Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research

journal.finfar.org

Hobbits, Ents, and Dæmons:
Ecocritical Thought Embodied in the Fantastic

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Abstract: This paper investigates the occurrence of ecocritical thought in two canonical fantasy epics, The Lord of The Rings *(1954–1955) by J. R. R. Tolkien and* His Dark Materials *(1995–2000) by Philip Pullman. Using current ecocritical theory as well as writers and critics of speculative fiction to study the primary works from a marginalized angle, this paper argues that fantasy fiction, more than other literary genres, has an intrinsic exploratory potential for ecocritical ideas because the strong immersive aspect of the genre entices the reader to open up for a less anthropocentric view of the world. If this is investigated further, the narrow space for fantasy literature in literary criticism and academia may be broadened to include a more politically engaged discussion of fantasy than typically assumed.*

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"Correct and sober taste may refuse to admit that there can be an interest for us – the proud we that includes all intelligent people – in ogres and dragons; we then perceive its puzzlement in face of the odd fact that it has derived great pleasure from a poem that is actually about these unfashionable creatures" (Tolkien, "The Monsters and The Critics" 112).

"Strip mining and single-crop farming are not the causes of the [ecological] crisis; they are logical end results of the central attitudes western humanity has developed and propagated about the relationship between itself and its environment" (Elgin 256).

Ursula K. Le Guin argues in "The Critics, the Monsters, and the Fantasists" (2007) that the most defining characteristic of the fantastic is that it fundamentally concerns the non-anthropocentric: "What fantasy often does that the realistic novel generally cannot do is include the nonhuman as essential" (87). Le Guin therefore proposes that "realistic fiction is drawn towards anthropocentrism, fantasy away from it" (87). Such a statement might seem obvious or simplistic, but in light of the rise of ecocriticism in literary studies, it could take a position of high relevance and calls for further investigation. Don D. Elgin, likewise, and twenty years before Le Guin, ties literature and particularly the fantasy genre to ecocentrism in "Literary Fantasy and Ecological Comedy" (1985). Here he concludes that "literature, particularly the fantasy novel, offers humanity

a way to reintegrate itself into the natural world and, in so doing, invites a new relationship between itself, its fellow creatures, and the science and literature that create and mirror that world" (Elgin 269). Le Guin, more vehement than Elgin, perhaps due to her artistic relationship with fantasy, moreover claims that we have "forgotten how to read the fiction that fully exploits fictionality" (Le Guin 84). Le Guin's agenda – as a writer of fantasy and as a literary critic – is to grant fantasy the critical acclaim she believes it deserves, suggesting ecocriticism as the fantasy genre's natural space in the literary critical landscape.

This image of fantasy literature as an arena for the unfolding of ecocritical notions is in other words not new, but it has not received due attention in literary criticism. I will in this paper explore whether Le Guin and Elgin's statements are convincing, using contemporary ecocritical work for support – as it is, such criticism overwhelmingly limits itself to science fiction, but leaves fantasy literature out. How can ecocritical thought be used to analyse canonical works of fantastic literature such as Tolkien's *The Lord of The Rings* and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series, and in what ways are ecocentrism and the genre of fantasy thus related? Could one claim, as Elgin and Le Guin do, that reading fantasy may heighten our perception of ecology, the environment, and move the reader's view on homo sapiens' place in the world towards something beyond "anthropocentric"?

The Ecocritical Potential

In *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), Cheryl Glotfelty defines ecocriticism simply as "the study of the relationship between literature and its physical environment", furthermore:"ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty xviii). This earth-centeredness is commonly called *ecocentrism*, which is the opposite of *anthropocentrism* (human-centeredness).Ursula K. Heise outlines the history of ecocriticism in "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism" (2006) from when it emerged in literary and cultural studies in the 1990s, and she sums up the essence of ecocriticism as inherently critical towards the commodifying, anthropocentric values associated with modernity and consumer society:

> Environmentalism and ecocriticism aim their critique of modernity at its presumption to know the natural world scientifically, to manipulate it technologically and exploit it economically, and thereby ultimately to create a human sphere apart from it in a historical process that is usually labelled 'progress'. This domination strips nature of any value other than as a material resource and commodity and leads to a gradual destruction that may in the end deprive humanity of its basis for subsistence (507).

