the Nameless Ones” as a young child (178). In this ritual she is named “the one born ever nameless”, Arha, the One Priestess of the Tombs. She alone is allowed to enter the subterranean labyrinth (the abyss) underneath the Tombs where the Nameless Ones dwell. Death is a central theme of this story — Arha is the Priestess of Death. Darkness, a brooding motif hanging over the story, is blindness, “like a bandage pressed over her eyes”, hiding the mystery of beauty, “a mystery deeper even than that of the dark” (226).

Ged seeks and finds the lost half of the Ring of Power in the labyrinth and persuades Arha to flee with him, renaming her Tenar, her true name. “If I leave this place I will die,” she protests. Ged replies, “You will not die. Arha will die... To be reborn one must die, Tenar” (272, 273). Arha, the nameless one, who has lived in fear, darkness and death in the labyrinth of the unconscious must die to embrace life. Beyond the unconscious’s mysterious labyrinth is a deeper mystery, of beauty and life. To be reborn to life, one must die to death.

This theme continues in *The Farthest Shore*, the third book in the *Earthsea* series. Lebannen, a young prince, appeals to Ged who is now a powerful Archmage for help as darkness, in the form of numbing confusion, creeps throughout the lands of Earthsea, while wizards lose their magical powers. In the confusion, fear of death is connected to the loss of names. Magical power, in the Earthsea world, is founded on language: power is to know something’s real identity through knowing its true name as names are fixed to an essential self or an intrinsic meaning. (This is at odds with postmodern views of instability between words and meanings.)

Ged and Lebannen sail to the farthest western shore (west, where the sun sets) to confront their enemy who is not death, but the fear of death. On their voyage they witness devastation caused by this fear and the loss of true language, the Old Speech. The loss of language is a type of death: meaninglessness leads to confusion and loss of power, identity and creativity. It is a human evil at work, suggests Ged, “an unmeasured

desire for life”, a craving for “power over life — endless wealth, unassailable safety, immortality” when “desire becomes greed” (333). With greed comes evil and ruin, and only a human “spirit, which is capable of evil, is capable of overcoming it” (334). When Ged is wounded Lebannen faces his own horror of death’s abyss and tries to hide from it.

[H]e knew in his heart that reality was empty: without life, or warmth, or colour, or sound: without meaning. There were no heights or depths. All this lovely play of form and light and colour on the sea and in the eyes of men, was no more than that: a playing of illusions on the shallow void. (409)

Ged replies to Lebannen’s despair that knowledge of death “is a great gift. It is the gift of selfhood. For only that is ours which we are willing to lose” (410).

Again, this is the paradox of losing one’s life to find it. Accepting our mortality is crucial to selfhood, Le Guin advocates, and only when we are willing to die can we live a full life. Without mortality, continues Ged, there are “no new lives. No children. Only what is mortal bears life... Only in death there is rebirth. The Balance is... an eternal becoming” (423). And so Le Guin pushes her two protagonists into the valley of the shadow of death:

[Lebannen] stood still, there in the narrow valley in the dark, and Ged stood still beside him. They stood like the aimless dead, gazing at nothing, silent. [Lebannen] thought, with a little dread but not much, ‘We have come too far.’

It did not seem to matter much. (459)

It is here that they confront the wizard, Cob. Like Voldemort, Cob has sacrificed life and love for immortality and power; light is darkness, he says. This is not a paradox but a twisted perversion. Cob has forgotten his name; “Where is the truth of you?” demands Ged. “Who are you?” (462).

Ged struggles to close the void of nothingness, Cob’s path to immortality, but his attempt drains his power.

There was no more light on Ged’s yew-staff, nor in his face. He stood there in the darkness... For a moment a spasm of dry sobbing shook him. ‘It is done,’ he said, ‘it is all gone.’ (467)

After the ordeal, Lebannen notices Ged’s abandoned staff and goes to retrieve it “but Ged stopped him. ‘Leave it. I spent all my wizardry at that dry spring, Lebannen. I am no mage now” (475). As a young man Ged was so determined that others respect his magical power that, in folly and pride, he loosed his evil shadow into the world. But in his maturity, he faces and defeats an evil that another wizard has let loose, sacrificing his innate power and vocation in the process, dying to his identity as a wizard as symbolised by his abandoned yew-staff.

Le Guin’s narrative of good and evil has both continuities and discontinuities with other narratives. It deals with themes of acceptance of mortality, dying to self as an

atonement for the past or to enable rebirth of the future, and self-sacrifice for the greater good of the community. It both mimics and reverses the Christian narrative: God, as a Christ-figure, lays down his life (in the form of his power) not to offer eternal life but to finish it.

### *The Deathly Hallows of Desire*

Pivotal to the plot of the Harry Potter series are two mirrored magical entities: seven horcruxes and the three Deathly Hallows. Horcruxes split the soul; the Deathly Hallows are to be united. Both are concerned with death: horcruxes offer immortality, and the Hallows offer mastery over death. Voldemort creates horcruxes, Dumbledore seeks — or sought — the Hallows.

Horcruxes are evil, but, asymmetrically, the Deathly Hallows, made up of a wand, a stone and a cloak, are not good but neutral. The Elder Wand, also known as the Death Stick, represents power and its history is traced in blood. Unknown to anyone but Grindelwald from whom he won it, Dumbledore last possessed the Elder Wand. He was permitted to “tame and use it... not for gain, but to save others from it” (*Hallows* 577). The Resurrection Stone has the power to recall people from death, but can drive the possessor “mad with hopeless longing” (331). It is through possession and use of the Resurrection Stone that Dumbledore is cursed, and it is the Hallow that Harry most desires (336). The Invisibility Cloak renders its owners invisible to death for the course of their natural lives. It is the cloak Harry has possessed, unaware of its significance, since the first book and it has sheltered him on numerous occasions.

Hermione says, “...it’s obvious which [Hallow] is best, which one you’d choose” to which Harry, Ron and Hermione simultaneously respond differently: Ron choosing power, Harry the dead returned and Hermione protection. This connects the Deathly Hallows with desire, and refers back to the Mirror of Erised implicitly and explicitly. In conversation with Dumbledore near the end of the book, Harry finally pieces together enough of Dumbledore’s narrative to believe he knows the truth of Dumbledore; the shadow of his past and the shadow of his self: “at last he knew what Dumbledore would have seen when he looked in the Mirror of Erised” (576).

The Mirror of Desire is a fantasy. Dumbledore says it reveals “the deepest, most desperate, desires of our hearts” (*Philosopher* 157). The young Harry sees himself with his living parents, and Ron sees himself as head boy, alone, standing out from everyone else. Desire is “seen”, imaginatively, as possibility, as fantasy; Žižek says through fantasy we are constituted as desiring, “through fantasy we learn how to desire” (370). Desire, in Žižek and in psychoanalytic theory, is associated with the Real, something absolute and true at the heart of us, but something that is also dark and unknown because

it lies beyond the rational mind. Desire, suggests Eagleton, is what is most real about us, but being true to our desire is also inevitable failure:

since desire is unshakable by nature. Those who have the courage to embrace this fact are the true heroes, rather as the classical tragic protagonist is one who snatches victory from the jaws of defeat. The very courage which allows him to submit to his destiny is also a power which transcends it. (*Strangers* 147)

The Mirror reveals regrets, losses, points of weakness and vulnerability behind its fantasy, but it also reveals strength as when Harry sees himself acting heroically when he gives the Philosopher's Stone to Dumbledore (*Philosopher* 212). Dumbledore tells Harry that this act reveals the purity of Harry's heart: "[the mirror] showed you only the way to thwart Lord Voldemort, and not immortality or riches" (*Half-blood* 478).

The one who unites the Hallows is the Master of Death, but they must be possessed "safely" (*Hallows* 577). That is, "the true master does not seek to run away from Death. He accepts that he must die, and understands that there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying" (577). Although Harry is master of all three Hallows, he is heir to only one. The wand he destroys, the stone he abandons, but his inherited cloak he keeps. Like Le Guin, Rowling advocates the ethical imperative of accepting our mortality — the cloak is the only Hallow that does not resist the inevitability of death. Harry accepts death, as he accepts that the past has written his destiny, literally inscribed it on his forehead. Resigned to his fate, he walks courageously to meet it. "Finally the truth... Harry understood at last that he was not supposed to survive. His job was to walk calmly into Death's welcoming arms" (554).

Harry's walk towards death, an innocent soul laying down his life at the feet of evil, is accompanied by the ghosts of those who have loved him, in the same way that the scene echoes back through fantasy and myth; he represents a sacrificial lamb, one dying to defeat evil and save the lives of many. He is not, however, the *pharmakos*, or scapegoat, who bears the sins of its community. He is not "fearfully polluted... [representing] the dregs and refuse of humanity" (Eagleton, *Strangers* 215), a Shadow of society, or a Christ bearing the sins of the world. In *Harry Potter*, as in *Earthsea*, there is no atonement for sin through sacrificial death.

Dumbledore, Snape and God bear the guilt of their past to their stories' end. They are driven to radical evil by their desire (for power, recognition, revenge), and all three characters repent when it results in the death of someone they love. Harry understands (at last) that Dumbledore's deepest desire is to atone for his actions that culminated in his sister's death. In *The Half-blood Prince* Harry witnesses Dumbledore's distress.

'It's all my fault, all my fault,' [Dumbledore] sobbed, 'please make it stop, I know I did wrong, oh, please make it stop and I'll never, never again...' (535).

In “more anguish than ever” Dumbledore then screams, “I want to die! I want to die!” (536). Dumbledore’s anguish is the fulcrum on which his shadow (desire for power) and his good self (his empathy and love) pivot. Likewise a grief-stricken Snape “looked like a man who had lived a hundred years of misery.... ‘I wish... I wish *I* were dead...’” he tells Dumbledore when Lily is killed (*Hallows* 544). Ged, returning from a long dark illness after loosing his shadow, “hid his scarred face in his hands and wept... Now lamed by pain, he went hesitantly, and did not raise his face” (*Wizard* 67). Humbled, he tells the new Archmage, “Better I had died” (68). The redemption of these characters is increased self-awareness and humility resurrected from the ruin caused by their shadow desires. This is symbolised by Ged’s scar, by Dumbledore choosing to become a teacher instead of seeking political power, and by Snape’s ongoing protection of Harry, the son of his despised enemy. These three characters agree: it is worse to cause another’s death than to die oneself.

This is a clear break from the Judaic and Christian tradition of a bodily scapegoat that bears, and, importantly, removes society’s sins. Becoming an integrated, or actualised, individual, one who has wrestled with one’s own demon shadow and named it with one’s own name, has taken the place of corporate spiritual salvation. Atonement is not possible, as Dumbledore discovers when he attempts to find it through the Resurrection Stone, just as Briony fails to find it in Ian McEwan’s novel *Atonement*. The past can never be made right, and the dead can never be returned to life.

The words engraved on Harry’s parents’ grave: “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death” (*Hallows* 268) recalls Donne’s sonnet on death: “One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,/ And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die” (“Holy Sonnets” X). This sonnet accepts of the inevitability of death but also anticipates rebirth. Donne’s sonnet personifies death (as does the Deathly Hallows tale) connecting it to a rich symbolic tradition. Death, says Donne, has no ultimate power because, as the soul is reborn (or wakes), death itself dies. Conquering death through death is a paradox embedded in the cycle of life; shadowing nature, it is a metaphor for the self’s ethical growth. Both *Harry Potter* and *Earthsea* stand within this tradition, but they also rewrite the narrative within a distinctly twentieth and twenty-first century ethos.

### **“On the edge of the precipice”: Materialism, Meaninglessness and Madness**

Materialism, a form of narcissism, is self-obsessed with superficial desires. The mirror of narcissism, represented by Dorian Gray’s portrait, is destructive and is juxtaposed with Gertrude’s mirror and the Mirror of Erised that reveal the deep desires of the

unconscious, shadowy and only partly known. Confronted with itself, the narcissistic ego faces the abyss and meets its death, but in meeting death is reborn. This paradox lies deep in the heart of a postmodern ethic of the self.

Rowling satirises mindless and meaningless consumption in the Dursleys whose greed is an ugly caricature of materialism; their lives, instead of being enlarged by their wealth, are diminished, their world reduced to a suburban house. The wizarding world opens out Harry's horizons, allowing him to engage in ethical conflict beneath the surface of life compared with the narcissistic and small-minded Dudley. When Dudley is attacked by a dementor he has no magical or ethical defence and is rendered helpless and inarticulate (*Phoenix* 28). Materialism is vacuous, providing no resilience to the madness of meaninglessness, suggests Rowling. She connects madness (symbolised by dementors) with loss of identity; being kissed by a dementor means "you'll have no sense of self anymore" (*Prisoner* 183). (Likewise, Le Guin's priestess, Arha, loses her true identity when she is "eaten" by the Nameless Ones of darkness.) In comparison, Sirius, surrounded by dementors in Azkaban prison, finds ethical resistance in knowing he is innocent: "it kept me sane and knowing who I am" (*Prisoner* 272). When he realises that Voldemort's spy is disguised as Ron's pet, he "had to do something... It was as if someone had lit a fire in my head... it gave me strength, it cleared my mind" (272-273). He breaks out of Azkaban; his urgent ethical task saves him from madness.

Meaning for Harry is in caring relationships, loss of those he loves hurtles him into meaninglessness. As Voldemort destroys Harry's friends, despairing, he almost succumbs to the dementors: "he almost welcomed the oncoming oblivion, the promise of nothing, of no feeling" (*Hallows* 521). Madness — passive negation, inaction and loss of identity — is a response to meaninglessness. Whereas Hamlet's *world* is fragmented and his uncertainty about how to act ethically amongst competing ideologies is a mad act, in fiction today the *self* is fragmented and struggles to form an ethical identity from competing roles, uncertain truths and the disintegration of ethical meaning. Failure to form an identity is the abyss of madness.

"To thine own self be true" expresses the modern self. Modernity has a self to which to be true, a self to unite and to actualise. Postmodernism problematises both the idea of a unified self and truth. The postmodern self is made up of fragments and multiple roles and narratives. When Harry looks into his mirror fragment he misrecognises the image. In a fragment we do not see what we think we are seeing but have a partial view, and are open to deception. Uncertainty must therefore underline everything we regard to be truth, including the truth of who we are.

Sinfeld points out that the narration of Hamlet's story is politically motivated: the "ruling elite" "want to establish their account of what has happened" because

“uncertainty is dangerous” (Sinfeld lvii). When social and the political factors impinge on personal narrative, it can be, not just fragmented, but skewed.

Seventeen years after publishing *The Farthest Shore*, Ursula Le Guin returned to her *Earthsea* series, writing *Tehanu* (published in 1990), a narrative of feminist critique.

Tehanu is the adopted child of Tenar, a girl saved from sexual and physical abuse and deeply scarred by fire. Tenar and Tehanu are the protagonists; Ged returns, but this is not his story. Tehanu is a silent and sad presence, a victim struggling to life. Her scarred face pairs her with Ged, but whereas Ged’s scarring was caused by his own shadow’s violence, Tehanu’s was caused by the violence and evil of others. The gap of seventeen years reveals Le Guin’s shift from a Jungian perspective to a political one.

Le Guin’s feminist agenda is explicit; misogyny is brutal:

He could not hate her more. To be a woman was her fault. Nothing could worsen or amend it, in his eyes; no punishment was enough. He had looked at what had been done to [Tehanu], and approved. (588)

Tehanu’s physical and psychological scarring is the work of patriarchy, an abuse built into the very structure of society. This problematises the journey of integration; if society has already split the female self into roles, how can a woman be integrated? This splitting is apparent in the three names Tenar is known by: Arha, the girl who had been eaten; Tenar, the lady of the Ring that would unite the nations; and Goha, a widow and mother of two children. Moreover, misogyny silences Tenar: “She said nothing, having no words that would come into her mouth” (682) and also makes the old Mage deaf to her:

His deafness silenced her. She could not even tell him he was deaf... How could he, who had never listened to a woman since his mother sang him his last cradle song, hear her? (613, 614)

The Council needs to replace Ged, the Archmage, and Tenar struggles to tell the young king (Lebannen) that it could be a woman whom they seek. “He listened. He was not deaf. But he frowned, intent, as if trying to understand a foreign language” (616). The Master Patterner’s prophetic utterance, “A woman on Gont”, perplexes the mages as it is inconceivable that this addresses the question of the Archmage. The answer is a “riddle”, Tehanu says, about sharing power. Liberating the female self from traditional roles is so foreign that the language of freedom is a riddle.

Against this background, Tenar develops a relationship with Ged. Ged has died to his power, leaving his wizard’s staff behind him on the farthest shore; his staff representing male power. Humbled and ashamed of his loss, he turns to solitude, herding goats on his home island where Tenar lives. She offers him friendship and they become lovers, their relationship affirming gender equality. Tenar has turned her back on magic to learn the wisdom of love and domesticity, complementing Ged who has learned the wisdom of magery at the expense of domestic love. “Only in dying, life,” says Ged (666).

When the self has confronted the shadow of evil within, divested itself of power and died to itself, then it can understand the language of shared power. *Tehanu* rounds out Le Guin's view of an ethical self, acknowledging the swell of social concerns of the 1980s.

In 2001, within the period of contemporary fantasies I am studying, Le Guin took up her *Earthsea* narrative yet again in *The Other Wind*. Although many threads of earlier *Earthsea* themes are woven into the narrative, there are subtle changes in the ethos of the fantasy: reversals, uncertainties and a theme of change. The feminist cry for justice is fainter, her Jungian worldview more sketchy, as she addresses society's disintegration into materialism.

As in *Harry Potter*, materialistic greed is associated with the abyss of madness, a type of death. Ged, the hero of yore, keeps house while his wife and daughter journey to help save the world from the paralysing fear of death that kills the joy of living. "Something is happening," Tenar said. "A great change in the world. Maybe nothing we knew will be left to us" (131).

Le Guin is speaking to this generation; change, and with it loss, characterises our era, as does materialistic greed. Greed is insidious and contagious, it is a dry and dying place in this novel. Individual and political greed is contrasted with the freedom of dragons. "You own the earth, you own the sea," says Irian, the dragon woman. "But we are the fire of sunlight, we fly with the wind! You wanted land to own. You wanted things to make and keep. And you have that... *Greed puts out the sun*" (227). "Those who cannot die can never be reborn" (226) refers back to a symbolic death of the narcissistic ego. Desperately clinging to the self we know, we live in the shadow of the fear of death. But it also refers to courageously facing death of the familiar and accepting rebirth of the unknown, the freedom of metaphorical dragons that fly on "the other wind".

"We sit here talking on the edge of the precipice," says a mage to the council (234). The world is divided; not only between the joy of life and the shadow of death, but also between good and evil, based on choice: "good and evil belong to us... We must choose and choose again," says Ged (53). Juxtaposing materialism and freedom, Le Guin leaves us with a personal and political ethical choice. Although we are splintered selves, her fantasy tenaciously declares that we are, nevertheless, moral agents.

*The Other Wind* ends with a paradox. "We broke the world to make it whole," says Ged (246). The world is under water, we are afloat without north and south poles, but we navigate with a moral compass. Selves are impossibly splintered, and the pages of our narratives hopelessly scattered, but we are required to act as moral anthropologists. The end of the story seems to be the abyss of meaninglessness and death, but in meeting death the self — and the world — is reborn. These paradoxes lie deep in the heart of a postmodern ethic of the self.

*Tehanu*, however, reveals the limitations of this ethics. The narrative identities of dispossessed Others are fractured, their voices unheard, their faces unrecognisable, their names forgotten and their moral agency in doubt. Ethics is more than personal librarianship. It must look further, beyond the margins to where the monsters live.

### Chapter III

## *Beyond the Margins where Morality meets the Monstrous Other*

Monsters are an ambiguous trope in fantasy: sometimes they are evil, sometimes they are appallingly alien. Sometimes they are snuggled in the shadows of the closet, sometimes they pound threateningly on the window, shrieking (or whimpering) to be let in. Monsters are simultaneously inside and outside, inhabiting tensions between moral and amoral, self and other, the subject and object, the same and different. While we are disrupted and displaced by the monster within, the monstrous face of the totally alien Other demands a response from us that takes us out of ourselves and beyond the margins.

Voldemort is a monster. In the previous chapter I described how he inhabits Harry as a monstrous infant, Harry's potential self. But Voldemort is also a separate personality, a self-created monster. In his previous incarnation as Tom Riddle he was a moral agent who sold his soul to evil and that choice created the deformed, appalling monstrosity of Voldemort. The monster is therefore both within Harry, as his shadow, and completely other than Harry, delineated from Harry by a clear margin of moral difference.

Likewise, Le Guin's fantasy series shifts from facing a monstrous inner evil to facing a monstrous victim, the hideously deformed Tehanu. Tehanu raises two important ethical questions: how should we respond to the evil of abuse that creates monstrous victims and how should we respond to Tehanu herself? The first question I take up in my next chapter; this chapter explores ethical encounters with monstrous others.

Moral agency is a central theme of this chapter. Agency is necessary to make moral judgements and to discriminate the monstrous villain (Voldemort) from the monstrous victim (Tehanu). Children have often been associated with a privileged amoral state of innocence; innocence, however, provides no resources to discriminate between monstrous villains and victims. Past experiences, accumulated in memory, build up an ethical narrative which provides the basis for moral judgement.

The moral agent is the apex of humanism: rational, autonomous, choosing right from wrong, and stands centre-stage in the modernist text. He or she is simultaneously an author narrating a story with a tried-and-true narrative arc, and a protagonist setting out on a heroic quest. Postmodern uncertainty surrounding moral agency, as comically articulated in *Noah's Compass* by Liam's assailant's mother, is magnified in the monster. Whereas moral agents are identifiably human — those who are the "same as us" — monsters, who live beyond the margins, are radically different: faceless, voiceless and nameless, they are the antithesis of moral agency. Monsters are not authors, narrators or

heroes. They lack morality or agency or both, having been deprived of it, or (by selling their souls to the devil of power) having deprived themselves of it by irredeemable evil. Moral agency meets its limitations but also demonstrates its importance when confronted with them.

The underside, or otherside, of moral agency is absence, silence, and anonymity. Postmodern children's fantasies often take account of this otherside, narrating monsters into the story, rewriting familiar plots into more deeply ethical narratives. Fantasy's traditional storyline, driven by a hero's quest, now frequently integrates disruptive and discordant monstrous voices. Strains of these other voices attest to silence beyond the margins, and skew a consistent (heroic) perspective. The status quo unbalances as established dichotomies disintegrate and certain moral meanings turn about face.

The fantasies discussed in this section stress the importance of seeing the monster (the Other) as the same as us in terms of their rights and agency but at the same time as unknowably different. Where Husserl views the Other as an alter ego (other self) or an object of consciousness, Levinas posits the Other as absolute alterity (Honderick 637) and this utterly unknown and different Other is a shadow of profound uncertainty for the hero. Contemporary fantasies reiterate Levinas's declaration that moral agency is decimated in the face of the Other.

However, in line with critical responses to Levinas by Ricoeur, Wall and Eagleton, these fantasies also assert the importance of retrieving moral agency and action — albeit only partially intact — not just for the human protagonists but also for the alienated Other. We are responsible to Others, moving beyond a passive acceptance of them to action on their behalf. It is only after the monster narrative is transcended, and Others recognised, not as opponents to be overcome or integrated, but as morally responsible friends, that we can look towards building a more just society, a personal encounter becoming a political commitment.

This chapter moves between fantasies from different historical eras. E. Nesbit's Edwardian *Psammead* fantasy series, contrasts with postmodern fantasies by Eoin Colfer (the *Artemis Fowl* series) and Jonathan Stroud (the *Bartimaeus* trilogy) in which morality is unravelled by amoral protagonists and then knitted back together. Mary Shelley's early nineteenth century monster in *Frankenstein* is juxtaposed with Elizabeth Knox's twenty-first century golem in the *Dreamhunter* duo, in which romance rewrites tragedy. Central to these texts is the paradox of being simultaneously the author (moral agent) of a story and an already narrated character within it. Rather than resolve this contradiction, postmodern fantasies exploit it.

Ethics therefore moves beyond ethics as a narrative of the self to ethics as a narrative of encounters with others. Wrestling with the insider (self)/ outsider (other)

uncertainty and calling to question the masterly narrative of liberal humanism's moral agency, many contemporary fantasies embrace, and reject, and then rewrite, what being a moral agent means today as we face the Other. And once again we are led to a negative image, to an abyss of self-abnegation and self-sacrifice and a final paradox of death and resurrection.

## **Amoral Actors or Morally Developing Agents?**

### ***Monstrous Scars***

In this chapter monsters are a metaphor for Others. Le Guin's *Tehanu* sketches out the trajectory of this chapter, baldly presenting a monster who is not just human, but a young girl. She is found dying, having been raped, beaten and pushed into a fire. We first meet her through the eyes of two compassionate women: Tenar, who "shut her eyes and held her breath a moment in dread" (485), and Lark, who weeps with pain, shame and rage (486). But nearly everyone else *Tehanu* meets recoils with horror when seeing her and several times she is referred to as a "monster". Half of *Tehanu*'s face has been devoured by fire, she has no known name and "her voice is burned away" (540). Like other monsters she is faceless, nameless and voiceless.

When Ged, whose own face is scarred, meets her it is "as if he did not see her hideous scars". Preoccupied with his own pain, "he scarcely saw her at all" (541) — but he responds to her words. Ged and *Tehanu* are paired, not just because they are scarred by evil, but because they have both lost their identity and their power (Ged's magical power has been his agency, his power to act) and this loss causes shame and "agony of humiliation" (559). Ged herds goats: he wryly says he "looked after the goats ... as well as a boy his age could be expected to do" (667), likening his middle-aged self to a teenager. When, at fifteen, he began his wizard training he was an "emptiness... A freedom". Tenar agrees that emptiness is freedom to choose and grow into one's potential, saying, "I made myself a vessel" (667). Moral agency is fluid, the freedom to become, and even to begin again, as Ged does, rewriting his narrative identity.

The monster child, *Tehanu*, however, has been deprived of freedom. She (who is feared) lives in fear of evil monsters (men) and fear cripples freedom. However, Le Guin affirms *Tehanu*'s "emptiness", or freedom to develop. Tenar cannot teach *Tehanu* the language of wizards, but she tells her stories. These stories provide imaginative possibilities, narrative potential, for *Tehanu*'s life. Like Harry, her suffering enables her to discern and resist the evil that later ensnares Tenar and Ged and, nourished by stories, she discovers choice, freedom and her potential. Imbued with the power of fire, she

summons a dragon who rescues Tenar and Ged from the edge of a cliff. The evil that burnt her and nearly destroys them is turned back onto itself and destroyed (689).

Both Ged and Tehanu inch towards moral agency through rewriting their narrative identities. Moral power is not magic but is attained through experience. It transcends both the horror of encountering difference and the horror of being different.

### ***Amoral Innocence to Morally Responsible Experience***

In the beginning, the story goes, Adam and Eve lived in a state of innocence, but, seduced by the villainous Other, they ate the fruit of knowledge of good and evil, losing their innocence/ moral ignorance and gaining experience/ moral knowledge. There is a long tradition associating childhood with the pre-fallen moral innocence of Adam and Eve, counteracting “original sin” with “original goodness”. Wall (*Ethics*) describes three major historical strands of belief about childhood morality. The first he calls the “top-down” view. Human beings start out as unruly and disordered, driven by natural or animal instincts as argued by Plato, or born in “original sin” as argued by Augustine (15, 17). The second he calls the “bottom-up” view. The child contains humanity’s goodness; “original goodness” is epitomised by childlike simplicity and purity and is in God’s image. This view can be traced through Judaic, Christian and Muslim thought to Rousseau (20–22). The developmental view is probably the most accepted today. Children are ethically neutral and grow into reason and maturity, as argued by Aristotle. From the twelfth century Sufi and Christian thinkers proposed stages of development, and Locke famously called children “tabula rasa”, the blank page, or potential for rational moral progress (Ged’s “emptiness”). Developmental theories proliferated in the twentieth century — from Freud to Kohlberg to Erikson (25–29). Wall extends this theory, arguing that children do not passively develop through stages, but actively write their moral development, interpreting experiences and creating meanings that underpin their moral lives. These very distinct views place different burdens of responsibility upon children morally. In the first, children have a natural bias towards corruption and must submit to correction. In the second, they are innocent, in need of protection and guidance. In the third, the blank page is written upon as an ongoing moral narrative, children growing into increasing moral agency; innocence and experience are not polarised.

My previous chapter described the first view of childhood, “original sin” in the guise of the unconscious shadow. In this chapter the second and third views are juxtaposed, illustrating a shift in popular moral philosophy. Innocence has long been placed in opposition to, and privileged over, experience, which has been typified by disappointment, disillusionment, scepticism and cynicism. But privileging innocence over experience now has little currency in children’s stories. These two perspectives are

starkly juxtaposed in Nesbit's *Five Children and It* and Colfer's *Artemis Fowl* and determine the characters' responses to the alien Other.

If children are innocent they are not moral agents but are premoral or amoral (without morals). This sentimental view of childhood was popular in the nineteenth century, alongside the contradictory view of the child as innately sinful and requiring harsh discipline. The two arguments are eloquently contrasted in Blake's "Songs of Innocence and Experience" (published 1794). Where "The Lamb" likens the child to Christ, "The Tyger", with which it is twinned, contains images of violence and Lucifer's rebellion. Experience is aligned with the Fall, the devil and danger. In "Infant Joy" the smiling newborn baby is "happy", "sweet joy". In contrast, "Infant Sorrow" ridicules this sentimental view. The parents resent the newborn baby, and the world into which it leaps is "dangerous". The baby itself is: "Helpless, naked, piping loud:/ Like a fiend hid in a cloud". Of course Blake is commenting, biting, on the poverty, harsh conditions and unwanted pregnancies of his time, but the poems also starkly contrast two views of childhood held at the end of the eighteenth century.

One hundred years after Blake, and no doubt reacting against the Victorian era's severe discipline, Nesbit, whose socialist utopian views are described in her children's fantasies, endorses childhood innocence. *Five Children and It* (first published in 1902) is dedicated to "My Lamb": John Bland, Nesbit's son. The baby in the novel is nicknamed "the Lamb". But all five children are Blakean lambs: innocent, gullible, needing protection. In the first chapter Nesbit outlines her position. The children burst out of the "dusty hired fly" to explore an "Earthly Paradise"; a "first glorious rush round the garden and the orchard and the... wilderness beyond the broken gate" (15). Innocents in Eden, they are about to stumble across magic in their naïve (or ignorant) attempt to dig a hole from England to Australia. Nesbit forthrightly declares that children's "naughty" behaviour in urban environments results from alienation from their natural environment (an earthly paradise, the natural world) (17). Moreover, "children will believe almost anything, and grown-ups know this" (20). Children are susceptible to environmental influences, and need instruction, correction and occasionally punishment to guide them into the coherent, stable adult world.

Artemis Fowl, a twenty-first century fantasy child protagonist, is amoral but no lamb. As he is keen to point out, his first name is linked to the hunter; he is the predator, not the prey. The Prologue of the first book in the series introduces Artemis as a "child prodigy". But why, the narrator goes on to ask, "does someone of such brilliance dedicate himself to criminal activities?" (1). Artemis has devised a plan to restore his family's fortunes; a plan that could "topple civilisations and plunge the planet into a cross-species war. He was twelve years old at the time" (2). He is solitary, intelligent, ruthless and

determined. He would never “believe almost anything”, and certainly never dig a hole to Australia — instead he rides shuttles through underground fissures in the highly sophisticated fairy underworld. Artemis is not susceptible to his environment but manipulates it to his advantage.

Artemis is not at home in an “Earthly Paradise”. The first chapter opens in Ho Chi Minh City in the summer. “Sun,” comments the narrator wryly,

did not suit Artemis. He did not look well in it. Long hours in front of the monitor had bleached the glow from his skin. He was white as a vampire and almost as testy in the light of day. (3)

Artemis, in a café, conducts negotiations with a local adult. These are no ordinary negotiations — Artemis is searching for a fairy and the man knows where one lives. The man is intimidated into leading Artemis and Butler (Artemis’s bodyguard) through Ho Chi Minh to find the fairy. The description of the city is raw.

Sewage and drainpipes fed directly on to the muddy surface. Cripples and beggars huddled on rice-mat islands... (8)

They descend deeper into the “squirming shadows” an earthly hell where they find the fairy:

The figure was small, abnormally so, and wrapped in a filthy shawl. Empty spirit jugs were half-buried in the mud around her. One arm seemed green. But then, so did everything else. (9)

The alcoholic fairy languishes in squalor. This whole scene, tripped through lightly and edged with ironic humour, is a very real hell. Colfer does not spare tragic details to protect the innocence of his child readers. Artemis’s indifference to suffering both heightens and obscures its tragedy. But the fast-paced narrative has us back in the comfort of Fowl Manor before its real impact sinks in, and the misery is forgotten, for the rest of the story, and for the rest of the series.

Artemis’s encounter with this fairy Other fades into the narrative background. She, like the beggars, is expendable, abject, an “it”. Nesbit’s fairy is altogether different, although similarly an “It” (of the book’s title). It has many animal characteristics: snails’ eyes, bats’ ears, a spider-shaped body and monkey arms and legs. Like Artemis, the children take control of the situation and the creature. “Shall we take it home?” asks Jane.

The thing turned its long eyes to look at her, and said: ‘Does she always talk nonsense...?’

... ‘She doesn’t mean to be silly,’ Anthea said gently; ‘... Don’t be frightened; we don’t want to hurt you, you know.’

‘Hurt me!’ it said. ‘Me frightened! Upon my word! Why, you talk as if I were nobody in particular.’ All its fur stood out like a cat’s when it is going to fight. (25)

The Psammead remains like a (curious) pet to the children, valued for what it can do rather than for what it is (which mirrors Artemis’s attitude when he meets the fairy).

Nesbit does not age her children but with five children in the family one or two of them must be at least twelve years old. None of them, however, show anything like the initiative, ambition or intelligence of Artemis. Their wishes, granted by the Psammead, are trivial: beauty, wealth, wings, Red Indians, jewels, and disappearing at nightfall. Artemis, who has contrived to secure a permanent and substantial stash of fairy gold, then negotiates for one fairy wish: his mother's return to sanity. Artemis does not live in a cocoon-like paradise waiting to emerge in full maturity; his world is dangerous, threatened on all sides by political, ecological and domestic lunacies. The flippant tone in *Artemis Fowl* is juxtaposed with deadly serious concerns.

Nesbit's children are amoral innocents, not moral agents. Their naughtiness is childish exuberance, lack of carefulness, unrestrained temper or misunderstood intentions. While accepting consequences of "naughty" behaviour as inevitable, the narrator allies herself with the children's rather than the adults' perspective.

The others were to be kept in as a punishment for the misfortunes of the day before. Of course Martha thought it was naughtiness, and not misfortune — so you must not blame her. She only thought she was doing her duty. (124)

The children do occasionally make moral decisions. For example, when they have wings they realise they cannot go home for food and, eyeing up a laden plum tree, debate the ethics of stealing plums. "Stealing is stealing even if you've got wings," says Cyril. But Jane's logic, and their hunger, convinces the children.

'Do you really think so?... If you've got wings you're a bird, and no one minds birds breaking the commandments. At least, they may mind, but the birds always do it, and no one scolds them or sends them to prison.'  
(101)

Neither the children nor the narrator consider the impact of the theft on the owner of the plum tree; the moral dilemma is posed as "breaking the commandments". And later, when they are hungry again, they justify the theft of a large quantity of food from the vicar's house:

'Well,' said Cyril firmly, 'if the country you're in won't sell provisions, you *take* them. In wars, I mean. I'm quite certain you do. And even in other stories no good brother would allow his little sister to starve in the midst of plenty.' (104)

At the end of this episode the children find forgiveness and tolerance when they confess their theft to the vicar and his wife. The children's ignorance of possible consequences of their crimes absolves them of responsibility. How their actions might impact upon others is not considered; looking after themselves supersedes others' rights. Their juvenile judgement is impaired; they are not moral agents.

Artemis knows his actions are criminal and scorns moral angst. His mission to save the Fowl fortune is ambitious and ruthless. He pre-meditates a crime (taking a fairy hostage to obtain ransom gold) and assesses its probable consequences. The narrator does

not defend him; Artemis is a Fowl, one of a long line of “legendary criminals” who enjoy amassing wealth (28). Whereas the legality of their actions troubles the five children (they worry about being sent to prison), this is irrelevant to Artemis who never considers a prison sentence. There is no doubt that Artemis is fully responsible for his actions. At the end of the fourth book we read:

Artemis Fowl had a big decision to make. Which way would his life go from here? The decision was his. He could not blame circumstances or peer pressure. He was his own person, and intelligent enough to realise it. (*Opal* 338)

Neither Artemis nor the five children are morally mature. Artemis is as disregarding of others as Nesbit’s children but, unlike Nesbit’s children, he is censured for his selfishness. The narrative voice often condemns Artemis’s amorality, and other characters are critical of his actions. The shift from morally innocent to morally responsible child places the reader in a more complex relationship with the protagonist. While we can bound complacently along with the five children as they blunder through their various scrapes without stopping to consider the moral implications of their dilemmas, this is not possible with Artemis. Moral complacency is not an option left open to us by Colfer.

### ***Memory Erasure: the Forgotten Story of the Past***

For Hamlet and Harry, Dumbledore and Pilgrim, Scrooge and Ged, the past is a burden that is carried into the present; it is a shadow of the unconscious, of hubris and guilt, cast over the good intentions of the conscious mind. The ethical self encounters the shadow, the burden of past wrongs, wrestles with it, and accepts the guilt it represents. In contrast, an alarming encounter with the Other can throw the self outside itself, displacing it, and setting it on a journey from innocence (or ignorance) to experience (or knowledge). Memories form the basis of an on-going narrative, weaving moral meaning into past experiences. This narrative journey enables the ethical growth needed to recognise and respond to others.

Eve’s encounter with a serpent, a profoundly different Other, is a lesson in morality. Eve, failing to discern good from evil Others, believes the serpent, suffers the consequences, and finds the knowledge gained from moral experience. (This ancient mythological pattern of meeting a stranger who has entered from the Outside and challenges the established ethos is re-enacted in many fantasy stories.) Can Eve be blamed when she has no moral experience to draw from? Naive obedience is all she has to guide her, and while this was thought to be sufficient moral guidance for Edwardian children it is not sufficient today.

A phrase lifted from a poem by Pope, “eternal sunshine of the spotless mind”, provides the title for a movie by Charlie Kaufman that deals with memory as its main theme. A doctor has the technology to wipe memories, and his receptionist says of his work:

‘It’s amazing ... to let people begin again. It’s beautiful. You look at a baby and it’s so pure and so free and so clean. And adults are like this mess of sadness and phobias. It just makes it all go away.’

Pope’s poem (published in 1717) describes the “happy” and “blameless” state of the vestal virgin who, instead of forbidden fruit, enjoys the “unfading rose of Eden”. Her “obedient slumbers” and “desires compos’d, affections ever ev’n” are woven from fine, ethereal threads. Monastic virgins are contrasted in the poem with Eloisa whose lover has been torn from her, whose passions will not sleep, and who struggles to surrender her memories of love for pious virtue. Kaufman’s receptionist changes her opinion of memory erasure when she learns that her own memories have been erased and she has been about to repeat her mistakes.

Joel, the protagonist of Kaufman’s movie, meets and develops a relationship with a woman very different from himself. When the magic of difference turns sour, he has his memories of her erased. During the procedure he realises his mistake; encountering a very different Other has shaken him out of his narrow world, de-centered him, and provided him with experiences that allowed him to grow and expand. Both positive and negative memories, this postmodern movie suggests, are essential to our psychological development and in resolving ethical dilemmas. Moral maturity depends on finding meaning in past experiences, contradicting the view that innocence is morally superior to experience and that abstaining from knowledge of good and evil is virtuous.

Memory erasure as a magical procedure in fantasy fiction raises the same issues raised by Kaufman. Nesbit’s children occasionally request that adults forget acts of magic, but this has no detrimental effects. However, memory erasure is taken much more seriously in postmodern fantasies. In *Harry Potter*, Muggles sometimes have their memories “modified” to keep the magical community hidden, and Hermione wipes her parents’ memories to protect them, but it is also a spell that conceited Gilderoy Lockhart uses to burgle other people’s heroic deeds. Fairies in the *Artemis* series erase memories to keep their society safe from humans but Colfer takes the concept further, suggesting that memory is crucial in moral development. This is entirely lacking in Nesbit’s pre-Freudian narrative.

*The Story of the Amulet* finds the five children with the Psammead again who, while unable to grant them wishes, directs them to a half amulet; the whole amulet can grant them their “heart’s desire” (24). The amulet allows them to time travel, both into history and into the future, and on one of their adventures they meet an ancient Egyptian

priest, Rekh-mara, who has the other half of the amulet. He follows them into their time and the Amulet is united. The children get their hearts' desire — their father returns from Manchuria and their mother from Madeira. Rekh-mara's heart's desire is "great and deep learning" (286), but he wants to stay in Edwardian England where he has met a "learned gentleman", a scholar of ancient Egypt. The amulet tells the children that no one can live in a time and land

'not appointed... but a soul may live, if in that other time and land there be found a soul so akin to it as to offer it refuge, in the body of that land and time, that thus they two may be one soul in one body.' (289)

The eyes of the scholar and Rekh-mara meet at these words "and were kind to each other, and promised each other many things, secret and sacred and very beautiful" (289). The scholar agrees to offer Rekh-mara sanctuary, "and the voices were eager, alive, thrilled with hope and the desire of great things" (289). As both men pass beneath the arch, the priest is drawn "like a magnet" into the body of "the good, the beloved, the learned gentleman" (290) and disappears.

Previously in the story the children met the scholar in their future. He explains how, after being given the amulet (and united with the Egyptian, although the reader doesn't know this yet), he "didn't need to theorise, I seemed to know about the old Egyptian civilisation... Theories they call them, but they're more like — I don't know — more like memories" (244). The gentleman has acquired Rekh-mara's memories but not his consciousness; he has no recollection of the union of their souls. Rekh-mara's "pure" memories are assimilated into the scholar. Memory, according to Nesbit, is pure, beyond morality.

In *Artemis Fowl*, for the fairy community to survive it is imperative that exploitative humans remain ignorant of its existence. When humans find evidence of fairies, the fairy police routinely erase those memories. Artemis escapes this at the end of the first book by cunning, but in the third book he agrees to it, very reluctantly (*Eternity* 156-157). This is a "fine-tune wipe" which only deletes memories related to Artemis's involvement with the fairy community.

It was a tough decision. On the one hand, his knowledge of the People was now a large part of his psychological make-up. On the other, he could no longer put people's lives at risk. (157)

However, Artemis secretly sets up prompts to trigger the return of his memories. Defending this, Artemis says, "These memories are part of who I am" (307). In a final protest Artemis asks the fairies whether they want him returned to the person he was before he met them.

Holly shuddered. She remembered the cold individual who had attacked her... He had been a despicable creature.

‘If you take away the memories and influences of the People,’ continued Artemis, ‘I might become that person again. Is that what you really want?’

It was a chilling thought. Were the people responsible for Artemis’s transformation? And were they to be responsible for changing him back? (317)

Despite an assurance that chances are slim of Artemis’s reversion, Artemis’s warning is justified. The morning after the memory wipe we read in Artemis’s journal:

‘I am Artemis Fowl, the latest in the Fowl crime dynasty, and I will not be turned from my path... I shall unleash a crime wave the like of which has never been seen. The world will remember the name of Artemis Fowl.’ (329)

This is a narrative device to draw out Artemis’s moral transformation to maintain the reader’s interest. Back at square one morally, the narrative takes on new possibilities. The next novel pauses from a pacy narrative to watch Artemis steal a painting from a top security bank vault in Munich (*Opal 95*). He is described as having “...a darkness in him, a hard surface in his heart that would not be satisfied with the quiet life...” (96). Holly, his fairy hostage turned friend, later tells him:

‘You know something, Artemis. You’re exactly how you were when we first met: a greedy Mud Boy who doesn’t care about anyone except himself. Is that how you really want to be for the rest of your life?’ (137)

Artemis is subliminally aware of affection towards Holly and guilt at his actions, but it is later, after Artemis discovers the laser disk that he made to trigger his memories and listens to his own narrative, that he feels shame. “I imprisoned Holly. How could I have done that?” (234). But his memories are also positive: “I have friends,” he says (234). He emerges from his memory recovery “a different person”, a “more welcoming and trustworthy person” (238). Memory is the foundation of relationships and understanding how our actions have impacted on others is the basis of conscience, suggests Colfer. Moral growth depends on experience; memory is intrinsically linked to morality.

Kaufman’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is an ironic title. The movie does not endorse the belief that innocence is preferable to painful knowledge of good and evil. In the process of having his mind wiped, Joel realises that joyous, life-enriching memories are eradicated along with painful ones. Memories, both positive and negative, Kaufman and Colfer suggest, are the raw material of an ethical self.

Narratives of the self are comprised of memories, the foundation and building blocks for moral development. Rekh-mara’s memories, distilled from lived experience, could not be “pure” impressions but interwoven with moral meaning. Two world wars stand between Nesbit and writers of today and this history makes a huge difference. “Lest we forget”, disciplined remembering of past narratives, literally and figuratively engraves historical events on our collective consciousness as Artemis ensures his own moral narrative will not be lost. Peter Jackson’s movie version of *The Lord of the Rings*

issues a warning about collective amnesia in a voice-over: “And some things that should not have been forgotten were lost. History became legend; legend became myth.” Forgetting historical narratives puts us on dangerous ground; if we don’t heed history we are doomed to repeat its tragedies. However, when history fails, myth takes over, reminding us through metaphorical stories to discern good from evil and to doubt beguiling strangers who promise that we can become gods.

### *Moral Agents or Amoral Actors*

In the previous chapter the past is a much-needed moral compass for the postmodern protagonists Harry and Liam. Taking their bearings from the past, they resolve present moral uncertainties and find direction for their journeys into the future. Artemis and Joel push the importance of the past further, linking memory intrinsically to a developing moral narrative and ethical relationships. Whether the characters are travellers on a journey or writers of a narrative, a degree of agency is implied in these recent fictions, but the old conundrum of whether we are subjects or objects, rational and self-directed agents or actors playing a pre-scripted part, is still unresolved. The empowered choice and freedom that Tehanu needs to discover her moral strength is fraught with uncertainty.

Margaret Mahy’s *The Tricksters* belongs to a decade (the 1980s) of burgeoning awareness of human rights and equality issues that recognised and protected the rights of discriminated-against Others. The novel celebrates change, fluidity and moral uncertainties. Harry, the protagonist, positions herself slipping between real and imagined, subject and object, author and character. She is a writer, but also a book: “you’d find you were a book yourself... and someone else was reading you. Story and real would take turn about” (34). Harry is a conjurer through her writing, but likewise the not-quite-real Ovid Carnival makes Harry’s sister into a work of art, a marionette. “Making her up” with make-up, he also “makes her up” as a work of imagination. “She had become the marionette of his dreams, a toy of precious but lifeless treasure.” He tells Christobel that she is “nothing less than a work of art”. Harry retorts, “Nothing more, either” (241). Felix, Ovid’s brother, likens Harry to Ovid, referring to them both as “puppet-masters”. Harry is simultaneously author and character, puppet-master and puppet, subject and object. She is a writer with a blank page, waiting for the narrative to come to her; her words “might lead in any direction” (332). Unlike more recent writers, Mahy does not address the ethical implications of the tension between subject and object.

