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The Truth About Daemons: Plato in the Fantasy Novels of Philip Pullman

Plato's mythic narratives furnish a model for the imaginary constructions of Peter Pullman's fantasy novels, *The Golden Compass* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York 1995) and *The Subtle Knife* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York 1997). I will examine a selection of Platonic myths all of which contain detailed descriptions of other worlds and peoples that are recalled in contemporary science fiction and fantasy writing. These myths will include the eight-limbed, double-gendered creatures in the *Symposium*, the cicadas and the charioteer and his black and white horses in *Phaedrus*, and Atlantis in *Timaeus*. All can be read as escapes from the text into other worlds.

Pullman's novels—whose intended audience is children—offer concrete interpretation of Platonic philosophy. In the world of *The Golden Compass*, all human beings have a daemon, a creature of animal form who exists as a semi-independent being yet shares their thoughts. The daemon is an outward manifestation of the soul and disappears at its human's death. Children's daemons change according to their humans' mental state, while those of adults have settled into one fixed shape.

Pullman's novels converge around the search to find the truth about a mysterious substance called dus, that seems to be connected with consciousness. Lyra Belacqua, the child heroine of *The Golden Compass*, has grown up in the academic environment of Jordan College as the ward of the faculty of theology—a discipline that recalls our physics. She and her daemon, Pantalaimon, journey north when a number of children, including her best friend, mysteriously disappear. Lyra discovers they have been kidnapped in a horrible plan to cut their daemons from them; the resulting energy in the severing of the soul from its human can be used to transport people into other worlds. Lyra is aided in this quest by her alethiometer, a machine, a "truth meter," that she can read to find the truth. In *The Subtle Knife*, she meets Will Parry, a boy from our world, in yet another world, Cittàgazze. Will acquires a magical knife that enables him to cut out windows between the various worlds. Both he and Lyra are pursued for the alethiometer and the knife by a range of evil forces, including Mrs. Coulter, Lyra's mother.

I will focus on Pullman's descriptions of the daemons and also of those who lack daemons. I will compare these to Socrates' description of his daemon in the *Apology*, to show how a fantasy novel "intended" for children contains an artful investigation of Plato's philosophy on such topics as the nature of the soul and questions of knowledge and perception.