Whereas Glotfelty's definition is broader and focuses on ecocriticism as a merging point for literature and ecocentric thoughts about nature, Heise's definition is more politically oriented and focuses on the *critique* offered by ecocriticism.

Likewise, in his introduction to *Green Planets* (2014), Gary Canavan couples science fiction with ecocritical-political potential, arguing that "SF is our culture's vast, shared, polyvocal archive of the possible" (18). Science fiction, Canavan claims, "can help us collectively 'think' [an imaginative] leap into futurity" (18), and further: "perhaps even ecological critique as such can productively be thought of *as a kind of science fiction*, as it uses the same tools of cognition and extrapolation to project the conditions of a possible future … in hopes of transforming politics in the present" [italics added] (19). For Heise and Canavan, transformation of political (and social) values thus appears to be a key term when engaging in ecocriticism. Moreover, Canavan's suggestion to "productively" think of "ecological critique" *as* science fiction is intriguing, and convincing testimony besides of SF's potentially powerful political commentary. I would argue, however, that Canavan's focus might be too narrow. While the relation between SF and ecocentrism

is rich, the other, big subgenre of speculative fiction deserves more attention in ecocritical studies such as Canavan's.

Although his focus is also on science fiction, Brian Stableforth is more generic than Canavan in his article "Ecology and Dystopia", where he claims that "most futuristic fantasies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries … accepted the notion that the most fundamental social evil … was the abstraction of human beings from a supposedly harmonious relationship with the natural environment and its inherent rhythms" (Stableforth 266). Chris Brawley's *Nature and The Numinous in Mythopoetic Fantasy Literature* (2014) is one of the few critical works that considers the practical applicability of (mythopoetic)[1] fantasy and links it to environmentalism: "By making trees walk or animals talk, mythopoeic fantasy is perhaps the most subversive art form there is. In a similar manner, environmental critics have noted that this subversion is necessary for regaining right relations with nature" (Brawley 23). Echoing Le Guin, Brawley further argues that fantasy "blurs the distinction between [human and non-human], allowing for the contemplation and challenge of our usual way of perceiving" (23). Heise thus declares an opposition between ecocriticism and modernity's inherent (and anthropocentric) materialism; Canavan announces science fiction as the genre that embraces ecocentrism as an *alternative* to anthropocentrism; Stableforth points out antagonistic attitudes towards modern and postmodern society in "futuristic fantasies"where the "modern human" and its increased distancing from the natural world is often associated with *evil*; and Brawley, finally, situates the exploration ground for a more ecocentric way of perceiving the world, in fantastic literature.

Ecocriticism is thus generally accepted as anatural critical approach to the science fiction genre – possibly because much critically acclaimed SF explicitly assumes (for instance) an apocalyptic, feminist, or posthumanist rhetoric, and thus coerces the reader to take a critical position (typical examples are Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1931), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) or Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003)). When it comes to fantasy, however, the existing literary criticism is often more concerned with mythical, religious, or psychological analogies than with eco-political agendas. This may have to do with the fact that the intimacy between the narrator in fantastic literature and the reader of fantasy typically is increased in order to support the reader's immersion with the story and with the secondary world presented. In "Fantasy Fiction and Related Genres" (1986), Dieter Petzold talks about the special condition that a fantasy text imposes on the reader, and argues that fantasy fiction,

> … far from astonishing the reader, often betrays a tacit agreement between author and reader concerning the relation between the secondary world of the narrative … and the primary world. This makes it possible for the author to construct seemingly autonomous fairy-talelike worlds in which the marvellous is represented as normal (Petzold 16).