In the premodern world individuals were immortal souls whose morality in this world determined their eternal destinies: Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit deprived her of immortality, whereas obedience to God endowed immortality. There remained, however, an unresolved contradiction between God, the omnipotent stage director who

manipulates the script, and the actors' freedom of action. Calvin's doctrine of predestination forced this contradiction to a radical resolution: the eternal fate of souls was predestined by God and their lives played out (enacted) this destiny. The implication of this doctrine for moral choice is taken to its illogical conclusion in Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) where the protagonist, believing himself "elect" of God, and therefore beyond judgement, refuses moral responsibility for his despicable actions. After such claustrophobic determinism, secular humanism with its autonomous self was invigoratingly enlightened.

Kant argues that accepting the rational, autonomous agent not only affirms the freedom to choose but is the basis of an ethical response to others: "every rational being, exists as an end in himself, not merely as a means for arbitrary use by this or that will" (qtd. in Sandel, 122). His ethics is based in respect for all others as rational beings and "lends itself to doctrines of universal human rights" (123).

No rational being, argues Kant, should be reduced to a thing, an "It", a means to an end, as utilitarianism (and arguably Calvinism) proposes. People are, and should be treated as, subjects not objects. "This is the fundamental difference... between persons and things. Persons... have an absolute value, an intrinsic value...rational beings have dignity" (122). The humanist self is the master of free will and moral choice; no longer a pawn of God, it should not be a pawn of others, either. The pervasive philosophy that inner personal strength can change not only the world but also our selves thrives today in self-improvement literature.

Even in humanism's heyday the humanist self was not undisputed. In the eighteenth century Hume concluded that concepts of the "self" were fictions (Penelhum 222). And, in an ironic historical twist, just as humanism countered ideologies of previous eras that put human destiny in the hands of fate, gods or God, offsprings of humanism, scientific rationalism and postmodernism, challenge human agency. Going full circle, scientific and postmodern thought concurs with premodern thought — with a different rationale.

Science disputes the relative influences of nature (genetic determinism) and nurture (environmental determinism) on the individual, but not that these factors do not determine who we are and what we can become. Scruton sets up a dichotomy between a contemporary scientific worldview of the self and a philosophical one. In what he refers to as the "demoralised world" (*Philosophy* 96), or the natural world, there can be no freedom because actions are traced to natural, or physical, prior causes. "What I shall do at any future moment is therefore inexorable, given present (and past) conditions" (98). Like Liam's assailant, we can claim that the past, stretching back through generations,

determines our present actions and refuse to be morally accountable for them (in much the same way that Hogg's protagonist does not hold himself accountable).

"Objects", as defined by Scruton, are fluid, mercurial, adrift without a moral compass. This concurs with postmodern theories of the self as unauthored, only ever partially seen, fragmented, and endlessly reflected in and reflecting the world. We are constructed, fabricated, caught in a narrative web, seeing only as far as our history and culture allow us to see. A self is a fabrication of discourse, or multiple fictions, clustered around a "subject", de-centering the undivided humanist self. We are "made up" within and by our context. We are either objects or subjects, Scruton argues: objects who lack agency and can only predict the outcome of our lives, or decision-making subjects who take personal responsibility for our choices, and both have important ethical ramifications.

This distinction touches on the very essence of rational agency. The person who only predicts the future, but never decides, has fallen out of dialogue with others. He is drifting in the world like an object... Only the person who decides can take part in moral dialogue... as one self-conscious being engages with another. (105)

Moral agency is therefore besieged by premodernism, postmodernism and even within modernism. Agency is disputed and morality, which leans on agency's judgement and choice, is thrown into question. Without either ideological absolutes or human agency to underpin it, morality threatens to splinter into relativistic pluralism, or upend into carnivalesque amorality as in *The Tricksters*. And even if agency is accepted as integral to human experience, morality may still be rejected or re-framed as personal freedom. Striving towards self-fulfillment, the apex of human development is self-actualisation in both Maslow's hierarchy of needs and existential philosophy. Free will finds expression in freedom from restrictions, and a free self should not be tethered by imposed rules, countering Kant's moral categorical imperative based on reason. Refusal of morality is amorality: being beyond good and evil, outside the moral law, beyond the margins of the Ten Commandments or Lacan's Law of the Father, the Symbolic. Although often regarded with suspicion, this view has a long philosophical history, and is even regarded as the "true heroism" of finding, and living as, an autonomous, unconstrained self (Booth *Company* 237).

"Men are as the time is," says Edmund in *King Lear* (V.3.31). We cannot transcend our historical, geographical, political and social context. Refusing personal responsibility due to chance, fate, God or circumstances is to refuse moral agency, to be beyond moral judgement. Jacques, described as a libertine in *As You Like It*, describes the world as a stage and individuals as actors playing changing roles. His fluid philosophy of chameleon actors, while consistent with premodern fatalism, also resonates with post-

Enlightenment Darwinian science and postmodernism: actors, competitive animals and constructed selves are essentially amoral. Amoral protagonists are actors who nowadays often unabashedly take centre stage, even in the pages of children's fantasy fiction.

Scruton asserts that we need to lift human action out of "the web of causal reasoning in which it is ensnared by science" (Philosophy 106).

The scientific worldview contains a fatal temptation: it invites us to regard the subject as a myth, and to see the world under one aspect alone, as a world of objects. And this disenchanted world is also a world of alienation. (107-108)

Scruton concludes that science cannot explore "what we are for one another, when we respond to each other as persons" (109). Our rights, duties and responsibilities are our own and lie at the heart of the moral law that reconciles strangers (111). If Scruton is correct that science cannot lead us far enough along the path of responding ethically to others and we must therefore turn to philosophy to guide us, then fantasy fiction takes us even further still. It leads us right into the heart of an enchanted world inhabited by alienated strangers and monsters where heroic subjects respond to these "objects" as persons.

While most children's fantasies endorse moral responsibility they are not anachronistic but actively engage with contemporary worldviews. Friction between moral resolution and the impossibility of resolution is evident in the stories. But beneath a playfully postmodern surface and an abiding moral uncertainty, most contemporary fantasies seem to eschew amoralism. Their ethics are unashamedly humanistic; moral agency is pivotal to the plots' progression. "Humanist ethics is distinguished by placing the end of moral action in the welfare of humanity" (Honderick 376) and child protagonists are not afraid to break the Authority's rules for the greater good of humanity, actively exploring moral issues rather than passively accepting what they have been told. They are not obedient subjects subjected to the demands of Authority, nor objects "made up" out of genetic material and their "time" and location, nor authorial subjects transcending time and place, but determinedly assert their freedom of moral choice. While this dispute is not new to literature, it has, I think, taken on new urgency because for many people science has more credibility than religion as the Grand Narrative that explains our world and human nature.

The inverse of the subject is also a pressing concern of fantasy. Beings that grant wishes and fulfil the desires of human hearts are ancient tropes in fairytale, but they are utilitarian objects. These object-beings are alien and their wish-granting powers make them sought-after commodities; they are often enslaved. Nesbit refers to the Psammead in her title as "It"; some thing (like a pet), not someone. All we know about it, apart from its physical characteristics, is that it has lived in its present location for several thousand

years, it remembers the era of dinosaurs and is susceptible to colds. By the end of the story the Psammead has had enough of the children and they have to physically restrain it before it burrows into the ground. It slaves all day giving people wishes and needs some time to itself, it complains. One of the girls bargains with it: if it grants one last wish they will never ask for another wish.

‘I’d do anything,’ it said in a tearful tone... ‘if you’d never, never ask me to do it after today... to wake up every morning and know you’ve got to do it. You don’t know what it is — you don’t know what it is, you don’t!’ (*Five Children* 221)

The Psammead is a self-pitying victim, a thrall to the children’s whims. Finally, after granting the children’s wishes it asks for one for itself: that they would be unable to tell anyone about it. If grown-ups knew about it, the Psammead explains, they would ask for “real earnest things” like “graduated income tax, and old-age pensions and manhood suffrage, and free secondary education... and the whole world would be turned topsy-turvy” (222). We probably have some sympathy for the Psammead, although (if we take the children’s perspective) not a lot, and no real empathy. It remains an “it” to the end of the story.

Nesbit was writing in the early years of the twentieth century at the height of the British Empire, prior to both world wars and the social disruption and change they spawned. The middle class complacency of a superior group belonging to a superior nation, ruling over a globe full of colonial jewels, is evident but unconscious in this text, I believe. The Psammead is like colonial others, an oddity that has been unearthed, something to exploit for its riches. This analysis is too simple without a codicil, however, because the Psammead does protest against its servitude and we have a hint of its independent thought and perspective. Knowing that Nesbit was a socialist, we can also read an ironic smile into how to turn the world “topsy-turvy”. Turning the world topsy-turvy may not be such a bad thing.

A much more recent wish-granting “it” of fantasy is Bartimaeus in Jonathan Stroud’s trilogy. The protagonists in the narrative are a boy, Nathaniel, who by the end of the series is a young man, a djinni, Bartimaeus, and later in the narrative a girl, Kitty. Stroud’s djinn are thoroughly alien. They are beings “of air and fire” according to Bartimaeus (*Amulet* 13) and “very wicked” according to Nathaniel’s magician master (28). Djinn change physical form at will and do not hide their contempt for their human masters, resenting their slavery. The first book of the trilogy follows in turns Nathaniel and Bartimaeus, sparking with their mutual antipathy.

The heavily ironic, and often sarcastic, humour in the first person voice of Bartimaeus undercuts all moral responsibility; it relishes human destruction from an emotional distance. Like the Psammead, djinn cannot act autonomously but are

compelled to grant wishes and use their magic to serve humans. And if granting the wishes will turn the world topsy-turvy, they must still comply. Although the “real earnest things” that the Psammead protests against are positive reforms, in Stroud’s fantasy the commands made of djinn are not. Djinn routinely perform evil tasks and the humans in the novels and the reader assume they are entirely without morals.

Djinn have no perceivable moral agency as they are enslaved by magicians. But Stroud doesn’t allow the case to rest there. When Kitty accuses Bartimaeus of being “aligned in wickedness” with Nathaniel, carrying out “his every whim”, Bartimaeus protests:

‘Aligned in wickedness? Hey, there *is* a certain master/ servant thing going on here, you know. I’m a slave! I’ve no choice in the matter.’

Her lip curled. ‘Just obeying orders, eh? Sure. That’s a *great* excuse.’

As Kitty dismisses his “excuse” for (not so naïve) obedience as “absolutely pathetic”, Bartimaeus concedes: “We slaves have dwelt so long in these chains of ours... to hear the resignation in my own voice sickened my essence to its core. I tried to batten down my shame...” (*Amulet* 490). Although compelled to obey on pain of the Shrivelling Fire, the djinn still have moral choice, Stroud insists. Disobedience, however, does not seem to be an option for the Psammead. This was written before people were called to account for war crimes; just following orders is not now deemed sufficient defence. According to this post-World War Two humanistic ethic, we are morally responsible for our obedience to the orders of those who usurp authority over us.

This highlights a difficulty for moral agency. Is the slave, positioned beyond the margins of society, also positioned beyond the margins of moral responsibility? Endowing the slave, who is denied both rights and freedom and who is simultaneously banished from society and imprisoned within it, with full moral agency seems flawed. How far does moral agency extend? Are children full moral agents?

Wall argues that human agency is an incomplete ethos, especially when we consider children.

What is needed in the light of childhood is a deeper sense of the connection between human agency and human vulnerability. These should be understood, not as polar opposites, but as intertwined for all human beings in a dynamic and creative tension... [T]he term ‘vulnerability’ comes from the Latin *vulnus*, meaning susceptibility to wound or harm. (*Ethics* 39)

Accepting the tension between agency and vulnerability, continues Wall, underlines the dynamic between independence and dependence, autonomy and the imperative of being in relationship with others. We negotiate between agency and vulnerability within relationships; “Being-in-the-world is from the beginning both passively constructed by others and societies and actively constructed by a self... Agency is always conditioned by vulnerability and vulnerability in turn is shaped by agency” (40). Children visibly

demonstrate the lively interplay or tension (stretching) of their worlds of meanings. “They are more energetically free agents and more profoundly vulnerable to circumstances” (41). This vibrant tension is captured in the contemporary fantasies I have read. In addition to this children have been socially marginalised throughout history, Wall argues, “because children have not been considered moral thinkers themselves” (177). Wall positions the child between the opposite pairs of agent/ actor, active/ passive, moral/ amoral, responsible/ innocent. Children’s fantasy today also places the child protagonist and the child reader in the role of moral thinker, situated at the fulcrum between dualities.

Narrative theory positions us between subject and object. We are moral agents and heroes on a quest, but we can only see and travel as far as the margins of the story that contains us. We are told the moral of our story, but we can also actively reconstruct its meaning. Like slaves and children we have free will and can make choices but we are also confined within physical, psychological, intellectual and social limits. We are subjects and objects, masters and slaves.

At one point in the *Bartimaeus* narrative, Kitty is taken captive by Bartimaeus. They spar and she judges him, calling him a “demon”. “You’re a monster!” she cries, enraged. Unlike the monster in *Frankenstein* who becomes “fully convinced” that he is “in reality” a monster, and is “filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification” (Shelley 109), Bartimaeus refuses this label. Smoothly he tells her this is demeaning, the correct word is “djinni”; “It keeps things friendly between us”. Kitty retorts, “No one’s friendly with a demon!” (*Golem* 497).

Monsters and demons are beyond the margins, on the wrong side of the story; as representatives of menacing evil they are kept off the page. Befriending them is exactly what some contemporary fantasy heroes do.

## **Offering Introductions to Monsters**

### ***Dangerous Encounters With Evil Monstrosities***

As Socrates suggests in the *Phaedrus*, strangers, gods and monsters belong to the world of myth, not philosophy. Philosophy proper should be able to transcend mythic imaginings in favour of more rational pursuits. (Kearney, *Monsters* 13)

Drawing lines, making margins and creating dichotomies have been bequeathed to us by the ancient world including the Hebrews, Persians and Greeks. Dark is separated from light, good from evil, innocence from experience, moral agent from amoral actor, villain from victim. Socrates sets myth in opposition to philosophy and the monsters that arise from these stories are opposed to reason. Philosophy and reason surpass myth and

monsters, leaving monsters behind, out in the cold, inferior. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* uses mythic traditions to explore the tragic consequences of these divisions. The descendants of Frankenstein's monster appear in contemporary children's fantasy fiction: Elizabeth Knox and Jonathan Stroud introduce us to monsters that challenge dividing lines and take us to the wrong side of the story where the protagonists not only reconcile their internal alienation and become moral agents but learn how to respond to the Other ethically. Myth circles back to embrace philosophy.

The face of a monster peering at us out of the darkness is a vision of terror: every child, woken by a nightmare, knows this. Monsters hide under beds, lurk in corners and take up residence in wardrobes waiting to confront us in our sleeping vulnerability. Monsters come from an unknown world, a place of dreams and darkness, or the realm of death. Different, alien and "other", they embody our deepest fears. At the same time they are close to us, inside our bedrooms. This "insider/ outsider" motif is held in tension because while monsters are absolutely alien they are also, paradoxically, near to us (the beast within, hiding in our bedrooms) and we may even have made them ourselves.

Monsters are unrecognisable: "they defy our accredited norms of identification. Unnatural, transgressive, obscene, contradictory, heterogeneous, mad. Monsters are what keep us awake at night and make us nervous during the day" (Kearney 4). Historically, monsters were believed to demonstrate moral aberrations and vices.<sup>20</sup> Physically deformed humans were "monstrous"; outwardly abnormal they advertised inward depravity, and served as a warning from God (Baldick 11). (This attitude is encountered in Tehanu's society.) Outwardly grotesque and inwardly immoral, these were faces to fear. "These figures of Otherness occupy the frontier zone where reason falters and fantasies flourish" (Kearney 3). Pieced together from disparate parts, monsters are mythological creatures, part human, part beast, trapped in the split between the same and the different.

Psychic and social anxieties are invested in monsters. They are "deep down, tokens of fracture within the human psyche. They speak to us of how we are split between conscious and unconscious, familiar and unfamiliar, same and other" (4). I have discussed how monsters are associated with the unconscious shadow and untamed impulses, but monsters also embody social anxieties. They are strangers entering our sphere from elsewhere, utterly unknown and unknowable to us. Even when they originate inside our society they are fundamentally different; beyond the limits of "normal"; marked by "abnormalities" (differences) of religion, race, social status, physical

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<sup>20</sup> The etymology of 'monster' is derived from the Latin words 'monstrum' – portent, monster – and 'monere' – warn.

appearance, and so on. Confronting monsters, suggests Kearney, we have a choice: to welcome our experience of strangeness or to repudiate it through projecting it onto others. When we disown the terrifying strangeness, projecting it onto others instead of identifying it within us, we re-enact the separation of good from evil, light from darkness.

Aliens proliferate in popular culture

where anxieties loom as to who we are and how we demarcate ourselves from others (who are not us). Alien-ation, as a postmodern phenomenon, is inseparable from the them-and-us syndrome. (Kearney, *Aliens* 103)

The “them-and-us syndrome” divides insiders (those who belong with us, inside the metaphorical city walls) and outsiders (those who are threateningly different and therefore alienated from our society). This uncertain division is played out in popular culture.<sup>21</sup> Our society’s obsession with aliens seems to reflect increasing uncertainty in our relationships with other humans due to escalating globalisation and magnified by the media. As Kearney argues, boundaries have become fuzzy as to who we are and where our social parameters are set. Are others safe or dangerous? Do they share our moral code or are they beyond the moral margins, alien and amoral?

Contemporary children’s fantasy fiction, like other forms of popular culture, negotiates the inside/ outside, same/ different, self/ other dichotomies, searching through metaphor and story for an ethical response to the “them-and-us syndrome”. These stories reflect a growing concern to place ethics in the forefront of a rapidly changing social life, and their optimism indicates the possibilities and potentialities of positive social relationships against a bleak historical background of colonialism, exploitation, genocide and other forms of violence. Whereas Frankenstein feels repugnance towards his creation and his tragedy unfolds from his rejection of it, these contemporary fantasies invert the tragic *Frankenstein* plot by challenging, even reversing, Frankenstein’s linking of monstrous with malign. In the dance where “insiders” and “outsiders” inhabit changing spaces and roles, these narratives move from oppression to liberation, from rejection to seeing face-to-face, from flight to an embrace.

The ethical journey begins with terror and ends with compassionate self-sacrifice. The path is not straight, and is littered with moral quandaries that belong in ongoing ethical discussions. Ultimately, though, monsters are not met in a dark theoretical mirror, but individually, face-to-face. They may have been banished outside the city walls, like the historical leper, but as they peer through the gaps, there is something very human in their gaze.

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<sup>21</sup> For example, Doctor Who is alien but indistinguishable from other Englishmen, down to some quirky eccentricities (an insider who is really an outsider), or E.T., who is immediately identified as an alien but evokes human empathy (an outsider who is, underneath it all, an insider), or aliens who remain – incomprehensibly – dangerously and malevolently alien (an outsider who must remain outside).

### *Defacing and Facing the Faceless, Voiceless, Nameless Monster*

On a dreary night in November, Victor Frankenstein infuses “a spark of being” into “the lifeless thing” at his feet. By the glimmer of a half-extinguished light he sees the “dull yellow eye of the creature open”. With “infinite pains and care” he has tried to create a well-proportioned body with beautiful features,

but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room... (Shelley 55)

When the monster later wakes Frankenstein in his bedroom, it fixes its eyes on him and opens its jaws and mutters “some inarticulate sounds”. Then it stretches out its hand, “but I escaped and rushed downstairs”.

Facing the monster, Frankenstein reads its face, or “countenance”, as a “horror” that “no mortal could support”. Appalled by what he has done, Frankenstein rejects his creation and tries to flee from it. Misery follows him, in the form of the monster and the monster’s deeds. It is deformed, inarticulate and has no name. In a similar scene, set a century after *Frankenstein* and written a century later again, Laura Hame, the protagonist of Elizabeth Knox’s fantasy, *Dreamhunter*, meets a monster.

Laura is fifteen years old, a dreamhunter, and alone in the Place, an uncanny landscape where people with a special aptitude for it can catch recurrent dreams, take them back to society, and publicly “dream” them to a paying audience. Laura’s mother is dead and her father, also a dreamhunter, mysteriously disappeared just before she embarked on her new career. Vulnerable in the place of the unconscious, situated between life and death, Laura meets a monster. Facing him, she feels horror and terror, and we are likely to feel that her fear is well founded. She sees “a huge, heavy, glittering mass looming after her, moving forward with great fluid strides”. Laura screams. The encounter is suffocating like being buried alive. “There was no air between her and the monster, no open space... The creature’s chest loomed above her like a stone lid”. She screams, begs and closes her eyes. She gives herself up, lying “motionless”, the monster’s innocent victim:

— but then nothing further happened...

Finally, Laura looked into its face.

It was a lopsided, lumpish face — and very solemn. The sand and clay from which it had been formed was crusty and uneven, and stained red, as though mixed with blood. (248–249)

As she looks at the monster’s face, she realises it is waiting. Through intuition and a resurfacing memory, Laura understands that her father made the creature to help her. It is mute, but she knows she can give it speech by finishing the inscription on its forehead: by adding the final “N” she makes the monster “Nown”.

Both Frankenstein's and Laura's monsters are human creations and have hideous, deformed faces. Both Frankenstein and Laura, faced with them, try to flee. In the initial encounter Laura's monster is mute and Frankenstein's mutters some inarticulate sounds. Neither is named; a little later when Laura asks the monster what he was called, he replies "Servant" (251, 258). They are therefore without a humanly recognisable face, without a voice and without a name, "non-persons", beyond the margins of humanity.

Shelley pushes her monster's marginalisation much further than Knox. No one Shelley's monster encounters face-to-face can see past his hideous face; he lives as an outcast on the edge of society, teaching himself language and speech. Only a blind man, who tells him he "cannot judge of your countenance" (129), can "hear" him and is persuaded of his sincerity. Frankenstein, when compelled by the monster to listen to his tale, says:

His words had a strange effect upon me. I compassionated him and sometimes had a wish to console him, but when I looked upon him, when I saw the filthy mass that moved and talked, my heart sickened and my feelings were altered to those of horror and hatred. (142)

The monster remains defaced, nameless, unheard and alienated. It demonstrates "a horror of the other that remains other" (Levinas, "Trace" 346). Likewise, Laura's initial encounter with an alien face is filled with horror. The alien face "speaks" of an alien being, beyond comprehension. "A face enters our world from an absolutely alien sphere," says Levinas (346).

The inhuman monster, deprived of citizenship, is enslaved, imprisoned or banished. Captivity is an important theme in many fantasy stories including *Dreamhunter*. Nown, created to obey orders, has been enslaved for centuries. Laura asks him if scruples would prevent him obeying but Nown, unlike Bartimaeus, enslaved by his nature and therefore truly amoral, can list only physical impediments to his obedience (261). The theme of captivity is foreshadowed in the Prologue. Tziga, Laura's father, dreams of chained prisoners, humans whose crimes have stripped them of their humanity in the eyes of their society. The brutal treatment of chain gangs by their guards stirs up resentment and anger, rebellion and violence. Monstrous actions breed (in)human monsters. This theme recurs in Stroud's narrative when the deeply embittered enslaved djinn gain power and find revenge in bloodshed. Their slavery makes them into the monsters the humans feared them to be when they first enslaved them.

Frankenstein's monster is not enslaved but he is denied citizenship and exiled. His complete alienation from others and his yearning for belonging are at the heart of his tragedy. He is an outsider roaming vast wilderness landscapes looking longingly through windows at loving domestic interiors. The looking glass that reflects the interior self or

the same becomes instead to the monster a glass window separating inside from outside, reflecting only difference. He is denied access, kept out, not in, trapped within himself. As he explains to Frankenstein, misery and unkindness have corrupted him; his own benevolence meets with violence, a violence which he then mimics in despair, the hostile physical environment paralleling a hostile social environment. As with Knox's prisoners and Stroud's djinn, alienation creates moral monsters out of outsiders.

It is in response to the alien face that Shelley and Knox part company in their narratives. Laura, seeing the face of the monster, realises that she must give it words and speech. The face speaks to her of its need of speech. Contemporary fantasy, as with contemporary ethics, cannot afford to be indifferent to the alienated Other, standing as we do on the other side of the twentieth century from Shelley. It is difficult to turn a blind eye to our global history; it stares us in the face and startles us out of our complacency in many forms of popular and not-so-popular culture. Levinas, a survivor of a Nazi labour camp, "delineate[s] an ethical 'face-to-face' relation with the Other, which, while immediate and singular, is none the less transcendent" (Honderich 481). This recalls the photos of faces of some of those who did not survive presented to us by Bronowski as he stands in the puddle at Auschwitz. Presence is manifested in the face, it is the first discourse, it speaks, says Levinas (352).

Laura wonders whether the letters inscribed on the creature's forehead, "NOWN", should be pronounced "noun" or "known", but as he does not know, she continues to say "noun" (258). A noun names, and Nown is named by Laura, his name underlining the fact that he has been named.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand he is not "known" in any sense to her, he is utterly alien. Laura wants to know "what sort of creature he was. How dangerous he was. What he might do, and what he was capable of" (257) so she asks him questions that he answers thoughtfully, or not at all.

Laura weighed the sandman's silence, his hesitation before speaking. She looked on his silence as a guilty one, then she looked on it as puzzlement. Then she tried to see it as profound consideration. (257)

Although he is opaque to her, being profoundly different, Laura wants to understand him. A short while later, "Laura wondered whether he was stupid. Slow, obdurate and earthy" (258). She cannot "read" his face and she cannot interpret him. He is elsewhere from her and his face's "wonder is due to the elsewhere from which it comes and into which it already withdraws" (Levinas 355). Adam Zachary Newton describes the face as a "fiasco of the Other", an exteriority to be read, and a site of intersubjectivity that is "fully social"

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<sup>22</sup> A childhood rhyme recalled by Laura states that each letter of Nown's name endows him with a characteristic. The first N (creating NOW) gives life; the last N (NOWN) gives speech. NON uncreates him; OWN gives him freedom or moral agency. Moreover, life and speech "are the same". In naming him with the "measure" that gives him a voice, Laura gives Nown a narrative identity – although not agency (250).

(237, 238). Because Nown's face is utterly unreadable to Laura, social understandings break down and this is a "fiasco".

Unlike the Psammead who is merely a curiosity and useful wish-granter for Nesbit's children, Nown, although a servant, is always more than this for Laura.

For [past generations of Hames] the sandman has represented only the carrying out of their will. Laura's naming him 'Nown'... suggests... her lack of interest in what she can do with him, and her interest rather in what he is. (Anna Jackson 27)

Echoing Kant's argument that people are never a means to an end, but always an end in themselves, Levinas says "...*He* is not the *it* of things which are at our disposal" (359). But even though Laura willingly gives Nown a name and a voice she is seduced by the power she wields over him. She is "dizzy with vanity" and asks "this creature compelled by his nature to be wholly honest to her" what he makes of her. He is unable to answer.

'So — you don't make anything of me?'

'I might,' he said. 'I can't say. It's not my business to make. I have been made, Laura. It seems to me a very great step from being made, to making.' (262)

This exchange deepens the complexity of relationships with different Others. It indicates the imaginative work involved in "making" others, or "making them up", as Ovid Carnival "makes up" Christobel, creating them in a likeness we can recognise, weaving our own narratives around them and providing them with motivations with which we can identify. Laura describes Nown as "an unimaginable thing" (263), although she has already worked hard, through her questions and her interpretations of his responses, to imagine him.

Despite her initial repugnance, Laura starts to trust Nown, and finds him trustworthy. Later, when (in her bedroom) she unmakes him in a moment of panic, she is smitten with the immensity of her deed. She calls to him, and cries, recalling the "curling column of music... smoking away from her body, the music she had felt singing between Nown and her when she gave him his voice" (291). After un-making him, Laura understands that the monster had come "inside", literally and figuratively. He is no longer an anonymous alien Other, or a useful "It", but a friend.

In the pile of sand that was Nown, Laura finds a letter from her father giving her a task he was unable to complete. Realising the potential of a powerful servant to help her, but also in order to recreate her friend (as she refers to him in conversation, 299), Laura learns the magic to make her own golem. However, Laura has formed a "strange notion".

She...wanted to learn who Nown really was — if he really was somebody in his own right... Laura was planning a kind of experiment that, she thought, would let her look on the *real* face of her sandman... (362–363)

She will sculpt him face down in the sand so that when he comes to life he will reveal his “*own true face*”. After studying sculptures in the museum, Laura carefully crafts the golem’s back. As he rises from the sand, he lifts “a face as handsome as that of a classical statue” (365, 368). Whether or not this is his “true face” we never know; as Laura has studied classical sculptures, Nown may still appear to her according to her expectations, but he is no longer a horror.

Frankenstein’s monster is never named. In comparison, Knox suggests that by naming the “It” who satisfies our desires, the “Something” becomes “Someone” (a noun) distinct from our wishes and fears. If we create others in our likeness, making them “known” within our frame of reference, their faces will be “lopsided and lumpish”, a crude depiction defined by the limits of our imagination, a sort of defacing. But if we allow the Other to exceed our imagination, to be truly Other, as we face them we will see their “own true face” as an epiphany, and “the epiphany of a face is alive”. The revelation of the face comes from a place beyond our representations, beyond signification and the symbolic (Levinas 351, 355). “Are you more yourself? More your *true* self?” Laura asks her recreated golem. “Yes, I am,” Nown replies (373).

But Nown’s meaning is veiled. Laura speculates on what he means, and is “pleased with her own speculation. She didn’t for a minute consider that her servant might have spoken obscurely” (373). The work of re-creating another, naming and identifying them, interpreting their words and recognising their face as belonging to someone unique is ethical. But the danger is that we still only see and hear what we expect to see and are attuned to hear.

### ***The Mirror of Identification***

Although she created him, Laura never sees Nown as her own reflection. He transcends all that is “known” to her. However, being able to see our own experiences reflected in the experiences of others, the process of identification, is long established in ethical thought. It is the “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” maxim of reciprocity. Seeing ourselves reflected in others breaks the mirror of narcissistic obsession. Identification is a limited ethic, but important.

Terry Eagleton, using a Lacanian framework in his book *Trouble With Strangers*, posits the moral mirror of benevolence as the “Imaginary” of ethics. He quotes Hume’s *Treatise*: “There is no human, and indeed no sensible, creature, whose happiness or misery does not, in some measure, affect us when brought near to us” (55). This Eagleton refers to as the “sympathetic imagination” and is a projection of one’s self into the needs and interests of others (36). Hutcheson and Hume, both Enlightenment philosophers, advance the notion that through proximity we can see in the face of the

other a reflection of ourselves, and this evokes (or should evoke) benevolence and sympathy. Husserl, in the twentieth century, advances the similar idea that other selves, although essentially concealed, manifest by their conduct “what I can identify as part of my own inward experience. The other is never fully present to me, but is knowable as a reflection of myself” (41). This mirroring of the self in the other is reciprocal, a double mirroring, a conveyance from one to the other “by resemblance, contiguity or causation” in a “double motion” (Hume qtd. 45). Eagleton refers to this double mirroring as the “social imaginary” in which “I find myself reflected in you at the same time as I see you mirrored in myself” (46).

Artemis’s world is not insular and parochial like the five children’s Edwardian England or Laura’s 1905 “Southland”. He has worked hard to find others outside the known world; his thinking is truly global. However, Artemis has not learnt sympathy. The reader, unlike Artemis, is introduced to the highly skilled, technologically competent, intelligent fairy heroine, Holly Short, early in the story. We know her thoughts, emotions, desires and the important relationships in her life. We know how her complex underground fairy society operates, and see her at work in her career. Artemis mistakes her for an expendable commodity, but we do not. When Artemis kidnaps Holly, therefore, our sympathies are with alien Holly not human Artemis.

Artemis consulted the basement surveillance monitor. His captive was sitting on the cot now, head in hands. Artemis frowned. He hadn’t expected the fairy to appear so... human. Until now, they had merely been quarry. Animals to be hunted. But now, seeing one like this, in obvious discomfort, it changed things. (*Artemis* 113)

This moment of moral uncertainty is necessary for us to salvage some respect for Artemis, if, ironically, we continue to see him as “human”.

Colfer achieves doubling of sympathy between Holly and Artemis by fluid narrative perspective. A few pages after the above excerpt we are with Holly. “Holly sat, never taking her hazel eyes from the diminutive monster before her” (120). Seeing Artemis, the human, as a “diminutive monster” (we are not sure whether these are Holly’s words or the narrator’s) changes the mimetic play of identification. We no doubt agree that Artemis is a moral “monster”, acting despicably, but to Holly he is also an alien monster, and so, therefore, are we. Who is the insider and who is the outsider? It all depends on viewpoint.

Reversals, ironies and twists enliven the story. Artemis “uses” Holly as a means to a selfish end, not as an (active) wish-granting fairy — that has been parenthesised — but as a (passive) hostage. Artemis’s request for a wish is therefore unexpected. Holly, asserting her agency, insists that Artemis must negotiate for it. He parts with half of the newly gained gold on trust, the “promise of a wish” (276). He berates himself for his

gullibility until he realises his mother is healed; Holly, the alien, is more trustworthy than Artemis. Holly's moral character influences Artemis, so when Butler requests, at the end of the story, that they should "never again" be involved with ventures of this kind because "Fairies are too... human", Artemis agrees (275, 276). But why "too human" when fairies are clearly not human at all and even morally superior to humans? British Enlightenment ethics suggests that through proximity we can see in the Other's face a reflection of ourselves. Paralleling Gertrude's moral mirror, we look past appearances to the Other's internal self. When Artemis identifies with Holly, he identifies her as "...human". The dots indicate that "human" is an uncertain, tentative, even an ironic, word and relates to outward indications of inner feelings: Artemis notes Holly's head in her hands, a position that indicates either profound concentration or despair, and her "obvious discomfort".

But sentiment is a flawed basis for an ethical response to the Other. Artemis notices Holly's discomfort, responds with his own discomfort, yet continues to exploit her. His reason does not inspire moral sympathy but works against it: moral "monsters" are like this. And as an ethical theory, the sympathetic imagination did not survive beyond the eighteenth century. Instead, says Eagleton, "benevolence abandoned moral philosophy and took up residence in that form of moral inquiry we know as realist fiction" (81). Many great nineteenth century novelists like Dickens, he suggests, were the progeny of the philosophy of sentiment.

At the end of *Dreamhunter* the re-created Nown carries Laura, "He cradled her", and "She lay quiet", a child escaping from disaster she created. "He'd tried to help her, and she'd silenced him" (432-433). A servant, she realises, will only reflect back to her what she can already see; she needs a mirror to show her what she cannot see, her "real" face as it appears to others. Eagleton, discussing the philosophy of Smith, suggests that the sympathetic imaginary is asymmetrical showing us what we cannot see for ourselves.

we view ourselves simultaneously from the inside and from the outside, though these two visions are not exactly commensurate. We judge ourselves through the eyes of others... This, indeed, lies at the very heart of morality: an entirely solitary human being, Smith suggests, would have no moral feelings at all, since he could no more view his qualities from the outside than he could see his own face... 'Bring him into society', however, 'and he is immediately provided with a mirror which he wanted before'. (74)

But this reflection still belongs to an ethics of mimicry because it is ourselves we see reflected through another's eyes, although a truer, more layered reflection.

### ***A Monster in the Mirror: Benevolence, Malevolence and Moral Judgements***

I have already discussed the scene in *The Story of the Amulet* in which the "pure" memories of an ancient Egyptian priest are absorbed into the body of a scholar. But

Nesbit here reveals her unconscious racism: when Rekh-mara and the scholar agree to be united, Anthea protests that the learned gentleman's soul is "as good as gold", insinuating that the Egyptian's isn't. The charm replies that nothing that is not good can pass through the Amulet. As the men pass beneath it, Rekh-mara disappears.

As for his soul...

'Oh the horrid thing!' cried Robert, and put his foot on a centipede... that crawled and wriggled and squirmed at the learned gentleman's feet.

'That,' said the Psammead, 'was the evil in the soul of Rekh-mara.'

There was a deep silence.

'Then Rekh-mara's him?' said Jane at last.

'All that was good in Rekh-mara,' said the Psammead. (291)

The union of souls has eradicated Rekh-mara's consciousness but retained his "pure" memories which amount to specialist knowledge of Egyptian culture and are disentangled from emotions and reasoned, on-going self-narrative. The gentleman's life is enriched, although he has no real memory of the union, describing it as "the most extraordinary dream". "I seem to see so many things clearly now — things I never saw before!" he says (292). And, with a blessing on the "dear, dear children" the novel (and the series) ends.

Nesbit has a huge ethical problem here. Rekh-mara cannot continue to live without either body or consciousness; all that physically remains of him is squashed underfoot; the "good" having entered the gentleman in the form of knowledge. Although he is self-absorbed and obsessed with his research, the gentleman is "good as gold" — white, middleclass, of the children's time and culture; sacrificing nothing, he is enriched. Rekh-mara, very different in time, place, race and culture, has evil within him and is expendable. His complete assimilation into the Englishman parallels the assimilation of colonised cultures into the British Empire, leaving a trace of exotic curiosities and artefacts. (The learned gentleman keeps the Amulet.)

This annihilation of the Other is presented, shockingly, by Stroud in *Ptolemy's Gate*. The villain Makepeace shows Nathaniel a magical experiment in which a djinni is conjured to inhabit a captive human. Nathaniel describes the action as "morally dubious. The fellow is an unwilling victim" (189). The prisoner suffers: "'Please!... I can't bear it! Oh, it whispers! It drives me mad!'" (190). Two separate consciousnesses inhabiting one body is associated with dual personalities and madness. Makepeace is enthusiastic about the experiment's potential, intending to harness the power of supernatural entities within himself. Later in the narrative, when a very powerful demon is summoned to inhabit him, Makepeace says,

'Ah — for a moment or two, my friends, there was a struggle — I admit it. The effect was disconcerting. But I commanded it most strictly, with all my power. And I felt that demon shrink back and obey. It is subservient within me. It knows its master!' (339)

But the powerful demon has gained control and Makepeace is the “demon” who has been made subservient. By inhabiting human bodies, powerful spirits then begin a reign of terror, vindictively killing innocent humans. Enslaved outsiders gain inside control, demolish the inside/ outside division, and seize the absolute power of victorious conquerors.

In Le Guin’s tale of “The Finder” (first published in 2001), the boundary between the self inside and the other outside is pervious. Imprisoned in an enchanted room, the young wizard Otter crouches “in the uneasy oppression of the spellbond”, watching the dim light fade through chinks in his blocked window, and remembers the slave, Anieb, he has seen that day and her disfigured (monstrous) body.

He saw her now more clearly than he had seen her in the tower. He saw her more clearly than he had ever seen anyone... It was as if she was with him in the room. It was as if she was in him, as if she was him. She looked at him. He saw her look at him. He saw himself through her eyes.  
(26)

Otter is occasionally possessed by Anieb’s soul as she speaks and thinks through him. She is the “monstrous other” who sees him and through whom he can see himself; though separate, they are merged. But Otter is also sometimes possessed by the evil wizard, Gelluk, as a darkness in his mind, in dreams, and by direct manipulation. Gelluk compels him to tell his true name. “There was a little struggle in the mind, but the mouth opened and the tongue moved” (32). This evil possession involves power over another person. “The occasion of violence, not to mention the turn toward violence, resides in the *power exerted over* one will by another will,” says Ricoeur (*Oneself* 220). Wall calls this power “radical evil”. “Instrumentalising others is... a form of radical evil. It implicates the self in making use of its will in doing violence to the will of another” (*Moral Creativity* 114). In these contemporary fantasies, possession, taking over or annihilating another person’s will, robs them of their agency, making them into disposable “Its”.

Bartimaeus tells Kitty that for two thousand years he has carried Ptolemy’s hope “that djinn and humans might one day act together, without malice, without treachery, without slaughter”. It is “the echo” of Ptolemy’s faith that convinces Bartimaeus to unite his power with Nathaniel’s and share possession of Nathaniel’s body (*Ptolemy* 437). Bartimaeus describes possessing Nathaniel as “being refreshed and rebuilt and reborn... My essence surged with a terrible joy” (439). He is tempted to overcome Nathaniel, but refrains. Nathaniel feels new energy: “It ripples through me! I feel so light! I could leap to the stars!” (441). Bartimaeus silences Nathaniel, reminding him, “There are two of us in this body now” (442). The battle of wills is humourous, but the two separate personalities learn to co-operate. The meshing of their energies and strengths enables

them to overcome the evil destroying London as Otter and Anieb together overcome Gelluk.

In both Le Guin's and Stroud's fantasies, an ethical response entails deliberate refusal to control another; it embraces the challenge of inviting other, very different, voices to speak to us and to live within us imaginatively. It is the converse of the annihilation of the other, instead it is annihilation of the self's will to power. Possession therefore has two sides: it can obliterate the other through overwhelming force or it can respond in submission and humility to the other in a relationship where power is negotiated and shared.

Possession expresses either hospitality or hostility. Kearney distinguishes between two ways of addressing alterity: as "other" (an alterity of reverence and welcome) or as "alien" (an alterity of selection and suspicion) ("Aliens" 101). As humans tend to demonise alterity, today there is theoretical reluctance to "rush to judgement" based on polarising or partitioning Others. For example, Derrida suggests that justice transcends the law and demands

unconditional hospitality to the alien. Hospitality is only truly just... when it resists the temptation to discriminate between good and evil others, that is, between the hostile enemy (*hostis*) and the benign host (*hospis*). (104)

Discrimination requires that visitors identify themselves and identification involves some violence (as Bartimaeus also informs us); specifically the violence of filtering, choosing and excluding. Hospitality should be offered to the "absolute other, unknown and anonymous" (Derrida qtd. 105).

The newcomer may be good or evil, but if you exclude the possibility that the newcomer is coming to destroy your house, if you want to control this and exclude this terrible possibility in advance, there is no hospitality. (Derrida, qtd. in Kearney, *Monsters* 70).

In deconstruction, says Kearney, aliens only come in the dark. "The absolute other is without name and without face" (70).

Outsiders, we are reminded by Derrida, are denied hospitality because they are non-persons, without a face, voice or name. Frankenstein denies his monster hospitality; Laura grants hospitality to Nown, and their opposite responses makes all the difference. But when outsiders disguised as serpents gatecrash the Garden of Eden we need to bring all our experience and moral judgement to the encounter. Kearney continues:

The problem of this [Derrida's] analysis of hospitality is, I fear, that it undervalues our need to differentiate... *ethically* between good and evil aliens. It downgrades — without denying — our legitimate duty to try to distinguish between benign and malign strangers, between saints and psychopaths (though admittedly most of us fall between the two). (70)

The postmodern danger is that in "fetishizing" difference we create an "idolatry" of "the immemorable, ineffable Other" as a correction to the idolatry of the modern Ego (229).

This idolatry, says Wall, “consists in taking otherness as the whole and end of the moral story” (132). It is important to move beyond passive acceptance to “practical judgement”, differentiating between “benign and malign strangers”, says Kearney (thus drawing on our knowledge of good and evil). The djinn who possess magicians in *Bartimaeus* are malign, made so by their enslavement to the magicians, but malign nonetheless, and identifying them as such and refusing them hospitality is an ethical judgement. Accepting moral responsibility necessitates making judgements, judgements that will always, inevitably, be imperfect because, as Derrida rightly reminds us, another is always ultimately unknown. By acknowledging our own susceptibility to error and refusing to rush to judgement, instead patiently attending to the voices of alienated others, we can endeavour to transcend our limitations and our conflicts of interest and respond ethically. Judging good from evil aliens, I believe, does not necessarily return us to monsters left outside in the cold.

### ***Oneself as Alien Other***

The mirror has become, among other things, a symbol of the double or shadow self. Dr Jekyll identifies “that ugly idol in the glass” as his own self and gleefully and narcissistically embraces the defaced reflection. The reverse, a stranger in our own reflection staring back, possessing us, alienates us. Fantasy explores this uncanny, disquieting idea, using metaphor to push against the boundaries between insiders and outsiders, ourselves and others.

In the Judaic creation story, after the Fall God is alienated from his own image (Adam and Eve). When Frankenstein first sees his creation he describes him as a “wretch — the miserable monster whom I had created”. Frankenstein flees from this “daemoniacal corpse”, rejecting the creation he had intended to be a magnificent reflection, made in his own human image (56).

Unlike Mr Hyde, the created monster is not a double but a morally autonomous offspring. Unlike the doppelganger, a stranger who is really oneself, the monster is conceived within the imagination but, once formed, is separate and alien. It is this separation that differentiates him from the shadow; although he originates in the unconscious, he gains a conscious life of his own. Like a child, he is formed by his parents, but once living he is distinct (although dependent). And also like a child, he struggles to gain both independence (moral agency) and interdependence, social acceptance. Violent separation from his creator alienates (makes an alien of) him. It is Frankenstein’s rejection of his monster, and his monster’s alienation from other people, despite his longing for belonging and love, that creates the tragedy of Shelley’s novel. The monster is destroyed still searching for social acceptance. Although he predates the

atrocities of the twentieth century and the extremities of alienation of recent history, Shelley's tragic end anticipates the failure of rational autonomy as a moral philosophy.

Creating a monster, like creating a work of art or even creating a child, may be a work of vanity but it also dislocates the self, making it alien, trapped in the paradox of being a part of oneself and being profoundly Other. Colfer plays with the concept of the self as alien to itself, reversing the Jekyll/Hyde split in *The Time Paradox*. The older Artemis must travel back in time to confront his younger self to save an endangered species and his mother's life. Told from the perspective of the elder Artemis, young Artemis is described as having an "almost cruel" expression, "smug as well as obnoxious and patronising" (151). The Artemises lock eyes for "a long tense moment" and the elder, "shocked by the cruel determination in his own blue eyes", describes himself as not "very nice" (154). The young Artemis, gloating in his victory over his elder self says,

'Remember the pain that you are feeling now. The ache of utter defeat and hopelessness. And, if you ever consider crossing swords with me again, review your memory of this pain...'

...Remember the pain? thought Artemis [the elder]. *I hate myself. I really do.* (155)

Recognising himself in the ruthless victor, Artemis feels shame. The moral person he has become, capable of shame, cannot persuade this other, monstrous, shameless self to act ethically; he is Other to himself. Eagleton suggests that confronting one's self as a stranger is "recognising at the core of one's being an implacable demand which is ultimately inscrutable, and which is the true ground, beyond the mirror, on which human subjects can affect an encounter" (60). This is the "Real", suggests Eagleton, of Lacanian theory.

