



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 25
Number 3

Article 11

4-15-2007

Pullman, Lewis, MacDonald, and the Anxiety of Influence

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Recommended Citation

Gray, William (2007) "Pullman, Lewis, MacDonald, and the Anxiety of Influence," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 25 : No. 3 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol25/iss3/11>

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Abstract

Building on the theoretical framework of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, traces a path of influence and "anxiety" from George MacDonald through C.S. Lewis to Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy.

Additional Keywords

Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence*; Lewis, C.S.—Criticism of George MacDonald; Lewis, C.S. *Chronicles of Narnia*; MacDonald, George; Pullman, Philip—Criticism of C.S. Lewis; Pullman, Philip. *His Dark Materials*

PULLMAN, LEWIS, MACDONALD,
AND THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE

WILLIAM GRAY

Just as we can never embrace [...] a single person, but embrace the whole of her or his family romance, so we can never read a poet without reading the whole of his or her family romance as a poet.

(Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* 94)

THE present essay began life as an attempt to explore the possible relationship between the fantasy writing of Philip Pullman and that of George MacDonald. However, that attempt rapidly encountered the force of Harold Bloom's warning against the error of treating poets as if they were self-contained individuals. In *The Anxiety of Influence* Bloom is admittedly making specific reference to the relations between lyric poets, whereas the work to be discussed in the present paper is fantasy writing in prose. Nevertheless I believe that Bloom's analysis of the "family romances" of "poets as poets" can be adapted to apply to writers in other literary genres, and to the so-to-speak "familial" relations that constitute a writer as a creative literary individual. Indeed, Bloom himself sought in his 1980 paper "*Clinamen: Towards a Theory of Fantasy*" to apply his "anxiety of influence" theory not only to the genealogy of the literary genre—or rather sub-genre (2)—of fantasy, but also to the relationships between particular instances of fantasy writing, for example the relation of his own *The Flight to Lucifer* to David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus*. Of course the gender bias of Bloom's famous theory of "the anxiety of influence" was long ago pointed out by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their *The Madwoman in the Attic*; this is an issue to which I shall return later in this essay. What I hope to show in the present paper is that however tenuous and complex the "family" connections that link Pullman and MacDonald may be, they tend to be dominated by another figure who is closely and inextricably associated with both of them: C.S. Lewis. Lewis figures, firstly, as a bad father to Pullman, a seemingly inevitable precursor whose writing seems to fascinate as well as repel Pullman. Secondly, Lewis appears as MacDonald's dutiful son, devoted to his spiritual (if not literary) master. Ultimately, however, there seems to me to be something hollow and unconvincing about both these versions of a filial relationship. In the first place, Lewis is arguably not the moral monster that Pullman makes him out to be; and secondly, MacDonald is more than just the spiritual director (important as that is)

that Lewis presents us with. For one thing, MacDonald is, I will argue, a much better writer than Lewis would have us believe. While there is not necessarily any “taint of insincerity” in these misrepresentations, only perhaps something rather *voulu* (as Owen Barfield once said of C.S. Lewis [xi]), nevertheless Pullman and Lewis could also be seen as “framing” their precursors, in all the senses of Barbara Johnson’s memorable usage of the term “frame” (Johnson). However, it is Harold Bloom’s “map of misreading,” in its own way as arcane as Johnson’s poststructuralist subtleties, that seems more apt here, and more in tune with the Gnostic sympathies of both Pullman and MacDonald.

Without venturing too far into the battery of explicitly Gnostic categories that Bloom elaborates in *The Anxiety of Influence* and *A Map of Misreading*, one might suggest that it is the first two of his six strategies for misreading—or “revisionary ratios,” as Bloom calls them—that might seem to apply most readily to the relationships that are the subject of the present paper. *Climamen* (or “swerving”) might arguably apply to the relation of Philip Pullman and C.S. Lewis, with the former “swerving” away from his precursor in a corrective movement. Bloom’s second “revisionary ratio” *tessera* (or “antithetical completion”) might seem more appropriate to the way in which C.S. Lewis (as I hope to show below) “antithetically ‘completes’ his precursor, by so reading [MacDonald’s work] as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough” (*Anxiety* 14). However, Bloom’s six “revisionary ratios” are so general—Bloom himself is quite undogmatic about their number, their names and their application—that it is difficult to be very precise in applying them. In the context of the present discussion of MacDonald, Lewis, and Pullman, I propose simply to use Bloom’s general idea that a writer must necessarily *misread* a significant precursor in order to achieve his own identity as a writer. Gilbert and Gubar have argued (referring *en passant* to MacDonald’s *Lilith*) that *The Anxiety of Influence* depends on a patriarchal Oedipal scenario (46-51). While I intend to argue that there is a degree of Bloomian misreading involved both in the relationship of Pullman to C.S. Lewis, and of Lewis to George MacDonald, I also intend ultimately to retain a degree of suspicion towards the Oedipal focus of Bloom’s approach.