What Petzold describes above has a clear connection with Brawley's argument about the subversive nature of fantasy. When reading fantasy, the reader allows herself to be immersed in the story without questioning its fantastic premise.[2] This necessarily implies that the contrasts between the secondary world and the primary world are weakened, as the reader is willing, nearly over-willing, to see the "other" as normal. In other words, the (more or less) explicit political agenda often found in science fiction is in fantasy literature more likely to be hidden (if it is there at all) in the fabric of the immersive-subversive fantastic. The reader-narrator closeness created through the "agreement" Petzold describes above could therefore lead to an easy dismissal of the fantasy text's potential for

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[1] Brawley defines mythopoetic fantasy as pertaining to "those authors who are employing fantasy as a subversive mode of literature to revise our perceptions of the natural world; and, the distinguishing feature of these authors is going to be an inculcation of a certain religious or mystical "feeling" of the numinous in the reader" (9).

[2] Already in 1817, in *Biographia Literaia*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined the famous term for this: the "willing suspension of disbelief" (chapter xiv), although this is a phenomenon applicable to all fiction and not just the fantastic. I would argue however, that fantasy fiction demands from the reader a greater willingness to suspend her disbelief.

political or social critique and thereby decrease the reader's readiness to consider and reflect on this potential. And if the average reader of fantasy is unable to locate a political agenda, it is less likely that the average critic will be bothered to engage with the genre at all.

Lance Olsen, conversely, ties the marvellous in fantasy to deconstructivist thought and politics when he argues that"[t]he fantastic confronts civilization with the very forces it must repress in order for it to remain whole, functioning, and successful" (290). In "Nameless Things and Thingless Names" Olsen classifies fantasy as a "deconstructive mode of narrative" because it is "designed to surprise, to question, to put into doubt, to create anxiety …, to disgust, to repel, to rebel …, to make ambiguous …" (289; 291). Petzold and Olsen's views are not necessarily mutually exclusive; fantasy literature may in fact create anxiety or elicit surprise in the reader precisely because of the depth of the text's subversion and the reader's immersion.

Olsen's view of fantasy as inherently deconstructive and political is nevertheless a marginal one, and due to the low amount of criticism dedicated to the political aspects of fantasy, it is challenging to find a critical angle from which fantastic literature may be analysed without falling back into the analogy vortex of religion, myth, and psychology. And of course there is nothing wrong with using religion or myth to approach fantasy critically. It may, however, have become the only "safe" critical space for literary researchers who wish to take fantasy serious on an academic level, thus ignoring other aspects of the "fiction that fully exploits fictionality"; the "most subversive art form there is" – as Le Guin and Brawley argue above. As we shall see, ecocriticism as defined by Heise and Glotfelty could be *one* critical approach through which the fantastic may unfold its political potential. Elgin goes back to the old modes of theatre in order to show how fantasy fiction and ecology are related.

Drawing on Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival – Studies in Literary Ecology* (1974), Elgin argues that beyond the more generic romantic fiction (as is Meeker's focus), fantasy literature specifically, as a genre within the comic literary tradition, has the potential to reassess ecological values and critique the environmental crisis. Understanding tragedy as the literary mode that has shaped "Western humanity's attitudes toward nature" (259), Elgin connects tragic philosophy to the ecological crisis, because the tragic mode glorifies the superiority (often by religious decree) of humanity over nature and "clearly asserts that the world revolves around humanity" (259). Comedy, on the other hand, Elgin describes as the mode in which humanity reaffirms rather than denies its relationship with the physical world, as the comic mode is "essentially connective" (255). Elgin argues that while comedy often portrays humans as "foolish, bungling, lecherous, smelly, and pretentious", it also "*sees* them as compassionate, not in obedience to a dogma or creed, but in response to the accumulation of experience" [sic] (Elgin 262).Therefore, according to Elgin, fantasy literature has "adopted a comic conception of humanity, placing its emphasis upon humanity as part of a total environment or system and acknowledging the absolute dependence of humanity upon that system" (Elgin 264).