## **Crossing the Margin to the Other's Side**

Understanding that she wants not a servant-mirror but a free companion who can counter her wishes, Laura erases the first N of Nown's name, making him his "Own": "[S]he had just set her servant free" (434). Freeing Nown is the first autonomous action Laura has taken in the novel. Up to this point she has acted according to others' expectations. Her deranged father, as he contemplates suicide, tells the golem he has just made (the first Nown) that "Laura isn't very good at thinking for herself" (397) and entrusts a letter to Nown that places on Laura a morally dubious task. Giving Nown moral agency becomes a reciprocal act because, in doing so, Laura takes up her own moral agency.

Breaking the mimetic interplay of mirrors where same reflects same, Laura creates a free "monster", an autonomous stranger, and makes a stranger of herself. She has no assurance that Nown will see her as she would like to see herself or continue to

cradle her in his arms, nor that he will not turn into an evil monstrosity. All she has is trust.

Nown hesitated; he broke stride. He faltered but he didn't stop walking. Laura sank back into the cradle of his arms, and he once again picked up his pace... (434)

The outsider is always an outsider for Levinas, always different and always “other”, never to be domesticated, controlled or forced into an interior mimicry of the “same”. Contemporary children’s fantasy acknowledges the need to liberate others by embracing their moral agency rather than keeping them captive to our own needs, interests and perceptions. If we create others in our own image they will become gods or monsters to us, but when we break the mimicry of the same and cross the margins to the other side we have the basis for friendship.

Although, as quoted above, Kitty says “*No one’s* friendly with a demon!” she later seeks friendship with Bartimaeus. In the first book Kitty is introduced as an unnamed “commoner”, but by the second book chapters are devoted to her story. In this world magicians hold political and social power; “commoners” are outsiders, an underclass. As an outsider, Kitty can question the magicians’ assumptions and realises that djinn are not evil, nor even amoral; they belong to a very different, unimaginably alien, world. “Other” is not synonymous with evil. Concerned by the magicians’ escalating political corruption, Kitty learns to summon Bartimaeus, not to subjugate him but to ask for his allegiance. Bartimaeus argues that the enmity between djinn and humans is too deeply established for a relationship of equality to exist between them (*Ptolemy* 206). Kitty argues back that Bartimaeus usually takes the form of an Egyptian boy, and his devotion to detail “could only come with genuine affection, or perhaps even with love” (214). Bartimaeus challenges her to prove she trusts him by relinquishing her power, making herself vulnerable by stepping outside her pentacle, but Kitty finds she cannot trust him and releases the djinni back to his own world (220).

As events become critical, Kitty decides to take an even greater risk — entering the Other Place to find Bartimaeus and ask for his help. “The Other Place is alien and terrible,” protests Nathaniel. “It would harm you, maybe kill you” (370). Past authorities describe it as “a region of chaos, whirl of abominations, a sump of madness” (384). But Kitty persists. It is:

a ceaseless swirl of movement, neither ending nor beginning, in which nothing was fixed or static... when [Kitty] attempted to locate herself... she grew a little disconcerted. She had no fixed point, no singularity to call her own; indeed, she seemed often to be in several places at once... The effect was most disorientating. (388)

Kitty cannot separate herself: “she *was* nothing: a being without substance, without anchorage... Her will faded... She began to drift...” (395). Surrendered to the utterly

alien, Kitty's identity has no co-ordinates to anchor her. But before she is obliterated she is welcomed by Bartimaeus.

Bartimaeus explains that to enter this alien Other Place, Kitty has had to separate from herself because here there are no divisions or limitations; "nothing definite, nothing defined" (408, 411). Whereas being named gives Nown life and speech, for djinn names are "a sentence of slavery" because names make distinctions, separating them and calling them away from the unity of their world (411). He refers to Kitty's attempt to assume a form as a "monstrosity" against the beauty of being One (412). Reluctantly Bartimaeus agrees to help Kitty who appeals to his love for Ptolemy and Ptolemy's dream to end hostility between djinn and humans. Bartimaeus dismisses Kitty. "She drifted, drifted. All around her was the weightlessness of death" (421).

Levinas suggests that Plato's "the One" is "the Unrevealed" not because of our limitations, but "because making oneself known implies a duality which already clashes with the unity of the One... it is beyond being, wholly other than being".

Does there exist a signifyingness of signification which would not be equivalent to the transmutation of the other into the same? Can there be something as strange as an experience of the absolutely exterior, as contradictory in its terms as a heteronomous experience?

"The heteronomous experience" is a "movement unto the other [that] is not recuperated in identification"; "a movement of the same unto the other which never returns the same" (347, 348). This movement is what Kitty submits to, finding there is no return to the same, no reciprocity. Kitty's experience of the "absolutely exterior" Other Place transforms her; when she returns to her body, abandoned to death in a room in London, it is aged and feeble.

Kitty's immersion into the Other Place is both descent into hell and resurrection. She is physically marked (aged) and defaced; a disfigured symbol who, in order to redeem her society, becomes a "living incarnation of what is most authentically human, an intolerable signifier of our shared mortality and fragility" (Eagleton, *Strangers* 271).

The outsider is always an outsider for Levinas, never to be forced into an interior mimicry of the "same", always transcending the symbolic representations of it in language. "[The] face of the other is not its physical appearance but, properly understood, 'the glory of the infinite' which is revealed to me absolutely and unmediatedly 'without dialogue'" (Levinas qtd. in Wall 124). (This evokes the faces Bronowski confronts us with at Auschwitz.) Wall goes on to describe Levinas's ethics as the "pure passivity" of total submission to the other who is always alien. "The other should never lose its absolute strangeness, as a stranger not only to myself but also to the world, a strange wanderer through this inhospitable vale of tears" (124-126).

“Levinas’s is an ethics of breakdown and vulnerability rather than a robust achievement, and as such belongs not to the world of politics and technology but to those fellow Jews who have been done to death by such things,” says Eagleton (224). The face of the other robs us of autonomy, takes us hostage and calls us forth in our “utter nakedness to a meaning beyond being” (225). The subject is fractured into non-identity through the other’s “absolute status... the infinity of his demand” (227). The “face” is the “sheer aching vulnerability of the other, [and] comes before all moral and political discourse” in a face-to-face encounter that is experienced as an epiphany, leaving me destitute. “It is putting myself in another’s place that I come to be who I am” (232). This process is a substitution — putting myself in the place of another, placing myself in the Other’s Place, a leap into the abyss of non-being — in which we become strangers to ourselves. And so, suggests Eagleton, ethics is an end to ontology.

Fantasies flirt with this ethic, but also issue it with a warning: to break down our internal walls separating us from strangers and make ourselves vulnerable is not to abdicate moral agency. Likewise, “[in] the face of the other, the self can still make its own self-transcending response”, says Wall (120). Ethical agency demands that we attend to the narratives of those to whom violence is done as “a deliberate and patient practice of self-discipline, however endless and humbling. It is a moral task that *belongs to me*” (116). The task will undoubtedly change us as it changes Kitty when, entering the Other Place, she listens to Bartimaeus’s narrative, and it calls us to respond.

A “self-transcending response” to the Other is a moral task, such as when Kitty enters the Other Place, and when Bartimaeus chooses to re-enter Kitty’s world to fight a battle that is not his, and Nathaniel, on the threshold of death, saving Bartimaeus. It is a response of compassion or love; a “poetic response... to stretch oneself apart, to exceed oneself by creating one’s actual world to be different” (135).

No longer trapped within its own conditions of sameness, but neither held hostage to otherness as such, the self is freed by otherness to stretch beyond its own given being in the world into being in the world of an ever more profoundly responsible kind. (133)

The moral agent employs its freedom to submit to moral responsibility.

After Laura has freed Nown, she asks him to please tell her anything she might need to know. He replies:

‘Laura, my experience of freedom is limited. So, therefore, is my experience of making judgements. I cannot yet know what I will have to consider each time I am considering what you need to know... I have tried to imagine, without guidance from you, what you might need. I have made mistakes... We are too different, you and I. If you ask me to mind you needs, are you then giving me *your* freedom? Why would you free me only to hand over your own freedom?’ (*Dreamquake* 128-129)

Moral agency entails making judgements that depend on experience. Experience is always limited so judgements with regards to the Other will always be imperfect. Moreover, in a relationship, freedom is reciprocal. Later in the conversation, Nown says that he is still susceptible to Laura's orders. "I still want to do what you want", he says, acknowledging the generosity and excess of love (130).

'Well — stop!' Laura ordered, exasperated.

'No,' Nown said.

She started to laugh... She felt happy... Nown was a fearful responsibility... He was so contradictory — scrupulous and untamed at the same time... Nown made her feel like God on the first Sabbath — he was a great responsibility, but he was *good*... (130)

### ***Transcending the Monster in the Mirror: The Inside/ Outside Barrier Shattered***

*Frankenstein* ends with tragedy. Frankenstein and the monster seek mutual vengeance, and Frankenstein dies a broken man. The monster, despairingly crying out his accusation against Frankenstein, plans his own lonely death in the northern-most extremity of the globe. "He was soon borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance" (215). In contrast, Laura and Nown's complex relationship develops almost romantically. The incongruity of monster/ lover is made explicit when Laura offers to introduce her cousin Rose to Nown. Rose replies with "indignation, fear and fury": "People don't meet monsters. No one offers introductions to monsters" (*Dreamquake* 200). Laura draws "the monster" out of hiding. Rose backs away, but Laura stands between them, "her face glowing with love".

'This is Rose,' Laura said to her monster, who continued to look down on the top of Laura's head, then into her face as she turned back and *glowed* up at it. (200-201)

This scene reads remarkably like the introduction of a lover. Laura repeatedly tells Nown that she loves him and he comforts her. Just before she is separated from him in time, Laura reiterates, "I love you" (458). And, as the narrative closes, Laura realises that the interference with telegraph messages that has baffled the post office was the voice of Nown singing, of her, " 'She is coming my own my sweet...' Singing a song she had taught it" (478).

Nown's response to Laura is, in Wall's words, "poetic", that is, self-transcending. He doggedly perseveres in his task that causes a dreamquake and throws him into a world where he is separated from Laura, thirty years in her future. "Laura had been his compass — she was north, south, east and west to him" (500). Nown walks to So Long Spit where he has previously been with Laura. "He began his waiting" (501).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> So Long Spit not only describes the geography of the Spit, and is a play on the real Farewell Spit, but also refers to Nown's long wait.

This is poignant but it is not tragic because Nown, like Kitty, Bartimaeus and Nathaniel has chosen his sacrifice.

Before Laura farewells Nown, she camps beside a grave where she dreams of her own death. Knowing that the body in the grave must be exhumed and that she will lose Nown, she howls “like an animal”, prays to die and resists choosing between Nown and her future. But like Nown, she sacrifices their love for an appalling unknown thing, a stranger buried in a grave.

The man Nown uncovers “looked dead” and when Laura touches him it feels “like touching a fresh corpse” (453, 455), echoing Frankenstein’s corpse-like monster. As he is awakened, or raised,

He turned his head slowly to face Laura, like someone half-frozen and very depleted. He whispered, ‘Why are you just sitting there?’ Then, ‘Why aren’t you running away?’ (463)

But Laura does not run from this half-dead human monster dressed in the clothes of a convict; instead she offers him an apple. Her friendship with Nown has taught her that monsters are not to be feared but faced. Laura touches him and he flinches and she reads hatred, suspicion and hurt in his eyes. Suspiciously, the convict asks if she is chasing him, but Laura reassures him that he is a stranger, someone she feels for. Then she invites him to tell her his story. He starts: “You can see by my trousers what I am.” “No,” says Laura; she does not assume that she can know anything about him by his appearance. He talks about the injustices and suffering he has endured, as the monster talks to Frankenstein, and Laura listens. “I didn’t feel human, or entitled to fellow feeling”, he says — he felt “specially hated and feared” (473-474). In his despair, fleeing from the law, an outlaw, outcast and outsider, he created a Nown out of the wilderness landscape through which he travelled, wanting respite and wanting revenge. The Nown he created in Laura’s future remembered the love it had for Laura in her present, and the created monster of the landscape buried the human monster, taking him to its heart to save him.

The monster in Frankenstein sees his reflection in a pool, and becomes “fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am”. Likewise, this outlaw sees himself, reflected in the attitudes of others towards him, as a monster. Even his name has branded him as a “tiger”. Laura’s response to him baffles him; she has not run away but listens to him, and this contradicts his self-image, so when Laura says, “I’m glad it’s so dark. It’s easier to talk to you without seeing you”, he concurs, “I guess I am a pretty pitiful sight”. “You idiot!” shouts Laura, because she recognises this monster’s face, though it is “grey with dust over black grime”, seeing reflected in him the two people she loves most —

her lover, Sandy, and her father — and she has guessed his infamous name: Hame.<sup>24</sup> His face speaks to her of love, not fear, she allows him a voice with which to narrate his story, and she gives him her own name, recognising him not as a monster, but as the yet unborn child she bears.<sup>25</sup>

Both Shelley and Knox use the inside/ outside motif to emphasise the alienation of their monsters. As I have already mentioned, in *Frankenstein* the monster peers through an “almost imperceptible chink” in a boarded up window and spies on the cosy domestic scene within. As Lazarus (the convict) runs from the law he doesn’t trust farm families to show him pity, and he is an outsider even to other prisoners in a mining camp. Knox highlights this motif in both her Prologue and her Epilogue. In the Prologue she describes a dream from the point of view of a convalescent travelling on a train “in the safe embrace of his bed”, but juxtaposed with his interior security in a benign outdoors environment is a “distressing dark turn” of the dream to chained convicts working on the railway, an exterior full of menace (*Dreamhunter* 5-6). In the Epilogue we see Laura’s extended family, including Lazarus, gathered together four years later in a domestic “interior”, although set outdoors. There is an earthquake, and the windows of the house shatter, the separation between inside and outside destroyed. Lazarus has married Rose and the crying baby inside the house is their child. Lazarus, integrated into family life, is a reversal of the convicts but also of *Frankenstein*: the monster has a mate.

Laura finds a broken stranger in the place of her loyal and loving friend, Nown. She welcomes him and takes him to her home, offering compassion and hospitality, and discovers that the stranger is her child. Laura breaks down delineations between inside/ outside, same/ different, self/ other, human/ monster, proving herself equal to the moral task that Frankenstein so tragically fails.

Mahy, writing during the rise of postmodernism, celebrates carnival, disintegration and fluidity in *The Tricksters*. Her monstrous brothers are united and then disintegrate, returning to the sea as a dead boy’s ghost. Harry, the writer, is poised over a blank page, waiting passively for her narrative to unfold, afloat on the tides without a compass. Knox, writing thirty years later, has her monster, Nown, journey to a destination of waiting with love as his internal compass, while the outcast, Lazarus, is raised to life and led on a journey home where he is embraced.<sup>26</sup> “Even in our world of fuzzy edges”, says Kearney, “many continue to wrestle with gods until they yield their

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<sup>24</sup> Later, when he is talking with Rose, Rose says, “You really are a Hame, aren’t you?” Defensively, he replies, “Meaning?” “Quaintly religious,” responds Rose. The feared name has lost its bite somewhat.

<sup>25</sup> This relates back to the connection between creating a monster and giving birth to a child.

<sup>26</sup> The word ‘hame’ is both part of a draft horse’s harness (recalling Lazarus’s chains) and the Scottish word for ‘home’.

names, to talk to strangers and reckon with monsters. In short, to say the unsayable as if it were somehow sayable” (*Monsters* 230-231). Saying the unsayable, contemporary fantasy confronts us with monsters and invites us to enter an unknown Other Place where we will be irrevocably changed. We are called to enter, rather than transcend, the “powerful, murky, and uncharted waters” of moral finitude, suggests Wall (132).

Indelibly marked by finitude, the human self has never ceased to ponder its boundaries or to imagine what lies beyond — namely, those strangers, gods, and monsters that populate its fantasies. (Kearney 230).

Unlike *Frankenstein*, contemporary fantasy fictions are usually optimistic about the possibility of ethical relationships with others. This is not to say that the writers have chosen a “happily ever after” conclusion to make the story palatable for a young audience as they uncompromisingly depict social evil. Instead their optimism indicates not only the potential but the imperative for positive social relationships against a bleak historical background of colonialism, exploitation, genocide and violence. Where *Frankenstein* feels repugnance towards his creation and his tragedy unfolds from this, these contemporary fantasies turn the *Frankenstein* narrative around and reverse the linking of monster with malign. They move from rejection to encountering face-to-face, from flight to an embrace, from fear to self-transcending courage.

Meeting a monster, these narratives suggest, should induce neither terror nor sentiment. The encounter involves a profound responsibility to stretch the boundaries of our known world to encompass those who seem alien to us. It is personal and it expands into the political realm. As Eagleton puts it, “Ethics is not simply a reverent openness to the Other, but a question of, say, formulating policies on advertising or infanticide which will affect those whom one does not know” (324). In the following chapter the ethics of fantasy fiction becomes political and engages with even deeper uncertainties than have yet been encountered.

Monsters clearly belong to both the worlds of myth and philosophy. Philosophy calls on myth, and myth draws ethics out of its metaphorical heart.

## Chapter IV

### *Dreams of a Better World: Social Justice as an Ethical Responsibility*

In the previous chapter, offering hospitality to monsters was a personal gesture. However, opening the city gates to welcome strangers is a public action and allowing alien Others right of entry, erasing the line that demarcates insiders from outsiders, is political. In this chapter, ethics moves beyond both the self, and encountering Others, to our responsibility to the many unknown marginalised, victimised, exiled and persecuted Others in society.

Evils (injustices) in society breed the evil of misery and misery is a breeding ground for evils. In response to social evil, ethics becomes political, moving outwards, as protagonists dream (or imagine) how things could be better in the hope of creating a more just world. Ethics demands protest and political (systemic and policy) change, battering the gates of power as Eagleton suggests (*Strangers* 324). But political action can founder on personal sympathies while personal (sympathetic) responses to injustice are often ineffectual. Dilemmas multiply and moral uncertainty becomes even more uncertain when personal and political interests clash. The personal is political, and the political is personal, and this opposition can revolve in a ceaseless and vicious moral circle.

Many contemporary children's fantasy fictions enter this labyrinth of moral complexity. These fantasies require child readers to engage with serious questions arising from social injustices; fantasies as diverse as *Harry Potter* and Patrick Ness's *Chaos Walking* (published 2008 to 2010) which address denial of citizenship, and *Dreamhunter* which depicts inequalities in the social contract. Where Nesbit's children time travel into a utopian future where the twentieth century is pre-written with no wars, failed socialist states or capitalist exploitation, Ness's futuristic journey to Utopia quickly disintegrates into dystopian colonisation, genocide, gynocide and war. The uncertainties arising from an unknown personal shadow or an unknown monstrous Other, from loss of a moral compass or from contradictions of free will, pale in these novels beside the predicament of impossible choice when all paths seem to lead to damnation. Right is hard to determine within an unsolvable maze of wrongs.

Politics overlays an ethics of the self and an ethics of the Other. Similarly, in this chapter theory overlays theory. Eagleton overlays ethical philosophy with Lacan's analysis of the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real. I interpret fantasy fiction through Eagleton's interpretation: an ethical journey from the Imaginary of sympathetic

imagination, through the Symbolic of language and the law, to the Real where law comes unstuck and language cannot extend to the conundrums of social justice.

In postmodern fantasies, many monsters live in communities. Others, who are on the right side of power with faces, names and voices, sometimes become monstrous in power. Protagonists desire a more just world, but are hounded by uncertainty. Wars are waged and moral direction is lost on the battlefield. Dreams of Utopia turn into nightmares of Dystopia as the abyss swallows known pathways to a good and happy end. But, postmodern fantasies declare, even here in the chaos we are not absolved from the search for moral truth, and even here there is hope.

## **“Evil Begets Evil”: A Personal Response to Injustice**

### *“Am I a Monster, or a Victim Myself?”*

Goodness begets goodness  
Evil begets evil  
Nothing is without its consequences  
If the time has not come  
Then the time will certainly come  
For consequences. (Chinese rhyme qtd. in Wong 213)

I have argued that monsters are denied basic human rights and social justice because they are not perceived to be human. Either they are born on the wrong side of society (they belong to the wrong species or race or gender) or they lose their humanity and its associated rights by stepping over the line of social belonging (for example, criminal behaviour). Raimond Gaita argues that unless people are seen (visible) as uniquely “precious” with inner lives and the capacity for deep feeling (including suffering) neither personal nor political responses to them will be just. “Treat me as a human being, fully as your equal, without condescension — that demand (or plea)... is a demand or plea for justice” (*Humanity* xx). Justice goes far deeper than equal access to goods and opportunities; it is “equality of respect. Only when one’s humanity is fully visible will one be treated as someone who can intelligibly press claims to equal access” (xxi). Gaita uses examples of gross historical injustices towards Australian Aborigines to show how “invisibility” resulted in land theft and injurious policies to separate parents and children. Because they were not “seen” to be fully human, the evil of their deep suffering was invisible.

Social invisibility is a recurrent theme in contemporary children’s fantasy fiction. From Ness’s “aliens” to Rowling’s house elves; from Stroud’s “demon” djinn to Colfer’s demons; from Le Guin’s powerless and abused women to Pullman’s witches and Ness’s segregated, branded and annihilated women; from Knox’s golem to her convicts; themes of enslavement, servitude, abuse, scapegoating, hostility and misery,

hatred and fear, are repeated over and over. The urgency of this theme suggests that post-Holocaust generations view human rights and social justice as probably the most important ethical challenge facing today's world; discrimination, alienation, persecution, vilification, victimisation and even genocide have continued unabated since the Nazis' atrocities were publicised. These fantasies unflinchingly make visible evils that fester from the misery of suffering.

Plato asks whether it can be proved that justice is, in fact, desirable by looking at its effects on individuals.

Prove to us therefore, not only that justice is superior to injustice, but that, irrespective of whether gods or men know it or not, one is good and the other evil because of its inherent effects on its possessor. (*Republic* 114)

In answer to Plato, this chapter argues that the evils of deprivation and injustice beget evil, both in the perpetrators and in the victims. Svidrigailov poses the question "am I a monster, or a victim myself?" to Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoevsky 281). Raskolnikov, who is himself described as "a monster and a scoundrel" (443) by his friend, is, like Svidrigailov, a deeply morally ambiguous character, at times generous and open-hearted, and at others callous, despicable and cruel. In a speech to Sonja, on the brink of his confession to her, he says:

'Haven't you seen children here on street corners, sent out by their mothers to beg? ... Children cannot remain children there. There a seven-year-old is depraved and a thief. But children are the image of Christ... they are the future mankind...' (329)

"There", in the midst of squalor, poverty and injustice, he suggests, we can see even in children goodness corrupted. When Sonja asks what can be done, Raskolnikov replies, "Smash what needs to be smashed, once and for all... Freedom and power, but above all, power!" (329). When he visits Sonja the next day, digging down through the layers of motivation for his crime, he mentions his poverty, the difficulty of rising above it and the spite it engendered: "low ceilings and cramped rooms cramp the soul and mind! Oh, how I hated that kennel!" (417). The theme of misery as a breeding ground for evil is a well-worn one in literature, traced through Shylock and Caliban and Frankenstein's monster to nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century children's fantasy fiction (as well as much adult literary fiction). Acting unjustly perpetrates evil; violently smashing oppressive structures to gain freedom and power is a political response to miserable social conditions.

The rise of humanism brought concern for universal human rights and social reform. Political reform was central to the agenda of eighteenth century radicals. The premise of Godwin's "Political Justice" (1793, 1798) is "that true justice is impossible as long as social inequalities exist within societies" (Chevalier 403). This view places the

responsibility for morality in the lap of social structures; evil begets miseries resulting from injustice in social systems and institutions. Reason will guide moral behaviour. Mary Shelley, disillusioned with the ideals of her father (William Godwin) illustrates in *Frankenstein* that reason and justice do not necessarily go hand in hand whereas injustice, misery and vice do. The monster repeatedly asserts that his misery would be alleviated by just treatment, and Frankenstein's failure in this regard unleashes murder, the connection between injustice and vice made clear (409). "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall be virtuous", says the monster (qtd. 410). Chevalier suggests that Shelley, writing her novel twenty-five years after Godwin's radical work, questions Godwin's "naively optimistic view that truth and knowledge, being self-evident virtues, will eventually be adopted by humanity as the only rational choice". He continues, "[u]ltimately, *Frankenstein* is a novel about the disappointment of the promise of revolutionary principles to remake the world" (411). "Remaking the world" is a theme I take up in the next section.

Although both Edith Nesbit and George MacDonald acknowledge the misery of the working classes in their pre-Welfare State and pre-World War children's fantasies, and Nesbit explicitly associates misery and poverty with wickedness, their child protagonists lack the agency to effect social change. MacDonald (who was contemporary with Dostoevsky) sketches the miserable poverty of his working class characters in *At the Back of the North Wind* (first published in 1870), but he paints morality in subdued colours, advocating benevolence rather than social action. Likewise Nesbit introduces us to a young orphaned girl who is destined for the workhouse, but she gives her a surrogate mother and a happy ending. Again, the response is personal rather than political (*Amulet* 182-189). These fictional characters live in a real London, contemporary with their creators, and child readers are shown how to respond sympathetically and charitably. The child victims of poverty meet benevolence with gratitude; their misery has not corrupted them as they respond to their fate like good Christian Stoics, retaining innocence.

MacDonald's two *Curdie* books, set in a fairytale world, are different. In the first, Curdie is twelve years old, a cheerful, hard-working miner, and a dutiful son, worthy to befriend a princess. In the second, he is fourteen and, no longer innocent, "becoming more and more a miner, and less and less a man of the upper world where the wind blew... He was changing into a commonplace man" (*Princess* 473, 474). He is not miserable, but calloused by labour.

There is this difference between the growth of some human beings and that of others: in one case it is a continuous dying, in the other a continuous resurrection. One of the latter sort comes at length to know at once whether a thing is true the moment it comes before him; one of the former class grows more and more afraid of being taken in, so afraid

of it that he takes himself in altogether, and comes at length to believe in nothing but his dinner: to be sure of a thing with him is to have it between his teeth. (474)

The maturing Curdie has grown sceptical, influenced by his underground labour and fellow miners, turning away from nature, beauty and the unseen world of imagination. This insensitivity leads him to shoot a “snow-white pigeon”, symbolising his heart. Curdie is at first proud of his skill, but as the wounded bird looks at him he feels sympathy and moral conscience: “He had done the thing that was contrary to gladness; he was a destroyer! He was not the Curdie he had meant to be!” (476). Curdie identifies himself as a monster rather than a victim, learning that “whoever does not mean good is always in danger of harm” (482). He “spins” a moral narrative of his wrongdoing, of “never wanting or trying to be better” (483). The bird is resurrected when Curdie recovers his moral direction, as befits the hero who will marry the princess. MacDonald acknowledges labouring in a mine for low wages from a young age is a breeding ground for discontent and scepticism, but nevertheless makes Curdie responsible for who he has become. His redemption from moral blindness is personal, enabling him to transcend his environment. Curdie is no victim but, as a moral agent (he has come of age), he overcomes corruption in the kingdom and finds his place in the world, ultimately as king. MacDonald stitches together fairytale, humanist, Protestant, radical and conservative elements in his tale.<sup>27</sup>

Recent fantasies seem less interested in their children’s fantasy forebears with their philosophy of sentiment than they are in the tragedy of *Frankenstein* where misery is not patiently endured but enflames bitterness. Influenced by the social sciences, these fantasy writers agree that social injustice breeds misery and misery breeds vice. With the burden of responsibility now shifted further from individuals and towards society, fictional characters, made in the image of their societies, give urgency to the cry for justice.<sup>28</sup> Chevalier argues that Rowling’s main concerns in *Harry Potter* can be traced back to Enlightenment ideals, comparing Kreacher, the downtrodden house elf, with Frankenstein’s monster (or creature).

While monsters have bred and multiplied since Frankenstein created his until fantasy literature is densely populated with them, and the world is not remade in the

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<sup>27</sup> MacDonald’s story is set in a feudal society. His monstrous Others are goblins in his first book, driven underground and harbouring resentment towards the king. In the second book they are humans who have been transformed into hideous creatures by their moral failings and who work out their redemption in this form. I have found it hard to locate themes of social justice as MacDonald is clearly operating within a feudal fairytale world, which undercuts his more egalitarian inclinations.

<sup>28</sup> It is important to note that this plea for justice is in perpetual conflict with belief in personal responsibility and autonomy. Remember *Noah’s Compass* and the mother’s plea for her son conflicting with Liam’s insistence on responsibility. Ideologies of personal versus social responsibility are frequently in hot dispute in society today.

glowing colours of Eden, fantasy writers, acknowledging miseries, cruelties and brutalities, work towards a just end for their monsters. Rowling's house elves take up their agency and fight as free beings, Stroud's djinn are freed from their slavery, Colfer's demon takes up an honoured role, Le Guin's heroine, who has passed through the fires of abuse, is transfigured into a dragon and saves the world, Knox's golem and her convict find a home and Pullman's witches and Ness's women fight back. However, in these fantasies establishing justice is far from simple in the crossfire of personal and political.

Social action creates a subplot in *Harry Potter*. Hermione, distressed by the oppression of the house elves, who are no more than slaves, instigates the Society for the Promotion of Elvish Welfare (S.P.E.W.). There is considerable satire in this subplot — fun is poked at acronyms and marketing of social action groups — and ultimately Hermione's campaign is unsuccessful. Ron, thoroughly enculturated into believing that elvish enslavement is natural, says to Hermione, "They. Like. It. They like being enslaved!" (*Goblet* 198). Hagrid agrees with Ron.

'It's in their natures ter look after humans, that's what they like, see? Ye'd be makin' 'em unhappy ter take away their work, an' insulting 'em if yeh tried ter pay 'em.' (233)

There is truth in what Ron and Hagrid say. Dissatisfied with her lack of success, Hermione, despite derision from her friends, tries more direct action and confronts the elves herself. Entering the kitchens, she finds them servile, eager to please the humans. But more significantly, she discovers Winky, an elf recently liberated from her slavery, pathetic and unkempt. When her freedom is referred to, she throws herself on the ground "screaming with misery" and when Hermione asks Winky about her wages, Winky indignantly replies: "Winky is a disgraced elf, but Winky is not yet getting paid!... Winky is not sunk so low as that! Winky is properly ashamed of being freed!" (331). The elves therefore participate in their own oppression, resisting Hermione's well-intended intervention. Much later in the story, when Winky is next seen, she has deteriorated into a state of filth and drunkenness. By the end of *The Goblet of Fire* Hermione's attempt at social reform has failed dismally. It is never re-ignited.

However, Rowling has not finished with the house elves. The satirical view of social action campaigns transforms into something much more serious in *The Order of the Phoenix*. Defeated in public reform, Hermione still advocates for house elves on a personal level. And on a personal level their treatment finds its way into the central plot — Sirius's contempt for, and neglect of, the elf Kreacher indirectly causes his death. Dumbledore explains to Harry how Kreacher betrayed Sirius:

'I warned Sirius... that Kreacher must be treated with kindness and respect... I do not think that Sirius took me very seriously, or that he ever saw Kreacher as a being with feelings as acute as a human's... He regarded him as a servant unworthy of much interest or notice.'

Indifference and neglect often do more damage than outright dislike...  
We wizards have mistreated and abused our fellows for too long, and we  
are now reaping our reward.' (733, 735)

Kreacher, with his twisted hatred, is a creature (creation) of his oppressors. Dumbledore's analysis of him equates to Gaita's plea for justice. In contrast, Harry, who, in the second book, befriends and frees the house elf Dobby, is saved by Dobby in the final book.

The three elf characters respond very differently to their oppression. Dobby resists his, acting as a moral agent despite his enslavement. Once liberated, he enjoys his freedom and uses it for good. Winky is fully victimised, having bought into her enslavement and lost her independent will, accepting the wizards' mastery as right. Kreacher, who is of most interest here, is positioned between Dobby and Winky. He is devoted to the Black family, especially Regulus, but despises other wizards, even Sirius (a "traitor" to the Blacks). The evils of contempt and neglect foster Kreacher's hostility culminating in murderous betrayal. Rowling proposes that regardless of political reform, we will reap what we sow on a personal level. Like MacDonald and Nesbit, she believes in kindness and respect and the power of the personal.

Simone Weil is quoted in Gaita: "if we see another person as a perspective on the world... then we could not treat them unjustly" (xxxiv). This theme is developed, although not necessarily endorsed, in Patrick Ness's *Chaos Walking*. There are three books in the series and, like the *Bartimaeus* trilogy, narrative perspectives are added as the story unfolds until the final book shifts viewpoint, with deliberate discontinuity, between three protagonists. Ness breaks down the division between victims and monsters, and as our sympathies swing between characters, and between the personal and the political, our moral judgements become increasingly unsettled.

The first book, *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, is told in the first person, present tense voice of Todd, a fourteen year old orphan. Within the first pages we learn about his very foreign world. All thoughts are audible as "Noise"; the indigenous Spackle are regarded as "aliens" and there are no women in Todd's town. "I was born into all that... mess," says Todd (9). This is an identifiably postmodern world. Alternative narratives constantly challenge Todd's assumptions, his "truths". He flees to avoid his coming of age ritual, although he is not sure what it is, why he needs to flee or where he is going, and is joined by a recently orphaned girl, Viola. Her lack of Noise unnerves Todd; he cannot "read" her perspective in her thoughts in the same way that the truth of his past is hidden in his mother's journal because he cannot read. Together they run to the city Haven for refuge, pursued by an army from Todd's town. Along the way Todd learns that many "facts" about his world are lies, although it is never clear what the truth is. In exasperated uncertainty, he exclaims, "I know what I know... even tho that's been half

the trouble, ain't it? How can this be true? How can this be true?" (155). Just as truth is "read" in another person (158), Todd must learn to "read" truth amidst lies to become morally literate.

Todd has been brought up to fear and loathe the indigenous Spackle who, he believes, are extinct. When he encounters one his truth is shattered again: "The world stops spinning... There ain't no more Spackle" (271). He describes the Spackle as:

Alien. As alien as you can be.

Holy crap.

You might as well just crumple up the whole world I know and throw it away. (271)

Moreover, on reaching Haven (which has been occupied) Todd learns that the city uses Spackle slave labour. Spackle lack identifiable faces, have no names and no voices; they are Other, alien and stripped of agency. When the slaves are put into a prison compound, Todd, now a prisoner himself, oversees the prisoners' labour. As he faces them for the first time he describes them as "looking nothing like a [man]. But you can see a man's face in there, can't you? Still see a face that feels and fears — And suffers" (*Ask* 59). Like Artemis, he identifies the "human" in the alien, but unlike Artemis, feels sympathy, "seeing" their perspective and suffering. Nevertheless, he unwillingly perpetrates injustice, branding the Spackle with numbered armbands, complicit in their "dehumanisation". Todd forms an affinity with one prisoner, 1017, who, when the Spackle prisoners are massacred, alone survives.

In the second book, *The Ask and the Answer*, Todd and Viola alternate the narration and in the third book, *Monsters of Men*, Todd, Viola and 1017 share the narration — one voice from each opposing army. Ness's shifting perspective reveals the confusion of competing demands for justice and the complexity of human responses to injustice. "Chaos" is an apt title for the series.

Before he flees the compound after the massacre, 1017 comes face-to-face with Todd. In Todd's "Noise" 1017 hears pain and horror at what has happened. Todd is:

so relieved, so happy, to see me in the middle of all that death where I am alone and alone and alone for ever... that I vow to kill him. (*Monsters* 117)

Sympathy is not received with humble gratitude (as it is in Nesbit's and MacDonald's fantasies), but with resentment and this adds considerable moral complexity to the story. Just as "seeing" another's perspective does not necessarily generate empathy, being seen with empathy does not necessarily generate reciprocal empathy. 1017 returns to his own people but, marked by difference and suffering, evokes shock and their shame (197); the slaves are referred to as "The Burden" by the free Spackle. "The Burden will be revenged," declares 1017 bitterly. "I will be revenged. And there will be no peace" (311). Ness refuses simple outcomes: Todd faces the consequences of his involuntary

complicity and the free Spackle are guilty of abandoning those who were enslaved, for the greater good. Revenge becomes a central theme.

Personal and political tensions mount when the humans send an envoy after a battle between humans and Spackle. While the leader of the Spackle accepts the offer of peace as politically expedient, 1017 hungers for personal revenge. Recognising Viola, Todd's "particular one", in the envoy he runs at her with a knife. She raises her arm in self-protection revealing her "red, infected, sick-looking band with the number 1391 etched onto it". "The blade doesn't fall," says Viola, "The Spackle is staring at my arm" (*Monsters*, 350). 1017 "sees" Viola as a fellow victim and cannot kill her. Todd then narrates, "1017 driven crazy. Course he would be. Who wouldn't be after what happened to him?" (352). Todd extends his perspective to include 1017's misery that festers like the infected armbands.

Ness does not necessarily agree with Weil. His shifting narrative perspectives reveal diversity, but the effect is like moral motion sickness. Multiple voices lead to "Noise", confusion, even chaos. And although the Spackle harmonise their voices, creating unity, they lose their unique perspectives. It is tempting to read *Chaos Walking* as advocating pluralistic relativism, the impossibility of fixed ethics in a fluid world of changing viewpoints. But whereas Mahy's *The Tricksters* celebrates drifting, fluid pluralism, Ness gives us ethical seasickness, storms and shipwrecks: his moral dilemmas seem unanswerable while the ethical stakes are raised considerably. Ness's characters face absolute life and death decisions.

In the prologue of *Dreamhunter*, Knox introduces the theme of social reform. Like Ness she develops the perspective of the oppressed in narrative fragments. Tziga Hame wakes himself from a dream he is performing at the Rainbow Opera before it takes a dark turn. The dream's first person viewpoint sees workmen on the railway line and feels frightened by them and unhappy for them but doesn't know why. Tziga, however, understands that the workmen's eyes "were full of menace and a kind of hungry expectation. And that... their legs were in chains".

Hame had begun to suspect who these men might be, and that their presence in an otherwise beneficial dream was not a mistake, but a message...

He lay under silence... and thought: "What do they want me to do? Tell their story? Or break their chains?" (*Dreamhunter* 6)

Laura is drawn into her father's world and Tziga asks her to complete the work of social reform he has failed to do. She faces a task she only partially understands and follows his vague and incomplete clues. While many dreams are benign, entertaining and even beneficial (thus the industry grown up around harvesting dreams), and most dreamhunters are able to edit out the more disturbing aspects of some of the dreams, The

Place also yields nightmares, and Laura, like her father, is particularly susceptible to these. “Who is using dreams to tell stories?” wonders Rose to Laura as they try to piece the puzzle together (186). Laura becomes convinced that The Place is trying to tell her something and, as many nightmares contain the plight of prisoners, Laura decides that it is drawing her attention to their suffering: “They are waiting to be seen. They’re waiting to be heard,” she says of them (344). But, like her father, Laura is uncertain what to do: should she publicly expose the convicts’ suffering? How can she break their chains?

The reader “hears” convict voices in fragmented dream narratives. We enter the consciousness of a convict about to be killed and hear him thinking, “This isn’t me... This isn’t what I’ve come to” (172). We feel the suffocating despair of a convict: “It was dark. He was shut in, shut in, scuffling on in the stifling dark... He hadn’t any hope. He was a penned thing” (390). And we see the casual brutality of the guards resulting in a convict’s death. The prisoner who dies as a result of the guards’ malicious sport sees in their faces:

what he already knew about the world — that it didn’t make any difference if you kept your temper or stuck to your good resolve, for there was malice always close, and always ready to lend its icy hand.  
(*Dreamquake* 105)

“Justice is absolute,” says Eagleton “and its denial drives men and women to a well-nigh ungovernable rage” (*Strangers* 190). A young violin thief, who is near the end of his sentence and hopeful for his future, witnesses the cruelty and thinks, “I’m not helpless”.

And then, in the dream, the young man surged up, took hold of a rifle from the hands of the nearest guard, the one standing slack-jawed and sated with cruelty. He... swung it, clubbing and clubbing, till the other guards hauled him off. The guard had a broken skull... and the young thief... a second sentence. (105)

This violent response to a brutality that denies what Gaita calls the “infinite preciousness” of the Other, is evil bred of evil. Maze Plaser, a dreamhunter under contract by the Corrections Department, mulls over the violin thief dream and recalls the terror, despair, rage and crushed hope of the prisoners. Unlike most dreams that are separated from the main narrative by italics, this dream is narrated in the emotionally distant voice from the unsympathetic perspective of Maze Plaser. He describes the dream as having a “nasty, sobering turn at its end”; but I am not sure that the reader shares that opinion. It is sad — the young violin thief now faces years of hard labour instead of freedom — but reaching out beyond despair to say, “I am not helpless” is a triumphantly defiant assertion of agency. It is akin to Raskolnikov’s declaration, “Smash what needs to be smashed [even if it is a skull?]. Freedom... but above all power!” Plaser recognises in the young thief’s face: “Eyes full of sadness and shame and resignation and, behind that, power: pitiless, cold power” (107). Like Raskolnikov, the thief/victim seizes power (of action) and, monstrously, breaks a skull. He and 1017 are a long way

from MacDonald's and Nesbit's patient sufferers, they refuse their disempowerment in the face of oppression, responding to evil with evil.

Laura, having discovered that torturous nightmares are used to discipline and "correct" deviant behaviour of real convicts, confronts Maze Plaser. Complacently he replies that the public:

knows what goes on. They may not want to be bothered with the details, but they know. The general public isn't fond of details. They know that this is a civilised nation, where no one is tortured, or lives in squalor. That's all they want to know. There's no scandal here... (*Dreamhunter* 343, 344)

This brutal treatment of the prisoners mirrors the brutality in the dreams. Laura optimistically believes that he is wrong — the general public "will behave kindly". She forms a resolution to follow her father's suggestion: to catch the Buried Alive dream and take it to the public:

so they'll know how bad it's been for the prisoners. It's like the little children working in mines and factories a hundred years ago — everyone knew about that, but they didn't feel how heartless it was till people wrote describing the conditions. The public opinion changed the law. If people experience what the prisoners are forced to, then they'll be shocked, indignant, and — I hope — compassionate. (387)

Laura believes in the power of story to evoke sympathy and instigate change, but she is wrong: the public cannot see past the nightmare's terror to either the personal suffering behind it or the political significance of it. Both Hermione and Laura seek to change social attitudes. Hermione's single-handed attempt ends in failure; Laura's ends in disaster.

### ***The Social Outcast and his Pound of Flesh***

Raskolnikov, Frankenstein's monster, Kreacher, 1017 and Lazarus are all victims of misery imposed by injustice and each harbours, and enacts, the desire for revenge. Revenge, I believe, is a response beyond retribution (the law of equivalency: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth); it is a deeply personal response of desire and excess. These victims demand more than correction of wrongs; they demand the assuaging of their personal suffering through personal revenge. Terror, despair, rage, crushed hope and especially shame cannot find their equivalency in a courtroom but in a punitive spectacle of suffering and humiliation. They desire to see their oppressors suffer as deeply as they have done.

Forgiveness is an alternative response to suffering. However, forgiveness can never be extracted by compulsion, as Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* clearly demonstrates. The courtroom drama that opposes justice and mercy provides important insights on the theme of revenge that also concerns Ness and Knox. Years of injustice,

discrimination and social ostracism have hardened Shylock to Portia's plea for mercy; the consequence of injustice is evil, a pound of Antonio's flesh, closest to his heart. That Antonio's life is spared by a discriminatory law compounds the tragedy. The pound of flesh, Shylock's entitlement and his over-reaching demand for revenge, confounds both mercy and justice.

Mercy and justice are two distinct strands of ethical thought that emerged from the eighteenth century, sharply contrasted in the writings of Hume and Kant. Hume argued for a morality based on human feeling or sentiment, specific to, and responsive to, the individual case (the personal). Kant argued for the "Categorical Imperative"; morality based in universal principles that are absolute and unswerving — a law of justice (the political). The arguments for and against these two ethical approaches are dramatically put on trial in *The Merchant of Venice* yet remain, perhaps deliberately, unresolved.

Hume's philosophy of subjectivism makes morality a matter of sentiment rather than fact. "A key concept for Hume is that of 'sympathy', which he also calls 'humanity' and 'fellow-feeling'. By this he means our capacity to share others' feelings of happiness or misery" (Honderich, 589). "Affection of humanity... being common to all men, ... can alone be the foundation of morals... the humanity of one man is the humanity of everyone, and the same object touches this passion in all human creatures," says Hume (37). Human affection is not confined to our neighbours: "No character can be so remote as to be... wholly indifferent to me" (37). Universal moral principles are forged in social conscience by way of "universal sentiments of censure or approbation... Virtue and vice then become known; morals are recognised" (38). Moral judgements spring from sentiment rather than from reason and are neither inherently true nor false. Although reason instructs us as to consequences of our actions, for Hume sentiment leads us to judgement. Morality is therefore arbitrary; principles based on socially agreed sentiments. Utilitarianism, building on Hume's ideas, and developed by Bentham and John Stuart Mill, suggests that morality is that which brings the greatest happiness to the most people. The principle of utility is that "all people are as happy as they can be" (Mill qtd. in Rachels 80). Right actions are those that bring the best consequences, that is, happiness. Happiness is therefore the one ultimate good.

Shylock aspires to be embraced in the bond of this common affection of humanity.

For the Hebrew scriptures in which Shylock trusts, the human body is not in the first place a material object but a principle of unity with others. It is genuine communication with Antonio and his ilk that he is after, as opposed to pragmatic deals, racist insults, specious persuasion and vapid signifiers. (Eagleton, *Strangers* 195)

Shylock, like the monsters in my previous chapter, desires the “common humanity” of Gaita’s philosophy. Shylock has appealed to his common humanity based in the body in his famous speech, “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?... If you prick us do we not bleed?” (III.1). Deprived of his humanity, he is a vulnerable victim, a position he resents. Hume’s philosophy would have Antonio respond with sympathy to Shylock, and Shylock to Antonio, but Shakespeare shows us that this is naïve. Hume’s benevolence tolerates ambiguities, extenuating circumstances and inconsistencies because it is fluid and moves with the flow of human sympathy, but does nothing to protect individual human rights, as Shylock understands so clearly. Krook critiques Hume’s aestheticism as “profound irresponsibility” as it does not provide for “the poor, the wretched, the deprived, and dispossessed” (qtd. in Diamond 260-261). Human sympathy can be fickle and being moved by sentiment can lead people to actions that are detrimental to the rights of others.

Shylock thinks he wants justice, objective moral judgement based on equality. Speaking to Antonio, he says, “Thou call’dst me dog before thou hadst a cause;/ But, since I am a dog, beware my fangs:/ The duke shall grant me justice” (III.3.10). Acknowledging solidarity with all those social outcasts whose alienation has made monsters (or sub-human dogs) of them, Shylock points to the importance of justice and law as an absolute standard and as a protection contrasted with the inadequacies of Hume’s personal ethics based on benevolent feeling. “The victimised need an unambiguous contract... since they can never know when their masters are likely to be seized by a spontaneous bout of joviality or mean-spiritedness,” says Eagleton (200). Shylock understands that the oppressed require the protection of print; the “punctiliousness of justice” compared with the “lavishness of mercy” (200), a Kantian political ethics of absolutes.

