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Cutting into the Abyss:

The Subtle Knife as the Pharmakon in Pullman's *His Dark Materials*

In Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, the subtle knife (or *Æsahættr*, literally meaning "god-destroyer") is the most significant of the trilogy's three central instruments. It is both a tool and a weapon, a device which is capable of revealing the abyssal void between the parallel universes that combine to form Pullman's multiverse; and capable of repairing the damage done by the all-consuming nothingness it exposes. Almost counter-intuitive in nature, the tool aspect of the knife creates the negative consequences of its use, whereas the weapon aspect of the knife comes to signify the positive consequences of its use. Having the potential for both good and evil, construction and destruction, I argue the subtle knife is the pharmakon of Pullman's trilogy. Originally a term referred to by Jacques Derrida, the pharmakon is a paradoxical aspect of being both the poison and the cure, or a dissembler of binaries. The pharmakon does not represent evil anymore than it represents good; it is purely neutral and thus a neutralizing agent.

Having the capacity to sever the binary of good and evil, the subtle knife, as the pharmakon, forces the conscious beings of Pullman's universe to abandon their reliance upon the strict dogmatic realities of hierarchies and binaries. But in its use, the knife severs the reliance on established yet arbitrary constructs such as divinity or good and evil, separating the protagonists

from the need for an existing order of right and wrong. But the protagonists Lyra Silvertongue and Will Parry's freedom from oppressive hierarchies comes at a cost. The dark realities of the knife's use threatens an apocalyptic collapse of reality. With an abyssal void existing in the absence of divinity, good and evil fall upon the choices of the protagonists' actions which create either negative or positive consequences for the entire multiverse. The dark consequence of the subtle knife's power reveals the gothic representations of the multiverse's uncanny netherworld. Conversely, in its neutrality, the knife can be used to repair the damage it has caused through the knife-bearer's ability to close the windows, undoing the harm it renders. Just as the knife is able to manifest the destructive misuse of knowledge and power, the knife is the only weapon capable of destroying the oppressive binaries of good and evil that exist within the multiverse.

Within this multiverse, the three critical devices play an intrinsic role in the protagonists' interactions with the multiverse's machinations. The alethiometer is the first tool introduced on Lyra's quest. The alethiometer is often mistaken for a compass, as it is "very [much] like a clock, or a compass, for there were hands pointing to places around the dial" (*Golden Compass* 79). However, the similarity ends there: "instead of the hours or the points of the compass there were several little pictures, each of them painted with extraordinary precision" (79). These symbols vary greatly in shape and meaning with such pictures as "an anchor; an hourglass surmounted by a skull; a chameleon, a bull, a beehive" (79) and more, including: "angel, helmet, dolphin; globe, lute, compasses; candle, thunderbolt, horse" (79) with "thirty-six altogether" (79). As she comes to understand the intricate and mysterious alethiometer through a kind of grace, Lyra understands the device possesses the power to tell the truth in regards to events in the past, present, and future. The amber spyglass, on the other hand, is not so wholly intricate or complex in its design or purpose but is equally important: it allows the viewer to see Dust; revealing to

the human eye the usually invisible golden streams of spirit and consciousness manifest. The alethiometer and the amber spyglass are simple in terms of their interactions with Dust; their purpose is straightforward and their respective uses are definite.

Of the three essential devices in Pullman's trilogy, the subtle knife is the most problematic, having both the form of a blade but the potential for both constructive and destructive purposes. Much like the alethiometer or the amber spyglass, the subtle knife is a unique and beautiful tool. Having an otherworldly quality with "a swirl of cloudy colors [that] seemed to live just under the surface of the metal" (*Subtle Knife* 181), the subtle knife has two distinct bladed edges: "One was clear bright steel, merging a little way back into those subtle shadow-colors, but steel of an incomparable sharpness" (181), while "the other edge was just as keen, but silvery in color (181). First and foremost a weapon, the subtle knife is as dangerous as it is subtle with "the most deadly fighting machines [being] little toys compared to that knife; the harm it can do is unlimited" (*Amber Spyglass* 180). Symmetrically shaped, the knife also has a dual purpose as a tool, being able to "cut an opening out of this world altogether" (*Subtle Knife* 181). Creating doors through the multiverse allows Lyra and Will to traverse various universes on their journey to defeat both the Authority, Pullman's God figure, and the Magisterium which are a perverse order of religious zealots and oppressive fear mongers. But as a tool, the subtle knife's power to allow Lyra and Will to travel through parallel universes on their journey comes at a terrible cost: "every time anyone made an opening between the worlds, ... the knife cut into the emptiness outside" (*Amber Spyglass* 483). The knife essentially sunders a world's fabric, making a gaping metaphysical wound between the countless parallel worlds and universes.