Pullman explicitly gives his own version of his literary origins in the “Acknowledgements” that conclude the *His Dark Materials* trilogy. He writes: “I have stolen ideas from every book I have ever read. My principle in researching for a novel is ‘Read like a butterfly, write like a bee’, and if this story contains any honey, it is entirely because of the quality of the nectar I found in the work of better writers” (*Amber Spyglass* 549). While this description smacks rather more of free love than of the obsessive Oedipal conflicts of the Bloomian nuclear family, there is nevertheless an interestingly masculinist subtext to its intertext. The phrase “Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee” originated of course with

Cassius Clay (later Muhammed Ali), than whom a stronger expression of male self-creation through conflict would be hard to find—with Sonny Liston perhaps figuring as the Bad Daddy in this Oedipal psychodrama. The suggestion that Pullman is, like Ali, “the Greatest” is reinforced by the quotations on the covers of Pullman’s books: “Is [Philip Pullman] the best storyteller ever?” and “Move over Tolkien and C.S. Lewis.” Admittedly this “hype” does not necessarily reflect Pullman’s own views, though the extraordinarily ambitious scope of *His Dark Materials* has not escaped some critical suspicions of hubris (Wagner, qtd. in Squires 74). Pullman is by any standard a “strong” poet or writer, and one unafraid of flaunting his literary lineage. Though Pullman himself has been in some respects critical of postmodernism,¹ some critics have found in his work an (inter)textually promiscuous postmodern pluralism (e.g. Thacker and Webb 148; 151-6). Such postmodern intertextual promiscuity notwithstanding, there is nevertheless one figure with whom it seems Pullman must contend above all others, and that is C.S. Lewis. This encounter seems susceptible of a Bloomian interpretation as an Oedipal misreading of a literary father-figure.

Philip Pullman and C.S. Lewis

Pullman has frequently and publicly attacked Lewis, most notoriously perhaps in his article “The Dark Side of Narnia” which vilifies the “pernicious” Narnia series as “one of the most ugly and poisonous things I’ve ever read” on account of “the misogyny, the racism, the sado-masochistic relish for violence that permeates [it]” (6). While none of these charges against Lewis is new, or perhaps entirely unfounded, it is in fact the “relish for violence that permeates” *Pullman’s attack on Lewis* that is most striking. Lewis seems too close to Pullman for the latter’s comfort. Pullman clearly feels the need to distinguish his own work from what seems to the innocent eye to be the rather similar work of Lewis. Specific textual correspondences could be multiplied: for example, in the first book of both the *His Dark Materials* trilogy and the *The Chronicles of Narnia* the heroine makes a momentous discovery in a wardrobe (even the names “Lyra” and “Lucy” are not too dissimilar—Blake’s “Lyca”² notwithstanding). However, it is the general thematic similarities that are most striking: both Pullman and Lewis have written fantasy with a religious (or quasi-religious) angle about growing up, with lots of intertextual allusions. If Pullman in an interview has called the *His Dark Materials* trilogy “*Paradise Lost* for teenagers in three volumes” (qtd. in Parsons and Nicholson 126), then Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* have been

¹ Pullman has said in a discussion with Rowan Williams that he is “temperamentally ‘agin’ the postmodernist position that there is no truth and it depends on where you are and it’s all the result of the capitalist, imperialist hegemony of bourgeois . . . all this sort of stuff” (qtd. in Hail 101).

² See “The Little Girl Lost” and “The Little Girl Found” in *Songs of Experience*.

called a “miniature *Faerie Queene*” (Myers 166). Of course, according to Pullman, his fantasy is not really fantasy, though his claim in the same interview that *Northern Lights* is “not fantasy [but] a work of stark realism” (qtd. in Parsons and Nicholson 131) seems to be somewhat tenuously based on his alleged superiority over the likes of Tolkien in the portrayal of psychology. Pullman is apparently anti-religious, though Hugh Rayment-Pickard in *The Devil’s Account: Philip Pullman and Christianity* does not have to work very hard to disengage Pullman’s ‘hidden theology.’ Rayment-Pickard forbears from any accusation of disingenuousness on Pullman’s part, suggesting only that the latter’s claim not to have a “message,” being merely a story-teller, is a kind of blind spot (23). Pullman clearly does have a “message” that is in certain crucial respects different from Lewis’s Christian one; however, the practical moral outcomes seem *mutatis mutandis* pretty similar, as is evident in the following passage from *The Amber Spyglass* where the angel Xaphania offers Will and Lyra these words of wisdom:

“Conscious beings make Dust—they renew it all the time, by thinking and feeling and reflecting, by gaining wisdom and passing it on.