Diamond refers to Kant’s ethics as “moralism”, a moral framework that is absolute and incontestable by which human actions can and should be judged, with conscience as “the internal moral courtroom” (257). “Moralism” implies an unrelenting moral code, but Kant’s Categorical Imperative is scarcely onerous: acting consistently with what we would aspire to be universal values and never treating others as a means to an end. The injunction against lying is an example of a universal value. “We could not will that it be a universal law that we should lie because it would be self-defeating; people would quickly learn that they could not rely on what other people said, and so lies would not be believed” (Kant qtd. in Rachels 107). Moral goodness, Kant argued, is what we rationally know we should do and, acting from a sense of duty, do it (116). Obedience to duty (to the moral law) is therefore elevated: “Duty! Thou sublime and mighty name that dost embrace nothing charming or insinuating but requirest submission...” (Kant 39).

The moral law is transcendent; “holy (inviolable)”. Being true to ourselves and our inner integrity and conscience is to submit to the moral law and gives us a sense of dignity and worthiness of life itself. But “this comfort is not happiness, nor even a small part of happiness... The majesty of duty has nothing to do with the enjoyment of life” (40). While the moral laws themselves may not be onerous, submission to Duty may be.

Kant’s Categorical Imperatives provide a moral structure to be obeyed because it is reasonable and right. Individual rights are protected in this philosophy; an individual is never a means to an end. Kant’s philosophy is one to which Shylock could, reasonably, appeal. However, it is a rigid structure that does not allow for extenuating circumstances; one’s duty must always come first.<sup>29</sup>

Shylock is frustrated in his attempt to find justice as Venetian law discriminates against Jews. Justice, based on the law, is only as good at protecting the vulnerable as the law it is based on. As Eagleton points out, when the law is at odds with justice (as the Venetian law is) the demand for justice becomes a “form of sabotage, a scandal and a stumbling block for civilised society” (199). Justice is blind to those who are not seen, heard or named as “one of us”.

Shylock demands retribution, his “pound of flesh” according to the (written and signed) bond and according to the law, until he is unravelled by his unconscious desire. He makes a lot of this demand, spurning financial recompense, on the basis of the law. Portia asks Shylock to show mercy as it is above the “sceptred sway” of “temporal power”. In the course of justice, she argues, none of us should “see salvation”. She asks Shylock to play God, condescending to be merciful, refusing to admit that he has been a wronged victim. (She does not ask him to forgive Antonio, thus recognising Shylock’s suffering.) Shylock chooses justice, demanding acknowledgement for the wrong that has been done to him. Although justice deals in retribution and contracts (bonds), it also protects individual rights and rights wrongs. It is (supposedly) “blind” demanding impartiality; Rawls refers to this as making ethical judgements behind a “veil of ignorance” (Sandel 214). Eagleton argues that Shylock’s appeal to the law for his pound of flesh — an appeal that becomes excessive in its demands — is an appeal for something that is uncommodifiable and priceless — that is, his demand for recognition: “the common humanity which Antonio and his ruling-class cronies owe to the untouchable Jew but arrogantly refuse to concede” (195). In this sense, the pound of flesh is

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<sup>29</sup> Being a “slave to duty” is satirised by Gilbert and Sullivan in ‘The Pirates of Penzance’ in the character of Frederick who obeys his sense of duty to the point of absurdity, and even in conflict with his own sense of morality. And this, of course, is what fiction does so well; it points to the extenuating circumstances and absurdities, to the inconsistencies and cracks in rigid structures and systems of thought. ‘Moralism’ is seldom endorsed in fiction.

Eucharistic, suggests Eagleton, the sharing of flesh as a symbol of a commonality (a kinship) based in bodily sacrifice (196).

Shylock does not resolve his own conflicted desire for a justice of equality and recognition (human commonality) and a justice of retribution (his “Hath not a Jew eyes?” faintly echoes “an eye for an eye”) as the tension between justice and mercy is never resolved in the play. The publicly humiliated Shylock exits after the courtroom scene and does not reappear. The “Christian” Venetian law brought to bear upon Shylock is not merciful but harsh and unsympathetic and although Shylock’s life is spared, he is not treated with charity but brutality. Shylock has anticipated this at the end of his speech quoted above.

and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? if we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me, I will execute; and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (III.1.)

In Michael Radford’s adaptation of the play, the film ends with Shylock, now doubly outcast, looking on as a group of Jews enter what is presumably the synagogue. Shylock has lost everything in his desire for revenge: villainy begets villainy, which again begets villainy.

Eagleton suggests that Hume’s ethics of sympathy belongs to Lacan’s Imaginary order and Kant’s ethics of the law of moral absolutes belongs to Lacan’s Symbolic order. The “excess” of Shylock’s demand for his pound of flesh belongs to the Lacanian Real; a desire beyond his own conscious grasp. Ironically, what Shylock really wants — the bond of human affection and recognition — belongs to the Imaginary. Using the Symbolic to demand it, the law cheats him of what he really wants; it forces him to become identical (Christian) rather than embracing his difference (Jewish). The personal (both the unconscious desire for inclusion and the conscious desire for revenge) and the political (institutional racism and the law) are locked in conflict and Shylock is undone by the contradictions.

While the two primary moral philosophers of the Enlightenment, Hume and Kant, provide both insights and difficulties concerning ethical issues and moral responsibility in society, neither can resolve the enigmas of mercy and justice we find in the case of Shylock. Neither the personal sympathy of the Imaginary nor the political justice of the Symbolic can alone resolve the excessive demands that suffering injustice engenders. But sympathy and justice are not necessarily exclusive of each other. Plato’s answer to the question, “Why should I be moral?” is that “psychic harmony” between reason, spirit and appetite grows out of good qualities, or virtues, and allows people to live in a condition that is happy and flourishing. “[T]he morally good life lived in

accordance with the virtues is thereby shown to be the best life for human beings” (Honderich, 587). The good life harmonises emotional sympathy and rational “moralism”. The way to a better world that embraces a common humanity must include both personal and political, sympathy and law.

Shylock’s confrontation with the Real is a tragedy; his desire for revenge is excessive. The Real is a traumatic encounter with truth releasing “the uncanny power to inaugurate a new human order. Only by passing through a sacrifice or symbolic death, divesting oneself of both imaginary and symbolic identities, can one struggle through to such transformation,” says Eagleton (195). Like Bassanio’s lead casket, to open the Real of unconscious desire one must “give and hazard all he has”. To “give” and to “hazard” speaks of excess of both generosity and risk; lead is also associated with death. “It is in the domain of the Real that one must risk one’s life for the sake of one’s desire,” states Eagleton (202). Generosity and risk — giving all one has — is the mark of the Real.

Neither human sympathy nor zeal for reform can change the vindictive hearts of the oppressed. It is only when Hermione, Harry and Ron listen to the story of Kreacher’s devotion to and love for the dead Regulus Black, responding to his distress and grief with compassion, that he gives them his loyalty. Kreacher has been through the horrors of death for Regulus and is prepared to face death for him again. He is last seen heading an army of house elves, “the locket of Regulus Black bouncing on his chest”, shouting, “Fight for my master, defender of house elves! Fight the Dark Lord in the name of brave Regulus!” (*Hallows* 588). Similarly, it is by listening to a narrative of devotion and love, appealing to Bartimeus’s loyalty to the memory of Ptolemy, that Kitty is able to persuade Bartimeus to help them overcome their evil aggressors. In both of these cases the victims’ desire for revenge is overcome by the telling of their tales and the “common bond” of compassion, or communion, that is offered in response to the narrative. The victims take up their agency, transcend their slavery and risk all they have to become moral agents of change. The insatiable desire of the Real is translated from insatiable revenge to self-transcendent forgiveness. As Viktor Frankl, a psychoanalyst and Nazi labour camp survivor, writes:

being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself — be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself — by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love — the more human he is and the more he actualises himself... self-actualisation is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence. (*Search* 110-111)

Self-transcendence is associated with death, with risk, with generosity and change. It is only through this encounter with the Real, says Frankl, that self-actualisation, the ultimate form of agency, is possible.

Lazarus and 1017 encounter the Real. Like Shylock, they face their desire for revenge as death. But Knox and Ness go further than Shakespeare; both characters are transformed by death, accepting reconciliation with others. And because others respond, recognising their need for personal mercy and political justice, they find communion in a common humanity.

## **Building a Better World: A Political Response to Injustice**

### ***Dreams and Nightmares: Utopias and Dystopias***

Fictions are interesting not when they are mere dreams outside reality but when they shape a new reality. (Ricoeur *Utopia* 309)

Emanicipatory theories, says Eagleton, are not just a way of interpreting the world but are a political force because “they form a link between how things are and how they might be” (Eagleton, *Marx* 143). By describing how the world is, they help us understand it, which “in turn can play a part in changing reality... moving beyond [the way things are] to a more desirable state of affairs” (143). Marx says we need to change the world; but, asks Eagleton, how can we change the world without first interpreting it, isn’t “seeing” it in “a particular light the beginnings of political change?” (144).

As a genre, fantasy has a unique role of both commenting on society (seeing it in a particular light) and imagining a better world. By creating an unfamiliar Other world, thick with symbols and metaphors, the writer displaces readers, removing them from familiar associations and expectations, provoking them to view their own world from a different vantage point, as an outsider, and reassess their assumptions about social relationships. Parable, allegory and satire are forerunners of fantasy as we know it today, employing symbolism to comment on society. Thomas More’s *Utopia* (first published in 1516), which plays on two Greek words, “eutopos” (a good place) and “outopos” (no place) describes a “happy island state where all things are held in common, gold is despised and the people live communally”. Utopia is therefore at once a good (eutopos) and an impossible (outopos) ideal. *Utopia* is ambiguously situated between genres: a vision of an ideal, a satire and a “humanist jeu d’esprit” (Ousby 1023). This discrepant fusion of hope, cynicism and literary play has, I suggest, now splintered into utopian and dystopian fantasies although both *Chaos Walking* and *Dreamhunter* navigate between the division fusing, like More, disenchanted cynicism (‘realism’), dogged hope and rich imagination.

Jonathan Swift predated most of the significant Enlightenment social philosophers (with the notable exception of Locke) but he was located historically in a time of political upheaval and change. The Enlightenment’s offer of hope in reason to

create a politically just society, the basis of an optimistic view of the future, is viewed sceptically in *Gulliver's Travels* (first published in 1726). The Houyhnhnm — highly rational horses — are the ruling creatures of the final society Gulliver visits. Yahoos, conversely, are humans ruled by “animal” instincts. Intrigued by the existence of a society of rational Yahoos, the leader of the Houyhnhnm conducts a series of interviews with Gulliver to find out more about his society. This lends itself to satirical observations on early eighteenth century society, Gulliver finding it increasingly difficult to account well for his race. The Houyhnhnm concludes that:

our [human] institutions of government and law were plainly owing to our gross defects in reason, and by consequence, in virtue: because reason alone is sufficient to govern a rational creature. (195)

The nature of the (human)Yahoo, the rational horse declares, with its inclination to greed, selfishness and aggression, is in opposition and an impediment to reason and, consequently, virtue. The disparity between political aspiration for a good society (based, according to Swift, on reason) and its inevitable failure due to personal weaknesses anticipates the utopian/ dystopian split and reappears in Ness's and Knox's fantasies.

Despite Swift's pessimism, faith in reason to deliver a just society sparked social upheaval and revolution in the late eighteenth century: for example, the French Revolution's “liberté, égalité, fraternité” and the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, protecting “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (qtd. in Paine 12). Equality was fundamental to political reform. Human or “natural” rights, Paine argued in *The Rights of Man* (first published in 1791), are “those that appertain to man in right of his existence” and equality is a simple given (14). Likewise, the premise of Godwin's “Political Justice” (1793, 1798) is “that true justice is impossible as long as social inequalities exist within societies” (Chevalier 403). Reason, for Godwin, as for the Houyhnhnm, is the basis for morality.

The nineteenth century was characterised by optimistic reform in England driven by ideas of equality and human rights. From such diverse issues as the abolition of the slave trade in 1833, to free universal education in 1870, and universal suffrage (finally) in 1928, social reform was on the political agenda. Marx developed his social and economic theory in the mid-nineteenth century. He critiqued the ideas of “equality” and “rights”, arguing that “equality” equates to “exchange value” of commodities, and that the “formal equality” of democracy masks real inequalities of wealth and class, whereas “rights” apply an “equal standard only in so far as they are brought under an equal point of view... everything else is ignored” (Eagleton, *Marx* 104). Genuine equality is not based on same treatment but on meeting different needs.

Everyone for Marx was to have an equal right to self-realisation, and to participate actively in the shaping of social life. Barriers of inequality

would thus be broken down. But the result of this would be as far as possible to allow each person to flourish as the unique individual they were. (104-105)

This criticism enriched the discourse of equality and rights (and, of course, instigated massive social change). It is at the end of this century of social change that Edith Nesbit, who was a Fabian Socialist, wrote her fantasy stories about the Psammead.

*The Story of the Amulet* was published in 1906, the year in which *Dreamhunter* is set. Nesbit's fantasy is much less sophisticated than *Dreamhunter*, and her utopian dream, from today's perspective, seems innocent, even simplistic. Nesbit's optimism is echoed in Jane's comment, "You know what people say about progress and the world growing better and brighter" (228). Her children visit the future and find themselves in a reformed and better world, which is immediately reflected in the environment. Echoing the "earthly paradise" of the first book of the series, the scene is "like a lovely picture" (231). There is a big garden outside the British Museum, with trees and flowers and lawns, arbours "covered in roses" and "[w]hispering, splashing fountains". Pigeons are sleek and babies play on the grass. Men and women care for babies, and wear simple, soft clothes without bonnets or hats. Jane exclaims, "I do wish we lived in the future!" (231).

One of the first things the children notice is the emotional equilibrium of the people: calm, unhurried, without anxiety. Littering is a serious offence; education is enjoyable, relevant and self-directed. There are no horses, only silent motor carriages. There is no smoke and the Thames is "clear as crystal" (234). A woman invites them into her home and the children are surprised at the domestic improvements: special rooms designed for children with soft edges and central heating. Cyril points out that in their world 3,000 children are burned to death every year and describes to the woman the misery of his London: homelessness, poverty, beggars, pollution, the filthiness of the Thames. The woman is shocked; her world has full employment and everyone is a good citizen. She tells the children of "the great reformer" named Wells (a probable allusion to H.G. Wells) who saw that "what you ought to do is find out what you want and then try to get it" rather than "tinkering" with existing (political and social) systems (236-239). Although the children are intrigued by this brave new world, seeing their own London's social problems afresh, other than vowing not to litter, they do not feel a responsibility to change social conditions. Nesbit's children, we remember, are not yet moral agents.

Godwin's view of social order is anarchistic in that it is a "projection of a future in which all people are ruled by individual reason, fed by social equality and personal liberty, rather than repressed and ordered by external forces" (Chevalier 403). This is reflected in Nesbit's Utopia where everyone is responsible for their "full share of doing

the work of making [their] town a beautiful and happy place for people to live in” (238).

The children hear an educational rhyme that includes the lines:

I must be kind to everyone,/ And never let cruel things be done./ I  
must.../ ...be glad that I'm going to... / To work for my living and help  
the rest/ And never do less than my very best. (238)

Nesbit juxtaposes her vision of Utopia with her own society. When the woman from the future very briefly visits Edwardian England she is deeply shocked, calling it “a hateful, dark, ugly place”. She observes the grey sky, a foggy street, a “dismal” organ-grinder, a beggar arguing with a match-seller. She describes their faces as “horrible” and asks the children what is wrong with them. Robert explains, “They’re poor people, that’s all”. But the woman protests, “it’s not all! They’re ill, they’re unhappy, they’re wicked!... their poor, tired, miserable, wicked faces!” (240). Fantasy steps outside its own society and sees it from a new perspective, dreaming, or imagining, a better world.

A hundred years after Mary Shelley and two hundred years after Jonathan Swift, Nesbit’s optimistic utopian vision still suggests that humanistic principles and socialist ideals can transform the world and usher in an enlightened age of equality, peace and prosperity. Radical reform, she happily asserts, can eradicate misery. Whereas “fantasy is impossible by nature, utopias are impossible only if they don’t work” (Clute and Grant 977); in 1906 utopian socialism still offered hope. Nesbit’s fantasy has a political agenda; although her children cannot change the world, she has implanted the seed of a vision of socialist utopia in her child readers’ imaginations. Radical social reform, she tells them, can make the world a radically better place.

Utopias are very rare in contemporary children’s fantasies. (I cannot recall one.) Instead of discovering an ideal society, fantasy writers suggest we can make our world better by opposing dystopian injustices. The concept of “dystopia” was introduced in the late nineteenth century by John Stuart Mill and dystopian fantasies have elbowed utopian tales out of the way, issuing a warning instead of inspiring an ideal. Many contemporary fantasies imagine (or perhaps revisit) the nightmare of a world that denies basic human rights, their worlds very frequently threatened by, and even overtaken by, brutal political systems and megalomaniacal power, the rights of freedom, equality and human kinship revoked. History has confirmed what Shelley’s novel illustrates: reason cannot redeem society. Ness’s fantasy is dystopian as is the hugely popular *The Hunger Games*, but in many others Dystopia is lurking in the wings waiting for its cue.

In *Chaos Walking* utopian dreams rush headlong into dystopian nightmares. This is not the ancient split between the virtue of reason (Utopia) and the vice of instinct (Dystopia), (evil) personal appetites waging war with (good) political ideals. Todd’s instinct is privileged over Mayor Prentiss’s reason (while not denying the importance of reason), and personal and political interests wrestle, neither adequate without the other.

In a fragment of backstory, Todd (and the reader) learns that the “settlers” left for New World “Cuz the place yer a-leaving ain’t worth staying for... [It] is so bad yer gotta leave” (*Knife* 163). “Old World” is “mucky, violent and crowded... a-splitting right into bits with people a-hating each other and a-killing each other, no one happy till everyone’s miserable” (163). We never know if “Old World” is Earth, but it is an apt-enough description, shabbily dystopian. The inhabitants of the first town Todd and Viola come to mimic the Amish: “church settlers... getting away from worldly things to set up our own little utopia” (188). But soon after Todd and Viola arrive, the “little utopia” is attacked and destroyed, and Todd and Viola are forced, yet again, to flee.

When they finally arrive at Haven, it has already fallen to the army led by brilliant, misogynist and insane Mayor Prentiss who gains and maintains power through terror and cunning. Todd and Viola are separated into opposing male and female communities and the second novel, *The Ask and the Answer*, alternates between Todd’s and Viola’s stories. With historical echoes of dark aspects of American history — slavery and disinheritance of the indigenous people — combined with Hitler’s megalomania and Nazi Germany’s labour and death camps, the male society descends into a brutal regime of terror. Many men, fed lies and frightened for their lives, accept the Mayor’s false assurances. The women are segregated and then, like the Spackle, banded with a number. (Although they do not know it, the bands have been infused with a slow-acting poison.) An army of women, led by the city’s “healers”, escapes and engages in terrorist activities, attempting to destroy Mayor Prentiss’s power. Todd and Viola are drawn, against their wills, into the central action of the male and female camps; Todd as a guard and Viola into terrorist activities. This Dystopia is brutally raw: captive labour, misery, torture, mass slaughter. But neither are the freedom fighters on moral high ground with their calculated terrorist attacks killing innocent victims, their botched missions and their philosophy of the end justifying the means. No one is a hero and no one is innocent. “Doing what’s right should be easy,” says Todd when he finally learns his town’s history. “It shouldn’t be just another big mess like everything else” (*Knife* 396).

Like Hitler, Mayor Prentiss craves not only absolute power but also war. The final book, *Monsters of Men*, involves a three-way war between the men, the guerilla freedom-fighting women and the Spackle who are determined to re-inherit their land. The title comes from Ben’s recounting of the settlers’ history. Crops failed, there was sickness and “no prosperity and no Eden, ” he says (391). A “poisonous preaching” blamed the Spackle leading to war; and after the Spackle were defeated, the men turned on women.

‘War is a monster... War is the devil. It starts and it consumes and it grows and grows and grows... And otherwise normal men become monsters, too.’ (392).

“War makes monsters of men,” Viola tells Mistress Coyle (the leader of the freedom fighters). “And women,” replies Mistress Coyle (*Ask* 102).

Even though utopian visions have faded, social reform (dreaming of a better world) is imperative in contemporary fantasy. In the aftermath of war, Viola describes a field of burnt bodies. Her companion, Bradley, comments, “In a place of all this beauty and potential... we just repeat the same mistakes. Do we hate paradise so much we have to be sure it becomes a trash heap?” (*Monsters* 335). When Viola asks if this is his idea of a pep talk, Bradley replies, “Think of it as a vow to do better” (336). Social reform is not a matter for cynicism but is an ethical challenge.

Re-writing history in metaphor, Ness provokes us to re-consider how we should respond to social evil. Utopian dreams are juxtaposed with dystopian realities and an ethics that encompasses both personal and political is crucial to untangle the “big mess”. What is right may be obscure, but even so we must respond to the face of misery. While Knox is sceptical about building Utopia (the Dream of Contentment that infects the population in *Dreamquake* is sinister), when Tziga Hame asks, “What do they want me to do? Tell their story? Or break their chains?” the novel suggests he should do both. In both Knox’s and Ness’s narratives, the personal and political merge at the story’s resolution.

## **Beyond The Imaginary and Symbolic: An Ethics of The Real in Fantasy**

### ***Untangling the Personal and the Political***

Ness’s narrative ranges over a vast moral landscape as he attempts to untangle the tight knot of personal and political ethical complexity. The three protagonists of the final book, *Monsters of Men*, Todd, Viola and 1017 are driven by personal interest and are counterbalanced by the three political leaders, Mayor Prentiss, Mistress Coyle and the Sky.

Todd and Viola’s relationship develops in *The Knife of Never Letting Go* to the point of love. When they reach Haven, Viola dying in Todd’s arms from a bullet wound, Mayor Prentiss has already taken over the city. *The Ask and the Answer* begins with Todd’s brutal interrogation by Mayor Prentiss. Todd promises to do anything the Mayor wants so long as Viola is saved. Viola and Todd are separated for most of this novel, and are motivated by their mutual love. Todd’s promise keeps him captive, working as a Spackle overseer, even when he is no longer guarded. Although he tries to lessen their

misery, he is complicit in the Spackle's abuse. He becomes both the Mayor's pawn and his protégé until, in the final novel, he rides to war at the Mayor's side against the Spackle.

Viola is nursed by the healers and becomes involved in their political action. Her love for Todd keeps her on the periphery and she is frequently critical of it. When Viola insists that her objection to terrorist activity is that she doesn't want anyone else to die, Mistress Coyle astutely observes to Viola, "Are you sure that's what you want?... Or is it your boy you'll do anything for?" (*Ask* 153). Viola proves her love by having herself banded so she can return to the city to rescue Todd.

The Mayor uses Todd's and Viola's love to manipulate them into very grudging obedience in return for his protection, although neither Todd nor Viola trust him and both see through his deceit. Todd and Viola (like Harry Potter) learn that brutal control is no match for love. Viola realises:

It's not that you should never love something so much it can control you.  
It's that you need to love something that much so you can never be controlled.

It's not a weakness —

It's your best strength...

There's nothing we can't do together. (*Ask* 492)

*The Ask and the Answer* finishes with this positive message, even although the Mayor warns Todd that 1017 has gone straight to his own people and the Spackle will declare war to avenge the Burden and reclaim their land. The personal/ political dichotomy has not been resolved.

*Monsters of Men* deepens the ethical vein running through the series. On a viewscreen, Viola sees that Todd is about to be killed in the heat of battle. She could release a powerful bomb that may save Todd's life. Bradley says, "I know how much this may mean to you... but we can't, there are so many more lives at stake... Not for one person... You can't make war personal" (149). Disregarding Bradley, Viola lunges for the button, saving Todd but releasing mass death. Viola, mulling this later, asks the reader: "If this is what Todd and I would do for each other, does that make us right? Or does it make us dangerous?" (166). Discussing this later she says, "you can't make war personal... or you'll never make the right decisions." Her friend Lee reassures her "And if you didn't make personal decisions, you wouldn't be a person. All war is personal somehow, isn't it? Except it's usually hate" (288). But, thinks Viola, don't those who die have people who'd kill for them? Personal interest may have political ramifications. Lee is right that the personal and political are inextricably entwined but Viola realises that justice is blind to personal interest (although ironically it is Lee who has been blinded.)

The personal (the mirror of love) is the Imaginary in Ness's series and the political (public actions and power) is the Symbolic. All three protagonists of the final

novel make the personal political. Todd rides to war beside Mayor Prentiss, caught up in a bloody war he wants nothing to do with, but because the Mayor is powerful and can protect Viola. In this he is correct; after a victory over the Spackle, the Mayor says to Todd, “I promised to save Viola, didn’t I?... What do you think would have happened to her if the Spackle had been allowed their little victory tonight?” Then he asks, “Do you trust me?” Todd looks at him, “his completely untrustworthy, unredeemable face”, and thinks “he did save us” (373, 374). Viola goes against her moral values to save Todd. 1017 seeks revenge for the “Burden”, the corporate shame of slavery, but also, we discover, for the death of his “one in particular”, a fellow Spackle slave with whom, in a tender love scene on a summer’s night, he makes the surprising discovery “that another kind of closeness is possible” (270).<sup>30</sup> It is this “one” who protects 1017, sacrificing his own life, as the Spackle are rounded up; “They killed my one in particular,” 1017 says, “They took him from me” (271). 1017’s defiance, rashness, indifference to death and his insatiable desire for revenge find their origin in his personal grief.

The three protagonists, Todd, Viola and 1017, driven by personal interests, are paralleled with the three leaders who are driven by political interests: Mayor Prentiss, Mistress Coyle and the Sky, the Spackle leader. All three agree that the end justifies the means. Mayor Prentiss is extremely clever and manipulative, cunning and callous. He relishes war<sup>31</sup>, and maintains power through force, intrigue, brutality and psychological control. He lacks the need for personal relationships, and, on shooting his own son says, “Never love something so much it can be used to control you” (*Ask* 484). But he admits to Todd, “You were always the truer son, Todd... the one I’d be proud to have serve by my side” (482). Todd recognises the connection.

I don’t trust him, not never, he ain’t redeemable —  
 But I’m seeing him a bit different, seeing him as a man, not a monster.  
 Cuz if we are connected somehow...  
 Maybe it’s a two-way thing...  
 And maybe I’m making him better in return. (*Monsters* 329)

In Todd, the Mayor meets his desire and his weakness. When Ben returns, Todd is overjoyed. Viola observes a “glimmer of pain” on the Mayor’s face (451).

Near the end of the story, dressed alike, Todd and the Mayor battle with their wills. The Mayor finally shows Todd his desire:

He wants to destroy it, destroy everything—  
 And I realise that’s what he wants —  
 That’s what he wants more than anything —  
 To hear nothing —

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<sup>30</sup> This very subtle sex scene, the only one in the novels, is homosexual, connecting the Spackle not only with black American slaves, Native Americans and Jews but also gays.

<sup>31</sup> “Finally we come to the real thing, the thing that makes men men, the thing we were born for, Todd,” he says. “...War” (*Ask* 517).

And the hate of it... and I'm looking straight into the emptiness of him,  
the emptiness that lets him destroy and destroy... (559)

The "reign of the Real" is "desire itself", betraying "something incurably diseased at its heart... sadistic notions of power", says Eagleton (*Strangers* 154). This Real, thanatos, is the desire for death, that resonates with Nietzsche's quote at the start of *The Ask and the Answer*:

Battle not with monsters  
lest you become a monster  
and if you gaze into the abyss  
the abyss gazes into you.

It is when Viola arrives on the scene, "riding to the end of the world to save me" (561) that Todd finds his true strength in her self-transcendent love for him and his for her — "And it makes me big as an effing mountain" (562). The Mayor, defeated, chooses to meet his death willingly to save Todd from forcing him into the abyss alive with vicious sea monsters — and is a sign of how personal relationship has changed the Mayor: he sacrifices himself for the sake of Todd's heart.

Mistress Coyle is a complex and enigmatic character, straddling good and evil. She is first introduced as a healer in the style of a formidable hospital matron from another era. She competently saves lives, including Viola's. But when Mayor Prentiss invades Haven, she recognises him at once as a dangerous enemy and is determined to stop him; she refuses any complicity. She and the other healers (all women) flee the town and set themselves up as freedom fighters, living in hiding and using isolated terrorist attacks to try to bring the Mayor and his army down, but they also remain healers. They are thus caught in a contradiction: politically they are aggressors, destroying lives in their pursuit of peace, while on a personal level they save lives. Viola admires and hates Mistress Coyle, seeing her as her own potential. When Viola learns that Todd has been banding women, her anger at Mistress Coyle erupts. "I hate you," she retorts. "Everything you do makes the Mayor respond with something worse."

'I did not start this war —' [Mistress Coyle replies.]  
'But you love... everything about it. The bombs, the fighting, the rescues.'

... 'You want simple good and evil, my girl,' she says. 'The world doesn't work that way. Never has, never will...'

... 'He needs to be overthrown... But when it's done?... Are we going to have to overthrow you next?'

She doesn't say anything. (*Ask* 351)

Like Viola, I am morally unnerved by Mistress Coyle. Good and evil are not a simple binary. However, resistance engages in power struggle and power tends to corrupt. Prefabricated moral imperatives do not stand up to this situation and threaten to make utilitarians of us all. Mistress Coyle parallels Viola as the Mayor parallels Todd. She, like the Mayor, confronts the Real, her desire for martyrdom, thanatos, and in a final,

defiant gesture blows herself up, intending to take the Mayor with her. Viola remembers her words, “You’d be surprised how powerful a martyr can be” (*Monsters* 417). Her mission fails, however, as Todd, reacting instinctively, saves Mayor Prentiss’s life.

1017 discovers he cannot take his revenge on Viola who is also numbered (dehumanised) with an armband. But the Sky offers him an alternative to Viola — Ben, Todd’s adopted father, who has been taken captive and healed by the Spackle. As 1017 raises his knife to kill Ben, he imagines:

How the Knife [as he calls Todd] will weep when he hears. How he will wail and moan and blame himself and hate me, as I take someone beloved from him—  
...I will have my revenge—  
I will make the Knife hurt like I do—  
I will—  
I will do it now—  
...And I begin to roar—  
...I cannot do it... (*Monsters* 383)

1017 wants equivalency of suffering through revenge but he also realises that he cannot take an innocent life to sate that desire. The Sky reassures 1017 that this is not failure. It is only humans who kill for hate, he says, and fight wars for personal reasons. “If you had done this, you would have become one of them.” The Sky makes decisions based on the political good of the people (384). As war continues, the Sky dies and 1017 becomes leader. 1017 confronts the remnant of the human army (“a frightened but willing army led by a blind man”, 538) and reads their desire for peace, for an opportunity to “live without constant threat”. “We [the Spackle army] are here for my revenge,” says 1017. “I have made this war personal” (538). Rising to his responsibility to act in the best interests and according to the desire of his people, 1017 transcends his personal desire.

1017 does finally get his pound of flesh. He mistakes Todd for the Mayor and shoots him. He realises, at last, that he really didn’t mean to or want to kill Todd.

I have finally killed the Knife—  
The thing I have wanted for so long—  
And it has gained me nothing—  
Only the knowledge of the loss I have caused. (577)

1017 identifies with Viola’s and Ben’s grief, seeing at last the “preciousness” of Todd and, fully repentant, offers Viola the chance to kill him and take her revenge. Thanatos loses its self-hatred to become self-transcendent. Ben, the one who has been resurrected from death, despite his own grief pleads with Viola not to do it. Personal revenge, he says, will have long-term political consequences for both humans and Spackle. Viola finally sees it:

never-ending war, never-ending death... If I make this personal again  
— If I make 1017 pay — Then the world changes — The world ends...  
And my heart... breaks for ever — ...And I drop the weapon. (582)

Viola finally untangles the personal and the political, sacrificing her desire for revenge for the greater good.

This is not the very end of the story. Todd's silence is not the silence of death and the Spackle take him to heal him as they healed Ben. Viola, watching over Todd, "can't quite forgive 1017 yet" (591). Forgiveness goes further than mercy or revenge, it is a deeply personal gesture of generosity, of excess, of even greater self-transcendence, one Viola is still too broken to offer. 1017, however, often "waits outside", and has refused the antidote for his poisoned armband, suffering pain until Todd wakes up, "as a reminder of all that was, of all that almost was, and of what we should all never return to" (591). 1017 has done what Shylock cannot do and what Viola is not ready to do — and by responding with forgiveness he has answered the need for personal and political resolution. The novel ends with hope: hope that Todd will return to life, hope that there will be peace for Spackle and human. "Maybe even [hope] in the paradise we always wanted," says Ben.

### ***Desire, Death and a Dreamquake: Transcending the Personal and Political***

In *Dreamhunter*, the Imaginary and the Symbolic are represented by the different personalities of Laura (and her father, Tziga) and Rose (and her father, Chorley). The Imaginary is personal and emotional; the Symbolic is political and rational. When we are introduced to Laura and Rose, Laura is described as small, she is quiet and apprehensive, and we enter her thoughts and perspective whereas Rose is tall, out-spoken and decisive. When Tziga suggests that they enter The Place illegally, two weeks before the official Try when persons over the age of fifteen are tested to see if they can enter, Rose wails, "It's against the law!" Laura says nothing but feels a great deal. Before their Try, Laura is uncertain and insecure about the outcome, whereas Rose is confident that as the daughter of the prominent dreamhunter, Grace Tiebold, she will be successful. However, it is Laura who can enter and Rose who cannot.

Tziga and Laura Hame are intuitive and religious and they are both dreamhunters. There are parallels between dreamhunting and fiction writing: the Place is a territory that only a few can enter, offering stories as dreams which can be taken back to society, shared and commodified. Dreamers enter the reality of the characters and situations of the dream. Dreamhunters who can dream "split dreams" (seeing from the perspective of different characters within the dream) are called "novelists". The drive for reform in both Laura and Tziga is an emotional response of sympathy or identification. Laura, in sharing the Buried Alive dream, hopes to awaken the sympathetic imagination of those in her society. She believes that, like Dickens, she can bring about social reform in this way.

“In the domain of the imaginary”, says Eagleton, “it is not apparent whether I am myself or another”. The self and other are conflated “in some primitive bond of sympathy” (3). The Imaginary, seeing oneself reflected in another, projects the self into the needs and interests of others. “As with the omniscient narrator of literary fiction, it involves a delightful decentering of ourselves into the apparently sealed subjective spheres of those around us” (36). Several eighteenth century British philosophers, especially Hutcheson and Hume, advocated this “culture of the heart” as a counterbalance to the instrumentalism of the Age of Reason. They saw the need to ground “moral imperatives in felt experience”; Hume said that “Morality... is more properly felt than judg’d of” (qtd. 50).

As Laura discovers, and Eagleton points out, the flaw in an ethics built on benevolence is that it is not a universal trait and it becomes strained as it reaches further out through the concentric layers of society; from friends, to neighbours, to strangers, then foreigners. Feeling is not inexhaustible and too much of it can be debilitating. Even those who sympathise deeply can be traumatised by others’ suffering and become paralysed, unable to act. This is what happens when Laura carries out her father’s plan, and over-powers her aunt’s performance of a dream at the Rainbow Opera with her own nightmare. “We need to make people see what it’s like for the prisoners. To make them feel pity,” says Laura (*Dreamhunter* 396). But the audience is deeply disturbed; some have clawed their faces or gnawed their hands, some are frantic, howling with fear, but most are holding one another, crying quietly. It is terror they feel, not pity. Nevertheless, narrative remains powerful and subversive in challenging political power, and the authorities are justifiably nervous of Tziga as the first and most powerful dreamhunter.

Just before Laura’s official Try, her father departs on a governmental contract job. Laura begs him to return in time for the Try, but instead of promising, he insists that she remember childhood nursery rhymes. This is of course insulting to a young woman about to face a critical test that, if she passes, will launch her into a very adult career. She is angry, hurt and confused. But Tziga is burdened with grief at his wife’s death and guilt that Laura later comes to understand. Locked into his own strong feelings, he cannot help either Laura or the prisoners. When he finally returns, after a failed suicide attempt, he is a broken, though kindly, invalid.

Rose and her father Chorley have an analytical approach to reform. (At the beginning of the narrative, Rose appeals to the law, and at the end she is studying towards a law degree.) Their concern is with institutions of power. Rather than the suffering of prisoners, they are concerned with political corruption: the use of (subliminal) political manipulation through “colouring” publicly performed dreams and a more ambitious plan to lull the entire population into a Dream of Contentment. They oppose corruption using

legal channels, seeking reform by submitting factual evidence at a legal hearing. This justice response belongs to the Symbolic order. The limitation of this approach is that political structures are not always responsive to evidence; personal agendas and fondness for power can obstruct legal appeals. Power is seldom willingly relinquished.

The Symbolic order of law and language is not a mirror but a chain of difference. Distinct subjects exist side-by-side rather than face-to-face and emotions like sympathy are suspect, “a warped form of cognition”, and inferior to intellect. In the philosophy of Kant, the law is transcendent, showing us how to conduct ourselves with those we don’t know and over-rides privilege and personal interest. It is like a divine edict.

For Kant, one becomes an authentic human subject — free, rational and autonomous — only by bowing to the sovereignty of a law which regulates and harmonises one’s ends in accordance with the ends of all other such free, rational beings. (*Eagleton* 104)

Benevolence becomes an obligation and a duty as ethical actions belong in a model of social exchange.

Knox explores the idea of inequality in the social contract of exchange explicitly in an argument between Rose’s friend, Mamie, and her teacher “about the balance between individual rights and ‘the common good’”.

‘Miss Melon,’ Mamie said... ‘do you not think that people can act in ways that lose them their rights? Convicted criminals, for instance. One citizen takes another’s life, and the law deprives them of their liberty. The law won’t let them vote. Rights are something we earn by being good citizens. Criminals haven’t earned, they have fallen into debt to society... After all, we all know what we have to do to keep on the right side of the law — that is, obey the law.’

Miss Melon... tried to sound tolerant. ‘But, Mamie... We aren’t born into a contract with society. Our relationship to society is something we negotiate — or rather is negotiated for us by... reformers and lawmakers and artists and so on.’

‘Yes, just anyone, in fact,’ Mamie said. ‘Which is... the charm of democracy. But... we all do inherit the law.’...

Miss Melon lost her temper. ‘Well, Mamie, you should consider that the law is all that some people inherit. They don’t inherit money, or privileges — only duties, and duress.’

‘We all inherit the law and its protection,’ Mamie said, cold and nasty. (222-223)

Using Marx’s argument, Miss Melon points out that Social Contract theory pre-supposes rational and social equals who are empowered to negotiate the conditions of their contract. The power to negotiate is “the charm of democracy”. But the theory does not cater for those on the margins without a “voice”, the privilege of power necessary for negotiation. Democracy does not ensure equality of access to power. The duty, or imperative, not to steal, for example, becomes intolerable if one section of society is starving while another is indulging in excess. Knox’s narrative shows how politically engineered and manipulated social circumstances offer the underprivileged little choice

but to turn to crime to meet their basic needs. Lazarus, the young violin thief, explains how the government's "Prosperity Measures — the penal code" used the hard labour of convicts for public development, taking work away from men "willing to work for the price of food" (*Dreamquake* 471). Having pawned his violin (the only source of his income) for food, he steals it back from the pawnshop and consequently becomes an involuntary, unpaid labourer, a convict.<sup>32</sup> In this scene between Mamie and the teacher, and the subsequent scene with Lazarus, we see that legal institutions do not provide equal protection for all.

This idea is pursued as we follow Rose and Chorley's attempt to work through legal and political systems. Social institutions block and frustrate reform; they are not responsive to evidence and appeals to justice. Ready to reveal their evidence that the population is being manipulated by the Dream of Contentment, Rose and Chorley themselves succumb to the Dream, willingly giving up their damning film to the authorities who are eager to destroy it. Tziga, also affected by the Dream, is able to find his way out of it by finding a sinister perspective within the euphoria of the dream, destructive wasps: a disruption of dissatisfaction, decay, threat.

Laura, captured and imprisoned, understands the significance of the Dream and refuses to come under its power: "I don't want to be happy," she says stubbornly (*Dreamquake* 247). She cannot enjoy the virtue of happiness, the "good life", while she is aware of the suffering of those in her society; it is inert complacency, an opiate, an ideological fog, that halts social action. The Dream of Contentment recalls Debord's "vision of stupefied consumers enmired in administered well-being" (Eagleton 277). By her mid-teens, Laura has experienced the death of her mother, the disappearance and then reappearance of her father who has been psychologically and physically damaged, the disappearance and probable death of her boyfriend, and the responsibility laid upon her to do something about the suffering of prisoners in dreams. She is also pregnant. Laura indignantly resists the soporific Dream of Contentment; she knows the extremities of life — grief and loss have figured prominently. She alone can save her family from the Dream and break its spell.

"The ethical is a matter of how we may live with each other most rewardingly, while the political is a question of what institutions will best promote this end," says Eagleton (325). According to Eagleton's distinction, Laura and her father are concerned with a personal ethics whereas Rose and her father are concerned with the political. But neither response to injustice is adequate to achieve the radical social and political change

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<sup>32</sup> In one of many parallels between the two characters, like Raskolnikov, Lazarus is forced by financial hardship to pawn something of great personal and symbolic value, something he has inherited, to buy food.

that will break the chains of injustice. It is only when Laura enters Lacan's order of the Real by going deeper into the unconscious, represented by an encounter with death in The Place, that the Dreamquake of the second book's title — an upheaval that changes the world — can occur.

“The Real is the point at which the best laid symbolic schemes come unstuck,” says Eagleton (203). A dream, an intrusion of the unconscious, interrupts Rose and Chorley's political reform campaign, and also the political scheming of the M.P. Cas Doran. The Real is:

that condition in which we are destitute, out-of-joint, pitched into the abyss of non-meaning, crushed by a traumatic core of meaninglessness which is closer to us than breathing. (111)

Lacan's ethical absolute is the injunction not to give up on our desire (184). It is a guilt-free obligation that is willing to face death for symbolic rebirth (185).

In the ethics of the Real, says Eagleton, there is a traumatic encounter with truth that releases “the uncanny power to inaugurate a new human order”. Imaginary and Symbolic identities are divested to pass through sacrifice and symbolic death (195). At a graveside in The Place, where Laura faces final separation from Nown whom she has made and loves, Laura doesn't know what horror will be exposed, but she does understand that she will lose him. Nown is a part of Laura, her creation in whom she has invested her love; to sacrifice him is to sacrifice herself. In exchange for a friend she will gain the future; but from her perspective, she exchanges herself for the stranger and for a nebulous, unknown future. Confronting the void, the horror of death, the place where the life force (Laura is pregnant) and the death drive (the grave) meet, is encountering the Real. Love as social benevolence is translated into love as sacrificial death moving beyond, but always including justice (321). Laura has moved beyond the sympathy-motivated Imaginary to the rational, willed compassion of the Real. “Real love is hard,” says Gaita, “hard-headed and unsentimental” (xxxvii). In her self-sacrificing love for a stranger, Laura re-enacts the ultimate sacrifice of laying down her life; and what she gains is a resurrection or a re-birth (the grave is a womb and the stranger in the grave is Nown's heart). Losing Nown, her sandman, once named Lazarus, she finds a flesh and blood Lazarus, her son returned from the future.

The social reform message in *Dreamhunter* is explicit: The Grand Patriarch says: “This society cannot continue its callous willingness to base its wealth on suffering” (*Dreamquake* 491). The dreamquake of the second book's title is a social upheaval: dreams are the future in the sense of an ideal, but also in the sense that a dream is the reality of the future. But future reality is not fixed, as Laura discovers. An old folk ballad, or rhyme, sung near the beginning of the narrative suggests this.

If I could, I would, my dear,  
Stitch the next happy hour to our good time here  
Sew up the whip, the cell, the noose,  
Till that time's a false pocket that lets  
No true terror loose.  
A stitch in time can save us, love,  
Now closed between then and then,  
A charm to work and spell to prove,  
A door to shut and dream to end... (*Dreamhunter* 118)

The "stitch in time" is action that halts the progress of evil and suffering in society.

Lazarus says:

'when anyone does anything absolutely extraordinary — great or terrible — when they change the world, they make another world. When God separated light from darkness and made the world, perhaps he left the dark world behind him.' (*Dreamquake* 494)

Laura, with hardheaded compassion, opposes her society's injustice and creates a dreamquake, that not only resurrects Lazarus but also destroys the Dream of Contentment. Rose and Chorley are then able to push through legal channels to political reform. A dreamquake is an ethical revolution, moving through and beyond both the Imaginary and Symbolic realms, creating a new parallel world, a more sympathetic and just world than the one previously inhabited. Time slippage is therefore about how action, a stitch in time, can change the "natural" course of history.

In the Epilogue, four years later, the Penal Reform Bill has passed, and Rose is studying law. That she is now married to Lazarus is significant. The marriage of Hame to Tiebold suggests that both sympathy and law, benevolence and justice are necessary to bring about social reform. But more than that, it is a self-sacrificing encounter with the stranger, the Lacanian Real as Eagleton describes it, that has the power to shake complacency and change the world.

The journey from Imaginary to Symbolic to Real is one also taken by Raskolnikov. Burdened with guilt and about to become a convict, he asks Sonja to read him the story of Lazarus. His confession to Sonja the following day meets sympathy (the Imaginary); a little later Porfiry's accusation is one of "mathematics" (458) and "a matter of justice" (460) (the Symbolic) — "have my head for the letter of the law... and enough!" Raskolnikov exclaims (544). But neither the Imaginary nor the Symbolic can drag him from the abyss: "the terrible and impassable abyss" of alienation (545). As a prisoner, chained like Lazarus, he submits to "meaninglessness"; "Pointless and purposeless anxiety in the present, and in the future one endless sacrifice by which nothing would be gained" (543).

It is on the brink of the abyss that the Real is encountered. Todd, Viola and 1017 face negation, meaninglessness and death beside an ocean swarming with monsters. Laura kneels beside a grave. It is on the bank of a wide, desolate river that Raskolnikov

meets Sonja; and suddenly she realises that “he loved her, loved her infinitely” and they shine in “the dawn of a renewed future, of a complete resurrection to a new life. They were resurrected by love...” (549). Pushing the metaphor further, that night Raskolnikov takes out the same book from which Sonja had read him the story of Lazarus (550). Responding at last to the love and forgiveness, the excess of the Real, that Sonja offers him, like Knox’s Lazarus he is raised from the negation, meaninglessness and symbolic death of the abyss.

Love can move territories and time Laura realises after hearing Lazarus’s story. It is the power of love that communicates the suffering of others to anyone who will listen; “To show them not just the injustices, but also the beauty of human life against which injustice is a blasphemy” (*Dreamquake* 478).