Elgin thus links "Western" mimetic literature (or realism) to tragedy and anthropocentrism, and fantasy literature to comedy and ecocentrism, arguing that tragedy encompasses the belief "that nature is made for humankind; that human morality transcends natural limits; and that the individual human personality is supremely important" (260). Elgin then points out how this belief or assumption ties directly in with "'causes' of the ecological crisis", and argues that the tendency in "Western" culture to favour the tragedy over the comedy, is one of the ways in which ecocritical thought is repressed and ignored in critical discourse (260). Fantastic literature has an intrinsic accessibility to ecological (comic) modes of thinking. Although Elgin, to the contemporary reader, might seem to draw rather narrow conclusions based on a widely encompassing field, the dichotomy between tragedy, realism, and anthropocentrism on the one hand, and comedy, fantasy, and ecology on the other, could be useful for an ecocritical approach to fantasy.

Elgin's placement of ecocentrism within comedy and anthropocentrism within tragedy is based on the stereotypical romantic-heroic quest with a happy ending and the equally stereotypical

downfall and "catharsis" found in realist fiction (and, according to Elgin, in the "Western" *reality*). These two patterns are of course not always adhered to– but they remain stereotypes for a reason – and by grouping fantasy with the one and realism with the other, Elgin suggests that a more ecocentric mind-set may be naturally explored in fantastic literature. Elgin's dichotomy, though it may be criticized for over-simplicity, nevertheless suggests the origins from which Le Guin's, Brawley's, and Elgin's own experience of the ecocentric in fantasy fiction emerged. Having accepted that the ecocritical-fantastic premise of Le Guin and Elgin holds merit, then, it is time to turn to two critically acclaimed works of fantastic literature for further exploration – beginning, quite naturally, in Middle-Earth.

Tolkien's Primal Desire of Faerie

J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of The Rings* has become one of the world's most influential books after its publication between 1954 and 55. Not only loved passionately by a massive mainstream readership, its critical acclaim surmounts that of most (if not all) fantasy books, as well as much non-fantasy fiction. Analyses of Tolkien's epic are numerous, and their topics vary from religion (or anti-religion), to quest narrative/ bildungsroman, to First and Second World War analogy, to postcolonialism. Ecocentrism, on the other hand, has received less consideration in relation to Tolkien; however, there are exceptions.[3] In *Ents, Elves, and Eriador* (2006), Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans focus entirely on Tolkien's environmental vision, arguing that Tolkien, throughout his authorship, "provides a deep and complex ecological vision incorporating many elements and spanning a broad spectrum of approaches, including positions compatible with both conservation and preservation in modern environmentalism" (xvi). And indeed, when we look at characters such as Treebeard, Tom Bombadil, or even the Hobbits or Elves, as non-human people, the obviousness with which they see themselves as *part* of nature and wilderness rather than rulers over it, clearly suggests at the very least a comparison to *homo sapiens*' relationship with Earth and our biological-hierarchical place on it.

In a paper published in *Tolkien Studies* (2009), Cynthia M. Cohen examines the many examples of extraordinary trees – and people's relationship with trees – in Middle-Earth. "By making trees … significant in the narrative, Tolkien enables a sense of recovery, allowing his readers to see trees – which, for many of us, have become all too familiar – in a vivid, new light" (Cohen 119). The significance of trees and forests is introduced early in *The Fellowship of The Ring*, when Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin enter the Old Forest just outside the border of The Shire. "I thought all the trees were whispering to each other", Merry tells the others. "They do say the trees do actually move, and can surround strangers and hem them in" (Tolkien 121). Right after this, the naughty-spirited Old Man Willow proves Merry right by catching Merry and Pippin in his trunk, and the ancient Tom Bombadil has to sing them out (128-130). The power of trees is further presented through the alien beauty of the *mallorn* trees in Lothlórien, which provide homes for the elves in a nearly symbiotic way. The Hobbits – being creatures close to nature themselves – acutely feel this awe-inspiring connection: "Frodo … laid his hand upon the tree beside the ladder: never before had he been so suddenly and so keenly aware of the feel and texture of a tree's skin and of the life within" (*Fellowship* 366).