“And if you help everyone else in your worlds to do that, by helping them to learn and understand about themselves and each other and the way everything works, and by showing them how to be kind instead of cruel, and patient instead of hasty, and cheerful instead of surly, and above all how to keep their minds open and free and curious . . . ” (Pullman, *Amber* 520)

Evidently Lewis has no monopoly on preaching, for Pullman shows himself here to be just as capable of didacticism as the next children’s author.

The real sites of conflict between Pullman and Lewis in this Oedipal struggle are, unsurprisingly, sex and death. Pullman specifically takes issue with two scenes in Lewis’s *The Last Battle*. Firstly, he criticises Lewis for excluding Susan from “the real Narnia,” or Heaven, on account of her being “interested in nothing now-a-days except nylons and lipstick and invitations” (124). This passage is often seen as some kind of sexist and/or puritan and/or misogynist attack on female sexuality, for which the nylons and lipstick and invitations are metonyms. Pullman accuses Lewis of a kind of prudish condemnation of adolescent sexuality, which he by contrast seeks to celebrate in the scene at the end of *The Amber Spyglass* where Will and Lyra mutually stroke their demons’ fur, an activity that presumably refers metonymically to some kind of sexual intimacy. However, I feel that Lewis has been rather harshly treated on this issue. The problem with Susan is not so much her adolescent sexuality as such but the fact that she allows the *construction* of that sexuality to be so all-absorbing that she doesn’t *want* anything else. And you don’t have to be sexist and/or puritan and/or misogynist to worry about what our culture does to teenage girls. When

Lyra and Will begin to explore their sexuality, they are still involved in a heroic quest; that's precisely what Susan—sadly—doesn't seem to want anymore.

Secondly, Pullman criticises Lewis for his allegedly “horrible” message that being killed in a train crash is the best thing ever if you end up in Heaven (qtd. in Rayment-Pickard 45). Apart from the fact that *His Dark Materials* is at least as violent as anything that Lewis ever wrote, Lewis's Platonism by no means necessarily implies a devaluation, let alone a hatred, of this world, only some care in our dealings with it. There is always a danger of conflating Platonism and Manichaeism. The latter *is* precisely world-hating, since for it Creation is actually the Fall, and consequently the world and the flesh are merely snares (or indeed “tombs”) from which the Manichaean adept seeks only escape—though sometimes not just yet, as one famous ex-Manichaean had once pleaded (Augustine, *Confessions* 8:7)! That famous ex-Manichaean, Augustine of Hippo, was acutely aware of the importance of discriminating between on the one hand Manichaeism, which despite the claims of its adherents was profoundly anti-Christian, and on the other hand Platonism, which was in Augustine's mature view compatible with Christian faith, though of course insufficient on its own.³ C.S. Lewis stands in a long line of Christian Platonists for whom the world and the body are, as the good creations of a good God, capable of expressing divine beauty and wisdom. That human beings are perennially prone to idolize, degrade and exploit that which if used properly should reflect the glory of God, is the problem of sin or evil. The point is that Christian Platonism, far from being world-hating, wants the world and the body to be used in the right way, that is, as images of the divine life. In this sense it is deeply world-affirming. The difficulty is that Platonism, like Christian faith itself, is dialectical, since the very desire that leads ultimately to God is dangerously powerful and always prone to short-circuiting the spiritual (and not only the spiritual) system by seeking premature fulfilment or joy. And joy prematurely grasped inevitably turns out to be mere pleasure or “thrills.” All of this is made abundantly clear in Lewis's deeply Augustinian spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*.⁴

Pullman, then, is perfectly entitled to proclaim some kind of this-worldly message; however, firstly, it is not the case that in order to do so he has necessarily to misread Lewis as a quasi-Manichaean (though a Bloomian reading might claim precisely that he *does* have to); and secondly, Pullman's purported this-worldliness appears less than consistent. It seems rather odd, for example, that a self-proclaimed this-worldly atheist should allow any sort of post-mortem existence whatsoever, as in the world of the dead sequence in *The Amber Spyglass*

³ On Augustine, Platonism, and Manichaeism, see above all Brown.