Svidrigailov asks, “Am I a monster, or a victim myself?” Cognisant of the depth of suffering that injustice inflicts and the evil spawned by that misery, contemporary ethics and contemporary fantasy advocate that monsterhood and victimhood with their insatiable desire for a pound of flesh should be exchanged for a common humanity of uniquely precious individuals. This is only possible after passing through the symbolic death of personal and political interests to meet the ethical challenge of social reform.

“Real love is hard in the sense of hardheaded and unsentimental,” says Gaita. We need to rid ourselves of sentimentality and pathos to allow justice, love and pity to disclose reality and see the invisible (xxxvii). Contemporary children’s fantasies search for and grapple with an ethic that reaches beyond both the Imaginary of personal sympathy and happiness and the Symbolic of impersonal political justice to the Real, where everything is jeopardised in pursuit of social justice that is reasoned and reasonable and has a compassionate face turned towards powerless and dispossessed individual Others. This compassion may be the justice freed from consensus that Lyotard seeks.

## Chapter V

### *When the Stars Threw Down Their Spears: Grand Narratives and War in Heaven*

When the stars threw down their spears,  
And water'd heaven with their tears,  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?  
(Blake "The Tyger")

In a climactic scene towards the end of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter wrestle on the edge of a precipice with the angel Metatron. This is a cosmic war of inter-universal significance, mirroring Milton's struggle between Lucifer and the Son in *Paradise Lost* and Blake's war between the stars in "The Tyger". This struggle is deeply symbolic: it is a struggle between good and evil, between the powers of light and the powers of darkness, between God and the devil. It is an ideological struggle; a war over what constitutes truth.

In this chapter I look at three inter-connected narratives that play out ideological dramas: John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*. Each of these texts reads and then re-writes other texts: Milton (writing in the mid-seventeenth century) rewrites Genesis and the Gospels, Lewis (writing in the 1950s) re-writes Genesis, the Gospels, Milton and the Romantics, and Pullman (writing in the 1990s) re-writes all of these. In doing so, these writers, through their highly inventive narratives, consciously promote their own beliefs and ideology, attempting to inscribe truth. *Paradise Lost* is not a children's fantasy but its influence on both Lewis and on Pullman's *His Dark Materials* is so significant that it is important to include it. These three writers are all outspoken about their ideological positions outside and, in the case of Milton and Pullman, inside their stories. I will initially focus on the intersection of ideology and ethics generally, leading into a discussion on how ideology influences the ethos of these stories, and conclude by suggesting that the contradictions between ideology and ethos in all three epic narratives opens up space to reappraise the ideological content of the narratives.

"Ideologies" are clusters of beliefs that are accepted by a group and given the status of truth. They can be religious, political, economic or philosophical. Ideologies are embedded in language and "fix perceptions in our minds" (OED Online) and language provides the means of transmitting these ideas to others.<sup>33</sup> In Marxist analyses (for

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<sup>33</sup> Analyses of ideology aim to "liberate men and women from their mystifications and irrationalisms... and restore to them instead their dignity as fully rational, self-determining beings" (Eagleton, *Ideology* 2).

example, Althusser's ideology, Gramsci's hegemony and Foucault's discourse), ideologies are pervasive ideas that serve the interests of the dominant class, ideas that distort "real" reality, or praxis.<sup>34</sup> (Marx used the metaphor of an inverted image to suggest distortion as reversal.) (Ricoeur, *Ideology* 3). Truth and power are therefore intrinsically linked, and truths can be "fixed" or accepted as true, even commonsense, by many people. Ideologies are ubiquitous: "everyone lives on the basis of an ideology" (8). Ideologies also convey ethical "truths". "Ethos" is the ethical character, or the ethical worldview, that lies beneath the surface of a text. The ethos is not necessarily in line with the espoused ideology of the writer, however, and the congruities and incongruities between ideology and ethos are where my main interest lies in this chapter.

Ricoeur likens ideology to a tornado, and suggests that the reflective act of critiquing ideology entails stepping outside the "whirlwind" (171, 172) which is a paradox identified by Mannheim: the concept of ideology does not turn back on itself (8). Ricoeur addresses this paradox by contrasting ideology and utopia. Both have "incongruence with actuality" (2) and for both "social imagination" constitutes "social reality", confirming and contesting the present situation (3). Ideology is everywhere; as I mentioned in my last chapter, Utopia is nowhere. Ideology is a social fabrication; Utopia is an individual fabrication. It is from the "empty place" of Utopia's nowhere that we can look at ourselves, says Ricoeur (15).

From this 'no place' an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted. The field of the possible is now open beyond that of the actual... for alternative ways of living. (16)

In that fantasy fiction is set in another, or magical, world, a "no place", it is utopian. The imagination we bring to fantasy is the same imagination that allows us to "rethink social life" (17): to critique ideologies and dream of a better world.

While a war in heaven might seem highly fanciful, the real war of fantasy is waged between ideologies over truth and its power, a battle not just between good and evil but to define them. A battle on this grand scale is, I suggest, two-fold: on one hand a story's content involves an ideological war, one which is waged between good and evil in the events of the plot; on the other, the story itself is part of an ideological war in the real world, a tool or instrument to fix what constitutes reality and truth, a re-writing of a Grand or Master Narrative. Truths (the stuff of ideologies) are buried deep in a story's heart, and morality is buried deeply within ideologies. It is up to us to interpret them.

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<sup>34</sup> Eagleton quotes Marx: "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (7).

***“Subtle Magic”: Enchanted Words and Deadly Serious Ideas***

The significance of ideological battles in art reaches further than abstract thought and symbolic stories. In a recent documentary by Patrick McGrady, Stephen Fry travelled to Germany to reinterpret the life and works of Wagner. In an attempt to reconcile his passion for the musical sublime and the sullied reputation of Wagner, Fry interviewed Joachim Köhler at the stadium of Nuremberg. Köhler, speaking of Hitler and the use of Wagner’s music at Nuremberg rallies, said:

He [Hitler] thought he could teach the Germans to see the world in a way which you find in the Wagner operas — the dialectical way that you have a protagonist and an antagonist; that you have good and evil... Siegfried and the dragon. Now, if you have this in the opera it is perfectly all right because the opera needs the tension in the drama between good and evil, but as soon as you turn that into reality it becomes a devastating political fantasy and an ideology.

Stephen Fry, commenting on this, says, “If Joachim is right, that makes Nuremberg... a monstrous example of the way Wagner’s music inspired some men to tear down the boundary which ought to separate fantasy and fact.”

There is no boundary that separates fantasy and fact. Fiction is a portal into the imagination where beliefs are formed from ideological influences; imagination is the forge in which the spears are crafted that wage ideological wars. Great literature does more than mirror society, says Ricoeur, it “opens outward to new times” and its “important ideas are not merely echoes” (313). The ethos of fantasy does not stand apart from the inscription of truth for good or harm; no story is ethically innocent. As Wagner’s *Ring Cycle* illustrates, art has real consequences. Creating simplistic dichotomies between good and evil to serve the need for dramatic tension is not, I believe, “perfectly all right” ethically; it seems evident from history that this binary division can have dangerous political ramifications. Art is not exempt from moral judgement, but is deadly serious with potentially far-reaching consequences.

The Prologue of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* contradicts my assertion that no art is innocent. Art, the narrator declares, transcends intention and morality:

There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book.  
Books are well written, or badly written. That is all...  
No artist has ethical sympathies. (17)

“It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors,” says the narrator (17). The story bears out this philosophy of art. The painting of Dorian is beautiful. The artist, Harry, sees it as a reflection of his inner secrets (21), Lord Henry sees it as a beautiful possession, and it reflects Dorian’s vanity and jealousy of the painting’s eternal beauty. The painting becomes a mirror, reflecting Dorian’s soul. Art is neutral, reflecting only the spectators’ morality and desires.

Despite its disclaimers, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a moral fable. Art is intrinsically ideological and ethical. Dorian is Lord Henry's ideological work of art, created out of ideas that "terrify" Harry (49), applying his influence to create Dorian as the embodiment of his own ideology. Dorian's bodily existence "becomes an echo of someone else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him" (29).

Ideology and language (narrative) are entwined. Dorian recognises that the power of ideas is in language, describing "mere words" as "terrible" and inescapable. "And yet what a subtle magic there was in them! They seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things... Was there anything so real as words?" (30). The "subtle magic" of language changes Dorian. Nietzsche suggests that language can enchant thought; thought is caught up in "the spell of certain grammatical functions" (qtd. in Eagleton *Strangers* 8). Similarly Wittgenstein writes: "A *picture* held us captive and we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably" (qtd. 8). Dorian is enchanted by the ideologies of Beauty and hedonism that ensnare him, creating a monster of him; when he dies, "He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage" (167). Our consciously and unconsciously held ideologies — the ideas that are woven around and through us, that hold us under their spell — circumscribe our moral values and actions, suggests Wilde. Art sanctions belief and belief, in turn, sanctions behaviour. Wilde therefore opens the gap between the story's espoused ideological position and its ethos. While *Dorian Gray* knowingly plays with this incongruence, many novels do not.

Stories, oral or written, whether libretto, epic poems, fables or novels, employ ideology to rewrite ethics and ethics to rewrite ideology. Art is infused with ideological content that will inevitably influence real people with its "subtle magic" and impact on their moral thinking. As Kearney puts it:

Far from being ethically neutral, each story seeks to persuade us one way or another about the evaluative character of its actors and their actions...  
Stories alter our lives... Every story is loaded. (*Stories* 156)

This problematises Köhler's claim that Wagner's dramatic conflict was misused to advance a political agenda when it was applied to Nazi politics because while this can undoubtedly happen, and may have been the case with Wagner, art is not ethically neutral. Art does not transcend ideology, but is inextricably bound up with it, and ideology provides the rationale for moral choices. Fantasy (the imaginative creation of possible worlds) and reality (the world as we perceive it to be) are not separate but interdependent. Even good and evil are up for grabs, as when Pullman's Lord Asriel (who represents the nobility of Lucifer) wrestles with the angel (who represents the corruption of religion). Tolkien, like Wagner, drew inspiration from Norse myth and wanted to

create a national mythology, but his fantasies, written during and immediately after World War Two, are fiercely anti-totalitarian.

We are born into a community in a particular historical moment, created already by Master Narratives, or “pre-figured” in Ricoeur’s narrative theory, but we are also makers of stories (configuring story) and we translate them into ethical action (refiguring the story) (Kearney 133).

[E]ach human existence [is] a fabric stitched from stories heard and told... we are born into a certain intersubjective historicity which we inherit along with our language, ancestry and genetic code. (154)

In narrative theory, Master Narratives (ideologies) do not inevitably blind and confine us; we can find imaginative spaces to interpret and refigure their influences and recognise their ethical character. As readers we need to be wary of enchantment, discerning and judging the ethos of the narratives we engage with, both those that are “real” and those that are not, because stories do change us. “[It] belongs to the reader, now an agent, an initiator of action, to choose among the multiple proposals of ethical justice brought forth by the reading,” says Ricoeur (qtd. in Kearney, 190). Literary writers and scholars remind us, says Underhill, that “all fiercely free-thinking individuals are capable of expanding the sphere of their own individual freedom by pushing back the limits” of the subtle magic “of their own language system” within history. The individual is not the “...‘victim’ of ideology” (6). Likewise, although ethical values are embedded in ideologies, at the same time they can illuminate inconsistencies and contradictions within ideological systems, opening up gaps for resistance and change.

### ***Epic Narratives in the Service of Ideology: Milton, Lewis and Pullman***

Blake’s poem “The Tyger”, quoted in part above, takes issue with Milton’s depiction of the battle between heaven and hell in *Paradise Lost*. The tyger is a creation of a God of war, a Mars, who dwells in fire. He is a creator-smithy twisting, with his “dread grasp”, the sinews, the “deadly terrors”, of the tyger’s heart. The tyger symbolises raw passion and violence, and the warrior stars weep; presumably these are the fallen third of the angels in Biblical mythology, throwing down their spears in defeat before they are cast out of heaven. Blake, like other Romantic poets, reverses and subverts the Biblical narrative as re-told by Milton, providing a reverse image of its ideology. Likewise, Pullman reverses and subverts Milton’s narrative which, although clearly not a novel idea, is interesting in that he is writing, not in the revolutionary era of the Romantics when humanism was making bold ideological inroads, but in the last decade of the twentieth century when humanism was a tired ideal. He is also writing, consciously and deliberately, against Lewis’s interpretation of the Christian narrative in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Pullman says about story-telling: “It’s to do with taking the story seriously, laughing, yes, but never scoffing at it, always taking the story seriously” (Butler, R.). Taking the story seriously involves engaging with its ideological sympathies. Pullman has vehemently criticised C.S. Lewis for his Narnia books, calling them “propaganda in the service of a life-hating ideology... [T]here is no doubt in my mind that [“the Narnia cycle”] is one of the most ugly and poisonous things I’ve ever read” (“The Darkside of Narnia”). He denies that Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* was influential in the writing of *His Dark Materials*, calling Tolkien’s work “essentially trivial”, but accepts that he may have been “arguing with Narnia”. “I’m trying to undermine the basis of Christian belief. Mr. Lewis would think I was doing the Devil’s work” (Wartofski). In Pullman’s mind at least, children’s fantasy fiction is an arena for ideological combat.

It is not particularly fruitful to debate whether or not fantasy should be a forum for religious or atheistic ideology because writers write whatever they like and the popularity of both Pullman’s and Lewis’s fantasies assures us that readers are not averse to the use of fantasy for this ideological end. It is even probable that fantasy is particularly suited as an ideological arena, due to its symbolic nature and its traditional purpose of transmitting cultural and ethical values. Milton overtly states his ideological agenda in *Paradise Lost*: “That, to the height of this great argument,/ I may assert eternal providence,/ And justify the ways of God to men” (Book I: 24-26). Lewis did not set out to write his Narnian Chronicles as a Christian allegory, starting only with a picture of a faun with an umbrella and parcels. Of Aslan he says, “I don’t know where the lion came from or why he came” (“On Stories” 53). He later describes Aslan as “the form in which Christ might have appeared in an alternative reality” (qtd. in Hooper 37). However, Lewis was an outspoken Christian thinker and his ideology inevitably underpins his narrative. Pullman, quoted above, makes no secret of his ideological position or his intentions for *His Dark Materials*: “If there is a God then he deserves to be put down and rebelled against,” he said in an interview (“Devil’s Party”) revealing his deep antagonism to religion. It is, I think, healthy for adults and children alike to be goaded by the provocation of these contradictory ideas. However, there is a fine line between integrating an ideological position into a story and using the story as a didactic weapon, twisting the story to fit the message, thereby skewing the imaginative force of the story.

Lewis and Pullman are descendants of their literary ancestors including: Genesis, the Gospels (which rewrite the narrative of the Fall described in Genesis with Jesus as a second Adam, resisting temptation and reversing sin and death), Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Blake’s “Songs of Innocence and Experience” and “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”, Shelley’s “Prometheus Unbound” and Keats’s “The Fall of Hyperion”. It is very likely that these two writers were familiar with all of these literary forebears and that they self-

consciously referred to them. Lewis refers to Blake, Shelley and Keats in his *A Preface to Paradise Lost* — as well as Milton, of course. Pullman has chosen to name his trilogy after a phrase lifted out of *Paradise Lost* and he frequently inserts quotes from the epic poem. He alludes to Blake and also takes up and elaborates a concept suggested by Keats in one of his letters. So here in these children’s fantasy fictions we have a genealogy of narratives of good and evil being reworked over and over.

In Milton’s epic, Utopia is both past and future, but is unattainable in the present. It is the Eden that was lost by Adam and Eve’s disobedience and will be restored by Christ at an unknown future time (Book I: 1-5). Good equates to God, and the central ethical imperative is obedience to divine command. In the epics of the Romantic era, Good equates to rebellion against the divine command in an assertion of human will. Utopia relates to the present as a reformed world under human control, free from religious ideology. These opposing belief systems underlie Lewis’s and Pullman’s fantasies, and the subtle magic of their very different fantasies infuses the ethos, the battle between heaven and hell, between good and evil, presented in the books.

Later in this chapter I will discuss in more depth Pullman’s claim that we must always take the story seriously (as distinct from the deadly serious ideas in the story), looking at how humour interacts with ideology. But first I will contrast the competing ideologies of Milton, Lewis and Pullman placing *Paradise Lost*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *His Dark Materials* alongside each other, focussing on themes of authority, sin and Satan. Comparing the intersection of ideology and ethics within these narratives, I will look for ways in which they each communicate their ethos.

## **Worldviews in Conflict: The Kingdom, the Fall and the Devil**

### ***Kingdom or Republic of Heaven?: Authority and Tyranny***

Lord Asriel devises a revolution of the highest order: to destroy the Kingdom of Heaven. His grand purpose is to kill the king, often referred to as the “Authority”, but who is also named God (and numerous Biblical names for God), setting up the Republic of Heaven in its place. This is Pullman’s ideological revolution against a religious worldview, and understanding the concept of authority, a concept woven through and through *Paradise Lost* and against which he is writing, is crucial to untangling Pullman’s complex ethos. Ideology gives meaning and legitimacy to authority (Ricoeur 13), but we also judge its legitimacy from an ethical and ideological position.

A major snag for readers of *Paradise Lost* today is the assumed hierarchical order of the cosmos, the natural world and of conscious beings. This is sometimes referred to as “the Chain of Being” (Donkin 121). “[*Paradise Lost*] is a poem depicting the objective

pattern of things, the attempted destruction of that pattern by rebellious self-love, and the triumphant absorption of that rebellion into a yet more complex pattern” (Lewis, *Preface* 132). Lewis explains the “hierarchical conception” that was commonly accepted in literature before the revolutionary period: everything except God has a natural superior and everything except unformed matter has a natural inferior. Originating in Greek philosophy, it was adopted by Christianity, and is fundamental to the ethos of Milton’s epic. He juxtaposes “Matter unformed and void”, discord, Chaos, darkness and the abyss with divine order, endowing them with moral undertones. “Darkness profound/ Covered the abyss. But on the watery calm/ His brooding wings the spirit of God outspread,/ And vital virtue infused...” (VII.216-236). Cosmic disorder therefore becomes cosmic order: “in His hand/ He took the golden compasses... to circumscribe this universe” (VII.224-227). God separates and divides the natural world into light and darkness, air and water, dry land and seas, sun and stars. “The goodness, happiness and dignity of every living being consists in obeying its natural superior and ruling its natural inferiors” (Lewis 73). Deviations from this order were believed to lead to disease or monstrosity and it was part of the Natural order itself that they were destroyed. Lewis quotes Aristotle: “Justice means equality for equals and inequality for unequals” (Lewis 75). Hierarchy and equality (between natural equals) are not antitheses, therefore, but hierarchy and tyranny (ruling over one’s natural equals). Both tyranny (ruling over one’s equals) and rebellion (refusing to obey one’s natural superior) were considered to be monstrosities (76). Thus, suggests Lewis, there was no inconsistency in Milton asserting the monarchy of God but refusing the monarchy of Charles II, a man and natural equal (77).

It is against this hierarchical order that Lucifer rebels. Lucifer is opposed against the “throne and monarchy of God” (I.42) and when he is cast out of heaven he declares that all is not lost — he retains his “unconquerable will... courage never to submit or yield” (I.106,108). In a much-quoted passage, he declares: “The mind is its own place, and in itself/ Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven... Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven” for “Here at least/ We shall be free” (I.254-259). Resentful of his inferior position to God’s Son he desires not just equality but superiority (the same resentment he feeds when tempting Eve, suggesting that she should be not just Adam’s equal, but his superior) (79). Denying all knowledge of his having been created, Lucifer asserts that he will besiege, not beseech, “the almighty throne” (V.868-869), accusing those who serve God of “sloth” (perhaps translated today as “inertia” or “lack of imagination”). Servility and freedom are opposed (VI.169). Abdiel, speaking for God, replies that Satan (the fallen Lucifer) is himself “not free, but to thyself enthralled” (VI.181).

Milton reinforces his theme of obedience in his Adam and Eve narrative. The forbidden apple is the “sole pledge of his [Adam’s] obedience” (III.95), and without the freedom to obey or disobey how, asks God, could his creatures give proof “sincere/ Of true allegiance, constant faith or love” (III.103-104)? Happiness depends on the free choice to obey, Raphael tells Adam: “Freely we serve,/ Because we freely love, as in our will/ To love or not” (V.538-540). Freedom is a point of dispute between God and Satan, defined by God as willing love and obedience, by Satan as independence and refusal of servility. Raphael’s speech suggests that true obedience is meaningful within a relationship. Eve obeys and serves Adam because of their mutual love; Milton paints their pre-fallen relationship in glowing colours (even Satan describes them as “imparadised in one another’s arms” and their relationship as “bliss on bliss”) (IV.507,509). Eve’s obedience does not prevent her from disagreeing with Adam, although her determination to follow her inclination instead of Adam’s leads her to the serpent’s temptation to eat the fruit that culminates in the Fall. It is out of love for her that Adam chooses to share her doom.

After their disobedience, Adam and Eve forgive each other and “strive in offices of love, how we may lighten each other’s burden”. Contrition, humble confession of faults and repentance are the ways to move past blame to reconciliation: “sorrow unfeigned, and humiliation meek” (X.1092): a human response to another. Adam and Eve are therefore united after the Fall (in contrast to Will and Lyra who are separated after their “Fall”). Adam learns that “to obey is best/ And love, with fear, the only God” (XII.561-562). Milton moreover posits servanthood as the ethical response of an authority towards inferiors. After the Fall, the Son pities Adam and Eve, and not disdain to be their servant, clothes them (X.213-214).

Milton advocates an ethic of loving obedience within hierarchical order. Reconciliation, both between God and Adam and between Adam and Eve, is through submissive love. Heaven contains discipline, the discipline of order and of virtue, according to Milton: “that our happiness may orb itself into a thousand vagrancies of glory and delight” (Milton qtd. in Lewis 81). Satan, whose “wounds of deadly hate have pierced so deep” (IV.100), cannot be reconciled to God and he is cursed with eternal exile. “All Milton’s hatred of tyranny is expressed in the poem: but the tyrant held up to our execrations is not God. It is Satan,” says Lewis (78).

Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia* are more ambivalent to authority. Speaking of Milton’s vision of perfection, Lewis writes:

Discipline, while the world is yet unfallen, exists for the sake of what seems its very opposite — for freedom, almost for extravagance. The pattern deep hidden in the dance, hidden so deep that shallow spectators cannot see it, alone gives beauty to the wild, free gestures that fill it...

The happy soul is, like a planet, a *wandering* star; yet in that very wandering (as astronomy teaches) invariable... The heavenly frolic arises from an orchestra which is in tune... Without sin, the universe is a Solemn Game... ( 81)

The language employed (extravagance, beauty, wild, free, frolic) and the images (patterns of a dance, wandering stars, music, a game) anticipates the *Narnia* books. (The *Preface* predates the first *Narnia* book by eight years.) In juxtaposing discipline and freedom; patterns and wild, free gestures; wandering and invariable; frolic with an orchestra in tune; a game and rules he uses a characteristic trait, one that is carnivalesque. The maypole and the romps of Bacchus never seem to be very far from Lewis's more austere authoritarian beliefs. Even though Lewis's ideal society is ruled by a human monarchy under the authority of a God-figure, it is important to remember that the kings and queens are children and the God-figure is a beast.

Despite criticisms to the contrary, Lewis does often subvert the hierarchical social structure of his society. The first king and queen of Narnia are a thoroughly working class London cabby and his wife, with the soapsuds of her washing day still on her hands, whose credentials for the job are that they can work manually, grow food, rule the animals "kindly and fairly, remembering that they are not slaves... but free subjects", and that they are prepared to ensure that justice is maintained amongst these free subjects (*Magician* 129). In *The Horse and His Boy*, Shasta, who has been brought up as little more than a slave, finds that he is in line to the throne of Archenland. He apologises to his twin brother for doing him out of the kingship, but his brother is delighted that he will only ever be a prince. "It's princes have all the fun," he says. "And that's truer than thy brother knows," says his father.

'For this is what it means to be king: to be first in every desperate attack and last in every desperate retreat, and when there's hunger in the land... to wear finer clothes and laugh louder over a scantier meal than any man in your land.' (187)

The view of the king as servant to his people is implied elsewhere in the *Narnia* books, but here is stated explicitly. Shasta grows up to marry Aravis, a dark-skinned Calormene, who, like him, escaped from an unendurable future and we are told they are a good king and queen (188). Her credentials are based on her character not her race.

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Caspian, the king, decides he wants to pursue an adventure to the end of the world. His crew and friends protest that he can't.

'Can't?' said Caspian sharply, looking for a moment not unlike his uncle Miraz [a tyrant]... 'I had thought you were all my subjects here, not my schoolmasters.'

'...we mean *shall not*,' said Reepicheep [a mouse] with a very low bow. 'You are the King of Narnia. You break faith with all your subjects... if you do not return. You shall not please yourself with adventures as if you were a private person. And if your Majesty will not hear reason it

will be the truest loyalty of every man on board to follow me in disarming and binding you till you come to your senses.’ (202-3)

This passage illustrates Lewis’s view that authority figures are themselves obliged to submit to the duties of their role. Authority is not self-serving, but should serve the common good. Caspian goes on to abuse his power, declaring that as he cannot, neither shall anyone else go to the end of the world, although this has been Reepicheep’s intention all along. He refuses to accept Reepicheep’s protest, and goes to his cabin “in a temper” (203). “But when the others rejoined him a little later they found him changed; he was white and there were tears in his eyes” (203).

In the interim Caspian has encountered Aslan who was “a bit stern at first” and tells Caspian that he is to go back to Narnia — alone (with his crew) and at once — while Reepicheep and the children are to go on to the end of the world. The king, therefore, is subject himself not only to the law of the land, to his oath as a king, and to his duty to his subjects, but also to Aslan.

Aslan is himself subject to laws or — as Lewis might express it — universal patterns. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* the White Witch demands Edmund’s life as he is a traitor and the Deep Magic “which the Emperor put into Narnia at the very beginning” has ordained that “every traitor belongs to me [the witch] as my lawful prey and for every treachery I have a right to kill” (130). Susan whispers in Aslan’s ear, “Can’t something be done about the Deep Magic? Isn’t there something you can work against it?” But Aslan replies, “with something like a frown on his face”, “Work against the Emperor’s Magic?” (131). This Deep Magic is Lewis’s interpretation of a moral universal law of retributive justice; the Deeper Magic from “before Time dawned” is based on willing sacrificial death and resurrection (150). Authority (God) is subject to the moral law of justice. Moral good is the ultimate authority; although retributive justice is a moral law, it is transcended by sacrificial love.

While Lewis clearly supports the notion of a hierarchical chain of authority and submission (including even mice), he also provides ample examples of defiance of authority as morally right. Civil disobedience is required where authority has been seized by force, not by right. (Hereditary entitlement is the main, but not exclusive, right to the throne.) Usurpers are invariably cruel tyrants: the White Witch, King Miraz, the Green Witch, Shift the Ape, Gumpus the Governor; and are forcefully overthrown. But there are also examples where the protagonist is required to go against benevolent authority in order to obey a yet higher authority (that is, Aslan). In *The Silver Chair* Jill and Eustace defy an aged King Caspian’s commandment that no one is to search for the lost prince, a task Aslan has given them. In *Prince Caspian* Aslan suggests to Lucy that she should have gone against her siblings and their decision made by a democratic vote, and to

follow him regardless. Submission is therefore not mindless and generalised obedience, but a moral decision made in a specific situation. In *The Last Battle* Puzzle the donkey, dressed up as a lion and posing as Aslan, aids the ape, Shift, to deceive the Narnians into accepting him as their ruler, usurping the true king. “The Ape said Aslan *wanted* me to dress up like that. And I thought he’d know. I’m not clever like him. I only did what I was told,” says Puzzle (70). Later Eustace rebukes Puzzle, saying, “If you’d spent less time saying you weren’t clever and more time trying to be as clever as you could...” (87). These passages suggest that Lewis’s view of obedience to authority is that each act of obedience must be in accord with the higher demands of “Deeper Magic” — that is, the moral law of sacrificial love. And if a king steps out of line it is the duty of his subjects to reprimand him and restrain him, by force if necessary, until he comes to his senses. Individuals are responsible for their own actions and answerable for them. Only doing what you are told is no excuse.

Where *Narnia* is in sympathy with *Paradise Lost*, Pullman follows the Romantic poets in its moral re-writing. In the age of the French Revolution, Aristotle’s hierarchical order was revised. Early evolutionary theories suggested alternatives to creation, and humanist “Man” displaced God on centre stage. Marilyn Butler notes the paradox that Newtonian science and expanding knowledge of the cosmos decreased humanity’s significance within it and contradicts the importance of free will: “the fantasy- portrait of man at the centre of the universe” (126). The Romantics re-wrote Milton’s war in heaven as a contemporary struggle between revolutionary, humanistic political forces and conservative authority. “In its dramatised conflict between null [sic], hypocritical, law-abiding Angels and energising revolutionary Devils, “ ‘The Marriage’ [of Heaven and Hell by Blake] is a direct rendering of current political tension”, says Butler (45). Milton’s Devils become “those most celebrated rebels of literature” and “his handling of the Angels reveals who he thought the enemy were” (46). Shelley’s “Prometheus Unbound” was another re-writing of *Paradise Lost* in which “the authoritarian father exacting retribution” is resolved in terms of a pagan and sexual mythology (131). Milton’s Satan is a revolutionary figure. Keats’s “The Fall of Hyperion” is more uncertain. “Like Shelley in “Prometheus Unbound”, he revises *Paradise Lost*, replacing Milton’s Christian cosmology with an evolutionary one, substituting a natural order for a divine order” (153). Keats evokes sympathy for the fallen gods/ angels, but change “has entailed loss, doubt, anguish, sacrifice”. Revolutionary expansion gives way to “fear of what living through change entails” (154).

For the Romantics, authority (represented by God in *Paradise Lost*) opposes revolutionary change and the progress of humanistic “Man”. In *His Dark Materials* “the Authority” (God) personifies that which stands in opposition to evolutionary liberal

humanism. Authority and freedom are antithetical. “Every little increase in human freedom has been fought over ferociously between those who want us to know more and be wiser and stronger, and those who want us to obey and be humble and submit,” says John Parry to Will (*Knife* 335). Obedience, humility and submission are on opposite sides of the fence from desire for greater knowledge, wisdom and strength.

Abhorrence of obedience is a common theme in popular culture. Rebels are frequently heroes whether their motivation is political, philosophical or attitudinal. However, Pullman’s position is not anarchistic, and he does not even unreservedly embrace autonomy. Prior to John Parry’s speech to Will, Lee Scoresby, a sympathetic character, has a dream, or a vision, in which he is a bird flying with the flock. He responds “with joy to the command of the eagle queen” and “whatever human-ness he had left felt the strangest of pleasures: that of offering eager obedience to a stronger power that was wholly right” (307). This “eager obedience” is instinctual and natural, that of a bird to the “queen”, but also employs moral language, the queen’s power is “wholly right”. This obedience is returned to at the end of the story and I will discuss it more fully later.

John Parry’s speech to his son (quoted above) is embedded in a more contradictory passage. Parry is aware that Will has the subtle knife, and tells him that as bearer of the knife, Will has a task in the forthcoming war, and “this time the right side must win... We’ve had nothing but lies and propaganda and cruelty and deceit for all the thousands of years of human history” (334). The makers of the knife have never understood its potential: “They had no idea that they’d made the one weapon in all the universes that could defeat the tyrant. The Authority. God. The rebel angels fell because they didn’t have anything like the knife” (334). Will protests that he doesn’t want the task, he hates it and he doesn’t want to fight. His father silences his protests with, “...you’re a warrior. That’s what you are. Argue with anything else, but don’t argue with your own nature” (335). Will sees this as an unwelcome truth, “heavy and painful”. Parry concludes his speech with, “You have to choose, boy.”

Will continues to protest until, resigned, he asks, “But what must I do?” Parry says, “You must go to Lord Asriel... Ignore everything else, no matter how important it seems, and go and do this” (336). But just as Parry and Will recognise each other as father and son, Parry is shot dead by a witch’s arrow. Grief-stricken, Will says, “...whatever you wanted me to do, I promise, I swear I’ll do it. I’ll fight. I’ll be a warrior, I will. This knife, I’ll take it to Lord Asriel... and I’ll help him fight that enemy. I’ll do it. You can rest now. It’s all right. You can sleep now” (338). Will has not learned Hamlet’s lesson never to make promises to a dead father, neither does he seem to have any opinion on the cruel tyrant he refers to as “that enemy”; in our world’s England he probably had very little contact with religion; it does not feature at all in his backstory.

Obedying his father's command, "You must go to Lord Asriel", is not motivated by personal conviction or by his instinct — his instinct seems to contradict obedience — but is an emotional pledge made to a father who, driven by his desire for adventure, abandoned Will when he was a baby. Therefore, although Parry has told us that obedience, humility and submission oppose human freedom, he asks for obedience from Will, and I think we are led to believe that Will chooses correctly in obeying his father. Ideology legitimates authority, bridging the tension between the claim to, and belief in, legitimacy, says Ricoeur (*Utopia* 13). Pullman legitimates John Parry's authority because he is ideologically correct, but in doing so contradicts Parry's own antithesis of authority and freedom. Will does find the Authority eventually, and uses the knife to cut him out of the crystal chariot in which he has been imprisoned, but killing him proves unnecessary as the ancient angel, no longer a tyrant, disintegrates before his eyes.

Pullman uses the title "the Authority" for God in his fantasy. It is impersonal, descriptive of rank or status. Authority is associated with authoritarian and in our society with "the authorities" (bureaucracy). Positions of authority bestow kudos but also ridicule or resentment as authority goes against the grain of democratic egalitarianism. Lewis's benign authority blends egalitarianism with Christian submission and medieval nostalgia, a pale shadow of Milton's anachronistic glorious, kingly authority that inspires unquestioning obedience. It is doubtful that many people today would consider obedience a positive, life-enhancing virtue.

### ***Eating Fateful Fruit: Sin and the Fall***

For Milton, disobedience, the betrayal of trusting love, is at the heart of sin. Adam and Eve, eating the fateful apple from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, have "Knowledge of good, bought dear by knowing ill" (IV.223). The relatively simple connection between sin and sex which is quite central in Pullman's version of the Fall is a lot more complex in Milton.

Adam and Eve, newly created, are described as "erect and tall... with native honour clad/ In naked majesty" (IV.289-291). "Then was not guilty shame", Milton tells us, because "dishonest shame" is "sin-bred". As they take pleasure in the garden with its flowers and its fruit, so they take pleasure in "youthful dalliance... linked in happy nuptial league" (IV.339-340). Adam, in a grand speech to Eve, tells her that the Power that made them "raised us from the dust, and placed us here/ In all this happiness" (IV.417-418). The "only sign of our obedience left" is "not to taste that only tree/ Of knowledge". As Eve recalls to Adam (and the reader) her first meeting with him, and how she yielded to his "manly grace", she looks on Adam:

with eyes  
Of conjugal attraction unreproved,  
And meek surrender, half-embracing leaned  
On our first father. Half her swelling breast  
Naked met his, under the flowing gold  
Of her loose tresses hid. He in delight...  
Smiled...and pressed her matron lip  
With kisses pure. (IV.494-502)

This scene is witnessed by the devil who turns aside “for envy; yet with jealous leer malign” and says,

‘Sight hateful, sight tormenting! Thus these two,  
Imparadised in one another’s arms... enjoy their fill  
Of bliss on bliss — while I to hell am thrust,  
Where neither joy nor love, but fierce desire  
... unfulfilled with pain of longing pines.’ (IV.506-512)

The devil continues in his soliloquy, pleased to have discovered the vulnerability of Adam and Eve’s bliss, that is, that it depends on their on-going obedience to the command not to eat the fruit from “one fatal tree”. “Knowledge forbidden! Suspicious... reasonless...” he mulls aloud.

‘Why should their Lord  
Envy them that? Can it be sin to know?  
Can it be death? And do they only stand  
By ignorance? Is that their happy state...?  
Hence I will excite their minds  
With more desire to know, and to reject  
Envious commands, invented with design  
To keep them low, whom knowledge might exalt  
Equal with gods. Aspiring to be such  
They taste and die.’ (IV.517-528)

In Satan’s plotting sex has no part. When he tempts Eve alone he deceives her into believing that God would only forbid her from eating the fruit and gaining knowledge “but to keep ye low and ignorant,/ His worshippers”, whereas in eating the fruit “ye shall be as gods,/ Knowing both good and evil” (IX.708-709). Experience, says Eve, having eaten the fruit, shall now be her guide — not obedience (IX.807-808). Adam is appalled by what she has done but is determined to share her fate:

‘I with thee have fixed my lot,  
Certain to undergo like doom.  
If death consort with thee, death is to me as life...  
Our state cannot be severed. We are one,  
One flesh. To lose thee were to lose myself.’ (IX.951-959).

Adam eats the fruit, “not deceived,/ But fondly overcome with female charm” (IX.998-999). Eating the fruit results in loss of innocent sexual delight, replaced by lust: “carnal desire inflaming. He on Eve cast lascivious eyes. She him/ As wantonly repaid. In lust they burn...” (IX.1013-1015). After they have taken largely of “their fill of love and love’s disport”, they discover that their eyes are opened and their minds are darkened. “Innocence... was gone; Just confidence, and native righteousness,/ And honour, from

about them, naked left/ To guilty shame;/ He covered, but his robe/ Uncovered more” (IX.1054-1059).

In Milton’s version, sexuality is corrupted by disobedience, but is not the initial cause of it. Eve is tempted by the serpent’s offer of superior knowledge and her elevation to the status of a god (hubris). This temptation corresponds to her intellectual inferiority and lower status to Adam, as described by Milton. Lewis suggests that Eve falls through pride and vanity fed by her discontent and her desire for equality, then progresses to desire for superiority and tyranny — she wants to be better than Adam. Then, wondering if her superiority will isolate her from him, or worse, that God will create another woman for him, she wants Adam to share her punishment of death. This, says Lewis, is the sin of murder; Eve wants Adam to die with her, but she rationalises her desire to obscure the baldness of this fact and so sin is enmeshed with self-deceit. Adam, however, knowingly disobeys because he is afraid of losing Eve, being “fondly overcome with female charm”, but finds their relationship altered, inflamed instead with “carnal desire”. Reason and will are now in subjection to “sensual appetite” (IX.1129) and “high passions, anger, hate,/ Mistrust, suspicion, discord” are “high winds” that shake Adam and Eve’s inward state of mind (IX.1122-1125). Knowledge of good and evil is therefore not superior knowledge; reason has been subjugated to passion in the Fall, and it is only through willful and rational obedience to the law of God, and ultimately the law of love, that humans find freedom from the consequences of the Fall.

Lewis is clearly interested in flawed choices and their consequences in the *Narnia* chronicles, and in *The Magician’s Nephew* he re-tells the Biblical story of the Fall.

Digory and Polly are tricked by Digory’s Uncle Andrew into becoming guinea pigs in his experiment to reach other worlds. Having arrived in the Wood between the Worlds by way of magic rings, once the children have recovered from their shock and anger with him, the possibility of adventure occurs to them and they jump into a pond that takes them into another world. They find themselves in “a queer place”, a world that is illuminated by a dull, red cheerless light with a sky that is “extraordinarily dark” (41). They are standing amidst ruins, and the silence is “a dead, cold, empty silence” (43). There is nothing living in this ruined city, and it has a dream-like quality, it is a place of the unconscious. The children have different reactions to this other world: Polly does not like it and wants to return home, whereas Digory is inquisitive. He silences Polly by accusing her of being afraid.

The children find a room full of people, frozen, like waxworks. The faces of the people at the front of the room are “nice”: “Both the men and the women looked kind and wise” (48). Further on the faces look solemn. Further on again they are “very strong

and proud and happy, but they looked cruel”. They become crueler, and no longer happy: “they were even despairing faces: as if the people they belonged to had done dreadful things and also suffered dreadful things” (48). The last figure is a woman “with a look of such fierceness and pride it took your breath away. Yet she was beautiful too”. The change from “nice... kind and wise” to cruelty, “fierceness and pride” is a moral regression. It is, or should be, a warning to the children that this identifiably human regression represents their moral potential. But it is a moral lesson without context or explanation and the children don’t know what to make of it. Digory, understandably, wishes he knew the story behind this. There is a little golden bell in the centre of the room with a little golden hammer to hit it with. “ ‘I wonder... I wonder... I wonder...’ said Digory”. On the pillar supporting the bell are words that initially they can’t decipher, but, as the enchantment of the room works on them, they find they understand them. But Digory “was too wild with curiosity to think about that. He was longing more and more to know what was written on the pillar” (49). The words are a rhyme:

Make your choice, adventurous stranger;  
Strike the bell and bide the danger,  
Or wonder till it drives you mad,  
What would have happened if you had.

Polly and Digory argue, Digory insisting curiosity will drive him mad, and Polly insisting that they should heed the warning. This seems to be a choice between curiosity and safety without the moral implications of Milton’s choice. (A warning is not a commandment.) However, there is a parallel here with Satan’s scheming: “I will excite their minds/ With more desire to know” and what happens next is driven by Digory’s determination to get his own way, like Eve arguing with Adam before she is tempted. Digory firstly accuses Polly of feminine ignorance: “Girls never want to know anything but gossip and rot about people getting engaged” (50). Polly engages with Digory’s gender sniping briefly, until Digory goes further and dismisses Polly as a “kid”. Polly “now in a real rage” says she is going home, and reaches for her magic ring.

I can’t excuse what [Digory] did next except by saying he was very sorry for it afterwards (and so were a good many other people). Before Polly’s hand reached her pocket, he grabbed her wrist, leaned across her with his back against her chest. Then keeping her other arm out of the way with his other elbow, he leaned forward, picked up the hammer, and struck the golden bell a light, smart tap. Then he let her go and they fell apart staring at each other and breathing hard. Polly was just beginning to cry, not with fear, and not even because he had hurt her wrist quite fairly badly, but with furious anger. (51)

And so Digory awakens evil — the fierce, proud and beautiful queen, who will become the White Witch, and who will tempt him again later in the story.

This Fall is enacted not in a newly created idyllic garden scene, but in an ancient and crumbling urban setting. Adam and Eve are children, innocent, and have not

“awakened” sexually. However, gender plays a role in this Fall, as in Milton’s Fall. Whereas Eve manipulates Adam, appealing to his love for her, Digory uses violence against Polly. “Masculine” traits of curiosity and physical strength are contrasted with “feminine” traits of pragmatism and caution: “What does it matter what would have happened?” Polly asks Digory. Digory allows his curiosity to take over his reason and his moral sense, resorting to force to get his own way and dominate Polly. When the queen, Jadis, is awakened and boasts of her cruelties and the destruction of her world, Polly judges her morally — “Beast,” she says — whereas Digory is partly seduced by her and finds her “dazzlingly beautiful” (61). Digory’s “sin” is not disobedience but a corrupted desire (or lust) for knowledge that will justify violent means to achieve its end. This “sin” is also found in Uncle Andrew and Jadis.

Both *Paradise Lost* and *The Magician’s Nephew* offer redemption from the Fall and the awakening of evil and moral self-consciousness (knowledge of good and evil). In *Paradise Lost* Eve, accepting responsibility for her actions, says,

‘This further consolation yet secure  
I carry hence: though all by me is lost,  
Such favour I, unworthy, am vouchsafed,  
By me the Promised Seed shall all restore.’ (XII.620-623)

Likewise, through Digory, an apple-seed will restore Narnia. Jadis has travelled with the children back to their world, and then, through a misidentification of pools, into a world that the children (and their party) see and hear Aslan sing into being. Jadis flees into the woods. When Digory meets Aslan, Aslan asks him to tell “these good Beasts” how she came to be in Narnia. Digory hedges before accepting the full blame for the situation. Then Aslan asks him if he will help to “undo the wrong you have done” (131) by procuring the seed from which a tree will grow that will protect Narnia. Digory travels to a walled garden (not dissimilar to Milton’s description of Eden). There he finds an inscription on the gates:

Come in by the gold gates or not at all,  
Take my fruit for others or forbear.  
For those who steal or those who climb my wall  
Shall find their heart’s desire and find despair. (146)

This inscription, like the inscription beside the bell, is not quite a command.

Digory picks the apple for Aslan and puts it in his pocket, but notices as he does so how enticing the fruit is. “But there were plenty of others. Could it be wrong to taste one?” Maybe, reasons Digory, the words are just advice, “and who cares about advice?” (147). When Digory turns to leave, he sees the Witch, stained with the juice of the apple. She accosts Digory with her relentless argument as the serpent accosts Eve.

[Y]ou are going to carry [the fruit] back, untasted, to the Lion; for him to eat, for him to use. You simpleton! Do you know what the fruit is? I will tell you. It is the apple of youth, the apple of life... Eat it, boy, eat

it; and you and I will both live forever and be king and queen of this whole world...’

‘No thanks,’ said Digory...

‘But what about this mother of yours whom you pretend to love so?... Do you not see, Fool, that one bite of that apple would heal her?... Soon she will be quite well again. All will be well again. Your home will be happy again...’

‘Oh!’ gasped Digory as if he had been hurt, and put his hand on his head.

For now he knew the most terrible choice lay before him. (150)

The Witch informs us that this is the Tree of Life, not the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil from which Adam and Eve ate the fruit. Digory has already succumbed to his lust for knowledge when he awakened the Witch; this is his second temptation. The Witch continues her persuasive arguments, tempting Digory. The stakes of the moral dilemma increase significantly; Digory’s mother is dying and he can save her with the fruit from the Tree of Life. This is a case where, arguably, disobedience is a virtue. But the Witch makes a “fatal mistake”. She suggests to Digory that no one would know about his stealing the fruit if he leaves Polly behind in Narnia.

Of course Digory knew that Polly could get away by her own ring as easily as he could get away by his. But apparently the Witch didn’t know this. And the meanness of the suggestion that he should leave Polly behind suddenly made all the other things that the Witch had been saying to him sound false and hollow. (152)

Digory chooses to take the apple back to Aslan, untasted.

Whereas in the Biblical story, Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden so they cannot eat the fruit of the Tree of Life, Digory faces another, and more morally problematic, choice: to complete the task that will undo the wrong he has done, or to prioritise his mother’s health. Digory obeys Aslan, and that this is the right decision is borne out by the plot. Aslan says simply, “Well done” when Digory returns. Later, when a tree that has grown up from the seed of the apple Digory brought back and planted, Aslan allows Digory to take one of its apples home to his mother. She is healed. Eve’s “seed” (her off-spring, Christ) that will save the world is mirrored here when the seed of Digory’s apple produces fruit that not only saves his mother, but grows into a tree that provides the wood from which a wardrobe is built. Four children enter Narnia through the wardrobe and save it from the tyranny of the White Witch (Jadis).