Once connected to the Old Forest, the Fangorn forest on the other side of the Misty Mountains is one of the oldest forests in Middle-Earth, and is home to the *Ents*, or tree herders. Dickerson and Evans offer interesting insight concerning the Ents and their lost female counterpart, the *Entwives*, whose views on how to "herd" nature differs from that of the Ents. While the Ents love nature for its wildness, wanting to communicate with the trees, the Entwives loved nature for

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[3] Other (explicitly) ecocritically-oriented titles on Tolkien's work: Susan Jeffers' *Arda Inhabited – Environmental Relationships in The Lord of the Rings* (2014) and *J. R. R. Tolkien: the Forest and the City* (2013), ed. Helen Conrad-O'Brien and Gerard Hynes.

its gifts, wanting to cultivate it. The Entwives disappeared from Middle Earth after their gardens were destroyed in the first Great War against Sauron. "As a result of this estrangement", Dickerson and Evans write,

> the Ents as a race are doomed for the lack of offspring. Toward the end of the trilogy, we read, "Treebeard's face became sad. 'Forests may grow,' he said. 'Woods may spread. But not Ents. There are no Entings'" (VI/vi). The message? Environmental positions should be held with conviction, but divergent views should not be adhered to so fiercely as to threaten one's very survival (252).

As Dickerson and Evans point out, this story "serves a powerful warning" (252) – whether Tolkien was conscious of the strong environmental allegory embedded in it or not.

In the case of Fangorn and the Ents, the ecocritical potential of Tolkien's universe thus becomes more explicit – also regarding mindless industry and destruction of nature for the sake of war and self-gain. The closest neighbour to Fangorn is the corrupt wizard Saruman, who believes he can overthrow Sauron and take The One Ring for himself. Using the forest as a resource to support his breeding of *Urûk-hai* (a powerful mix-breed of orc and man or orc and elf) for his army, Saruman cuts away a large chunk of Fangorn's forest edge. Saruman disturbs an ancient harmony, and the normally slow-paced, sleepy Ents rise up and go to war. As Treebeard says to Merry and Pippin, "We Ents do not like being roused; and we are never roused unless it is clear to us that our trees and our lives are in great danger" (*Two Towers* 89).Thanks to the Ents, the *Huorns* (semi-sentient, malevolent trees), and the two Hobbits, Isengard is cleansed of orcs and Urûk-hai, and Saruman is trapped in his tower.

Saruman is the face of industry, modernity, and destruction of nature in *The Lord of The Rings* – perhaps more so than Sauron, who remains a more abstract, albeit ever-present, force of evil. "Portraying trees as something worth fighting for and asserting the connections that exist between humans and trees", Cohen concludes her article, "Tolkien compels his readers to become responsible for preserving and protecting the trees in their own lives." (119).Even though Cohen's conclusion is in danger of pushing an agenda onto Tolkien's books, and in retrospect turning Tolkien into some sort of nostalgic, environmental activist, her statement nonetheless illustrates the power which *can* be attributed to nature as portrayed in Middle-Earth. Furthermore, Dickerson and Evans share Cohen's "applied" reading of *The Lord of The Rings*. Although careful to state that they do not intend to over-allegorize Tolkien's epic, Dickerson and Evans nonetheless admit that their book is an attempt at "providing what may be called an allegorical application of the legendarium's ideas to the particular topic of twenty-first-century environmentalism, suggesting that the principles embedded in [Tolkien's] work should be brought to bear on environmental problems in the modern world" (220).It appears that Tolkien's embedded environmental principles are too strong to avoid the temptation of ecocritical-allegorical readings. These principles again become evident in one of the last events of the trilogy.