⁴ See the chapter “The Quest for Joy (or the Dialectic of Desire)” in Gray, *Lewis* 4-16.

when, in a kind of reversal of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, Lyra goes to find and rescue her friend Roger who has been captured and killed by “the Gobblers.” More significantly, the ghosts escaping from the world of the dead (which incidentally seems to owe something to the conclusion of Ursula Le Guin’s *The Farthest Shore*) are seen to achieve a kind of blissful release in a moment of mystic pantheism that is again rather hard to reconcile with a rigorous this-worldly atheism. As Lyra reassures the ghosts, reading the alethiometer:

“But your daemons en’t just *nothing* now; they’re part of everything. All the atoms that were them, they’ve gone into the air and the wind and the trees and the earth and all the living things. They’ll never vanish. They’re just part of everything. And that’s exactly what’ll happen to you [...]”
(*Amber* 335)

One of the ghosts takes up Lyra’s theme: “We’ll be alive again in a thousand blades of grass, and a million leaves, we’ll be falling in the raindrops and blowing in the fresh breeze; we’ll be glittering in the dew under the stars and the moon” (336). And when the ghost of Lyra’s old friend Roger becomes the first to achieve release from the world of the dead, it is presented as a moment of intoxication: “He took a step forward, and turned to look back at Lyra, and laughed in surprise as he found himself turning into the night, the starlight, the air . . . and then he was gone, leaving behind such a vivid little burst of happiness that Will was reminded of the bubbles in a glass of champagne” (382). Pullman at this point seems very close, *mutatis mutandis*, to the Romantic pantheism of Wordsworth, for example as it is expressed—admittedly with much more ambiguity and ambivalence than Pullman’s “Happy Hour” version of pantheistic mystical surrender—in “A slumber did my spirit seal”:

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

There is even a hint in Pullman’s text at this point of something not dissimilar to MacDonald’s notion of the “good death” which the young Lewis picked up on (Lewis, *MacDonald Anthology* 21). The “good death” motif is in part a version of the Romantic principle of “*stirb und werde*” [die and become]; it is perhaps most strangely expressed in the aëranth or flying fish which dives into the boiling pot in *The Golden Key*—the latter is incidentally the only MacDonald text that

Pullman says he actually remembers reading.⁵ Perhaps there lies, behind Pullman's inconsistent (but in a Bloomian sense necessary) misreading of Lewis, a family resemblance to the literary father that Lewis in his turn misread, George MacDonald.

C.S. Lewis and George MacDonald

If Pullman's misreading of Lewis is an act of vilification, Lewis's misreading of MacDonald is an act of sanctification. Lewis claimed MacDonald as his spiritual master, and famously said: "I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him" (Lewis, *MacDonald Anthology* 20). For Lewis, MacDonald was "the greatest genius" as a maker of myths, of "fantasy that hovers between the allegorical and the mythopœic" (16, 14). However, Lewis did not rate MacDonald as a writer; in literary terms MacDonald was, according to Lewis, not even second-rate:

In making these extracts I have been concerned with MacDonald not as a writer but as a Christian teacher. If I were to deal with him as a writer, as a man of letters, I would be faced with a difficult critical problem. If we define Literature as an art whose medium is words, then certainly MacDonald has no place in its first rank—perhaps not even in its second. There are indeed passages [...] where the wisdom and (I would dare to call it) the holiness that are in him triumph over and even burn away the baser elements in his style: the expression becomes precise, weighty, economic; acquires a cutting edge. But he does not maintain this level for long. The texture of his writing as a whole is undistinguished, at times fumbling. Bad pulpit traditions cling to it; there is sometimes a nonconformist verbosity, sometimes an old Scotch weakness for florid ornament [...] sometimes an over-sweetness picked up from Novalis. (Lewis, *MacDonald Anthology* 14)⁶

It is noteworthy that even those elements of MacDonald's style that satisfy Lewis's perhaps over-sensitive critical palate are attributed to the holiness of MacDonald the Christian teacher, rather than to the skill of MacDonald the professional writer. Lewis's assertion that "the texture of [MacDonald's] writing as a whole is undistinguished" (*Anthology* 14, emphasis added) seems to disallow the move which would interpret his criticisms of MacDonald's writing style as applying only to the "realist" novels, but not to the fantasy works. Lewis does make a sharp qualitative distinction between the two bodies of MacDonald's

⁵ Private correspondence with Philip Pullman.