In this story Lewis combines many of elements of the Fall from *Paradise Lost* but has lightly coloured it with psychoanalytic shades. The ruined city of Charn, as I have already suggested, can be read as the unconscious and the evil Witch that Digory awakens is his shadow. Her fierceness and pride, and the cruelty on the faces of the other kings and queens in the Hall of Images, are reflections, or images, of his own cruelty, pride and fierceness that he uses against Polly as they fight over the ringing of the bell. The Witch follows him (shadow-like) from the dead (unconscious) world of Charn into his own

(conscious) world, and then into Narnia (a world of creation, of imagination). Digory half-admires the queenly Jadis (compared with Polly who detests her), and sees this admiration full-blown and ridiculous in his Uncle Andrew's attitude to her. Digory has not yet recognised any of this within himself and needs Polly to point out to him, that if he wants her help to get rid of the Witch, he needs to apologise to her. " 'Sorry?' exclaimed Digory. 'Well now, if that isn't just like a girl! What have *I* done?'" (72). Polly describes his misbehaviour, and calls him "a cowardly bully" and "a silly idiot". Digory is "very surprised", but apologises, finally awakened to moral self-consciousness, the knowledge of his potential for evil (and good). Unlike Le Guin, Lewis's resolution is that the Shadow, rather than embraced and integrated, must be resisted in obedience to a higher moral authority than the vagaries of human moral reasoning. The Shadow for Lewis is sin, disobedience of the moral law, and is overcome by (humble) acknowledgement and apology.

Pullman energetically opposes the concept of sin, especially the doctrine of original sin that he upends in *His Dark Materials*.

In the fifth century "[Saint] Paul's view that Adam's fall introduced sin and death led Augustine to develop the doctrine of original sin: that Adam's fall perverted all humanity and that its effects were passed by hereditary transmission from generation to generation... Augustine's interpretation of the Fall became the accepted doctrine of Catholic Christianity" (Metzger 223). Pullman accuses his fictional "Pope John Calvin" of slaughtering babies. The historical John Calvin was not a pope but a Protestant opposed to the hierarchical structure of the Catholic church. The accusation is attributed to him probably because Calvin advanced Augustine's view of sin. Mary, a sympathetic character in Pullman's series, and an ex-nun, says that "good and evil are names for what people do, not for what they are" (*Spyglass* 471). This statement now seems self-evident rather than heretical; the belief that babies are born sinful is probably more shocking to most people.

Lewis does not seem to advocate original sin in the Narnian chronicles. Guilt relates to choice and actions. Digory succumbs to curiosity and violence, Edmund, who "had begun to go wrong" in "his first term at that horrid school" (*Lion* 165), betrays his siblings in spite, Jill is rebuked for "showing off" (*Chair* 28), causing Eustace to fall off a cliff. When (in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*) Eustace's greed turns him into a dragon, Aslan undresses him (in a reversal of Adam and Eve being clothed by God), peeling off deep layers of dragon skin, and he is turned back into a boy. This does not suggest that Eustace was born sinful or corrupt, rather that with "greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart" (81) his nature changes into something inhumanly monstrous (83) and that self-deception has many layers.

Pullman uses the word “dust” to convey sin. “The word ‘dust’ carries a complex range of contradictory connotations and resonances” (Rayment-Pickard 62). Dust is connected to the story of creation — Adam was formed from dust, and after the Fall God said to Adam “dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return” (Gen 3:19). For English poets of the seventeenth century “ ‘dust’ was simply ‘death’”. “[T]he word ‘dust’ has become a metaphor for the frailty and transience of the human body... Dust is an emblem of the inevitable corruptibility of matter” (Rayment-Pickard 62). For seventeenth century poets it was also connected with sin: “Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back, Guilty of dust and sin”, wrote George Herbert (“Love.III.” 180). Rayment-Pickard notes that dust is also dirt, and in Pullman’s church it is seen as “the corrupt basis of human nature that must be cut out and destroyed” (62, 63).

Dust is “an emanation from the dark principle itself” (*Lights* 97). Mrs Coulter describes it as “something bad, something wrong, something evil and wicked” (284). Lord Asriel tells Lyra that “The Magisterium [of the Church] decided that Dust was the physical evidence for original sin” (371). He then reads Lyra chapter three of Genesis. This reading is a parallel Genesis describing a parallel Fall, in a text that is same-but-different, and it describes the “opening” of Adam and Eve’s eyes as their daemons (souls) assume their “true form”. Eating the fruit leads to an awareness of difference and separation from the natural world and also to the knowledge of good and evil (372). “Somewhere,” says Asriel, “out there is the origin of all the Dust, all the death, the sin, the misery, the destructiveness in the world... *That’s* original sin. And I’m going to destroy it. Death is going to die” (377). After Lyra’s friend Roger has been murdered by Asriel in pursuit of this grand scheme, Lyra in anger and grief concludes, “if *they* [Mrs Coulter, Asriel and the evil Oblation Board] all think Dust is bad, it must be good...” (397). This is not faultless reasoning, of course, but it is the premise for Pullman’s argument: original sin is a *good* thing: “If Dust were a *good* thing... If it were to be sought and welcomed and cherished...” muses Lyra.

The mystery of Dust deepens in *The Subtle Knife*. Lyra connects Dust with Shadows and Dark Matter when she talks with Mary, the ex-nun and physicist. “So what is it, Shadows? Is it good or evil, or what?” she asks Mary (100). Mary replies, “Everything about this is *embarrassing*... D’you know how embarrassing it is to mention good and evil in a scientific laboratory?” Lyra rebukes her “severely”: “You can’t investigate Shadows, Dust, whatever it is, without thinking about this kind of thing, good and evil and such” (101). Dust is therefore deeply entwined with morality. Mary investigates Shadows further using her computer to converse with them. The Shadows, she finds, are the same as Dust and Dark Matter. They are conscious and, as humans evolved, “the human brain became the ideal vehicle for this [physical] amplification

process [of Shadows]. Suddenly... [humans] became conscious” (249, 259). They, the Shadows, are “angels”, that is, “shadow-matter”, and “Matter and spirit are one” (260). Furthermore, these angels intervened in human evolution motivated by vengeance. Mary realises these are “rebel angels”. They instruct her to “Find the girl [Lyra] and the boy [Will]. Waste no more time. You must play the serpent” (261). Mary is told exactly what to do, and to “Do it now and go at once” (262). She obeys without question. Mary is central to Pullman’s Fall; she is the serpent. In this passage, Pullman re-writes the Fall within evolution — there is no Creator — but there are rebel angels who are responsible for, in my words, moral self-consciousness, knowledge of good and evil. “Shadows” suggest Jung’s Shadow, the dark side of human nature, but unlike Jung’s Shadow they are associated not with innate evil but consciousness and good.

Mary is told another “Fall” story by the mulefa, creatures who use seedpods as wheels in an ecologically co-operative way. (Using the seedpods as wheels breaks them open so they can germinate.) In this story, the mulefa were tempted by the serpent to use the seedpods as wheels, and they did, gaining consciousness, self-understanding and language. This consciousness, called “sraf”, gave the mulefa “memory and wakefulness” (*Spyglass* 236,7). This story is puzzling as a “Fall” as it lacks moral choice. The mulefa’s story anticipates Lyra and Will’s “Fall”, and the seedpods refer to Eve’s seed representing reproductive life, but they miss the redemptive quality in Genesis, the Gospels, Milton and Lewis. When, later in the narrative, a priest considers evangelising the mulefa, he ponders:

‘The first thing to do here would be to convince the four-legged creatures, who seemed to have the rudiments of reason, that their habit of riding on wheels was abominable and Satanic, and contrary to the will of God.’ (490).

This suggests that there is a moral aspect to wheels although it is obscure as they are used only for transportation. Pullman appears to use seedpods as a metaphor for sex, ridiculing the vacuity of culturally inappropriate and repressive “moralism” of nineteenth century missionaries. I am not convinced this “Fall” works, however.

Pullman’s “Dust” is connected with sexuality. Dust clusters around adults and children at puberty but pre-pubescent children are relatively free of Dust. Pullman’s Church condemns Dust, no doubt because of its connection with sex, but towards the end of *The Amber Spyglass* we are in no doubt that Dust is a positive, life-enhancing and life-giving substance. Mrs Coulter, in the falling Dust “which gave a soft clarity to every detail”, whispers, “Dust is beautiful... I never knew” (426). This, as Rayment-Pickard observes, conjures up Joni Mitchell’s stardust; “dust as the essence of natural human goodness: ‘We are stardust/ We are golden/ And we’ve got to get ourselves/ Back to the

garden” (62). Joni Mitchell’s sentiments are close to the heart of Pullman’s morality, I believe.

Pullman’s “Fall” is overshadowed by the busy plot in *His Dark Materials*; so much so that Hugh Rayment-Pickard, who is generally quite astute, says, “The story does not need Mary Malone’s sexual history” (53) and describes her “principal function” as filling out “Pullman’s critique of religion” (55). In fact, her sexual history is pivotal, and her principal function is to act the part of the serpent, the tempter, as we have been told previously in the narrative. Dust, in the mulefa’s world where Mary is living and where Lyra and Will find themselves, is disappearing, flowing out of the world. Mary feels “the weight of responsibility like a heavy hand” and sees that her way of helping to restore the balance of this world is to “Tell [Will and Lyra] stories” (463).

Mary tells them stories from her life: how, while still a nun, at a scientific conference she was sitting under lantern light under a lemon tree and felt sexual attraction. She remembered her twelve-year-old self falling in love over a piece of marzipan. (This seems to echo Lewis’s Turkish delight temptation.) Lyra’s reaction is important: “Lyra felt something strange happen to her body”, the “sensations in her breast” are “exciting and frightening at the same time” (467). She is deeply affected, “as if she had been handed the key to a great house she hadn’t known was there” (468). Mary continues to describe this pre-adolescent relationship: kissing in a garden, “aching” for the boy, it is “paradise” (468). This memory triggered her rejection of her vocation, symbolised by throwing her crucifix into the sea, and she fulfilled her sexual desire. After hearing the narrative, Lyra’s sensations are of “a fragile vessel brim-full of new knowledge” (471). All this imagery is taken straight out of Genesis: Mary, by storytelling, has played the tempter’s role and Lyra is sexually awakened, “brim-full of new knowledge”, although this is not knowledge of good and evil but sex.

The actual “garden” scene of Pullman’s “Fall” is initially told from the point of view of Father Gomez whose mission is to kill Lyra. He tracks Will and Lyra and, as they enter “a little wood of silver-barked trees”, praises God for his mission because “it was clearer than ever that the boy and the girl were walking into mortal sin” (489).

[T]here she was, and she paused and looked back so that he saw the expression on her face, and he could not understand how anyone so steeped in evil could look so radiant with hope and happiness. (490)

The point of view then shifts directly to that of an impartial observer.

Lyra took one of those little red fruits. With a fast-beating heart, she turned to him and said, ‘Will...’

And she lifted the fruit gently to his mouth.

She could see from his eyes that he knew at once what she meant, and that he was too joyful to speak...

Then before they knew how it happened, they were clinging together, blindly pressing their faces towards each other...

Around them there was nothing but silence, as if all the world were holding its breath. (492)

This “Fall” reverses the flow of Dust from the world. Mary sees Will and Lyra returning. “They were holding hands, talking together, heads close, oblivious to everything else”. Mary decides not to watch them through her amber spyglass.

[Mary] knew what she would see: they would seem to be made of living gold. They would seem the true image of what human beings always could be, once they had come into their inheritance.

The Dust pouring down from the stars had found a living home again, and these children-no-longer-children, saturated with love, were the cause of it all. (497)

Pullman’s “Fall” lacks the crucial element of the Biblical Fall: moral choice. Both children are unparented; no authority tells them that sexual intimacy at the age of twelve is unwise, let alone sinful. Their “sin” is therefore completely innocent, even naïve, something they “fall” into, by chance. It is not sin in the traditional sense because Pullman does not believe in sin. Moreover, the sexual “temptation” of Will and Lyra, succumbed to, is the salvation of the mulefa’s world and, ultimately, all worlds. Juvenile sex it seems will save the worlds — if only there are enough rebel angels about to kill the evil priests who want to kill the children. Closely shadowing Mitchell’s song, Will and Lyra appear made of “living gold” and Dust pours down from the stars, as stardust. It is tempting to think Pullman is advocating a 1960s free love permissiveness, an “all you need is love” ethos; nostalgia for a simpler life, closer to the land, a desire to “get my soul free” and to get “back to the garden”.

I think that Pullman is more serious than this suggests, however, and uses sex as a symbol of that which is life-giving. In Blake’s poem, “The Garden of Love”, the speaker returns to the Garden of Love (Eden) where he/ she used to play, and finds in the middle of it a chapel with “Thou shalt not” written over the door. The speaker turns again to the garden “that so many sweet flowers bore”.

But I saw it was filled with graves,  
And tomb-stones where flowers should be;  
And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,  
And binding with briars my joys and desires.

It is against restrictive, life-denying religious belief that Pullman places his “Fall”. The priest is, happily, murdered before he can kill Lyra with his “moralism” — his “Thou shalt nots” — so Will and Lyra can enjoy innocent (that is, free from guilt) sexual intimacy.

Inverting the concept of dust (or sin) to make it positive problematizes moral choice and evil. I will go on to argue that Pullman’s ethos does not carry this position to its conclusion.

### ***The Angel of the Enlightenment: Romanticising the devil***

*Paradise Lost* has divided readers for centuries between those who admire the pride and defiance of Lucifer and abhor the authority of God, and those who see him as a cruel but convincing villain whose rebellion against the Kingdom of Heaven is not only futile but malign. There seems little doubt that Milton intended Satan to be read as a villain but, in endowing him with human motivations and aspirations, he allowed the possibility of Satan being misread as a hero. Lewis sides with Milton, whereas Pullman deliberately “misreads” *Paradise Lost*, building his narrative upon the heroic aspirations of his Lucifer.

Gabriel says of the fallen Lucifer, renamed Satan, “sly hypocrite, who now wouldst seem/ Patron of liberty... Once fawned, and cringed, and servilely adored Heaven’s awful Monarch” (IV.958-961). Although Blake confidently declares, “The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, & at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil’s party without knowing it” (“The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”), I think that Milton, knowingly, warns us not to be taken in by this Satan he has created. He calls Satan a “sly hypocrite”, he is deceptive and duplicitous. He may “seem” the “Patron of liberty”, but he is not to be trusted. Gabriel remembers him as one who once “fawned and cringed, and servilely adored” God; this is not a pretty description of a heroic character, but one who is self-interested and ambitious, who is willing to stoop low to advance his interests and a far cry from the moral obedience that Milton advocates. Lewis argues that Lucifer is a tragic figure in *Paradise Lost*. If this were not an epic poem he could be painted as comic, but Milton has rounded him out, made him “human”. He is full of contradictions and subtleties: for example, wanting equality and liberty for himself but not for his followers. “Satan’s monomaniac concern with himself and his supposed rights and wrongs is a necessity of the Satanic predicament... to be in himself and for himself” says Lewis (102).

“Romantic readings of *Paradise Lost* had tended to see Milton as romanticising the devil. This was certainly both Blake’s view and Percy Shelley’s; and it is shared by Gilbert and Gubar, for example, and by Bloom” (Milner 222). “Romanticising the devil” is to elevate him to heroic status, to view his rebellion as a Grand Defiance and his pride as admirable self-assertion, ascending to heaven to “seize the fire” like Prometheus, and refusing obedience, submission and humility. “Good is the passive that obeys Reason,” says Blake, “Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell... Energy is Eternal Delight”. Satan represents energy, passion, action; he is the tyger; he not only seizes the fire but he dwells in fire.

In “Prometheus Unbound”, Shelley has Prometheus give wisdom to Jupiter “with this law alone, ‘Let man be free’”. Shelley’s Prometheus is a Satanic figure, one

who steals fire from Zeus, and, in opposing a god, is punished. Shelley outlines his ethic in the last stanza: to suffer woes, to forgive wrongs, to defy Power, to love, bear and hope;

Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;  
This, like thy glory Titan, is to be  
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;  
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

Freedom is a central Enlightenment ideal; the first value in the cry of the French Revolution. Shelley's Prometheus makes freedom a moral law and in this he is Satan's kin.

Milton's Satan represented a revolutionary figure in the Enlightenment, and he returns to become a voice for equality for radical feminist literary criticism in the early 1980s. For Gilbert and Gubar, God the Father is a symbol of patriarchal authoritarian rule and Milton's Satan defies this rule.

[Satan's] aristocratic egalitarianism, manifested in his war against the heavenly system of primogeniture that has unjustly elevated God's 'Son' above even the highest angels, suggests a Byronic (and Shelleyan and Godwinian) concern with liberty and justice for all. (202)

Autonomy and knowledge, they argue, are pre-requisites for freedom. The "revolutionary cosmologies" of the Romantic poets (Blake, Byron and Shelley) were "emblematic of that liberated dawn" of a reborn society, repudiating "the conservative, hierarchical 'politics of paradise'" (204). But Gilbert and Gubar go further, for women, they suggest, Milton's Satan is not just the emancipator of the oppressed and women, but also women's ideal:

the incarnation of worldly male sexuality, fierce, powerful, experienced, simultaneously brutal and seductive, devilish enough to overwhelm the body and yet enough a fallen angel to charm the soul. (206)

He is "a sort of Nietzschean Übermensch, giving orders and expecting homage to his 'natural' — that is, masculine — superiority, as if he were God's shadow self, the id of heaven" (206). Gilbert and Gubar's evocation of Nietzsche's Übermensch seems apt; he represents "the fundamental will of the spirit" that "wants to be master within itself and around itself and to feel itself master" (*Good and Evil* 141). Our entire instinctual life comes down to "one basic form of will... the will to power", argues Nietzsche (49).<sup>35</sup> The will to power, rather than to obedience, is certainly central to Milton's Satan as it is to Pullman's Lord Asriel.

Lewis has learned a lesson from Milton's *Paradise Lost*: not to make his Satan "human" and humanly identifiable. Mr Beaver therefore tells the children that the Witch is "no daughter of Eve"; she is half Jinn and half giant. "No, no, there isn't a drop of real

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<sup>35</sup> Hollingdale's commentary in this edition of *Beyond Good and Evil* clarifies that Nietzsche is not advocating the will to power, but suggests "that the drive in living things is the drive to aggrandisement and augmentation of power" (211).

human blood in the Witch” (*Lion* 78). We hear of her first through Mr Tumnus who is “in the pay of the White Witch”, and how she makes it “Always winter and never Christmas” (23). That small phrase, “and never Christmas” speaks volumes to a juvenile readership: only a really nasty tyrant would abolish Christmas! It is a whole page later that we hear of the atrocities in store for the faun for defying her: cutting off his tail, sawing off his horns, plucking out his beard, disfiguring his hooves, even turning him into stone (24, 25). We are already prejudiced against her when we encounter her meeting Edmund in the next chapter and her behaviour confirms our prejudices. Unlike Edmund, we are not taken in by her lies and duplicity. By the end of the story, after she has murdered Aslan and gathered her nightmarish army to destroy the good, honest, decent Narnians, it would take a lot of cynicism to “misread” her as anything but personified evil.

It is not until *The Silver Chair*, four books later in the series, that we meet Jadis, the White Witch, again. This time she does initially fool us — she is:

a lady on a white horse, a horse so lovely that you wanted to kiss its nose and give it a lump of sugar at once. But the lady, who rode side-saddle and wore a long, fluttering dress of dazzling green, was lovelier still.  
(79)

The children, Jill and Eustace, are fooled, but their guide, a chronically pessimistic Marshwiggle called Puddleglum, is suspicious of her. She promises the travel-weary children hot baths and beds to sleep in, and “ease and refreshment” at Harfang Castle (81) but is, in fact, sending them to their deaths. As soon as we understand this we revise our attitude towards her, and we are hardly surprised when she later metamorphoses into a serpent, the symbol of Satan. It is in this story that she meets her death; the Shadow is finally defeated in the Underworld of the unconscious.

In *The Magician’s Nephew* we gain Jadis’s backstory. Lewis makes her motivation one of greed for power, but he makes this greed simultaneously adult (Jadis’s power is political) and childish. Jadis describes the battle for power and destruction of her own world: “It was all my sister’s fault... she drove me to it... Her pride has destroyed the whole world” (60). The lust for power, and the total destruction of a world (like an apocalyptic nuclear disaster), are reduced to childish sibling rivalry. She tells the children that she used the secret of the Deplorable Word (total destruction of all living things) that reverses the Biblical creative power of the “Word”. Digory and Polly protest, “But what about the people?... All the ordinary people...” (61). Jadis replies:

‘what would be wrong for you or for any of the common people is not wrong in a great Queen such as I. The weight of the whole world is on our shoulders. We must be freed from all rules. Ours is a high and lonely destiny.’ (61)

Jadis has no narrative sympathy. She is very powerful but speaks like a self-obsessed child, a cruel bully. Her moral rhetoric, although it may sound grand, is ugly by its consequences. Her love of power is “hungry and greedy” (62).

Lewis treads more carefully, as if knowing he is on shaky ground, with his depiction of evil in other, non-Aslanic, religions. Tash is first introduced in *The Horse and His Boy*, in passing, as a foreign god, central to the Calomenes’ religion. Prince Rabadash addresses Aslan as a “demon... the foul fiend of Narnia... the enemy of the gods” setting up an opposition between Aslan and Tash (182).

In *The Last Battle* Tash is re-introduced. He is observed gliding Northwards by the protagonists of the story. He has a “deathly smell”, is transparent like smoke, has a bird of prey’s head, “a cruel, curved beak”, four arms and “long, pointed, bird-like claws”. The “grass seemed to wither beneath it” (85, 86). It, or he, is a cruel, deathly thing that inspires fear. The Dwarf comments, “And this fool of an Ape, who didn’t believe in Tash, will get more than he bargained for! He called for Tash: Tash has come” (87). I do not think that Tash represents Satan, personified evil, as Jadis does, but he is a god, maybe a fallen angel, opposed to Aslan. (The Calormene culture is based on Middle Eastern culture, but Tash is not Allah as this description of Tash illustrates. He seems more like a mythological monster.) But Lewis insists that devout followers of Tash are not condemned to hell; Emeth, who has served Tash faithfully all his life, desiring to “know more of him”, meets Aslan after passing through the stable door (symbolising death). He falls at Aslan’s feet, certain he will be punished, but Aslan says, “Son, thou art welcome” (166). When Emeth protests that he has served Tash not Aslan, and does this mean that Tash and Aslan are therefore one, Aslan growls and replies,

‘Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites, I take to me the services which thou hast done to him. For I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. Therefore if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath’s sake, it is by me he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him. And if any man do cruelty in my name, then, though he says the name of Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted.’ (166)

For Lewis, then, good and evil are opposites, and no matter what words we attach to deeds, they are identifiable as good or evil by absolute markers of integrity or, conversely, cruelty. Personified evil is therefore not known by its name but by its deeds; ethics, it seems, is ultimately transcendent in Lewis’s ethos. Lewis anticipates Pullman’s cruel Authority and his assistant, Metatron; for him, the Authority would not be the Judeo-Christian God but Satan.

Lord Asriel is an ambiguous character and has many parallels with Milton’s Satan. He is introduced to the reader as:

a tall man with powerful shoulders, a fierce, dark face, and eyes that seemed to flash and glitter with savage laughter. It was a face to be dominated by, or to fight: never a face to patronise or pity. All his movements were large and perfectly balanced, like those of a wild animal, and when he appeared in a room like this, he seemed like a wild animal held in a cage too small for it. (*Lights* 13)

Twice he is referred to as a wild animal, alluding to Blake's tyger; his daemon is a snow leopard, a powerful feline, although of snow rather than fire. He is the romantic hero that Gilbert and Gubar describe: "the incarnation of worldly male sexuality, fierce, powerful, experienced, simultaneously brutal and seductive". Mrs Coulter, who herself uses her sexuality manipulatively to gain power, finds him sexually compelling. Like Prometheus, his ambition is over-reaching, like Satan, he wants to be a god and declares war on God, determined to destroy the Kingdom of Heaven.

Asriel is given the title "Lord", setting him apart as aristocracy in a hierarchical society. He is a champion of republicanism but he never renounces his title and his behaviour is "lordly" throughout the narrative. He is the epitome of Nietzsche's noble man, the master. Nietzsche's noble man is aristocratic, proud and holds truth in high regard (*Good and Evil* 176). There are two types of moralities: master and slave, Nietzsche suggests. Masters create their own morality: "The noble type of man feels himself to be the determiner of values... he creates values" (176). He (and I don't think this is a universal "he") is powerful and "[h]onours in himself the man of power" (176), having pride and believing in himself. He feels no pity, and is contemptuous of selflessness, "sympathy and the 'warm heart'" (177). He despises utilitarianism (the highest good for the most people), finding the good in himself rather than in actions. By comparison, slave morality belongs to the oppressed. "The slave is suspicious of the virtues of the powerful" (178), resentful of power, designating it as evil. The morality valued by slaves include: "pity, the kind and helping hand, the warm heart, patience, industriousness, humility, friendliness" (178). That is, the "good man" is a "harmless man" (178). This is a "morality of mediocrity" and speaks of "moderation and dignity and duty and love of one's neighbour..." (182).

I set it down that egoism pertains to the essence of the noble soul, I mean the immovable faith that as to a being such as 'we are' other beings have to be subordinate by their nature, and sacrifice themselves to us. The noble soul accepts this fact of its egoism without any question-mark... as something that may be grounded in the primal law of things... 'it is justice itself'. Under certain circumstances... it will admit that there are others with rights equal to its own... (185)

It is this master morality that Nietzsche and Asriel privilege.

Raphael, speaking to Adam in *Paradise Lost*, says:

Heaven is for thee too high  
To know what passes there. Be lowly wise.  
Think only what concerns thee, and thy being.

Dream not of other worlds... (VIII.172-175).

This advice is spurned by Asriel who has an insatiable curiosity for knowledge of his own and other worlds. His vision of Utopia (the republic of heaven) is a rejection of his society's ideology. Lowly wisdom is anathema to him, as it is to Nietzsche, and as it is to Milton's Satan. Asriel is completely single-minded in his desire not only learn of, but to enter, other worlds, and particularly to find and destroy the Authority.

Early in *The Subtle Knife* the witch, Serafina, interrogates Asriel's manservant, Theorold, as to Asriel's intentions. Theorold has guessed correctly what drives Asriel — his disgust at the doctrines of the church and his rebellion against, not just the church, but against the Authority. "I think he's aiming a rebellion against the highest power of all. He's gone a-searching for the dwelling place of the Authority Himself, and he's a-going to destroy Him," he tells her (48).

'He dares to do what men and women don't even dare to think. And look what he's done already: he's torn open the sky, he's opened the way to another world... so with one part of me... I say he's mad, wicked, deranged. Yet with another part I think, he's Lord Asriel, he's not like other men. Maybe... if it was ever going to be possible, it'd be done by him and by no one else.' (49)

The Kingdom of Heaven is the tyrannical rule of the Authority and the rebel angels who wander between many worlds want to destroy the tyranny. Mrs Coulter meets one of these angels, Xaphania, who tells her, "I have pledged my allegiance to Lord Asriel, because I see in his great enterprise the best hope of destroying the tyranny at last." Mrs Coulter asks her what will happen if he fails. Xaphania replies, "Then we shall all be destroyed, and cruelty will reign for ever" (*Spyglass* 220). But on the next page we learn that Asriel does not intend to invade the kingdom, but to set up a "world where there are no kingdoms at all... We intend to be free citizens of the republic of heaven" (222). However, it is a very militaristic republic; Asriel has commanders, an armoury, forges and iron-works, and smithies and miners work for him. We are led to believe that the workers in this republic are willing volunteers (although we are not told this explicitly), but there is no sign of a democratic process; this is a very hierarchical republic (224-225). The description of the forge recalls the hammers, chains, furnaces and anvils that create Blake's tyger.

In one respect Asriel is different from the Satan of Christian mythology — he dwells in ice and snow rather than fire; he is pure reason, not pure passion. It is this pure reason that makes him so cold-hearted; cold-hearted enough to murder a child in a scientific experiment.

Lyra confronts Asriel just before Roger's death with the truth that he is her father and that he has hidden it from her for years. She would have been "so proud" had she known, she says. But Asriel, unmoved, calls her "an insolent child". Distraught at his

frigid severity, Lyra cries out, “You en’t human, Lord Asriel. You en’t my father... Fathers are supposed to love their daughters, en’t they? You don’t love me, and I don’t love you...” Asriel replies, “If you’re going to be sentimental I shan’t waste time talking to you” (*Lights* 368). When Asriel kills Roger, Lyra is “wrenched apart with unhappiness. And with anger, too; she could have killed her father...” (397). Rayment-Pickard comments, “Lord Asriel’s murder of Roger is narrated without any kind of moral comment... The moment of Roger’s murder is handled by Pullman with narrative sleight of hand. Pullman does not describe Roger’s death at Asriel’s hands, but instead describes the beautiful, even heavenly, environmental effects that his death produces” (41). Immediately subsequent to the moment of Roger’s death, Pullman, after describing these beautiful effects, then spends four pages describing a romantic encounter between Asriel and Mrs Coulter, thus deflecting the emotional impact of the murder. And Lyra, though angry with her father, does not refuse to have anything to do with his experiment, instead she participates in it:

She turned away [from Roger’s body]. Behind them [Lyra and her daemon] lay pain and death and fear; ahead of them lay doubt, and danger, and fathomless mysteries... So Lyra and her daemon turned away from the world they were born in, and looked towards the sun, and walked into the sky. (398-399)

These are the final words of *Northern Lights*. Asriel’s responsibility for Roger’s death is quickly forgotten in the sequels and this is important because he is to become the leader of the rebellion with which we should sympathise.<sup>36</sup> Morally, Asriel may be mad, wicked and deranged, but we cannot miss the admiration in Theorold’s words, “He’s Lord Asriel, he’s not like other men”. He is a genius and a charismatic leader.

Asriel is an ideological hero in the Romantic sense. Along with Lyra’s mother, Mrs Coulter, he remains a deeply problematic and ambiguous hero, one, I think, we are supposed to admire for his cause but who remains unrepentant and unredeemed to the end of the story.<sup>37</sup> A man who dispassionately murders a child, viewing him as a disposable means to an end, requires a radical change of heart to function as a sympathetic hero, as would a child-mutilator, like Mrs Coulter. Is he morally ambiguous or is he beyond good and evil? I think, given his inability to feel pity, sentiment or remorse, he has placed himself with Nietzsche, beyond good and evil.

Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* is severely diminished to human size in Lewis’s *The Magician’s Nephew*. Digory initially sees Jadis as a romantic heroine and we see this

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<sup>36</sup> When first reading the series I was certain that Asriel would be called to account for Roger’s murder and was disturbed that this never happened.

<sup>37</sup> Repentance and redemption presuppose sin and are therefore incompatible with Pullman’s ideology. Lyra is the only character who shows regret and desires to make amends, and I will discuss her ethical role later.

full-blown in Digory's Uncle Andrew. Asriel and Uncle Andrew are interesting to juxtapose because they share some basic characteristics: Lyra initially believes Asriel is her uncle and both men are willing to sacrifice a child's life — a friend of their own child/ nephew — for their scientific/ magical experiment to explore other worlds. There is nothing of the Byronic romantic hero about Uncle Andrew, however. He is described as “very tall and very thin. He had a long clean-shaven face with a sharply-pointed nose and extremely bright eyes and a great tousled mop of grey hair” (18). He has “very long, beautifully white, fingers” (19) and he cracks his knuckles. Like Asriel he wants a child guinea pig for his experiment and like Asriel he is entirely indifferent to the ethical implications of this; like Nietzsche's Master he believes he is above common slave morality. The following statements from *Beyond Good and Evil* are echoed in a speech by Uncle Andrew:

Our supreme insights must — and should — sound like follies, and in certain cases crimes, when they come impermissibly to the ears of those who are not predisposed and predestined for them. (43)

The overcoming of morality, in a certain sense even the self-overcoming of morality: let this be the name for that protracted secret labour which has been reserved for the subtlest, most honest and most malicious consciences as living touchstones of the soul. (46)

When Digory tells Uncle Andrew he was “jolly rotten” not to keep his promise, he replies “with a puzzled look”:

‘Oh, I see. You mean little boys ought to keep their promises. Very true: most right and proper, I'm sure, and I'm very glad you have been taught to do it. But of course you must understand that rules of that sort, however excellent they may be for little boys — and servants — and women — and even people in general, can't possibly be expected to apply to profound students and great thinkers and sages... Men like me, who possess hidden wisdom, are freed from common rules just as we are cut off from common pleasures, Ours, my boy, is a high and lonely destiny.’ (23)

Digory initially thinks he is saying something “rather fine” because he looks so “grave and noble and mysterious” but then he recalls the “ugly look” on his uncle's face before Polly vanished and sees through his “grand words”. “ ‘All it means,’ he said to himself, ‘is that he thinks he can do anything he likes to get anything he wants’ ” (24). This is a cutting critique of Nietzsche's philosophy, and also of Asriel's, and Lewis persuades us through the narrative that Digory's assessment of Uncle Andrew as “simply a wicked, cruel magician” is correct. Digory then asserts that Uncle Andrew's experiment is “exactly the same as if you'd murdered her [Polly]” (28). When Uncle Andrew is propelled into another world by chance, he is shown up as a coward; drunk and ridiculous, he is declared a Joke by the Narnian animals (121). Lewis has reduced his *Übermensch* to a pitiful fool, not unlike Malvolio; in the post-World War Two era in which he was writing the memory of real horrors perpetrated by those leaders who

subscribed to Uncle Andrew's and Asriel's philosophy was very much alive. Lewis has chosen to cripple the philosophy through ridicule rather than elaborate the real horrors of it.

Asriel's ambition both succeeds and fails. The Authority disintegrates and Metatron, the ruthless second-in-command after the Authority (and who is, I think, a re-writing of Milton's Son, Christ, the head of the corrupt ideology of the Church), falls to his death, taking both Lyra's parents with him. We have already been told that "Lord Asriel's great enterprise will fail in the end" because "we have to build the republic of heaven where we are, because for us there is no elsewhere" (382). There are therefore no other worlds in the end. All the cuts between the worlds must be mended so that Dust, the life force, can be retained within each world separately. (I presume that this is not a symbolic sealing off the other world of imagination — Ricoeur's Utopia — if so it places a storyteller in an odd position.) Lyra, who has not seen her father since her angry outburst at the end of *Northern Lights*, offers Asriel this eulogy: "all that bravery and skill... All that, all wasted! All for nothing!" (482).

Although Pullman's ideological sympathies lie with Asriel (Xaphania, who is a good authority figure, pledges him her allegiance), I am not convinced that Pullman stands, ethically, beside him. Pullman's ethos is more complex, and more problematic, than this. Both Lyra's parents, Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter, add moral ambiguity to his narrative but I believe it is with Lyra that Pullman's ethical sympathies lie.

## **The Ethical Hearts of Lucy and Lyra**

Milton's underlying ethical worldview rests on a hierarchical ideology; obedience to God is therefore the heart of the ethos of *Paradise Lost*. However, Milton has done the work of a storyteller too well, and as his characters move through his narrative they acquire a life of their own and we believe in them. In the imaginative space where stories are received and pondered and do war with held ideologies, the character of Lucifer/ Satan has emerged as a Romantic hero and not a villain. We do not inevitably accept this reading; Lewis's interpretation of him as a selfish coward is an example of an alternative reading and emerges from Lewis's own ideological position. I find Milton's portrayal of Eve much more problematic than his portrayal of Satan, and I read her against the grain of Milton's ideology, accepting her claim to be equal with Adam as just and her eating of the apple as sympathetic. I reject Milton's prioritising of Adam's reason over Eve's emotion. The subtle magic of Milton's lyricism has not brought me under the spell of his ideology as it clashes with my own ethical values.

In comparison with Milton's sexism, there is something rather touching about two middle-aged Oxford men, both well-regarded writers, entrusting the ethical heart of their respective narratives to two young girls: Lewis with Lucy and Pullman with Lyra. I do not think it is a coincidence that Lucy's and Lyra's names are so similar as there are many parallels between the two characters.

At first glance the two protagonists are very different. Lucy is the youngest of four children with two living parents (although all the adventures occur when the parents are absent) whereas Lyra is alone, believing herself to be an orphan; she has been abandoned since infancy by her two self-obsessed parents. Lucy is docile, whereas Lyra is strong-willed and wild. Lucy's age is never stated, but she is probably about eight in the first book, whereas Lyra is twelve. Lucy is absolutely truthful whereas Lyra is a habitual liar. But despite the differences, both girls have been endowed with ethical characteristics that the writers seem to hold dear.

As *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is dedicated to Lewis's god-daughter, Lucy Barfield, it is expected that her namesake will be the heroine of the story. But over the first few pages Lucy's siblings get more attention than she does; she is notable mainly for her apprehension, timidity and fear. When the children explore the house, however, it is Lucy who stays behind in the wardrobe room and discovers that the wardrobe is magic. "Lucy felt a little frightened, but she felt very inquisitive and excited as well" (13). She reassures herself that she can go back at any time before she sets off to investigate the world within the wardrobe that she has discovered.

When Lucy meets Mr Tumnus, accepting his invitation for tea, we find out a lot more about her character. She is trusting and considerate, and when Lucy finds out the chilling fact that Mr Tumnus intends to hand her over to the White Witch, although she is "rather frightened", her fear turns to "great distress" when he starts to cry (22). Her sympathy for him obscures the horror of her predicament, and when he leads her back to the lamppost so she can go home they part as friends — she holds no resentment towards him, concerned only for his safety. Lucy emerges as cautious but curious, concerned for others as much, or more, than for herself, timid and fearful but also compassionate, sympathetic and forgiving. These character traits are reinforced through the next few scenes — Edmund teases her cruelly for her insistence that the wardrobe world is real, and when he enters it himself she readily overlooks his spite — she is "too happy and excited to notice how snappishly Edmund spoke" (43). When he denies going to Narnia to Peter and Susan, Lucy doesn't argue (she rushes out of the room and cries in solitude); but nor does she deny her story, insisting that she knows that what she has experienced is true. When the children discover Narnia together, and realise that Lucy has been right all along, Peter apologises to Lucy and her forgiveness is immediate and total. She is

later given a healing cordial by Father Christmas and by the end of the book she has taken on the attribute of a healer, attending the wounded on the battleground (165).

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lucy's character is developed more fully. Still compassionate, she heals irritating and ungrateful Eustace of his seasickness with her cordial (28). When a dragon accosts the company, Lucy notices its swollen leg. She calls it a "poor thing" and, disregarding Caspian's warning, runs towards it and attempts to cure it (87). Both these episodes illustrate Lucy's uncalculating generosity of spirit. Several chapters later, she and her friends are captured by invisible creatures who require her to perform a task. She immediately agrees and, nervously but courageously, walks into an unknown danger to save her own and her friends' lives. The fearless Reepicheep calls it "a noble and heroic act" (124).

Her task is to find, in a book of spells, one to make the creatures visible. Reading through it, she comes across "An infallible spell to make beautiful her that uttereth it beyond the lot of mortals" (131). This is the only chink in Lucy's moral armour that we are ever shown: desire for recognition and beauty. She cannot utter the spell, however, because as she looks at the page she sees Aslan's face staring at her and growling. She turns the page hastily. After Lucy succeeds in her task she sees Aslan and runs to him "with a little cry of delight and with her arms outstretched". As her face lights up, we are told, she looks almost as beautiful as "that other Lucy in the picture" (136); her illuminating beauty is ardent and unselfconscious love. (This sets her in opposition to Dorian Gray). When, at the end of the story, Aslan tells Lucy and Edmund that they will never return to Narnia, they cry out in despair. "It isn't Narnia, you know," sobbed Lucy. "It's *you*. We shan't meet you there. And how shall we live, never meeting you?" (209). Edmund refers to Aslan as "Sir", but there are no formalities between Lucy and Aslan; Aslan frequently refers to Lucy as "dearest". Love for Aslan is fundamental to Lucy, so much so that she doubts she can live without him. She is in love with personified goodness, goodness like a Kantian unshifting rock upon which she bases all her decisions. Unlike Milton, Lewis privileges passion over reason.

Truth, ardent love, healing and compassion are also core characteristics of Lyra although Pullman makes these characteristics less straightforward in his heroine than Lewis does in his. Where Lucy is *accused* of being a liar in the beginning of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lyra is a habitual liar. Like Lucy, Lyra is associated with a wardrobe; *Northern Lights* begins with Lyra hiding in a wardrobe to conceal herself from the scholars as she is forbidden to be in the Retiring Room; curiosity leads her to explore that which is out of bounds. We know at the outset of the novel that Lyra is prepared to disobey adult authority (where Lucy is not), but when Lyra observes the Master pouring poison into a decanter of wine, she faces a moral dilemma unlike anything the honest

Lucy ever faces. She can make herself known and get into trouble for her disobedience or save a life. But, we are told, “[Lyra’s] main thought was anxiety, and it wasn’t for herself” (10). When she sees Lord Asriel pour himself a glass of the poisoned wine, she impulsively tumbles out of the wardrobe and snatches the glass from his hand (13). It is not, however, love that prompts her to save Asriel — we are told she admires and fears him greatly; her feelings for him are ambivalent (6).

Pullman frequently interjects through the narrative with denigrating judgements of Lyra: the Intercessor is “confounded by her sly indifference and insincere repentances” (52), Ma Costa calls her “deceptive” (113). The narrator describes her as a “practised liar” and one who “wasn’t imaginative” (249). In *The Amber Spyglass* Lyra describes herself as “good at lying and betraying and cheating, which all came as naturally to her as breathing” (180). Lyra’s “lying” is fiction-weaving, usually used as a strategy to get herself and others out of trouble or to right wrongs (as in the case of returning Iorek to the throne of armoured bears). Her storytelling coexists with her truthfulness; Lyra can intuitively read the alethiometer representing truth. When she and Will enter the Underworld, she tries to bluff her way in by fabricating a fiction but is attacked by a harpy who cries, “Liar! Liar! Liar!” (*Spyglass* 308). The echoes muffle and change the word so that “*Lyra* and *liar* were one and the same thing” (308). But when the dead beg Lyra to tell them about the living world, she narrates “the story” of real events and experiences. They listen intently, remembering, and finally Lyra realises that the harpies are listening, too, “solemn and spellbound” (331). They tell her that her true words are nourishing (332). Lyra’s gift of storytelling therefore evolves from fiction (lying — although there is obvious irony in this) to truth, and the truth is nourishing.

Either Pullman wants to make Lyra morally ambiguous, in which case he has not succeeded because she is associated with truth, loyalty and transparency or he wants to make morality ambiguous. Pullman through Lyra, like Rowling through Dumbledore and Harry, implies that telling the truth is mere rule-keeping; truthfulness is something deeper and much more important. Prior to this episode in the Underworld Lyra has been accused of deceit. “You’re a thoughtless irresponsible lying child. Fantasy comes so easily to you that your whole nature is riddled with dishonesty, and you don’t even admit the truth when it stares you in the face” (280). Lyra feels a “great sob of rage”.

‘You *don’t know*... you just don’t know what I got in my head or my heart, do you?... . You got no idea what’s in my heart... how I feel sad and wicked and sorry... it’s a torment and a sorrow to me that I never said goodbye to my friend Roger, and I want to say sorry, and I want to say sorry and make it as good as I can... and if I have to *die* to do what’s proper, then I *will*, and be happy while I do.’ (280-281)

The Master, referring to Lyra early in the first book, says she will commit a “great betrayal” (33). Two separate episodes are referred to as betrayals: when Lyra

unknowingly leads Roger to his death and her forced abandonment of her daimon, Pan, when she enters the Underworld. To call either of these actions a “great betrayal” is puzzling because there is no violation of trust involved; as always, Lyra acts with instinctive integrity. Rayment-Pickard calls her “betrayal” of Roger a “mistake” (74) and argues that “[t]he parting of Lyra and her daemon involves no breach of trust or act of cruelty. In fact, their separation can only take place because of trust and loyalty” (74). Both of these “betrayals” occur because Lyra passionately desires to save Roger. She journeys north to save him from the Gobblers and from a cruel experiment to cut away his daemon/ soul, and successfully rescues him. Then she literally saves him from Mrs Coulter’s clutches, pulling him into the balloon in which she will travel north to rescue her father (Asriel) from prison at Svalbard (299). Saving Roger draws him into her adventure. When they arrive at Svalbard he has a premonition of danger and tells Lyra he is more afraid of Asriel than of Mrs Coulter. Lyra offers to consult the alethiometer, but Roger replies, “There’s things I’d rather not know” (366). Presumably, had he accepted her offer, he would have been able to escape Asriel’s murderous machinations.

Lyra realises that Asriel has taken Roger for a child sacrifice to open the way into other worlds.

Oh, the bitter anguish! She had thought she was *saving* Roger, and all the time she’d been diligently working to betray him...

Lyra shook and sobbed in a frenzy of emotion. (380)

Again Lyra rushes to rescue Roger but despite her best efforts he is killed. Lyra accepts responsibility for his death even though she has saved his life twice already and her “mistake” (as Rayment-Pickard puts it) is to think better of her father than she has any right to. What is more, the text tells us that “the fates” bring Asriel a child to sacrifice (310, 380). Lyra then determines to save Roger’s soul from the Underworld’s eternal gloom, leading to her second “betrayal”; one against her own soul, one of self-sacrifice. Lyra’s “betrayals” therefore illuminate the depth of her love and loyalty. Like her literary sister Lucy, Lyra lacks the duplicity and guile required for betrayal.

Like Lucy, Lyra is associated with healing. When, in self-defence, Will seizes the subtle knife and loses two of his fingers fighting for it, Lyra immediately comes to his aid, binding up his arm to stop the flow of blood. She knows what healing herb she should use (*Knife* 186). Over the next days she tends his wounds and cares for him as he grows weaker. Will’s father heals Will, but Lyra nurses him and leads him to the source of healing.

Whereas Lucy’s ardent love is directed to Aslan, Lyra’s is directed to Will. By *The Amber Spyglass* Lyra is aware of these emotions. She describes Will as “truly fearless, and she admired that beyond measure; but he wasn’t good at lying and betraying and cheating, which all came to her as naturally as breathing. When she thought of that

she felt warm and virtuous, because she did it for Will, never for herself” (180). When Lyra’s alethiometer is stolen, Lyra feels guilty because the alethiometer instructed her to stop pursuing her interest in Dust (resulting in the theft) and help Will instead. Lyra describes her refusal to listen to this instruction as having “done something very bad” (*Knife* 164). (Does this parallel the intellectual curiosity that gets Digory into trouble?) Will accepts her self-blame, and Lyra apologises, but Will replies, “What’s the use of that? I don’t care if you’re sorry or not. You did it” (165). Lyra’s fascination for Dust is understandable. Both her parents have been engaged in scientific studies of it, she is caught up in the debate over it, and her destiny is controlled by it. To obey her instinct and curiosity rather than the instruction of an inanimate object (even if the object symbolises Truth) seems entirely reasonable but Lyra unquestioningly accepts her guilt, passionately desiring to heal her relationship with Will. Once the alethiometer is recovered, she uses it only to do as it has instructed — to lead Will to his father.

Lyra is often accused by other characters and the narrator throughout the novels and branded a liar and a traitor. I am not sure why Pullman sets Lyra up in this way; possibly he does not want her to seem insidiously “good”, but the reader surely sees deeper than the labels even she attaches to herself. Her actions are almost always motivated by kindness, generosity and consideration for others. Her devoted love for Roger spans three novels, her passionate love for Will spans two, and in both cases it never falters. And, even deeper than these loves, is her love for Pantalaimon, her polecat daemon, her soul. She is, I believe, unambiguously good.