Saruman's corruption and vindictive nature go so deep that after Gandalf has taken his wizard powers, exiled him from the Council of Wizards, but spared his life, he goes to the Shire with his servant Gríma Wormtongue to perform one last act of mischief. In the second to last chapter, "The Scouring of the Shire", the Hobbits have against all odds survived the horrors of war against evil, and come home to the Shire expecting their familiar, blessedly naïve, undisturbed home. But Saruman has been efficient, and what greets the home-comers are suspicious fellow Hobbits, cowed by fear, and a Hobbiton on the verge of desolation and industrialization:

> Many of the houses they had known were missing. Some seemed to have been burned
> down. The pleasant row of old hobbit-holes in the bank of the north-side of the Pool were
> deserted …. Worse, there was a whole line of the ugly new houses all along Pool Side ….
> An avenue of trees had stood there. They were all gone. And looking with dismay up the
> road towards Bag End they saw a tall chimney of brick in the distance. It was pouring out
> black smoke into the evening air (*Return of The King* 283).

Plot-wise the scene is striking, as the Hobbits realise that not even their beloved Shire is safe from corruption; moreover, the criticism of modernity is nowhere in the trilogy as blatant as here. In his much-quoted paper "On Fairy-stories", Tolkien writes that "one of the primal 'desires' that lie near the heart of Faerie [is] the desire of men to hold communion with other living things" (6). In *The Lord of The Rings*, Tolkien strengthens the reader's response to this desire by threatening the very communion that has been glorified and fought for throughout the books. Herein clearly lies the groundwork for suggesting a more ecocentric way of thinking, although it had no name in Tolkien's time.

In Elgin's eyes, this embodiment of the ecocentric in the fantastic is natural, and he maintains that canonical fantasy writers such as Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and Frank Herbert "have offered an alternative to the tragic conception which has brought humanity and environment to the point of imminent destruction" (Elgin 265). Brawler supports this statement, underlining that Tolkien's unmistakeable "appreciation for nature is a view of nature as part of a community, not as a commodity. This involves an appreciation of nature as it is, not for how it can be used" (109-110). Le Guin writes further in *Cheek By Jowl* (2009) that animal stories and fairy tales in which non-human creatures play a major part, evokes a longing in the reader. "Fearful and suspicious as it is, the human mind yet yearns for a greater belonging, a vaster identification. Wilderness scares us because it is unknown, indifferent, dangerous, yet it is an absolute need to us; it is that animal otherness, that strangeness … that we must join, or rejoin, if we want to stay sane and stay alive" (Le Guin 1112). This longing echoes Tolkien's "primal desire", though Le Guin ties it explicitly to ecocentrism and the need to "rejoin" nature in order to remain on Earth. Such yearning for wilderness and animal otherness is also present in Philip Pullman's fantasy trilogy, where ecocritical thought takes on ever more complex fantastical shapes.

Dust and Universal Connectivity

In Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, the world of Lyra Belacqua is parallel to our primary world and very similar (she lives at an esteemed Oxford college, for instance), but there are several striking, supernatural differences. For instance, every human in Lyra's universe has a part of their spirit on the outside of their body, in the shape of an animal: a *dæmon*. The animal part of the soul takes a settled shape when a person reaches puberty, usually of the opposite gender of its human; before that, it can shapeshift. The dæmons have the ability to speak and think rationally (often to a greater extent than their human), but the human and the dæmon cannot read each other's minds, and in this sense they are two separate beings. Lyra's own Pantalaimon is often the one who calms her down or stops her from making rash decisions; for example, the first book begins with a scene where Lyra accuses Pan of being a coward, to which he replies, "Certainly I am. May I ask what you intend to do?" (Pullman 9).