⁶ It is interesting to note how Bloom tries to transfer Lewis's ambivalent reading of MacDonald to his own equally ambivalent reading of Lindsay (Bloom, *Clinamen* 17).

work: “[MacDonald’s] great works are *Phantastes*, the *Curdie* books, *The Golden Key*, *The Wise Woman*, and *Lilith*. [...] they are supremely good in their own kind [...]. The meaning, the suggestion, the radiance, is incarnate in the whole story” (17). But the transcendent supremacy of this “canon within the canon” of MacDonald’s *oeuvre* is not made on the basis of any literary merit, since Lewis has already precluded any serious consideration of MacDonald as a literary artist. According to Lewis, MacDonald’s artistic achievement is not a literary one at all, but rather belongs to what Lewis calls mythopoeic fantasy. Lewis hesitates to discuss the latter in strictly literary terms since, as myth, it is for Lewis in principle independent of language: “Myth does not essentially exist in *words* at all. We all agree that the story of Balder is a great myth, a thing of inexhaustible value. But of whose version—whose *words*—are we thinking when we say this?” (15) As evidence of this claim, Lewis offers the anecdote of his hearing the story of Kafka’s *The Castle* related in conversation and afterwards reading the book for himself. He claims, incredibly enough for those who find the quality of Kafka’s prose disturbing, that “[t]he reading added nothing” (16). The date of publication of Lewis’s *MacDonald Anthology* (1946) suggests that here Lewis was not consciously going against the Spirit of the Age and the mid-twentieth century “linguistic turn,” although he was quite capable of (and indeed, one suspects, would have relished) such deliberate provocation.⁷ Lewis’s view that Myth has a power and value “independent of its embodiment in any literary work” (*Experiment* 41) may have a certain immediate plausibility, but it runs counter to the prevailing intellectual climate of the latter half of the twentieth century, which might be summed up in the slogan deriving from Derrida’s *On Grammatology*: “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (“there is nothing outside of the text” [Derrida 1825]). More concretely, current debates about the success (or otherwise) of the translation of *The Lord of the Rings*, and indeed *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, into film versions would seem to raise questions about Lewis’s assertion of the myth’s in-principle independence of its literary form. It is also noteworthy how critics in areas other than literature (Lewis’s examples are mime and film) tend to describe their particular medium in quasi-linguistic terms.⁸ I suspect I am not alone in finding it hard to accept Lewis’s claim that “the meaning, the suggestion, the radiance” that is “incarnate” in MacDonald’s great works (*Anthology* 17) is merely “a particular pattern of events which would equally delight and nourish if it had reached me by some medium which involved no words at all” (15).⁹ Indeed, in his edition of MacDonald’s *Complete*

⁷ See Lewis’s inaugural lecture at Cambridge University where he presented himself as “Old Western Man” (“*De Descriptione Temporum*”); see also Gray, *Lewis* 2.

⁸ See for example Monaco.

⁹ Since writing the above I have come across the following comment by Adelheid Kegler which seems to be saying something very similar: “*Lewis klassifiziert MacDonald als guten*

Fairy Tales, U.C. Knoepfelmacher has specifically blamed Lewis's influence (particularly through the latter's *MacDonald Anthology*) for the lack of critical attention to what he calls "the rhetorical sophistication of [MacDonald's] best work," so that:

MacDonald's profoundly experimental and inter-textual fairy tales and fantasies, his subversive incursions into so many different nineteenth-century literary forms, and his delight in the friction and contradictions he could produce through his generic criss-crossings, went unnoticed. (Knoepfelmacher viii-ix)

One example of MacDonald's stylistic virtuosity might be the fourth sentence of "The Wise Woman," which takes over 400 words to lead up to the bare fact that "something happened" (225-6). This might even be seen as a kind of prescient ironic commentary on Lewis's claim that what matters is the "events" which need no words at all, so that "[i]f the story is anywhere embodied in words, that is almost an accident" (*MacDonald Anthology* 15). Lewis's doubtful theory of language thus allows him to celebrate MacDonald's acts of myth-making genius, despite the latter's alleged shortcomings as a writer. Whether Pullman would welcome being placed alongside MacDonald as a creator of myths is uncertain. I suspect, though, that Pullman, who evidently takes considerable pains over his literary style, would hardly relish being damned with Lewis's faint praise when the latter separates the power of a myth from its actual literary expression. Such damnation with faint praise is precisely one of the ways in which Lewis arguably "misreads" MacDonald. Whatever reservations one might have about MacDonald's "realist" fiction, for the most part his fantasy fiction is brilliantly written. And this is not simply a case of style (or indeed formal experimentation) for its own sake. The *content* of, for example, *The Light Princess*—which interestingly is not listed in Lewis's "canon within the [MacDonald] canon"—is literally inseparable from its literary *form*. In the meaning of this tale, the tone of its narration is crucial: levity is what it is all about.