Mr Tumnus calls Lucy a “Daughter of Eve”. Adam tells Eve in *Paradise Lost* that her “pride and wandering vanity” (X.874-875) have brought about his downfall. Lucy’s weakness is vanity although she resists the temptation to become more beautiful. Adam also calls Eve a “serpent”, because she is false and hateful (X.867) and he turns away from her (as Will turns away from Lyra when she apologises to him). Eve, weeping, “at his feet/ Fell humble” and, accepting his blame, says, “Witness heaven/ What love sincere, and reverence in my heart/ I bear thee” (X.914-916). Eve’s love is the same quality of ardent love that characterises both Lucy and Lyra. The humility and passion of this “feminine” love is contrasted with Adam’s cold, rather pompous and judgemental superiority, although, according to Milton’s hierarchical ideology, Adam’s love is preferred as reason is superior to emotion.

Unlike Milton, Lewis and Pullman’s female protagonists carry the moral heart of their narratives. Although ideologically opposed, their ethos is not dissimilar. Aslan (in feline form) represents universal and unchanging moral Good, the basis of Lewis’s Christian ideology, while Pan (usually in the form of a polecat) represents a human soul, the internal and sometimes changing goodness of moral character, based on Pullman’s

atheistic humanist ideology. But Lucy and Lyra are literary sisters and daughters of Eve, and their ardent, sincere love, their honesty, loyalty and transparency and the generosity of their compassion transform these ethical narratives into personal, emotionally warming and sympathetic stories.

## **The Importance of Not Being Too Earnest**

I have argued that the ideological content of stories is deadly serious. Now I will turn that argument around and argue that it is only when we step back from the narrative and do not take it too seriously that we can enter the imaginative and creative space that allows us to reflect on and reappraise the ideological content of a story.

The movie adaptation of *The Golden Compass*, the first book in Pullman's fantasy trilogy, is lively with Pullman's inventiveness: his alcoholic armoured bear, daemons, parallel Oxford and strong characterisation. But despite this, when my children watched it they soon lost interest, describing it as "boring". I enjoyed it but also felt it missed a vital ingredient, and on reflection decided it was humour. One intense scene followed another with no relief. The colourful characters were unsympathetic, even Lyra. This sombre intensity is also present in the books, although I think Lyra's relationship with Pan softens them, providing much-needed warmth.

Comedy and tragedy are the two faces of drama. Rather than opposites they are complementary, part of the dramatic whole of life. As fortune turns, one or other will reveal its face, but they are balanced, one undercutting the other. There is a childlike quality to comedy; "everything comic is based fundamentally on degradation [or "stepping down"] to being a child," says Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (qtd. in Bennett and Royle 95). However, as with innocence and experience, the child/ adult division is not a clear-cut dichotomy; there is a vulnerable child in every adult and a knowing adult in every child. For an ideologically-laden story to carry its message successfully, I propose that both dramatic elements are needed.

Previously I quoted Pullman: "It's to do with taking the story seriously, laughing, yes, but never scoffing at it, always taking the story seriously". Pullman accepts laughter, but it is not clear how it fits with "taking the story seriously". "Scoffing" (an interesting choice of words) is juxtaposed with seriousness. Why would we scoff at a story (unless it is told very badly)? And, much more importantly, why should we "always" take one seriously? Pullman's insistence on seriousness works, I believe, to the detriment of his narrative. In comparison, Lewis, writing of his discovery of G.K. Chesterton's essays, says:

His humour was of the kind I like best... the humour which is not in any way separable from the argument but is rather (as Aristotle would say) the 'bloom' on dialectic itself. The sword glitters not because the swordsman set out to make it glitter but because he is fighting for his life and therefore moving it very quickly. (*Surprised* 153).

Although Lewis is writing about non-fiction here, I think this attitude is apparent in his fantasy fiction. His humour is "not 'jokes' imbedded in the page like currants in a cake" (153) but liveliness that infuses the narrative.

*His Dark Materials* inverts the binaries of God and Lucifer, good and evil as found in *Paradise Lost*. This redefined duality is deadly serious for Pullman, and in this he is fundamentally different from Lewis. Lewis, as a scholar of medieval literature, understood the polarities of good/ evil, comedy/ tragedy, God/ Lucifer, laughter/ seriousness. In his own way, Lewis, like Pullman, inverts these traditional binaries, but he reaches further back historically, beyond the Renaissance, into Medieval culture where laughter is at the heart of such reversals.

In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin describes the medieval culture of humour. "Folk humour" existed and developed outside the official sphere of "high ideology and literature" (71). Laughter was forbidden in the official sphere which was hierarchical, repressive and deeply rooted in religion. "Fear, religious awe, humility, these were the overtones of this seriousness" (73). Jests and laughter were believed to be from the devil, and therefore "permanent seriousness, remorse, and sorrow for his sins befit the Christian" (73). Alongside this repressive and humourless piety were the carnivals permitted on various feast days, for example, the Feast of Fools and the Feast of the Ass. These were characterised by parodies, masquerades and "improper dances" (74). Folly was permitted as a vent for the second, or lower, human nature (Bakhtin refers to it as the bodily lower stratum), but this allowance for laughter and carnival was confined to specific dates, ensuring that people were devoted to greater service to God outside those carnival feast periods.

In Medieval parody "laughter was as universal as seriousness; it was directed at the whole world, at history, at all societies, at ideology" (84). Nothing was exempt from ridicule, not even the sacred. Carnival laughter celebrated utopian freedom; inversions enacted liberation from the Medieval repressions of church and feudal society, a class culture that was characterised by authoritarianism, violence, prohibitions, limitations, fear and intimidation. "Laughter, on the contrary, overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority" (90). Hell, the grotesque image of terror and tyranny, the lake of fire, was burned in the carnival.

In such a hierarchical society, truth was official and upheld the status quo. It was protected by scholars and there could be no such thing as “general human truth” (93). However, laughter unsettles this construction of truth (ideology).

Laughter is essentially not an external but an interior form of truth: it cannot be transformed into seriousness without destroying and distorting the very contents of the truth which it unveils. Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great internal censor. (94)

The antithesis of laughter, seriousness, “terrorised, demanded, and forbade. It therefore inspired the people with distrust” (94). But folk humour was not opposed to all seriousness, only intolerant and dogmatic seriousness (121).

Prior to the Middle Ages, Greek tragedy demanded laughter and parody as a corrective and a complement. Even Greek philosophy was “tested in the crucible of laughter” (121). The openness of humour allows intellectual expansion and re-framing of the world.

True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, and the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naivete and illusion, and the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from one being, forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness. Such is the function of laughter in the historical development of culture and literature. (122-123)

Lewis describes humour as a “grace”: all-consoling and all-excusing. His devil, Screwtape, distinguishes between derisive scoffing and “the joke proper”, that is, incongruity (*Screwtape* 58). Incongruity is a form of humour that runs through the Narnia series in unexpected reversals and carnivalesque disruptions. The underlying laughter in the stories has charmed me since I was a child; it bubbles away under the surface ready to erupt at unexpected moments. It is most obvious in the character of Aslan. When he is first introduced he is not personally known to any of the characters, and is described as intimidating and awe-inspiring, unsafe, austere and powerful. When the children actually meet him, he is described as “good and terrible” (117). The children and the Beavers then have a comic (because identifiably uncomfortable) exchange where they try to pass the responsibility for introductions from one to the other. This comedy undercuts the intensity and fear of the situation. Then, after a serious and brief conversation about whether Edmund can be saved from the White Witch, Aslan “shook his mane and clapped his paws together (‘Terrible paws,’ thought Lucy, ‘if he didn’t know how to velvet them!’) and said, ‘Meanwhile, let the feast be prepared...’” (120)

Feasting is a motif of abundance and rejoicing in Narnia, and is especially associated with Aslan; as is a good romp. When Aslan rises from death, Susan, Lucy and Aslan

rolled over together in a happy laughing heap of fur and arms and legs. It was such a romp as no one has ever had except in Narnia; and whether it was more like playing with a thunderstorm or playing with a kitten Lucy could never make up her mind. (151)

The romping and feasting has a Medieval carnival flavour although the freedom of this carnival is not a brief liberation from the prohibitions of an austere God figure; the God-figure leads the carnival, overthrowing an oppressive regime where it was always winter and never Christmas. In fact, the devil of Narnia, the White Witch, refers to Aslan as a fool. “ ‘The fool!’ she cried. ‘The fool has come. Bind him fast’ ” (140). She means that Aslan is acting foolishly by walking straight into his death, but Lewis’s use of the word fool also invokes the meaning of the fool as a jester or clown, a comic and subversive (even diabolical) figure in Medieval and Renaissance literature. On top of this, Aslan is a lion, an animal, and therefore associated with the lower, natural world rather than the higher, spiritual world. This inversion of God and the devil in Lewis is parallel to Pullman’s inversion though with a very different purpose.

Comment is often made on the allegorical elements of Lewis’s fantasies although Lewis denied that he intended to write allegories (“Fairy Stories” 72). His Christian ideology nevertheless pervades all the *Narnia* books. Set against the Materialist argument (of, for example, Dawkins, quoted in my introduction) that fantasy is unscientific and that myths are dangerous, I suggest that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* asserts the elevation of imagination and mythology over serious rationalistic thought.

When Lucy goes through the wardrobe and discovers the Other World of Narnia where fantastic and mythological creatures live, she interprets her experience as a real experience. Her siblings are sceptical. Edmund calls her “batty”, Susan tells her not to be silly (28). Peter suggests that she is “making up a story for fun”. Their scepticism makes Lucy “very miserable”.

She could have made it up with the others quite easily at any moment if she could have brought herself to say that the whole thing was only a story made up for fun. But Lucy was a very truthful girl and she knew that she was really in the right; and she could not bring herself to say this. The others who thought she was telling a lie, and a silly lie too, made her very unhappy. (29-30)

Lucy’s adventure becomes a “wretched business”, until she begins to doubt the reality of her experience. Integrity is at stake here — Lucy’s misery is a result of her being “very truthful”. After Lucy’s second visit to Narnia, where she meets Edmund who subsequently lies, denying he has been there, Peter and Susan visit the old professor who owns the house.

Concerned that Lucy may be “out of her mind”, Peter and Susan approach the Professor with some trepidation. He patiently listens to the story, then says nothing for a long time. “Then he cleared his throat and said the last thing either of them expected: ‘How do you know?’ he asked, ‘that your sister’s story is not true?’” (48). This is also the last thing that the reader, even — maybe especially — the child reader, expects as well. As a child I fully expected the Professor to side with the two older children; of course he would, even I knew the difference between fantasy and reality and knew the world in the wardrobe wasn’t real. But his interrogation of the children’s assumptions and his validation of Lucy’s truth surprised and delighted me. It is incongruous, for surely a professor would never be so naive as to be taken in by the world of the imagination.

The Professor tells Peter and Susan that if Lucy has always been truthful, then to lay a charge of lying against her “is a very serious thing; a very serious thing indeed” (49). She is either lying — she doesn’t lie; she is mad — she isn’t mad; or she is telling the truth. The possibility of worlds within wardrobes is, he says, “more than I know” (49). He shrugs off Peter and Susan’s objections about reality and time, things that so little is known about.

‘But do you really mean, sir,’ said Peter, ‘that there could be other worlds — all over the place, just around the corner — like that?’

‘Nothing is more probable,’ said the Professor, taking off his spectacles and beginning to polish them, while he muttered to himself, ‘I wonder what they *do* teach them at these schools.’ (51)

The Professor is a caricature with his shaggy white hair and beard, his mutterings about logic and his tutting over modern education, and the scene simmers with eccentric humour and a deeper underlying argument about the nature of reality and time. The Professor elevates the realm of the imagination above the mere “pretend world” of childhood, takes it seriously and challenges the privileging of a rational, materialist view of the world as held by the older children: “if things are real, they’re there all the time,” says Peter. “Are they?” asks the Professor (50). This was a radical, and very subversive, idea for me as an eight-year-old child.

That the narrator approves of the Professor’s subversion of rationalism is implied as he is given almost the last words of the book. When the children confess to him that they have lost four of his coats in Narnia, he “believed the whole story”. And then he warns them not to go looking for Narnian adventures, and not to discuss them with others unless they find that they have had adventures of the same kind. You can tell, he says, by odd things they say, by their looks. “Keep your eyes open,” he says. “Bless me, what *do* they teach them at these schools?” (173). Serious things, like the scientific method and empirical facts, instead of flights of fancy, we could reply. Have we also mislaid, inadvertently, the ability to laugh at fairytale incongruities like frogs becoming princes?

The Enlighteners tended to impoverish the world. In their minds there is much less of the real world than can be imagined; they exaggerated reality at the expense of archaisms, fantasies, and daydreams. (Bakhtin 124)

As a writer of highly imaginative fantasy, Pullman obviously values imagination and daydreams. He describes imagination in *The Amber Spyglass* as not making things up, but as a “kind of seeing” (523). At the end of the novel Lyra asks two Oxford scholars to promise they will believe her story which, she says, is not a lie or a made up story but a true story (542). (This parallels the Professor, surely?) But, of course, Lyra’s true story is Pullman’s made up story. Pullman’s privileging of “true” stories over “made up” stories is an apparent contradiction, surely deliberately ironic, creating, I believe, a distorting distinction, itself ideological. All ways of “seeing” the world, whether drawn from the real, empirical world, the rational world of ideas or the unreal, fantastic world are “made up” interpretations of truth. Both the kingdom of heaven and the republic of heaven are utopian, conceived in the fertile “no place” of imagination, and both are ideological. Pullman enters Milton’s story world, deliberately rewriting and reversing it to convince us that the story is untrue and unreliable. His narrative then tells us that only true stories are nourishing. His reversal is not carnivalesque but is a deadly serious rebellion intended not to disturb but to destroy an ideology.

Victory over fear is not its abstract elimination; it is a simultaneous uncrowning and renewal, a gay transformation. Hell has burst and has poured forth abundance. (Bakhtin 91)

Pinsky, quoted in Bakhtin, describes the comic as the “indestructible joie de vivre” of human nature. This is not a quality I find in Pullman. Whereas joie de vivre bubbles just beneath the surface in Lewis’s fantasy, in Pullman’s fantasy anguish is ready to overflow. Cruelty and brutality lurk around many narrative corners: children’s souls are severed from their physical selves, spectres suck the souls from adolescents, death, separation, mutilation and loss haunt the narrative and leave little room for joie de vivre or abundant transformation. Good fiction includes sorrow but Pullman’s is a heavy dose. Rebellion against an evil God is the subject matter of tragedy, not comedy.

The world of the imagination, like the world of the carnival, is a world where utopian freedom can be dreamed of and lived. In imagination it can be lived even beyond death; that is why, despite the deaths of the protagonists in the last of the Narnian stories, the end is “happy ever after”. Lewis, significantly, uses the metaphor of a narrative with which to close his own story.

And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story... in which every chapter is better than the one before. (183-184)

This is not to confuse the world of imagination with the real world, but to say that for the period that the story is being lived, eternal utopian freedom is real in the same way that it was during the period of the Medieval carnival. In contrast, Pullman's heroes look forward to an annual visit to a park bench in Oxford and the hope of the final reunion of their souls as they are joyously absorbed into a cosmic whole. Life after death is not anticipated by most contemporary fantasies.

Comedy, Bakhtin says, complements tragedy and in ancient Greece laughter freed philosophy from dogmatism. Children need to think for themselves, and they need both laughter and imagination to open up the intellectual possibilities of their world. Devoid of humour, ideology of any variety too easily becomes dogmatism limiting both freedom of thought and the world itself. Fear of opposition is a narrow hell that forbids laughter because laughter breaks the spell of truth's power. Besides, strong beliefs are much more palatable when undercut by incongruities, and spell-makers must be aware that their subtle magic is an illusion of truth, a description of the world woven from symbols and riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions.

### *Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time*

If subtle magic is the weaving of ideological spells through language, there is a deeper magic that is ethical. Furthermore, the presented ideology and the ethos of a text are not necessarily aligned. As ideology can and does shape ethics, ethics can and does work its deeper magic on ideology.

*Paradise Lost* has the explicit intention of justifying the ways of God to readers. Obedience to God, says Milton, is the foundational ethical truth. However, by creating credible characters, Milton has inadvertently provided loopholes, opening up the imaginative space in his narrative for the reader to empathise with the "wrong" characters. Romantic poets "read" against Milton's ideological intention, pulling at the loophole, romanticising the devil, and unravelling the narrative's intention. Twentieth century feminist readers, reading against Milton's subjugation of women, find Eve's eating of the fruit a life-enhancing decision that grants her equality. Pullman has taken Milton's epic and re-written it into a narrative that explicitly opposes Milton's ideological foundation: the authority of God. These readings contradict Milton's espoused ethic; Milton creates empathy where he intended none, and this doubling in his writing caused Blake to say that he was of the devil's party without knowing it.

Likewise Lewis, in the Narnian Chronicles, provides an ethical loophole. Of the three writers discussed in this chapter, he is the only one who is not explicit about his ideological position in his narrative. It is possible to read the Narnian Chronicles without overlaying them with a Christian interpretation although the veil between ideology and

story is sometimes very thin.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, I think we must accept that Lewis's narrative grew out of his Christian worldview and there are points where traditional theology is called into question by his narrative. The most significant of these is when Aslan tells the children that he is subject to Deep Magic (the law of justice) and that he cannot go against it. "Deeper Magic" (sacrificial love) is a deeper, even more ethical, ethics. Ethics is therefore prior to God. Another incongruence is when Aslan tells Emeth that his services to Tash are counted as services to Aslan. In traditional Christian thought unbelievers are destined for hell; in Narnia ethics (being committed to Good) is privileged over belief (in Aslan). In the imaginative space of story-weaving, the raw materials Lewis has appropriated — mythology, ancient and more modern philosophy, religion and literature — are interlaced to create the ethos of Lewis's narrative, and, like Milton's, opens up the possibility to read against the grain of his espoused ideology. We do not have to believe in God to believe in Aslan.

Pullman's narrative, I think, opens even wider than Milton's and Lewis's the contradiction between ethos and ideology. Despite Asriel's grand rebellion and the death of both the Authority and Metatron, Pullman does, finally, seem to subscribe to Milton's ethos of obedience to higher spiritual authority. The angel Xaphania demands Will and Lyra's obedience in closing the windows between the worlds. Mike Gray says:

Lyra and Will's reaction is puzzling. Although they have, if anything, learned to be skeptical of spiritual authority, they submit immediately to the angel. They show no suspicion that the angel might just be another spiritual spoil sport under a new regime. Nor do they debate the facts — they do not demand proof, for example, that the statistics about the in and out flux of Dust might not leave an option for two windows, or whether their own joy and freedom might not make up for the Dust lost through the extra window. If ever they were tempted to think and act as autonomous moral agents, it must be here — but they don't give in. They don't talk back. They just obey... (10)

The self-imposed separation of the two very young lovers is anomalous in literature. Romeo and Juliet, Cathy and Heathcliffe, the *Twilight* heroes are just a few who belong to a literary tradition that paints early adolescent love as uncompromising. It would be easy for Pullman to allow his lovers their joy but he separates them. Every window must be closed except for the one between the underworld and paradise.

Gray suggests that the uncritical obedience of Will and Lyra is yet another retelling of the temptation of Adam and Eve. Whereas previously in the narrative Will

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<sup>38</sup> When, as an eight-year-old child, my mother told me that Aslan was Jesus I was indignant. Aslan was not an historical man in a white robe and dusty sandals, he was a lion who belonged in Narnia, and the essential difference of species and location mattered fundamentally. I rejected her imposition of a Christian interpretation onto the stories and I am now inclined to think that my rejection was correct.

and Lyra have been more explicitly and subversively figured as the new Adam and Eve, here the parallel is perhaps unconscious.

[I]t seems as though [the aesthetic and moral appeal of Lyra and Will's obedience] is based on precisely the same sort of authority the previous narrative set out to undo. In fact, the story reenacts the Genesis temptation not once but twice — and the second telling is, in essence, far more similar to a Christian interpretation of the Genesis narrative. The only crucial difference is the story's end: the new Adam and Eve do *not* choose to be like God in autonomous knowledge of good and evil; they obey. (11)

Gray refers to Will and Lyra's obedience as "a new form of religion". This reading of *His Dark Materials* is so contradictory to Pullman's stated ideological position as to be almost farcical.

If Lyra carries the ethical heart of Pullman's narrative, then her poignant closing speech is probably near to Pullman's own ethos. Lyra tells Pan that she would have sacrificed herself to go with Will into his world.

'But then we wouldn't be able to build it. No one could, if they put themselves first. We have to be all those difficult things like cheerful and kind and curious and brave and patient, and we've got to study and think, and work hard, all of us, in our different worlds, and then we'll build...'

'And then what?' said her daemon sleepily. 'Build what?'

'The republic of heaven,' said Lyra. (*Spyglass* 548)

If the corrupt king is dead and the repressive hierarchy destroyed it seems to me that the outcome should be less dreary and puritanical than Lyra's speech makes it sound; after all, being cheerful, kind, curious, brave and patient aren't always, or even often, "difficult things".

Any dogmatic belief system that closes off other ways of thinking becomes repressive. Lewis has the dwarves in *The Last Battle* tragically and comically unable to "see" the world around them because, like MacDonald's miners, they do not want to be taken in by ideologies and stories. Stories can "take us in" and deceive us with their subtle magic, but they can also take us in to an enchanted world where we can see anew the workings of ethos, a still Deeper Magic.

## Chapter VI

### *Negative and Positive Capabilities: Ethics of Uncertainty*

Keats's concept of "negative capability" is appropriated by Pullman in *His Dark Materials* as a way of seeing the world, seeing further and more deeply. I am dubious about Pullman's interpretation of negative capability, but as Keats describes it, "capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts", it resonates with the postmodern world. In the paradox of negative capability, uncertainty finally yields deep moral meaning. Moral uncertainties snaking through contemporary fantasy for children emerge as ethical possibility, a "moral compass" for today.

In this chapter, I will begin by analysing how a moral compass can be deciphered in *His Dark Materials*, and then, drawing from several of the other texts I have already discussed, I will argue that negative capability holds ethical weight.

#### **A Compass, A Knife and a Spyglass: Finding Moral Direction**

Pullman gives us three symbols of moral practice: an alethiometer or the golden compass, a subtle knife and an amber spyglass. The significance of these three symbols is highlighted in naming his novels after them.<sup>39</sup> Lyra, whose name is associated with song and fiction (lyre and liar), "reads" her alethiometer through her innate abilities of imagination and intuition. She grasps long chains of meaning, through internal resonances of archetypes and symbols, through the sacred truth of poetry and metaphor. Moral *wisdom* lies within, partly conferred by culture, partly by nature. Lyra's sympathetic intuition equates with Eagleton's ethical Imaginary.

Will, whose name suggests independent rational choice, wins the knife in a fight. His knife divides and has the power to open up other worlds. It uses the power of reason and language to make distinctions and to recognise and name differences. Language, like the knife, gives us entry into other worlds through communication. It can divide good from evil. But the knife is also destructive. It amputates two of Will's fingers and it is named AESahaettr, "god-destroyer" (*Knife* 286), destroyer of ideologies. Will's moral *judgement* is social and intellectual, based in language and reason. Will's divisions and distinctions equate with Eagleton's ethical Symbolic.

Mary, whose name is probably the most meaning-loaded feminine name in Western culture and hailed by Catholics as the Mother of God, creates, rather than is

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<sup>39</sup> The American edition, and the movie, of the first book, *Northern Lights*, is *The Golden Compass*.

given or fights for, her spyglass. As an ex-nun in a Protestant country and a physicist she sits uneasily at the intersection of contradictory worldviews. She uses her scientific processes of observation, experimentation and analysis to make her instrument through which she can “see” the unseen, that is, Dust. Dust is life-force, breath (of God transforming dust into life), libido, positive, procreative energy, the charged consciousness of matter. For Pullman these creative energies are “Good”, and therefore moral, and Mary perceives them through scientific processes. Moreover, Mary uses her observations to heal the natural world, a moral ecological project. Mary’s moral *understanding* grows out of her objective scientific approach to the world, combining intuition with reason and, adding to these, analysis. (Her analysis does not, however, neatly represent Eagleton’s ethical Real.)

These three symbols are not, ultimately, adequate. By the end of the narrative all three are either destroyed (the knife), discarded (the spyglass) or no longer intelligible (the alethiometer). Lyra loses the intuitive ability to “read” the alethiometer, or truth, and must spend the rest of her lifetime analysing its symbols and metaphors to recover her ability.<sup>40</sup> Will rejects the knife, destroying it with strong emotion. Mary abandons her spyglass and learns witchlore and mystical arts. These aids, therefore, are limited and their usefulness does not extend beyond the perimeters of the story; they are not guides for the matured characters. Instead, each character must find moral balance: intuition balanced by analysis, reason balanced by emotion, scientific analysis balanced by mysticism. Thus, Pullman implies, they become morally mature and the republic of heaven can be built here on earth (*Spyglass* 548).

I question whether Pullman’s moral maturity holds enough weight, however. Rayment-Pickard claims that “*His Dark Materials* contains very little moral ambiguity” (72).

Lyra is given a truth-telling device, the alethiometer, which means she never has to make proper ethical choices... Her moral universe never requires her to live with uncertainty: her choices are always made clear to her.

For real people living in the real world the future is unknown and all human choices must be made in the face of this ignorance... Lyra always makes the right choice based upon certain knowledge about how things will turn out. So there are no proper dilemmas for Lyra. (72)

Although this claim does not always stand up to the events of the plot, it is a pertinent point that the alethiometer tells Lyra, not just the correct moral direction, but also the future. Rayment-Pickard continues to argue that moral decisions are presented in terms of the “right thing to do”. “The only thing that Will and Lyra must decide is whether they

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<sup>40</sup> This is fundamentally different from the moral compass discussed in Chapter 3 where the past and future are lined up to indicate moral direction.

have the courage to do what must be done. It may be a painful choice, but it contains no ambiguity” (73).

Pullman clearly wants the world of *His Dark Materials* to be a complex moral space in which... the labels of ‘good and evil have been abolished’... What Pullman actually creates, however, is a black and white universe with few shades of grey. Pullman projects all evil onto an abstract organisation staffed by irredeemably wicked people. All moral negativity is thus externalised... There is no Judas in *His Dark Materials* and no Peter. (73)

Pullman has allowed his three main characters little real moral choice. Moral guidance is to be found in “negative capability”. Whereas for Keats “negative capability” is the capacity for accepting uncertainty and the unresolved, Pullman interprets it as something mystical, and this damages the ethical uncertainty that he seems to want to convey. Will’s father is a shaman, and gains knowledge by travelling in a trance (*Knife* 224); Lyra’s alethiometer divines truth and also the future — rather like horoscopes; Mary’s I Ching sticks guide her (*Spyglass* 84- 85). An angel tells Will and Lyra what their moral obligation is and Shadow particles tell Mary to destroy her research. Serafina teaches Mary to “see” the unseen world by “holding a special state of mind”, a “trance-like open dreaming” simultaneously with “ordinary seeing” (previously referred to as “negative capability”) (535).<sup>41</sup> Mystical enlightenment guides Pullman’s characters when the path is unknown. However, I believe that surrendering to mystical guidance is not a substitute for moral judgement but removes personal ethical responsibility, in the face of moral complexity, from the work of finding truth, gaining knowledge and decision making.

Although Pullman’s three main characters find greater balance in their lives this is no guarantee that they have become more ethically responsible as they have never had to overcome their own potential for evil or face their own shadows. Pullman seems to reject not only original sin but also an internal Shadow. Lyra shares many of Mrs Coulter’s character traits, indicating that Mrs Coulter represents Lyra’s potential (double). She is indifferent to the suffering of children she seduces and captures, and, as she acknowledges herself, deception lies at the core of her being. Metatron describes her as “a cess-pit of moral filth” (*Spyglass* 418- 419). Lyra never acknowledges her potential to become like her mother and she is so without guile it is hard to imagine her as a cunning, cruel and deceitful “moral cess-pit”. I believe the story’s ethical vein is weaker for Lyra’s innocence.

Mary, who carries the most moral weight in the story, says, “good and evil are

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<sup>41</sup> Millicent Lenz argues that Pullman is drawing from the Romantic idea of “sympathetic imagination”. The Romantic poets called the ability to use imagination to recreate the world “hetrocosm” (53).

names for what people do, not for what they are” (*Spyglass* 471). This sidesteps several important ethical questions, perhaps the most important being what lies behind, or motivates, ethical choice and action, “what people do”. Where does evil originate? Why do some people repeatedly perform evil deeds? Why do decent people sometimes succumb to evil? The narrative sheds little light on these questions; because Pullman has rejected inherent moral tension within the human psyche he avoids them. Instead, evil resides in ideology, power and institutions. The priests, without exception, are power-crazed and cruel — repeatedly doing evil — power and ideology seems to have completely corrupted them. We know what motivates the rebellion of Milton’s Satan, but we do not know how the Authority and Metatron became such cosmic bullies. And how characters become good people is unexamined; there is no wise old Dumbledore telling us, ad infinitum, that our choices create our moral character. Pullman’s refusal to explore these questions and provide a plausible psychology of evil diminishes moral complexity in the story.

The narrative ends with the children submitting themselves to the care and guidance of responsible, nurturing surrogate parents which, though cosy, is a rather flat ending for two such fiercely independent children entering puberty. Mary returns to her world to “deal with” the consequences of her vandalism but we are told nothing else about her intentions and how she will use her experiences and expanded knowledge (540). For all the grandeur of Pullman’s scope and vision, ethics is collapsed into domesticity and culminates in doing one’s duty: being cheerful, kind, curious, brave, patient, studious, thoughtful and hard-working; all dreadfully White Anglo-Saxon Protestant values!

Pullman’s promise of revisions and reversals leaves us with the status quo. The republic of heaven sounds very much like self-discipline and moral fortitude; does it differ from the kingdom of heaven within? Is it just quieter, more decent, less dangerous, more British? It is less radical than, for example, Tolstoy’s vision of the Kingdom of God Within as peaceful resistance that profoundly influenced Gandhi and led to India’s liberation from British rule. And Lyra’s world needs to shake off its corrupt religion, indisputably, but does Will and Mary’s world, contemporary England? Should Will and Mary actively campaign against priests like Hugh Rayment-Pickard who calls himself “one of Philip Pullman’s most enthusiastic and dedicated readers” (3)? Or destroy the power of an archbishop who cites Pullman as one of his favourite modern writers?<sup>42</sup> It

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<sup>42</sup> Rowan Williams goes on to say that Pullman takes the “Christian myth” seriously enough to want to “disagree passionately with it” and commended his “search for some way of talking about human value, human depth and three-dimensionality, that doesn’t depend on God” (Adams).

seems unclear what Pullman's utopian dream is, whether we should aspire to it, and whether his interpretation of negative capability provides moral direction. After the storm and fury of destroying the Authority has died down, morality emerges as a series of orderly signposts.

Will and Lyra's sacrifice is an exception to this domestic ethic in *His Dark Materials*, but not much is made of it. It slips into the ethical net almost apologetically; Pullman says: "I tried all sorts of ways to prevent it, but the story made me do it. That was what had to happen. If I'd denied it, the story wouldn't have had a tenth of its power" (qtd. in Rayment-Pickard 24). I will return to Will and Lyra's sacrifice later because, I believe, it is the important, and probably unintended, ethical impulse of Pullman's story.

## **The Paradox of Negative Capability**

"The way of paradoxes is the way of truth. To test Reality we must see it on a tight-rope," says Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (43). Paradox is the undoing of binary dualisms, it dismantles the poles and intertwines them so the opposites incongruously embrace. Paradoxes are subversive and moral paradoxes threaten the moral order of the universe. But in the postmodern world where Reality, including ethical Reality, is teetering on a tight-rope, paradox brings balance, searching for truth and moral meaning.

Keats' paradox of "negative capability" was expressed in a letter to his brother:

several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously — I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason — Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. (Baldick *Literary Terms* 221-221)

"Negative capability" therefore accepts uncertainty, mystery and doubt, and is content with half-knowledge "without any irritable" striving for logical resolution. It is not specifically ethical, but a state of suspension between knowledge and imagination. It is described as "a state of intentional open-mindedness" and compared with Heidegger's concept of *Gelassenheit*: "the spirit of disponibilit e [availability] before What-Is which permits us simply to let things be in whatever may be their uncertainty and their mystery" (Heidegger qtd. in Scott). This is not scientific open-mindedness where uncertainty drives the researcher to continue worrying at half-knowledge to find fuller knowledge — this is what Keats accuses Coleridge of doing. Instead, it accepts finitude, limitations, our ignorance and mysteries beyond our understanding. These mysteries may be imaginatively translated into poetry, as with Shakespeare. Heidegger suggests that:

Art, especially poetry, are [sic] of crucial importance for thinking and language. Poetry is not a secondary phenomenon: it has a special relation to being and truth. Poetry is ‘founding of truth’: it discloses the (or ‘a’) world and creates a language for its adequate expression... Poetry is close to the sacred: ‘The thinker says being. The poet names the holy’. (Heidegger qtd. in Honderich 348)

This is the subtle magic of artistic language through which mysteries and uncertainties may be probed and expressed, but remain, nevertheless, ultimately unknown.

Pullman’s interpretation of “negative capability” differs from mine. Mary has Keats’s quote on a “scrap” in a “muddle of papers on her desk” (*Knife* 92). When she puts her mind “in a certain state... confident and relaxed at the same time” the Shadows (“particles of consciousness”, fallen angels) respond. “The Shadows flock to your thinking like birds” (93). Lyra’s state of negative capability, when she reads the alethiometer, is “watching, calculating, seeing down the long chains of meaning to the level where truth lay” (95). The I Ching, a Chinese method of divination, we are told, also uses this method of consulting “dark matter” (99). The space of imagination that opens up when we step back from the mirror is not, I believe, a blank and passive space (a *tabula rasa*), waiting to be filled by inspirational Shadows, but a fertile, hospitable space — a space already inhabited by our life experiences — where we actively welcome, entertain, judge and are altered by narrative voices.

## **Enchantments and Disenchantments: The Uncertainty of Truth**

I have already argued that the subtle magic of language is infused with ideology, and that this magic can unweave ethics, but that also that the deeper magic of ethos can unweave the magic of ideology. Now I will expand this argument to include other fantasy writers, and to relate the uncertainty of truth to an ethics of morally creative capability.

Nietzsche, in “On Truth and Lies”, expresses the postmodern view of truth with literary flourish:

What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms... Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer coins. (84)

Truths are illusions, poetry with a forgotten origin. Ideologies, or “Grand Narratives” as Lyotard refers to them, are constructed out of this ethereal poetic/ philosophical substance and built upon insubstantial shifting sand. We pile up “an infinitely complicated dome of concepts upon an unstable foundation” like a structure “constructed of spider’s webs: delicate enough to be carried along by the waves, strong enough not to be blown apart by every wind” (85).

“What, then, shall be considered true?” asks Descartes. He replies, “Perhaps only this, that there is nothing certain in the world” (102). Descartes argues his way to his own existence, to the existence of God and to the existence of corporeal things. Many people question Descartes’s conclusion that he is, in fact, a thinking, material self, knowing the world through sensory perception and discovering real reality and true truth through reason and experience. They accept his original answer: there is nothing certain in the world. We create our own stories, fables, myths and then cleverly forget that we created them, for our own peace of mind, says Nietzsche.

Only by forgetting this primitive world of metaphor... only in the invincible faith of *this* sun, *this* window, *this* table is a truth in itself... only by forgetting that he himself is an *artistically creating* subject, does man live with any repose, security, and consistency. (86)

Metaphor, like fantasy, is not true, but we cannot dispense with the drive for metaphor in thought — it would “dispense with man himself”. But for Nietzsche, the “drive toward the formation of metaphors” is central to “man”:

a regular and rigid new world is constructed as its prison from its own ephemeral products, the concepts. It seeks a new realm and another channel for its activity, and it finds this in *myth* and in *art* generally... It continually manifests an ardent desire to refashion the world which presents itself. (89)

We are inclined to deception and are “enchanted with happiness when the rhapsodist tells [us] epic fables as if they were true” because this releases our minds from “slavery”. “With creative pleasure it throws metaphors into confusion and displaces the boundary stones of abstractions...” (89–90).

Bauman’s liquid times of postmodernism have an ancestor in Nietzsche’s philosophy. Our ideologies are built on “running water” (85). The moral boundaries of the world, as drawn by the Son’s golden compasses in *Paradise Lost*, are dissolved and we live instead in a world “beyond good and evil”. For Nietzsche this is not an uncertain world, but a free world. Two world wars and innumerable atrocities and genocides lie between Nietzsche’s place in history and our own which has engendered some cynicism about the “good” of moral freedom and existential self-actualisation. Freedom can become anarchy and moral anarchy can readily (although not inevitably) unleash the monsters within with their lust for blood. Stranded between enchantment and disenchantment in the crossfire of language, we may struggle to articulate an answer to Nietzsche that allows us to rehabilitate good and evil.

“Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions.” Illusory “truth”, or truth claims, that is, ideology, is described by Helene Cixous as:

a vast membrane enveloping everything. We have to know that this skin exists even if it encloses us like a net or like closed eyelids. We have to know that, to change the world, we must constantly try to scratch and

tear it. We can never tear the whole thing off, but we must never let it stick or stop being suspicious of it. (145)

Entrapment, forgetfulness and blindness are metaphors in the above quotes for the illusion of truth. Fantasy and fairytale are familiar with unreality and untruth posing as reality and truth; it is called enchantment. In fairytales enchantments are often broken by the intervention of a benevolent third party, but contemporary fantasy is more exacting — the protagonist must find his or her own way out of the forgetfulness and blindness of enchantment.

In a school lesson, Harry Potter is placed under the Imperius curse, a spell that enables the control of another person's will, by a teacher posing as Madeye Moody. Harry experiences it as “the most wonderful feeling”.

Harry felt a floating sensation as every thought and worry in his head was wiped gently away, leaving nothing but a vague, untraceable happiness. He stood there feeling immensely relaxed... (*Goblet* 204)

Harry is commanded to jump onto the desk, and his body prepares to obey. “Why, though? Another voice had awoken in the back of his brain. Stupid thing to do, really, said the voice”. Torn between the command and the voice in his head, Harry trips, smashing into the desk, and feels considerable pain. He remembers suddenly “exactly what was happening”. I want to highlight the pleasantness of succumbing to the spell, Harry's resistance to the spell as a voice in the back of his brain awakening, and Harry's “remembering” as a consequence of pain caused by his ambivalent response — half-compliance, half-resistance.

In *Dreamquake* the enchantment is the Dream of Contentment. As in the above scene, enchantment is likened to sleep. The Dream of Contentment, as its name suggests, is a state of blissful surrender and suggestibility. I have already discussed how Tziga, “enchanted” by the dream, finds his way out of it by identifying discordancy in it, a point of rupture, of contradiction. He finds a place within the dream where he can view the scene from the perspective of the desperate convict, Lazarus, and menacing wasps arouse him from the stupefying dream. It is not pain but disillusionment that awakens Tziga from the spell.

Likewise in *Tales from Earthsea* (first published in 2001) Otter is imprisoned in a web of spells, but in this fantasy the enchantment is not pleasurable.

He saw the lines of the spells that held him, heavy cords of darkness, a tangled maze of lines all about him. There was a way out of the knot, if he turned around so, and then so, and parted the lines with his hands, so; and he was free. (24)

Otter can see the “spiderweb cords of the spell” just after he has had a vision of an ill slave who stands waiting to die. “It was as if she was in him, as if she was him. He saw her look at him. He saw himself through her eyes” (24). The suffering of the shockingly abject Other allows him to see the web of his enchantment, making it apparent, revealing

the way out of the enchantment. But when the vision disappears Otter is left again in darkness.

He was alone in the dark. The cold grip of the spells took him by the throat and choked him, bound his hands, pressed on his lungs. He crouched, gasping. He could not think; he could not remember... He was frightened... It was all darkness. But in his body, not his mind, burned a knowledge he could not name any more, a certainty that was like a tiny lamp in his hands in a maze of caverns underground. He kept his eyes on that seed of light. (27)

The slave is a counterpart to Ged's shadow. But she is not at all evil, she is a scapegoat and bears in her body the consequences of another's evil. Dying herself, she brings the gift of life to Otter. "She was there, the sick woman who could heal him, the poor woman who held the treasure, the stranger who was himself" (36). Otter's recognition of, and identification with, her suffering and immanent death shows him the way out of the enchantment. Where before the ensnaring evil was opaque, now he sees it clearly, and a way to be freed from it. Knowledge enters Otter's body, "a certainty" like a "tiny lamp", one he cannot name, that burns in a perplexing maze of underground caverns. Otter's certainty is that he must resist oppression and tyranny and free both himself and the slave. Like Harry and Tziga he finds a small space within himself to resist the spell and oppose the evil that controls his will. The slave dies, but her death brings to light freedom and redemption from both the lies of enchantment and from the evil of oppression the spells (hegemonic structures of belief) protect.

There are several parallels between Otter's resistance and Puddleglum's in Lewis's *The Silver Chair*. Lewis's protagonists find themselves underground in a network of tunnels on a mission to rescue a lost prince and are enchanted by a Witch who lulls them into a dream-like trance-state. She uses logic to dispute first the existence of Narnia and the Overworld, arguing that such a place is one of "many imagined lands in thy fancies" (151), and then the existence of the "other world", our world. Initially they argue with the Witch, fighting her enchantment. Jill agrees that there is no "other world", accepting it as a dream with "relief" (151). Puddleglum, fighting the enchantment, describes Narnia. His words have "a very rousing effect. The other three all breathed again and looked at one another like people newly awakened" (152). Prince Rilian declares he has been dreaming. As in *Dreamquake*, enchantment is likened to sleep and dreaming. The Witch, unperturbed, continues to dismantle their reality:

'When you try to think out clearly what this *sun* must be, you cannot tell me. You can only tell me it is like the lamp. Your *sun* is a dream; and there is nothing in that dream that was not copied from the lamp. The lamp is the real thing; the *sun* is but a tale, a children's story.' (153)

Finally they are all hypnotised by the Witch's music, her magic perfumed fire and her "cooing" voice. After a struggle, and with "such... relief to give in and say it",

they agree that there is no sun and this seems to be “very good sense” (154). Aslan, likewise, is described as “a pretty make-believe”, a copy, a “bigger and better cat” than those in the “real” (Under) world. They succumb to the enchantment, “the strength all gone from them”, accepting their memories as “foolish dreams”. Lewis creates a shifting sense of reality. The enchantment is a dream from which they awake, but the Witch describes their other world reality as a dream. This mimics a prior scene; before Rilian is freed he tells the travellers that he is enchanted at a certain hour when he turns into a dangerous enemy. Witnessing his transformation they discover that his “enchantment” is actually his disenchantment and they free him from the silver chair that binds him. Underworld is a place of illusions. Reality is out of joint. The Prince, who looks like Hamlet we are told, like Hamlet is caught between conflicting ideologies.

Puddleglum stamps on the enchanted fire with his bare foot to extinguish it.

‘All you’ve been saying is quite right, I shouldn’t wonder’, [he says].  
‘I’m a chap who likes to know the worst and then put the best face I can on it. So I won’t deny any of what you’ve said... But... I’m going to stand by the play-world. I’m on Aslan’s side even if there isn’t any Aslan to lead it. I’m going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn’t any Narnia... So... we’re leaving your court at once and setting out in the dark to spend our lives looking for Overland. Not that our lives will be very long, I should think...’ (156-7)

This is an interesting response to both Nietzsche’s argument about truth and lies, and also to the deliberate manipulation of “truth”. The Witch, wanting to control her victims, presents herself seductively and sets about disillusioning them of their “truths”. Her underground kingdom links her to the unconscious and Freud, and to the conscious darkness of uncertainty. There is an obvious connection between ideology and enchantment in all of the fantasies I have mentioned, and in *The Silver Chair* the Witch deconstructs one ideological framework to replace it with another. She suggests that the travellers’ world, their truth, is a creative mesh of metaphors and images, a constructed fiction.

Nietzsche tells us that we need to believe that our perception is truth even although this involves “forgetting” that we are “artistically creating” subjects. Unlike the children and Prince Rilian, and contrary to Nietzsche’s forgetting, Puddleglum does not argue against the Witch’s refusal of his version of truth and reality with “irritable logic”. Instead he sees through to the fabrication of his beliefs and worldviews. He accepts the likelihood of his self-deception, conceding that his version of reality may not be truth, it may indeed be a fiction built on metaphor and image, and agrees that “real” is, indeed, a problematic concept. Reality as he perceives it may or may not be a fiction, and he cannot know certainly one way or the other, but he knows he is still free to choose what fiction he will live in, what narrative he will weave for himself.

Like Harry, Tziga and Otter, Puddleglum resists enchantment, finding a space within himself to step outside ideology. (Lewis's story is the only one of these narratives that specifically uses discourse, or argument, to weave enchantment.) Harry and Laura (who resists the Dream of Contentment) find the strength within themselves for resistance; Tziga is attentive to the resistant voice of the Other; Otter finds strength in Anieb and together they overcome the spell. Like them Puddleglum *remembers* himself as an "artistically creating subject", a moral agent. Remembering destroys "repose, security and consistency", and is experienced as pain, but it also frees these characters from enchantment's power. Puddleglum breaks the enchantment (the mastery of truth) by extinguishing the bewitched fire. His pain is both physical and the on-going pain of disenchantment. He has been a chronic pessimist throughout the story, always ready with an alternative and gloomy interpretation of events, always eager to point out negative possibilities. He is sceptical, already disenchanted with life — his feet are hard and cold-blooded. He is predisposed to accept the pain that accompanies disenchantment, compared with the children and Rilian who find it a relief to yield to the enchantment. He knows that the pain will be less for him than it would be for them — "But he knew it would hurt him badly enough" (155). Conceding uncertainty, he holds both his doubt and his faith in his version of truth and reality simultaneously. He is, I think, operating in negative capability. There is no deluded security in this negative capability, but there is courage and honesty.<sup>43</sup>

Puddleglum and dreamhunter Tziga accept that they are located between worlds: the Underworld and the Overworld, real and imagined, dreamworld and waking world, unconscious and conscious. Truth slips between places, between the present perceived world and "elsewhere" or "nowhere", a place of imagination and metaphor. (This dual vision may be what Pullman refers to when Serafina teaches Mary to "see" the unseen through superimposing the perceived and imagined in a "trance-like open dreaming" — although this sounds more like enchantment than consciously embracing paradox.) The imagination is where concepts, including moral concepts, are conceived through metaphor and poetry. It is where a larger-than-life cat can grow a mane and an unfeline-like moral character (who, in the real world, has known a cat to act unselfishly?) and become the personification of an abstract concept called Goodness.