The idea that everyone has an animal spirit is loaded with mythical allusion, and one instantly thinks of native or heathen religions as well as fables. Pullman's evolution, so to speak, of humans in Lyra's world immediately suggests a relationship with non-human creatures and nature that far surpasses that which the reader is used to. It is less evident than in *The Lord of The Rings*, however, as the dæmons in essence (if not in shape) are more human than non-human. Pullman's trilogy is more concerned with the all-encompassing connectivity between every creature in the world, and between parallel worlds and universes, inventing Dark Matter particles (also called *Dust*

or *Shadows*) as the universal source connecting everything. Dr Mary Malone, a physicist from "our" world (at least the world is similar enough to the primary world to call it so) who has spent her entire life investigating the elusive, sentient Dark Matter, is introduced in the second book, *The Amber Spyglass*. She is finally able to communicate with the conscious particles when Lyra visits through a portal from her world to Malone's.

The Dust particles (as people in Lyra's world call them) are everywhere and they are drawn to living matter – though concentrate around humans only after they reach puberty. Lyra is in the possession of an *alethiometer*, a golden, compass-looking instrument through which she can converse with the particles and learn truths about the past, present, and future if she asks the right questions. After Lyra shows Dr Malone how she must phrase her questions, Malone is finally able to communicate with the Dark Matter through her computer, learning that the particles are in fact angels. Dr Malone knows from her research that "something happened thirty or forty thousand years ago", something that "involved evolution" and made humans conscious (Pullman 238).The angels confirm that they did in fact "interfere with human evolution" in order to avenge themselves on the Authority, or God (Pullman 249).

Religious commentary aside, angels, or Dust, are thus the reason for the existence of the human consciousness and spirit– but not only *human* consciousness. Dust is what makes *all* life forms conscious, and the biggest quest of *His Dark Materials* is to stop Dust from leaking out of the universe. The existence of Dust thus vastly downplays the importance of humanity in the world, and this is perhaps Pullman's point. His fantasy exposes, trivializes, and ridicules anthropocentrism through spiritual, conscious Dark Matter that was there long before humankind. Naomi Woods writes in her article "(Em)bracing Icy Mothers" (2004) that Pullman's Dust "suggests that if we do not acknowledge our materiality and love the world that gives us birth, we are doomed to destroy it" (213). There are several creatures in Pullman's world(s) that embrace the Dust particles and thereby contribute to the ecocentric exploration of the trilogy.

In addition to angels and dæmons, *His Dark Materials* introduces sentient Icelandic warrior bears called *panserbjørns*; there are powerful witches, zombie-like, soul(Dust)-eating spectres, and the creatures called the *mulefa*. More than anything else in Pullman's fiction, the mulefa display an ecocentric alternative worldview. Presented to the reader by Dr Malone when she escapes from the police in "our" world through a portal in the second book (*The Amber Spyglass*),the creatures are grey, antelope-sized, "with horned heads and short trunks like elephants", and a "diamond-shaped structure" to their legs: one in front and one back; two in the middle(Pullman 88). In other words, the mulefa are utterly "other". The mulefa live in splendid symbiosis with the massive trees of their world, as they use the hard, disk-shaped seedpods of the trees as wheels on which the otherwise clumsy creatures move around with great speed and elegance.

Dr Malone first compares the mulefa to a similarly built animal she has seen grazing on the plains when entering the new world, but realises upon closer inspection of their intelligent eyes and acute awareness, that they are "as different from the grazing animals nearby as a human was from a cow" (Pullman 89). Malone quickly begins to see them as *people* rather than *creatures*: "These beings weren't humans, but they were people, she told herself, it's not *them*, they're *us*" (123).The experienced otherness of the mulefa is replaced with astonished recognition. Such an explicit encounter with a species as self-aware as humans baffles the reader through Dr Malone, and because she is delighted and amazed, the reader is more likely to feel the same way – having, of course, already accepted and incorporated many other fantastic *others* in the course of the trilogy.