However, Lewis not only attacks MacDonald's potency as a writer, whilst all the while praising him a spiritual master who through his mythopoeic genius baptised Lewis's imagination (*MacDonald Anthology* 21; *Surprised by Joy* 146); he also misreads the theological *content* of MacDonald's work. This is particularly relevant to a comparison of Pullman and MacDonald since the theology of C.S. Lewis to which Pullman objects is not necessarily to be identified

Mythopoeten, jedoch eher mittelmässigen Schriftsteller [...]. Leider wird diese Klassifizierung in der MacDonald-Literatur häufig noch unhinterfragt übernommen ("Lewis classifies MacDonald as a good creator of myth, but as an average writer [...]. Unfortunately this classification is often taken on uncritically in writing on MacDonald") (Kegler, 162n4).

with MacDonald's, despite the fact that Lewis has co-opted the latter. In her paper "George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis" in William Raeper's *The Gold Thread*, Catherine Durie shows how Lewis systematically misread MacDonald's theology. One important aspect of MacDonald's theology that Lewis "quietly drops" is what Durie calls "the childlikeness of God," and its corollary that "MacDonald consistently claims that theology misrepresents God when it portrays him as the great king." MacDonald's view of God is, says Durie, "a long way from the hierarchical and authoritative images that move Lewis" (173). Lewis's misreadings of MacDonald culminate in *The Great Divorce* when he makes the character "George MacDonald" express views directly opposite to views the real MacDonald actually held. As Durie puts it:

Lewis and MacDonald are here made to change places; but the MacDonald who makes such forceful points is a ventriloquist's dummy. It is Lewis's voice which subverts the real MacDonald's belief in hell as a temporary purifying force, and heaven as the home of every one of God's children. (Durie 175)

These misreadings of MacDonald by Lewis bear directly on issues that Pullman has raised in relation to Lewis. Firstly, Pullman's idea of "the republic of heaven" depends precisely on his opposition to the idea of God as king (an opposition which MacDonald shared, but Lewis edited out). Secondly, on the issue of universal salvation, Lewis actively misrepresents MacDonald and makes him reject the idea of universalism that MacDonald actually espoused, and according to which not only the mildly rebellious Susan, but also the seriously rebellious Satan (or "Samoil", as he appears in *Lilith*¹⁰), will ultimately be saved (MacDonald, *Lilith* 217-8). So even if Lewis does let Susan be damned (in both senses of "let"), then MacDonald certainly wouldn't. This raises the possibility that Pullman may have more in common with MacDonald than we would expect if we assumed that MacDonald and Lewis shared identical (and to Pullman offensive) theological views.

MacDonald and Pullman

What then could MacDonald and Pullman be seen to have in common? First of all, a faith in stories, and more specifically, stories that appeal to what MacDonald called "the fantastic imagination" (I put it this way partly to circumvent Pullman's avowed dislike of the genre "fantasy literature"). Stories,

¹⁰ "Samoil" (probably to be identified with "Sammael") is the name of the Shadow (George MacDonald, *Lilith* 107). 'Sammael' is also related to the Satanic figure of "Zamiel" who appears in Pullman's *Count Karlstein or The Ride of the Demon Huntsman*, and is derived from Carl Maria von Weber's opera *Der Freischütz*.

and more specifically fairy stories, are a way of communicating in a non-conceptual way; for MacDonald it is a kind of category mistake to expect a fairy tale “to impart anything defined, anything notionally recognizable” (“Fantastic Imagination” 8). MacDonald’s view of language not only echoes (especially German) Romanticism; it also seems to prefigure Kristeva’s distinction between “the Symbolic” and “the Semiotic” (or the “phenotext” and the “genotext” [Kristeva 2169-79])¹¹ when he replies to the claim that words—unlike music—“are meant and fitted to carry a precise meaning”:

It is very seldom indeed that they carry the exact meaning of any user of them! And if they can be so used as to convey definite meaning, it does not follow that they ought never to carry anything else. [...] They can convey a scientific fact, or throw a shadow of her child’s dream on the heart of a mother. (“Fantastic Imagination” 8)

This idea that “sometimes fairy stories may say best what’s to be said” is of course particularly associated with Lewis (“Sometimes”), but he certainly didn’t invent it; it was common property shared with other Inklings such as Tolkien and Barfield and derives ultimately from Romanticism and especially perhaps German Romanticism. Lewis’s version of the concrete imaginative experience of myth versus the abstract intellectual understanding of allegory tends to be set up in a way that resonates with the New Critical privileging of the organic unity of a non-conceptual, non-paraphrasable transcendental meaning (see Gray, *Lewis* 33). This derives principally from Coleridge, with the emphasis on the organic unity of meaning; but there is also a different kind of Romanticism which stresses, if not the indeterminacy of meaning, then at least the diversity of meaning as received differently by different hearers. I use ‘hearers’ advisedly because in MacDonald’s essay “The Fantastic Imagination” the key example for how art communicates is music or the sonata. As MacDonald puts it: “The greatest forces lie in the region of the uncomprehended” (9).