Enchantment is a metaphor for power over others in postmodern fantasies. Although Lewis is the only writer who specifically connects enchantment with

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<sup>43</sup> Given Lewis's Christian convictions it should be added that he is probably offering a response to a crisis of belief, privileging faith – or imagination – over rationalistic doubts, but I believe that the scene can and should be read on more levels than that of a simple religious parable. Lovell (2005, 43) interprets it as an answer to Freud's critique of religion; whereas Matthews (2005, 175) suggests Puddleglum is playing Plato to the Witch's Aristotle.

discourse<sup>44</sup>, and therefore ideology, ideology is implied in the other texts because the spells or dreams control the mind. Enchantment frequently involves loss of memory and self. In all cases feeling or confronting pain and suffering dispels the enchantment and enables remembering. Noticing gaps and inconsistencies in the dream spell — even simply asking why — awakens the mind to critical doubt and in that doubt lies disenchantment and the unravelling of the net or web of ideology. In Le Guin’s fantasy Otter confronts the monstrous Other who is also himself and his ethical awakening makes the spells that bind him visible and provides a way out of the darkness of illusion and subjection. Having travelled through the pain of disillusionment he then sees how to act, guided by compassion and his conviction that evil must be defeated.

Disenchantment is not a positive capability, nor is it ethical. Rather than a mystical experience, as Pullman seems to advocate, I think negative capability begins with de-mystification, involving loss, discomfort and even pain. Disenchantment, like deconstruction, is the undoing of “truths” that are actually illusions. But together with loss and undoing and even (in the case of Otter and Anieb) death there is also freedom. Because it has nothing to lose, no beliefs to protect or arguments to justify, it is also a place of recklessness and abandon. This emptiness is a creative and fertile place where ethics can be re-conceived. This is the place where Levinas and Derrida build their ethic of self-abnegation and submission to the Other, a stripped down, empty, humble place where the Other’s face speaks to us of our shared vulnerability and our need to accept alterity. It is a place of openness, unsolvable mystery and paradox.

## **The Seed of Light: Tentative Certainty in the Dark**

Postmodernism has thrown us ironies, cynicism and amoral protagonists who mock the naïveté of simplistic divisions of good and evil. It has given us a world without boundaries and without a reliable compass. Without an Authored script we improvise, and like Otter we are “alone in the dark” on an empty stage. Disenchantment is not comfortable and is often painful. Uncertainty, however, offers possibilities other than permanent disenchantment and a collapsed, fatally wounded morality.

Ricoeur, Wall and Eagleton agree that we need an ethics of transformation. Having come through a century troubled by, and obsessed with, dystopia, a vision of Utopia, of life and society as it could and should be, seems delusionally optimistic but transformation looks to the future. “Our vision is turned toward the future, by the idea of a *task* to be accomplished”, says Ricoeur. “Hope makes of freedom *the passion for the*

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<sup>44</sup> Although Lewis was not writing in the postmodern era, I suggest he was responding to Nietzsche’s philosophy.

*possible*” (qtd. in Wall 156). This is the hope that Ben from the *Chaos Walking* trilogy advocates even when faced with dystopian despair. “Freedom must be liberated... from its own participation in ideological alienation” argues Wall. “It can be regenerated in the face of its own participation — whether as an instigator or as a victim — in the distortions of social oppression” (156).

Otter’s dark, oppressive spell-bonds are released by a “seed of light” just as Puddleglum’s disenchantment does not disable him with paralysing passivity. Puddleglum chooses to believe in something (Narnia and Aslan) — knowing that this may well be a fiction — rather than the reality the Witch offers. He then acts on that choice, leaves her court and sets out in the dark to look for the Overworld. It seems like a small choice, but it has far-reaching consequences, ultimately saving Narnia from military invasion and tyrannical rule. Disenchantment becomes the active acceptance of negative capability and transforms into positive — moral — judgement, choice and action. This is the ethic that Ricoeur and Wall advocate; Wall refers to it as moral creativity. It is a way of imagining possibilities for a better, more ethical, life. Like Liam’s moral compass, it lines up history with hope for a more just future.

Ricoeur would call Puddleglum’s declaration of faith against doubt as an “attestation” (“I believe-in”), a vulnerable statement of testimony that is aware of its own lack of foundation and that is under “permanent threat of suspicion” from a more reliable account (*Oneself* 22).

As credence without any guarantee, but also as trust greater than any suspicion, the hermeneutics of the self can claim to hold itself at an equal distance from the cogito exalted by Descartes and the cogito that Nietzsche proclaimed forfeit. (23)

The “hermeneutics of the self” (a self who interprets the world, creating meaning, and interprets his/ her self in the world, creating a narrative identity) is based neither on rational and sensory certainty against scepticism of existence (Descartes) nor on scepticism of all rational truth claims (Nietzsche). For Ricoeur, the ethical self is based in self-esteem (“ethical intention”) and respect for self and others (“solicitude”) and reaches out from that foundation to honouring Others in their absolute alterity, culminating in justice. Wall refers to “morally creative capability” (7). It is neither a subjective “ethical aestheticism” (Hume), nor retrospective, trying to recapture a lost moral Golden Age, nor does it search to apply universal moral principles to specific situations (Kant), nor is it a movement towards a historical synthesis (Hegel). It points beyond itself to “moral worlds that are always yet to be imagined and formed” (8). Moral creativity is “the *still more radical* poetic capability for the human transformation and renewal of its social world” (9). Negative capability becomes positive capability through creative and the poetic imagination; dark labyrinthine mysteries are illuminated, partially

and incompletely, through metaphor. As Ricoeur says, “by telling stories and writing history we provide ‘shape’ to what remains chaotic, obscure and mute” (*Reader* 115). For Ricoeur, the telling of stories (imaginative capability) is a way of making sense out of chaos, like Otter’s seed of light.

For Nietzsche, reality is “refashioned” by imaginative concepts, that is, self-constructed “truths”. A “free intellect” treats the framework of concepts that uphold a “needy man” as a “scaffolding and toy” to be smashed or reconstructed ironically — to be “shattered and mocked” — and instead of being guided by truths (moral or otherwise), the free intellect is guided by intuition (90). But as Lewis implies in his story, a refashioned, self-constructed truth can itself become an enchantment if the storyteller has power. In the dichotomy set up by the Witch between reality and imagination, anything unseen or imagined is refuted (shattered and mocked) not because she doesn’t believe in her victims’ versions of reality (truth is irrelevant here) but because she wants to have power over them by controlling what counts as “real”. Like many postmodern theorists she understands the connection between truth and power and it is because of this connection that Lyotard insists that justice must stand apart from the whims of an easily enchanted and manipulated majority.

Accepting the importance of the imagination to morality, Wall suggests that moral creativity is a “primordial mystery” and relies on mythology to generate moral meaning (11). Moral creativity is “profound human capabilities” (that is, moral decision-making) “to be capable of acting freely” (14). This morality operates outside the prison of moralism. Its creative, choosing, freely acting capability lies in the chaotic heart of the “dark materials” of uncertainty like a seed of light, and therefore I have called it a tentative certainty.

Children’s fantasy writers are not generally ethical philosophers but the good ones do understand the power of metaphor to explore mysteries. Starting with a prevalent ethos that demands flexibility, pluralism, scepticism and unresolved uncertainty — but, at the same time, aware of an increasing imperative for ethical judgement as sections of society disintegrate into violent, destructive or self-obsessed moral anarchy — thoughtful writers push through these tensions in search of a place to stand ethically. All of these contemporary narratives arrive at the same ethical place, a barren, dark mythological landscape, rewritten. These texts suggest, sometimes obliquely with the barest of sketch-marks, sometimes much more directly and boldly, a tentative certainty against a backdrop of moral complexity and doubt. Like singing in the rain, or planting flowers in wartime or living *as if* there is a Narnia through the wardrobe, living *as if* Good (including justice) is an absolute value of infinite importance is a seed of light in the bleak gloom of history.

Singing and flowers and fantastic lands attest to a greater good in which we can participate.

Ricoeur's attestation ("I believe in", the willing suspension of disbelief) in the face of suspicion gains a "fragile concordance" when I recognise my ethical responsibility to the Other and say, "Here is where I stand!" (*Oneself* 168). This is not self-deception, says Eagleton, living *as if* we were subjects does have real effects. "In living 'as if', subjects do not live in illusion, this 'as if' is the *reality* of their existence as subjects" (*Ideology* 121). Scruton suggests that it is important to live *as if* our lives matter eternally. He suggests that behaving well is an end in itself and is its own good; the desire to live well is the desire for something of intrinsic value. In the face of uncertainty, like Puddleglum, he proposes the importance of living *as if* there is an Overworld and *as if* goodness (represented in the Narnia chronicles by following Aslan) matters. Alienation is a theme of Greek tragedy, and the death of erring heroes transfigures them, allowing their reintegration into the community. Alienation from society is also a contemporary concern; our society is consumeristic and consumption is a means with no end, a place of nothingness, where the ghosts of satisfaction are pursued by the ghosts of desire, argues Scruton. There is no point of arrival and no re-integration into the community. "[The] passage back to the moral order has been closed and the rites discarded" (48).

Fantasy fiction, and especially children's fantasy fiction, is regarded as "low", or popular, culture but it reiterates the same theme that Scruton confers on "high" culture: that is, loving sacrifice. Writing of Wagner he says,

myth is not just a fiction, and our engagement with it is never just a game. The myth sets before us in allegorical form a truth about our condition, but a truth which is veiled in mystery. Through myth we understand both the thing to which we aspire, and the forces which prevent us from attaining it. (*Modern Culture* 67)

This is precisely the function of fantasy, as I have argued. The thing we aspire to — the tentative "truth" — is a moral truth, usually presented symbolically, and the opposing forces are those obstacles, both within us and outside ourselves, that demand our moral fortitude to overcome so we can achieve the object of our quest (reconciliation). Scruton suggests that living *as if* redemption is possible through loving sacrifice reconciles us to our disenchanted lives: "...we should live as if a heroic love were possible, and as if we could renounce our life for the sake of it" (67). Reaching right into the heart of the fantasy fiction I have examined in this thesis, he continues, "Redemption... lies in love and in the exalted acceptance of death which love makes possible" (69).

## Rewriting Narratives: Desire, Death and Redemption

Dying to give birth to life is a mysterious paradox of negative capability. Eagleton, who reads themes of redemption, reconciliation and social transformation through Lacanian theory, establishes love and death as central themes; the interlocked but opposing forces of eros (toward life) and thanatos (toward death). Those people ear-marked for death, who are marked by their own mortality, can “unleash a formidable power for transformation”. They are “incarnations of Thanatos... men and women who are dead but won’t lie down”. Desire lies at the very heart of Lacanian ethics, but Lacan’s “desire in the end is desire for nothing” (152).

So there is no sovereign good... beyond clinging intractably to one’s longing for it... to have realised one’s desire ‘in the end’ is not to have achieved its object, since in the end it has no object other than itself. (153)

Lacanian ethics, Eagleton says, is an ethics of “heroic failure” (153).

“The Deathly Hallows” is a narrative within a narrative. It is a folk tale of the wizarding world where death meets desire in the form of three brothers. The first desires great power (a wand), the second desires the return of the dead (a stone), and the third desires an invisible yet full life (a cloak). Possessing all three hallows, Harry confronts Voldemort, but it is the stone that returns him to his beginnings, the Mirror of Desire and his dead parents. The yearning for a desire that can never be fulfilled — for the lost maternal body (Lacan) or for the lost community (Shylock) — is the Real of Lacan’s desire. Harry loses the stone in the Forest, forsaking his implacable desire.

Eagleton re-writes Lacan’s ethical narrative leaning on his interpretation of the Christian narrative. Sacrifice and redemption become key themes of his rewriting. “Only by passing through a sacrifice or symbolic death, divesting oneself of both imaginary and symbolic identities, can one struggle through to such transformation”, that is, of releasing “the power to inaugurate a new human order” (195). Sacrifice transforms life into significance by transcending individuality. Eagleton quotes Levinas: “I must be prepared to stand in for all others even to the point of dying on their behalf” (232), but suggests that sacrifice for “all others” is not an end in itself, it is a revolutionary passage from being a victim to power, the shocking laying down of one’s life transforming society. Through tragedy’s loss we learn the value of life. Negative capability is transformed to positive capability.

Le Guin’s *Otter* confronts the horror that evil creates, and it is a personal encounter with a diseased woman who is not himself, being entirely Other, but paradoxically is also himself. Eagleton describes Lacan’s ethic as sacrificial, a “disfiguring Real” at the core of identity, and this is who the slave woman is to Otter.

Desire (for freedom) and death take the form of the disfiguring Real. But Anieb (the slave woman who has a name) is not just a symbol of desire and death and a scapegoat, although she is these things. She is also a character in the narrative and this is very important. Ethical theory has to return to the personal, to the specific where life is lived, to real characters in a real narrative. “Make the light,” she whimpers, plaintively, as she walks forward in the darkness to freedom, and this is a real woman’s distress, “Can’t you make the light?” (37). Otter’s light glimmers faintly, barely illuminating their path to freedom. As they travel from the total oppression of slavery, their certainty is less sure and less absolute than it was when he was in the spell-bond. It is only when the sun rises over the mountain that Otter can see more clearly.

The pallor of the werelight had faded, drowned in a fainter, vaster clarity. Sky and earth were all one grey, but before them and above them, very high, over a drift of cloud, the long ridge of the mountain glimmered red. (38)

Anieb, whose goal has been to see the mountain, dies, instructing Otter to ask the village women how to liberate the people of the land. Anieb’s desire (to see the mountain) and her death become one in the grey in-between of darkness and light, and the mountain glimmers red, mirroring the blood that runs from her mouth as she dies, thus symbolising her sacrifice. “She saved me but I couldn’t save her,” laments Otter (39). Desire, death and sacrifice look toward transformation as day dawns.

Otter embraces (literally) the disfigured, abject, dying Other. Kearney suggests that death to self is the answer to evil within; it is identifying ourselves as the monster. This is because “the primary source of death and destruction is to be found in humanity’s own will-to-power” (*Monsters* 52). After Anieb’s death Otter loses his strength. “He had lost something, lost it forever, lost it as he found it” (40). It is a humbled Otter who emerges from the death of his self, identified with Anieb. Even his own heroic role in overthrowing the evil wizard is subject to question.

‘Will it make any difference? Will the slaves go free? Will beggars eat? Will justice be done? I think there’s an evil in us, in humankind. Trust denies it. Leaps across it. Leaps the chasm. But it’s there. And everything we do finally serves evil, because that’s what we are. Greed and cruelty.’ (42)

Otter’s despair, however, changes into hope. “We can’t do anything without each other,” he says (42). With others social transformation is possible.

Kearney links the scapegoat with death to self.

If we are to put an end to the cycle of scapegoating, might we not begin by trying to understand our own monsters?... They are lurking within us here at home — often in the depths of our own selves. (61)

Embracing the monstrous Other is a death to self and therefore a form of self-sacrifice. If we embrace the monster we risk becoming that monster; as in *Shrek* where kissing the ogre transforms beauty into a beast rather than the ogre into a prince. Mrs Coulter seduces

rather than embraces the monster (Metatron) using her powers of deceit. She struggles with him on the brink of the abyss but, unlike Ged wrestling with his Shadow, she does not recognise him as her own monster-shadow and so falls to her death with him. Kearney quotes *Apocalypse Now Redux*: “Horror may have a face... Horror and moral terror are your friends. If they are not then they are an enemy to be feared” (53).

Desire’s close link with death, especially death to self, is recounted in Chaucer’s medieval “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”. A “lusty bachelor” rapes a “mayde” and his sentence of death is suspended when the Queen begs the King to allow her to pursue justice. She gives the knight a year and a day to answer the question “What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren” (905). At the point of despair, the knight meets an old, foul and poor fairy woman, “A fouler wight ther may no man devyse” (999), who provides him with the answer if he will give her whatever she requests. Having promised, he returns to the Queen and tells her that “Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee” (1038). The decrepit old woman then demands to marry the knight. He faces the wedding night in deep apprehension. The old fairy woman asks him to choose whether she will be beautiful and faithless or foul and faithful. The knight, by now truly humbled, replies, “I put me in youre wise governance... For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me” (1231, 1235). Eros, as dangerous desire, had subjugated the maid to its power, but the knight learns that his desire must be subjected to the Other, sacrificing his own sovereignty (autonomy) for the foul fairy — the vile Other. She then grants his desire: she will be beautiful and faithful. Desire and death meet in an ethical marriage, the knight discovering the paradox that in sacrificing his desire he finds it. Ethics demands death to the undesirable within us, transforming our desire through a terrifying confrontation with the Real, so that we can embrace the Other and be reconciled to our community.

Non-being is not simply death, says Wall, but is incapacity to create meaning. Non-being is integral to transformation, it leads to new depths of meaning. We have to face non-being in order to be. This pattern is repeated over and over in fantasy. The knight is given a task that he cannot complete because it demands an understanding that he does not yet have, and although he eventually answers the riddle, he cannot decipher its meaning. It is not until he is rendered speechless, unable to answer the riddle at the core of his Real desire, facing the profound uncertainty of non-being, undone by the Other who transcends his known world and cannot be contained by it, that he finally receives his desire in the humble reciprocity of love.

The landscapes of the Real are wildernesses. The knight meets the loathly lady in a forest, Laura resurrects Lazarus in a lonely desolate place, Otter holds Anieb as she dies on a lonely path under a mountain, Harry walks to meet Voldemort through the Forbidden Forest. These are indifferent, inhospitable, even hostile landscapes. They are

landscapes far beyond the safety of the community, they are places where a solitary human is alien, and where travellers cannot find their bearings. This is where dragons dwell: dragons that are evil monsters or dragons representing freedom from ideological oppression and meaninglessness (as in Le Guin's narrative).

Vivid images of sacrifice in contemporary fantasy include: Harry Potter walking resolutely to his death; Laura, weeping, erasing the N of The Place and thereby erasing her beloved Nown; Nathaniel, moments before he dies, releasing Bartimaeus; Artemis walking to the tower to die to save humanity<sup>45</sup>; Todd, Viola and 1017 enduring suffering for others; and Will and Lyra choosing their separation. Each of these images involves self-motivated sacrifice for the good of another or others. They differ fundamentally from Nesbit's (chilling) plea for self-sacrifice at the end of her fantasy — duty to King and country, a conscripted, romanticised abstract grand sacrifice (discovered, too late, to be a personal blood sacrifice).<sup>46</sup> In contemporary fantasies the consequences of self-sacrifice are apparent and horrifying but willingly chosen. It is sober and costly, motivated not by heroism or glory but disinterested compassion. As Aslan says of his own feelings as he stumbles resolutely to his death, it is sad and lonely. Even when the stories resolve into a happy enough ending, the dark times are remembered, and the characters bear the scars of their loss.

It is strange that self-sacrifice emerges as an ethic from all these contemporary fantasies as it is an ideal that we should approach with some cynicism after the rhetoric of two world wars made a ghastly glorification of it. Maybe it is a response to today's self-absorbed hedonism and consumerism, providing an alternative vision of commitment and the courage to stand against the shadow of narcissism and with society's victims, to disentangle the personal and the political in the quest for justice and to

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<sup>45</sup> The final *Artemis* book came out while I was editing this thesis. *Artemis* is intended for a younger audience than most of the fantasies discussed in this thesis and appears to have the least serious ethical intentions. I was therefore surprised that the series ends repeating this same theme of self-sacrificial death.

<sup>46</sup> In *The Story of the Amulet* the children attend a magic lantern show and a lecture about the South African wars:

‘And I hope every boy in this room has in his heart the seeds of courage and heroism and self-sacrifice, and I wish that every one of you may grow up to be noble and brave and unselfish, worthy citizens of this great Empire for whom our soldiers have freely given their lives.’

And, of course, this came true... [because the wish-granting Psammead is present].  
(270)

This episode is dated in the novel as 1905. Although Nesbit imagined a future for her children with no world wars but a benign socialist Utopia, nine years later these fictional boys, including Cyril and Robert, her protagonists, and many of her young readers, will be fighting as “worthy citizens of this great Empire”, facing the horrors of unwilling death.

challenge the web of deceit of ideological power. Self-sacrifice is a negative capability, with the power to change not only the world but also ourselves.

Although the moral circumference of the world has smudged and even disappeared altogether, although we no longer sit obediently in our proscribed place in the divine physical, social and moral order, although there are doubts, uncertainties and mysteries, and we fumble our way through metaphors and fictions and fantasies towards a nebulous and probably non-existent truth, the ethics of contemporary fantasy for children is retrieved from ancient wisdom. Homeric epics pursue the theme of altruistic self-sacrifice (Constantelos); Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15.13). The context is secularised and even, with Pullman, hostile to religion, but this ethic is accepted and goes even further. One can die for a friend, just as one can love a stranger; but to die for a stranger is the ultimate ethical “event”, says Eagleton (319).

However, death is not the end of the story. Sacrifice, as well as a real demand, is a symbol of transition and transformation. Harry, after submitting to death in a voluntary, non-resistant encounter with Voldemort, finds himself in a place resembling Kings Cross Station, a place of transition. He is no longer Voldemort’s victim, because in willingly laying down his life he has gained power. Eagleton points out that sacrifice is never an end in itself.

The eighteenth-century moralists... advocate an exchange of sympathies with others... Kant and Levinas, by contrast, are bent on the subjugation of men and women to the moral law or the Other... [B]oth styles of ethical thought, sympathetic and sacrificial, are disfigured by their separation from one another. The advocates of self-fulfilment generally fail to grasp just what painful self-abandonment this would actually entail... For their part, the purveyors of a sacrificial ethics seem not to see that if this self-abnegation is not made in the name of more prodigal abundance of life all around, it remains no more than a morbid compulsion. Sacrifice is a revolutionary passage from victimage to power, a turbulent transition from destitution to riches. It is not an end in itself. (239)

Death as sacrifice only has ethical meaning if it is made in the greater interests of life and transformation. *Thanatos* is not masochistic but wills the death of aspects of the ego, or society, that hinder more abundant life. If the death wish lies deep in the unconscious, deeper still lies the desire for life. When the children, Prince Rilian and Puddleglum set out to leave the Underworld after Rilian slays the Shadow Queen who has transformed into a serpent, the earth splits open. The Earthmen, who have been enchanted by the Witch’s ideology, unable to do or think anything “except what she put in [their] heads. And it was glum and gloomy things”, remember their homeland that is opening up, deep beneath Underworld (173). Peering into the chasm, the travellers see brilliant colours and are told that jewels grow like fruit, and salamanders speak wittily

from rivers of fire. Deeper down in the unconscious, suggests Lewis, beyond the Shadow, is the drive for *Eros*, the desire to create life (Freud), for wholeness and relationships (Jung), and love.

In contemporary fantasies, self-sacrifice is a transition from juvenile to mature morality; an entry into creative, giving relationships in society. These relationships demand more than sentimental feelings or lawful duties; they can demand the negative capability of personal sacrifice in order to enhance life for others and ourselves. There is great power in cultural stories to transmit ethical values: the pathos of the walk of Aslan, Harry and Artemis to their sacrificial executions carries the emotional resonance of many literary predecessors. The deliberate choice of symbolic, if not actual, death is echoed in all of these contemporary fantasies. An ethos is therefore built out of mythos.

## **Conclusion:** *The Precipice, The Pond and the Paradox*

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the BBC produced two major television series. One was called “Civilisation” and the other “The Ascent of Man”. Today both titles would be unthinkable; but even then there was some irony, uncertainty, and even a hint of sadness at the loss of such grandiose concepts. “Civilisation” traced the history of Western Culture through the arts, and Kenneth Clark, whose narrative it was, concludes: “We can destroy ourselves by cynicism and disillusion, just as effectively as by bombs”. He then quotes Yeats:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Clark continues:

The trouble is that there is still no centre. The moral and intellectual failure of Marxism has left us with no alternative to heroic materialism, and it isn't enough. One may be optimistic, but one can't exactly be joyful at the prospect before us. (347)

Clark has previously said that he holds certain “beliefs that have been repudiated by the liveliest intellects of our time” which include creativity, gentleness, forgiveness, human sympathy and the importance of history. These ethical values, which define him as a “stick-in-the-mud” (346), are, he implies, anachronistic, conservative, backward-looking. To look forward, he says, is to look into a gap, an absence, where a rational and moral heart used to reside in the centre of things.

Bronowski's “The Ascent of Man” was to be science's answer to Clark's “Civilisation”. “Knowledge is not a loose-leaf notebook of facts,” he says. “Above all, it is a responsibility for the integrity of what we are, primarily of what we are as ethical creatures” (436). The final paragraph of the series concludes with Bronowski wondering: “We are all afraid — for our confidence, for the future, for the world. That is the nature of the human imagination” (438).

Clark and Bronowski wrote those words forty years ago. There is a strong sense, reading their grand narrative accounts of “civilisation” and “the ascent of man”, that they were standing in the twilight of an epoch. They both express concern, even fear, as they peer into the future, sensing great and inevitable change afoot, for what could arise from the ashes of the past? They could not predict the phoenix of postmodernism; or maybe they did, and were afraid of it.

The children's fantasies I have studied in this thesis are the hatchlings of postmodernism. Postmodernism may be characterised by a gap, an absence, an abyss of individualism, consumerism and meaninglessness, but these stories approach this moral abyss with a "rational and moral heart". In this conclusion I pick up the three themes that run through my argument, and are woven into each chapter: that is, the precipice (skirting the abyss of moral meaninglessness), the pond (the portal of story that takes us to the space of imagination) and the paradox (of ethical meaning).

### *The Precipice of Moral Uncertainty*

As the gates of Milton's hell are opened they reveal, on the outside:

the hoary deep — a dark  
Illimitable ocean, without bound,  
Without dimension; where length, breadth, and height,  
And time, and place, are lost; where eldest Night  
And Chaos, ancestors of Nature, hold  
Eternal anarchy... (II.891-896)

For Milton, Chaos, or "His dark materials" (II.906), is the raw matter out of which God created worlds. The Son, the "omnific Word", speaks: "Silence, ye troubled waves, and thou deep, peace... Your discord end" (VII.216-217). In his hand he takes "the golden compasses" to "circumscribe/ This universe" and to determine "thy just circumference, O world!" (VII.25-32). The Son creates divine order out of the Chaos, creating physical and moral boundaries.

With the possible exception of *Artemis Fowl* all of the fantasy stories I have analysed acknowledge the abyss, either overtly or covertly. In *Harry Potter* and the *Earthsea* series the abyss symbolises the banal meaninglessness of consumer society, but also, and more importantly, darkness within: the desire for wealth, power and immortality. It is the unconscious where repressed passions lurk; the Jungian Shadow that is associated with evil. We must face and overcome our interior dark evil, Rowling and Le Guin suggest, by dying to our desire for wealth, power and life. The sacrifice is great — Ged loses all his magical power — but it is the only ethical way forward.

In the monster narratives of *Bartimaeus* and *Dreamhunter* the abyss is a place beyond the margins where the abject Other is faceless, voiceless and nameless. It is being without moral agency, a being who is a non-being; the loss of self in the Other Place where self-identity disintegrates; something appalling in a grave. The abyss is the place where subjects are made objects, stripped down to nothing. Ethics demands a compassionate response that begins with listening without judgement, bestowing the Other with personhood. It is the ethic of Levinas: of self-abnegation where the Monster becomes a friend.

The social reform themes of *Dreamhunter* and *Chaos Walking* locate the abyss in Eagleton's account of the Lacanian Real where the seam joining the self and the world has been torn apart to reveal the impossibility of ethical choice that answers to the demands of both the personal and the political. Dreams of Utopia become dystopian nightmares. The personal shadow is confronted, the monstrous Other is embraced, and social reform is fought for, but still negation, meaninglessness and death swallow the ethical labour. The Real of subterranean desire pitches us "into the abyss of non-meaning", says Eagleton (111). Again, ethical direction is found in a paradox: death to desire (especially the desire for revenge) becomes the resurrection of hope not only for social, but also personal, justice.

In these fantasies discussed the protagonists confront the abyss and deepen their moral understanding. Graves, destitute plains, bottomless or black holes, battlefields, dark forests are all landscapes the fantasy hero encounters and traverses in order to find moral truth and gain moral maturity.

Pullman's abyss is not as straightforward to interpret. When leaving the Underworld, Lyra and Will are led along the edge of an abyss. This abyss is another, horrifying, world, a deep hole, hell.

And that abominable fall yawned all the time, and one little slip... would send you down for ever and ever...so far down you'd die of starvation... and then your poor ghost would go on falling... into an infinite gulf... for ever conscious and for ever falling... (*Spyglass* 377).

I am not sure what, if anything, this abyss represents, nor the abyss Metatron, Mrs Coulter and Asriel wrestle beside and fall into. It is not death because the dead are also terrified of it. Falling entails eternal consciousness and it is juxtaposed with the ghosts' release into the Overworld, their consciousness disappearing in a "vivid little burst of happiness" like "bubbles in a glass of champagne" (382). Perhaps Pullman's Overworld is the conscious, rational mind, while the Underworld represents the unconscious mind. If this reading is plausible then lying beneath the unconscious is an eternal horror of, perhaps, eternal meaninglessness.

Pullman celebrates the death of the Author/ Authority in his narrative. This death is an ideological event, the disintegration of a Grand Narrative. "The Ancient of Days" is "light as paper" as he is rescued from his chariot: "in the open air there was nothing to stop the wind damaging him, and... his form began to loosen and dissolve... Then he was gone: a mystery dissolving in mystery" (*Spyglass* 432). This leaves Pullman's world with no pre-established boundaries; as Milton expresses it, in "eternal anarchy". Pullman, however, does not seem content to leave his characters floundering in a fluid, liquid and anarchistic world where meaning is endlessly deferred and signs slip into semantic chaos. Instead, signs, as read in Lyra's alethiometer, locate and focus meaning, reversing the

chaos of meaninglessness. However, Pullman's lodestar for meaning does not hold sufficient ethical weight, I suggest; it is too open to ideosyncratic interpretation.

The psychiatrist Viktor Frankl refers to meaninglessness as an "existential vacuum" (*Unheard Cry* 25). The desire for meaning is a "primary motivation" of life and one "is able to live and even to die for the sake of his ideals and values," he asserts (*Search* 99). As Grand Narratives, which are narratives of meaning, have been stripped of both the subtle magic of their imaginative power and the deeper magic of their moral truths, the deepest unconscious desire may be for meaning and especially moral meaning. Although Mrs Coulter and Lord Asriel fall into the abyss, Lyra and Will manage to perilously inch their way along the edge of it: morally uncertain but clinging to moral meaning.

Chaos, or "his dark materials", is the natural life-giving world for Pullman, a place where there are no fixed boundaries or divinely-ordained laws. Moral meaning is not an absolute Kantian universal, but is found within, and between, people. Lyra, rather than the Son, holds the golden compass in her hand to find truth and circumscribe the moral universe. Moral truth is based on intuition, the ability to read signs. Therefore, both Milton and Pullman turn the abyss around into Chaos, a place of life-giving productivity. It is a space where the "Word" (language, signs or narrative) speaks order and meaning into being. For Milton, the speaker (the author) creates the sign (narrative); for Pullman, the reader interprets it. But for both, Chaos is the creative, active space of the imagination.

### ***The Pool as a Portal to the Other World of Imagination***

In *The Magician's Nephew*, when Uncle Andrew sends Polly and Digory into another world by means of magic rings, they find themselves in a wood between the worlds. The portal to this world is a pool, and when Digory steps out of the pool he is in:

the quietest wood you could possibly imagine. There were no birds, no insects, no animals, and no wind. You could almost hear the trees growing... This wood was very much alive. When he described it afterwards Digory always said, 'It was a rich place: as rich as plumcake.' (*Magician* 31-32)

Digory starts to forget the "real" world, feeling he has always been in the wood; he describes it as an in-between place where nothing ever happens. It is emotionally neutral; Digory feels neither fear, excitement nor curiosity. There are dozens of pools other than the one Digory has emerged from, and each, he and Polly discover, is a portal to a different world. The wood between the worlds is a metaphor for the world of imagination, a neutral place of stillness, quiet growth and richness. The pools into which

the children plunge discovering other worlds are narratives where other lives are lived and dramas unfold.

Imaginative engagement with a story takes two forms: imaginative redescription and vicarious imagination. Imaginative redescription (mimesis) is doubled: we tell our lives as stories and stories tell us about our lives. Real life can only be properly understood by being retold as narrative and narrative exposes us to “new possibilities of being” (Kearney, *Stories* 133). Mimesis sets us apart from the story; as Oscar Wilde points out, stories reflect ourselves back to us, but from a distance so we can simultaneously reflect upon their meanings. Vicarious imagination (catharsis) is an interplay of distance and immediacy; we watch the drama from offstage, but we enter it and live it as it unfolds. “Cathartic awe stops us in our tracks, throws us off kilter, deworlds us... enabling us to see through things, however troubling or terrible, to their inner or ultimate meaning” (138). Catharsis, vicariously living in the story (or gate-crashing another world’s reality), goes beyond reflection. It “solicits a mode of sympathy”, or empathy, that develops our ethical sensitivities (139). It engages our minds and our emotions from the safe distance of an imaginative space (a wood between the worlds). This is where the ethical critic in all of us takes up residence, the interior space where we search through layers of symbolic meaning in our personal alethimeters to make sense of the story, ourselves and our world. And, as I have previously argued, each narrative world we enter has its own unique ethos or ethical character to which we inevitably respond.

Contemporary fantasy fiction is located in the postmodern world, on the edge of the abyss of meaninglessness. Negotiating the precipice, these fantasies are ethical narratives that begin with the self, then look outwards towards the Other, then past the Other to social structures, then beyond social structures to the worldviews that create and shape us, building an ever more complete and complex picture of ethical reality as we live it.

Stories are stitched into the narrative arc of *Harry Potter* in the form of personal recollections, memories, diaries, fables, journalistic articles in a patchwork of interconnected narratives making up one whole. The ethos or moral character of a person is revealed in their life narrative, Rowling suggests, through the choices they make. The ethical character of Harry is ultimately determined by his defining choices. The most notable of these is the scene where Harry knowingly walks to his death in the Forbidden Forest. He does not run from death, but faces it, understanding that “there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying” (*Hallows* 554). As friendship, love and loyalty are values explicitly espoused in the series, the things that are worse than death

are betrayals of those values.<sup>47</sup> Overcoming the shadow of evil for Harry (as for Ged) entails laying down his life in order to be resurrected as a deeply altered and authentic human self. “To thine own self be true” is an ethic of the authentic self, and being true to others is the way, both Rowling and Le Guin suggest, to be most true to one’s self.

Just as monsters are deprived of agency, they are deprived of their personal narratives. An ethical encounter with the Other begins with the telling of personal stories as Knox’s Laura and Stroud’s Kitty discover. Listening to a narrative is an ethical response in these fantasies. They take ethics beyond loyalty and love for friends and one’s own community to an outrageous generosity of love for an outsider who is a stranger. This quality of generosity and love is transformative, requiring sacrifice of something held dear: youth and health or someone loved. It is a sobering ethos, because in neither of these stories the sacrifice is reversed. Kitty remains in an old body, and Laura loses Nown.

In *Chaos Walking* 1017 never does tell Todd his story. The reader overhears him tell the Sky a snippet of it and learns of his early separation from his mother in a passing dream-fragment. *Chaos Walking* is told with urgency, in the first person, present tense voices of Todd, then Todd and Viola, then Todd, Viola and 1017. Todd’s illiteracy and his frequent spelling errors problematise written narrative. How is Todd able to write his narrative at all? The story “sounds” oral, as if narrated on the run. The narrative strands clash and jostle in the same way that the ethical uncertainties clash and jostle. The personal and political are in constant tension and this tension is never resolved. Love, we know, is a powerful force, but it cannot overcome all obstacles, and the desire for revenge, we find, destroys what we most desire. There is no Utopia in this story; tenacious hope for a better world is all the scarred and battle-weary who have wrestled beside the abyss have left — but maybe it is enough.

Sacrificial love to save a prisoner, the community, or all the worlds from tyranny emerges as a powerful ethos from contemporary fantasy. Despite Pullman’s rejection of an overarching moral order, his reversals of good and evil and his morally ambiguous characters, his strongest ethical statement in *His Dark Materials* is the separation of Will and Lyra. If Dust is created by living a good life and helping “everyone else in your worlds to do that” as Xaphania says (*Spyglass* 520), and as sexual love creates a downpour of Dust’s golden glory, Will and Lyra’s relationship should surely continue, creating this joyous Dust in their lifetimes before being swallowed up into it, like bubbles bursting in the “champagne” of “Chaos” (*Spyglass* 382; *Paradise Lost* II.906). In terms

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<sup>47</sup> An impassioned Sirius, rebuking the cringing Peter Pettigrew who protests that not to have betrayed his friends, the Potters, would have been his death sentence, cries, “Then you should have died!” (*Prisoner* 275).

of the narrative, Will and Lyra's separation seems contrived, and it seems inconsistent — even disastrous — according to Pullman's ethos. But Will and Lyra know “there was no arguing with fate” (522) — a fate that Pullman authors — accepting the imperative to sacrifice their love. I can see no motivation for this “fate” unless it is Pullman's unconscious impulse towards a Deeper Magic: that is, an ethical love is that it is willingly laid down for a greater good.

The recurring ethos in all of these stories is self-sacrificing love. It is an unexpected ethos given the vacuity of postmodern individualistic consumer society and given the crippled state of the great ideologies of religion and humanism that would support such an ethos. But it is also an ethos that reaches back historically and is found in ancient mythologies; an ethos retrieved from mythos and written back into stories for children today. But there is a difference; these stories are founded on a paradox: in the midst of moral uncertainty and meaninglessness is found the frail light of moral meaning and a tentative certainty.

### *The End of the Story: A Paradox in a Pond*

In an episode of “The Ascent of Man” entitled “Knowledge or Certainty”, Bronowski says, “Heisenberg's principle [of uncertainty] says that no events... can be described with certainty” (365). The quantum is the measuring rod of tolerance; the area mapped out by uncertainty. “Yet the Principle of Uncertainty is a bad name,” says Bronowski. “In science or outside it, we are not uncertain; our knowledge is merely confined within a certain tolerance”. Bronowski has an analogy: face recognition. Descriptions and drawings of faces “do not so much fix the face as explore it... each line that is added strengthens the picture but never makes it final”. We are shown a portrait of a man's face, a sketch in black and white, suggested by broad strokes, shadings, light and darkness and the play of shadows. This is not representing an absolute reality — there is no line of certainty — but exploring uncertainty. Bronowski continues, “There is no absolute knowledge. And those who claim it, whether they are scientists or dogmatists, open the door to tragedy... We have to treat [information] with humility” (353).

This plea for humility is a plea for ethics. It is not abstract intellectual curiosity. In an “irony of history”, Heisenberg's principle was being worked out in Germany in the 1920s and 30s when “a principle of monstrous certainty” was arising with Hitler; “the despots' belief that they have absolute certainty” (367). Dogma (as readily as the chronic uncertainty of consumer society, we could add) turns a civilisation “into a regiment of ghosts — obedient ghosts, or tortured ghosts”, he urges (370).

Bronowski's narrative takes us to Auschwitz — also a place of pilgrimage for most postmodern ethical philosophers and some fantasy writers (who thinly disguised it

in metaphor), suggesting that post-Holocaust ethical thinkers have to assimilate this stark landmark of human evil into their philosophies. This, he says, is where people were turned into numbers, and from numbers into ashes. It was not done by gas, but by arrogance, dogma and ignorance. “When people believe they have absolute knowledge... this is how they behave” (374). As he stands in a pond where the ashes were discarded, we are shown the prison photos of faces of victims; silent images, representing the voiceless oppressed. Bronowski continues his impassioned plea for doubt, uncertainty, humility. “We have to cure ourselves of the itch for absolute knowledge and power... We have to touch people” (374).

This story of tragedy, on a scale far beyond Aristotle’s catharsis, silences us. We know we are implicated in it wherever we are located geographically or historically. The words almost herald in the postmodern era, expecting it, welcoming it. But the irony is that while postmodernity has ushered in an era where nothing is fixed or final, and no knowledge is absolute, it has likewise ushered in an era that can — and sometimes does — doubt the veracity of historical narratives like Bronowski’s.

Echoing Bronowski, Kearney warns us that “absolutism... leads to binarism” and that binary dualisms need to be deconstructed (*Monsters* 188); it scarcely needs to be added that moral absolutes polarise good and evil. Postmodern fiction, as we have seen, has no qualms about uprooting these markers and shifting them, even tossing them aside altogether. Nothing is sacred or beyond the reach of deconstruction: not God or gods, not the Categorical Imperative, not ethics, not history, not even tragedy. Moral values are equally hard to retrieve from cavalier uncertainty or carnivalesque irrelevancy.

Bronowski’s words have conviction: “we *have* to cure ourselves... we *have* to close the distance... we *have* to touch people”. There is, paradoxically, an imperative here, a certainty, even an absolute, about our need for uncertainty and our moral duty to others and to the dead. The dead, Bronowski insists, are not anonymous strangers, they are individuals with faces, names and narratives. This is an inverse of Aristotle’s argument that a well-told story discloses universal aspects of the human condition, transcending the particular into the general; here the particular remains stubbornly particular, rescued from the universal, and its very individuality is a call to ethics. And so, as we draw close to the particular, to the individual victim, placing ourselves within the influence of our narrative imaginations, we can feel the tug of the untold story that begs to be told and the weight of the “*ethical capacity of narrative imagination*” (Kearney 182).

So, in the postmodern era, “Man” ascends to uncertainty. “He” longs to speak, but every word “he” might utter is implicated in contradictions and conundrums. Besides, “Man” is no longer a unified subject with a voice as “he” no longer exists — “he” has

been torn apart by feminist, ethnic, postcolonial, sexual and political critiques. Narrative gives way to silence, because to speak for others claims power over them, so only silence can speak for the nameless, faceless victims. However, a way through this enigmatic silence is, I believe, to retrieve an ethical voice in symbolic narrative.

In the wood between the worlds, Digory and Polly join hands and jump into a pond that turns out to be a world where they enter a drama in which their moral uncertainty becomes moral judgement. Will uses his subtle knife to cut slits in the fabric of the world through which he can reach other worlds and universes and participate in a cosmic battle of good versus evil. Harry Potter is bequeathed Snape's memories at his death, and tumbles face first into a pensieve where narrative fragments of Snape's life are played out before him and his moral judgement of Snape is reversed. And, most significantly for postmodern ethics, Laura and Kitty confront their fears of personal annihilation and enter worlds known simply as The Place or The Other Place where they are disassembled by the absolutely Other and are fundamentally changed.

The leap into alterity in our own world requires an historical memory that needs "*both* empathic belonging *and* critical distance" — a simultaneous drawing close and drawing away — as Ricoeur reminds us (Kearney 183). This doubling of intimacy and distance is integral to narrative — and is yet another paradox — but it also enables a gap in which the ethical imagination can open out, an in-between place, a wood between the worlds, where face-to-face encounters with others can change us.

Moral uncertainty is not, in Ricoeurian ethics, either cavalier or carnivalesque, it is instead disinterestedness that is "a readiness to suspect one's own condition of personal interest or prejudice". Ricoeur refers to this as "epoche", "the bracketing of one's own desires" (qtd. in Kearney 183); it is a "desire [that] is revealed to be goodness" (Levinas, "Trace" 351). Postmodern Ricoeurian ethics is not, therefore, *less* ethical but *more* ethical. It demands far more from us than Kant's Categorical Imperative, obedience to a fixed moral law. Where Kant's law demands that we tell the truth, an ethics of alterity reaches deeper into us and demands integrity; where Kant's law demands that we do not kill, we are shown the way of unswerving respect and humility for the Other who can never be known to us. What is distant and what is close become engaged in a "hermeneutic dialectic", a discussion that interprets and remakes our personal worlds. And it is here, I believe that fantasy fiction plays a pivotal role in children's — and adults' — moral journey: through metaphor we feel our distance from the story but at the same time the characters are familiar and close to us, we identify with them, even offer them hospitality within us. We appropriate their worlds and take their moral struggles and their tragedies to heart. Fantasy succeeds in making the unutterable — that which is beyond telling and beyond narrative — utterable. It takes us to the uninhabitable poles of good

and evil, sometimes personifying them, and also shows us the whole spectrum in between, the grey zone in all its diversity, in which we live.

I think Clark is right; there is no centre to our world. But I also think his pessimism in the face of the decentred world is mistaken, and that the fissure, gap, or void at the centre — the abyss of uncertainty — is a portal of possibility. I am more inclined to Kearney's view that we are in a period similar to that at the close of the Middle Ages, a "period of not knowing", "when new worlds sprang up in all directions, rendering existing charts redundant", yet again requiring new cartographies.

At Land's End once more, we require novel mappings of uncharted realms, lest we slip over the edge into the abyss of the unknowable. The familiar dragons and demons have been replaced with different ones, of course. (Kearney 230)

Maybe it is the uncertainty of the unknown, or maybe it is a meeting place of Eagleton's Real where the dragons and demons turn out to be lovers after all. But whatever our uncertainties and doubts, whatever the paradoxes, we can still tell stories. Stories, now as much as from the dawn of our known history, from the earliest myths, grow out of incongruities and gaps, attempting to find meaning in that which may never be explained, that which lies beyond the end of the world. Contemporary fantasy looks at the fractured surface of the postmodern world and re-imagines a world of moral possibility, one that tries to answer the complexity in which it is enmeshed. It finds, in doing so, that morality is not null and void, but that our understanding of morality must now be deeper and more complex than anything that has preceded it, and that our moral task is even more responsible and urgent than it was in the past. Negative capability bestows on us a fractured power of moral agency but demands that we exercise it in the humility of uncertainty. "Every judgement," says Bronowski, "stands on the edge of error, and is personal" (374). I think Bronowski answers Dawkins's argument against children reading fantasy with a simple eloquence: reason and scientific pursuit can only take us so far, our knowledge is finite. When we reach the end of the known world we are left with an ethical claim on us: to listen to the stranger's story; "to touch people".

Moral uncertainty rumbles beneath the surface of many contemporary fantasy narratives. Nevertheless, malicious dark lords, symbolising history's many great wrongs, continue to stalk through these narratives engendering terror. They are still countered and eventually defeated by child protagonists with their faltering courage and loyal friendship, generous hospitality and sacrificial love. These stories contain the markers of good and evil, like tentative compass points, to guide travellers through the moral confusion of the in-between zone of uncertainty. The conviction of moral truth — a feeble seed of light — is all we need, these stories remind us, when we face the darkness outside and the monsters within.

Stories, lies and moral choice are distinctly human capabilities, Ged tells us in *The Other Wind*. Dragons — representing our own imaginative and ethical possibilities — speak in the True Speech, “in which there are no lies, in which to tell the story is to make it be!” (Le Guin 52-53).

[T]hings change:

authors and wizards are not always to be trusted:

nobody can explain a dragon. (Le Guin, *Tales* xvii)

We have come a long way since Aristotle said that poetry describes the universal, yet we have come no distance at all. The ancient and the postmodern face each other, touching.



*Illustration “Dragon in the Text”*  
By Elise Huggard - used by permission.

*These two paintings were part of a sixteen-year-old girl's art portfolio in which she explored the theme of imagination in the form of fantastic images arising from the pages of books.*



***Illustration "Once Upon a Time"***  
*By Elise Huggard - used by permission.*

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