This manipulation, if you will, of the reader's empathy is made possible by what Petzold refers to as the "tacit agreement" between the writer and the reader, and shows that Pullman's trilogy fulfils what Brawler calls the subversive nature of fantasy. Such manipulation, as discussed above, facilitates the move towards a less anthropocentric way of viewing the primary world *through* the secondary world presented in *His Dark Materials*. The mulefa's symbiotic relationship with the seedpods reinforces Pullman's fantastic alternative to human supremacy on Earth. Without

the seedpods, the mulefa would not have evolved, and without the mulefa, the seedpod trees would die as nothing would be able to crack open the pods; "Each species depended on the other" (Pullman 129). Dr Malone moreover learns, by observing and sharing in the community of the mulefa, that Dust needs

> … some feedback system to reinforce it and make it safe, as the mulefa had their wheels and the oil from the trees. Without something like that, it would all vanish. Thought, imagination, feeling, would all wither and blow away, leaving nothing but a brutish automatism (Pullman 453).

It does not require high levels of abstraction to see the analogy to our own primary world. What feedback system would keep Earth safe from impending eco-crisis and "brutish automatism" of future modernity? Through the description of the mulefa, and the universal essence of Dust, Pullman thus performs what Brawley terms fantasy's blurring of the boundaries between human and non-human; what Le Guin understands as the reader's "longing" and fantasy's move towards non-anthropocentrism; what Tolkien would call humans' "primal desire"; and Elgin would refer to as acknowledgement of humanity's interdependence on nature. It is the juxtaposition of modernity's, as Heise describes it above, "presumption" of human domination over nature with an alternative; an alternative world view that moves away from the anthropocentric and towards an environmentally conscious approach. This alternative may be easier to access in the fullest from within the immersive space of fantasy.

Fantastic Ecocritique or Cheerleading?

Judging from the examples given and the critics discussed, the hypothesis attempted to be worked out in this paper regarding the intrinsic embodiment of ecocritical thought in fantastic literature at the very least appears to be worth investigating further. However, there is also reason (as always) to be critical. Michael D. C. Drout reminds us that due to the stigma surrounding fantasy in literary criticism, it is easy to become apologetic or naïve, or as Drout puts it: to "run the risk of being cheerleaders rather than scholars" (18). Drout's paper, "Beowulf: The Monsters and The Critics Seventy-five Years Later", is a response to Tolkien's famous lecture. Although he does not deny the importance of Tolkien's contribution, Drout nonetheless points out that Tolkien defending monsters and heroes "because no one else was" ultimately led to a category mistake of over-allegory: "all of a sudden we're not talking about monsters, we're talking about us" (20).

Drout thus calls for caution and nuanced, critical approach from the fantasy apologist, and this is good to have in mind also when exploring ecocentrism in fantasy. One could argue that anthropocentrism is just as easily found in Tolkien as ecocentrism, looking for instance at the elves in Middle-Earth, who are manipulating nature just as much as humans or orcs (who said the mallorn trees benefit from growing into elven castles?). Le Guin actually points out the anthropocentrism inherent in Pullman's dæmons: "They are fragments or images of the human psyche given animal shape, wholly contingent, having no independent being and therefore incapable of relationship. Lyra's much-emphasized love for her daemon is self-love" (1083). In other words, even though non-human, sentient creatures often feature in fantastic literature, they are not immediately signs that the text is (exclusively) ecocentric. Rather, as this paper has shown, the fantasy genre's subversive-immersive nature gives the fantasy text a higher potential for engaging with ecocritical ideas. This does not mean that other literary genres *cannot* fulfil such a potential; rather that fantasy has an inherent capacity for exploring it. The author manipulates the fantastic space to her wish, and if the reader agrees to be manipulated –to be immersed –fantasy holds the power to take her, as David Sandner writes it in *Fantastic Literature – A Critical Reader* (2004), "to the edge of meaning itself" (3). Perhaps it is at the edge of meaning itself that humans may glean a manner of thinking that encompasses more than the anthropocentric.

Acknowledgements

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