Taking music as the condition to which all the arts aspire was central to German Romanticism (whence the later European Symbolist movement took the idea¹²). Pullman too has related his writing to musical experience. In the powerful final sequence of *Northern Lights* (U.S. title: *Golden Compass*), when Lyra (and indeed the reader) are moving into “the region of the uncomprehended” as Lyra advances into another world, Pullman explicitly echoes a line from the German symbolist poet Stefan George’s poem “*Entrückung*”: “*Ich fühle luft von anderen planeten*” (“I feel air from other planets”) when Lord Asriel cries: “Can

¹¹ On MacDonald and Kristeva, see Gray, “George MacDonald, Julia Kristeva and the Black Sun.”

¹² See for example Raymond.

you feel that wind? A wind from another world!" (*Northern Lights* 394). Pullman has intertextually related the effect of this transition into another world to Schoenberg's setting of George's poem in his String Quartet No. 2 when the music leaves the world of tonality altogether and moves into the strange new world of atonality.¹³ Here, in an archetypally Romantic gesture, literary Symbolism (George's poem) fuses with music (Schoenberg's Quartet) and illuminates the strange power of this numinous moment in Pullman's novel which stretches towards a kind of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, as Rudolf Otto famously described the experience "The Holy." Lyra's first full experience of the Aurora or "Northern Lights" had moved her to tears with a vision which "was so beautiful it was almost holy" (*Northern* 183), though perhaps we might have expected the rhetoric of "the Sublime" rather than "the beautiful" for a sight whose "immensity [...] was scarcely conceivable" (183). The Romantic register returns at the climax of the novel when the Aurora is described, for example, as "a cataract of glory" (392). This rhetoric of the sublime and the numinous seems to echo the claim of MacDonald—whose supreme gift according to Lewis was to mediate "Holiness" (*Surprised by Joy* 145)—that it was supremely in music and (in the widest sense) the fairy tale, those products of "the fantastic imagination," that we encounter those "greatest forces [that] lie in the region of the uncomprehended" ("Fantastic Imagination" 9).

Such attunement to the diverse possibilities of interpretation—Lyra relates her numinous experience of the Aurora to her trance-like state while consulting the alethiometer (*Northern* 183)—is foregrounded by MacDonald in his essay "The Fantastic Imagination"; it is characteristic not only of German Romanticism but also of postmodernism.¹⁴ Both Pullman and MacDonald have been linked with both "movements" (or climates of thought and sensibility). Pullman's qualified alignment with postmodernism was noted above. The claim has also been made by various critics that MacDonald in some ways anticipated postmodernism¹⁵ (this should not be a surprise, given Andrew Bowie's claim that in certain crucial respects German Romanticism anticipated postmodernism by well over a century). The considerable debt of MacDonald to *German Romanticism* is very well known; we need look no further than the epigraphs to *Phantastes*, and especially those by Novalis. Pullman too has a nostalgia for German Romanticism (as he has 'cheerfully' admitted in correspondence). For example, the list of "Works consulted and ideas stolen from" at the end of Pullman's *Count Karlstein or The Ride of the Demon Huntsman* includes "Caspar

¹³ See child_lit LISTERV (July 27, 2000). Also cited in Lenz and Scott, 5-6.

¹⁴ See for example Bowie 8-15.

¹⁵ On MacDonald and postmodernism see McGillis xvi-xxviii, Prickett 123-4, and Thacker and Webb 42-4, 140-2.

David Friedrich, *various pictures*” as well as Carl Maria von Weber’s archetypal Romantic opera *Der Freischütz*, from which the plot of *Count Karlstein* is largely derived. *Count Karlstein* as well as *Clockwork* simply exude German Romanticism in general and E.T.A. Hoffmann in particular. Similar MacDonald tales would be “The Cruel Painter” and the tale of another Prague student, Cosmo von Wehrstahl, located at the centre of *Phantastes*.

The debt of both MacDonald and Pullman to *English* Romanticism is also evident. MacDonald was deeply interested in Wordsworth and Coleridge, as well as in Blake (though the extent of his knowledge of Blake is unclear). Pullman of course has declared himself of Blake’s party, though the general Romantic attempt to re-imagine religious experience in a non-dogmatic and non-supernatural way clearly informs his work, as it also does that of MacDonald.¹⁶ Pullman has declared the importance to him of his traditional Anglican background; however, his evident love of Milton and Blake align him with the tradition of English dissent. MacDonald also came from a tradition of dissent, though the Congregationalist tradition to which he belonged tended to be dominated by Calvinist theology, with its “puritanical martinet of a God” (Raeper, *MacDonald* 242). MacDonald not only aligned himself with the Christian Platonist tradition going back to Plotinus and Origen (also a universalist); he was also willing to explore the current of Gnosticism implicit in it (240; 243; 257-8). That tradition included Boehme and Novalis, as well as more exotic writers such as Swedenborg, whom Blake memorably, if ambivalently, dismissed in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. MacDonald’s predilection for the Wise Woman or Great-great-grandmother motif has also been widely seen as connected with the Sophia figure in Gnosticism.¹⁷

Pullman too admits to an interest in Gnosticism, citing as a source Harold Bloom’s novel *The Flight to Lucifer: A Gnostic Fantasy*, and raising the question of Gnosticism in his dialogue with Rowan Williams (Haill 87). But even if the oracle himself had not announced it, the Gnostic influence in *His Dark Materials* would have been clearly evident. Pullman’s so-called atheism could be seen as a Gnostic anti-theology in which, like some early Gnostics, he re-tells the Genesis story backwards; in this counter-version, the Fall is really an advance in human potential enabled by good offices of the serpent, the bringer of wisdom, who succeeds in circumventing the usurped power of the demiurge who is not the true God at all but merely the jealous creator of a shameful and imprisoning world.¹⁸ The anti-clerical, anti-hierarchical and in some cases anti-patriarchal

¹⁶ See for example Abrams.

¹⁷ See for example Hayward.

¹⁸ This summary of some key motifs in Gnosticism is dependent on, *inter al*, Jonas, Robinson, Pagels, Rudolph, Layton, and Filoramo.

elements that inform historical Gnosticism reappear in Pullman's work. Above all, there seems to have been in historical Gnosticism a commitment to the power of stories narrating spiritual experience: "[E]very one of them generates something new every day [...] for no one is considered initiated [or: 'mature'] among them unless he develops some enormous fictions," complained St Irenaeus (Pagels 48). The development of "enormous fictions" intended to mediate spiritual insight could certainly be seen as characteristic of both Pullman and MacDonald. Both *Lilith* and *His Dark Materials* are by any reckoning enormous in scope, comparable, *mutatis mutandis*, with David Lindsay's *Voyage to Arcturus* or perhaps Goethe's *Faust*—MacDonald himself apparently nursed the ambition to see *Lilith* considered a kind of modern *Divine Comedy* (Raeper, *MacDonald* 367-9). Lewis's *Space Trilogy* also seems to belong in this family constellation. Whether, or how, Lewis's other work might fit into this family group is a matter for discussion. Presumably Pullman would disown Lewis, but as I have argued above, a bit of internecine Oedipal conflict or misreading *à la* Bloom is only to be expected. And as I have suggested elsewhere (Gray, *Lewis* 45-6), Lewis's Christian Platonism comes much closer to Gnosticism (especially in the *Space Trilogy*) than one might expect, given the appropriation of his work by the orthodox. In this too, Lewis seems actually closer to the spirit of MacDonald than even his own more orthodox pronouncements might suggest.

Postscript

Who George MacDonald "misreads," and who his literary father-figure might be, is another question. At the beginning of *Phantastes*, Anodos's fairy grandmother is dismissive of his knowledge of his male precursors, and chides his ignorance of his female relatives; great-grandmothers and sisters are more to the point (5). The great-grandmother/Wise Woman motif is a marked feature of MacDonald's work, and can be interpreted as indicating MacDonald's interest in *pre-oedipal* maternal material (as I have argued in my article offering a Kristevan reading of *Phantastes*¹⁹). Whether MacDonald's reliance on Novalis and the Sophia myth may suggest a different scenario than Bloom's aggressively Oedipal one, and whether this may allow a way to circumvent the Eve versus Lilith double-bind, predicated on what Gilbert and Gubar call, following Virginia Woolf, "Milton's bogey" (Gilbert and Gubar 187-95) remains, I think, an open question. Behind the double misreading of Lewis by Pullman, and MacDonald by Lewis, there might be a link between MacDonald's and Pullman's attempts to get beyond the power nexus of patriarchal binary thinking. Such a link would have much to do with the subterranean connections of Romanticism and

¹⁹ See note 11.

postmodernism, with both of which “movements” (or “styles” or “structures of sensibility”) both MacDonald and Pullman have been associated.

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