Pullman's multiverse is a framework of countless parallel universes with Dust being the energy or life source that circulates through the complex and continuous construct of universes.

Book 2 of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* sets the stage for Pullman's *His Dark Materials* and his mysterious Dust with the paradoxical existence of Chaos--its self a supplement to the existence of God and creation. Chaos is "a dark / Illimitable ocean without bound/ Without dimension, where length, breadth, and heighth, / And time and place are lost" (2.891-894) which holds "His dark materials to create more worlds" (2.916). In Milton's gendered universe, Chaos is "The womb of Nature and perhaps her grave, / Of neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire, / But all these in their pregnant causes mixed" (2.911-913), with God being the masculine entity required to impregnate Chaos to conceive creation. Pullman expands upon this problematic notion of *Paradise Lost* and brings it to the forefront of his trilogy. Unlike Milton, who divides God and Chaos into two independent yet simultaneously dependent entities, Pullman forms Dust out of a combination of both entities. In short, Chaos is Dust and Dust is Chaos. Dust represents elementary particles of pure potential, and as the curious elements combine, they form consciousness to the point of sentience. God is superseded by Dust's obsession with itself and its ability to form new and more advanced beings. As Anna Gurley notes in "Chaos and Dust," "Dust is the embodiment of the synthesis of spirit versus matter and good versus evil" (7). Pullman collapses paradoxical distinction between the God the Maker and Chaos the materials and makes Dust an active and self-aware agent in itself.

Unlike the other two devices, the subtle knife's interactions are independent of Dust; instead of being manipulated by Dust, the knife manipulates the world around it. The subtle knife is not dependent on Dust, but rather Dust is dependent on the subtle knife. The alethiometer, while almost infinitely useful, is dependent on Dust for its function of omnipotence as a channel for the Dust to communicate with the alethiometer, and quite simply: "Dust is what makes the alethiometer work" (*Golden Compass* 370). The amber spyglass has a greater reliance upon

Dust, whereas the alethiometer seems to "[know] things like an intelligent being" (*Golden Compass* 147) and "had moods, like a person" (*Subtle Knife* 80). The amber spyglass is simply a tool to take a glimpse of the normally unperceivable Dust. The subtle knife is not so straightforward. While Lyra and Will attempt to use the Subtle Knife for good, its power has dark and destructive consequences that become apparent as they continue on their journey to find and destroy the Authority.

Unbeknownst to Will as the knife-bearer, using the tool comes at a cost to Dust itself. The bear-king and master blacksmith Iorek Byrnison warns: "sometimes a tool may have other uses that you don't know. Sometimes in doing what you intend, you also do what the knife intends, without knowing" (*Amber Spyglass* 181). The openings made by the knife become metaphysical wounds where Dust "has been leaking out of the worlds and into nothingness" (484). While central to Pullman's multiverse, Dust, as the "particles of consciousness" (*Subtle Knife* 88) that are the essence of creation, does not have "a fixed quantity that has always been the same" (*Amber Spyglass* 491). The subtle knife is also key to destroying the dangerous and tyrannical Authority as it is the only weapon capable of inflicting damage upon superior, ethereal beings such as angels and the supposed God himself. The subtle knife's extraordinary and devastating power becomes innately intertwined with Dust as the subtle knife becomes the key in either preserving or destroying Pullman's mysterious Dust, and in turn, becoming key in preserving or destroying both Lyra and Will's parallel worlds.

Given the significance of the subtle knife, one might expect a healthy critical discussion regarding the titular tool. However, critics tend to focus on the functions the alethiometer and amber spyglass play within the text. Critic Shelley King discusses the parallels of reading *His Dark Materials* in relation to Lyra reading the alethiometer in that "the primary device within

the novel for focusing the reader's attention on the process of reading itself is the alethiometer, a "golden compass" marked by thirty-six symbols, each capable of signifying multiple levels of meaning, in infinite combinations" (107). According to King, reading the text equates to negotiating the alethiometer as "a complex interpretative act" (107) which necessitates "the ability to entertain multiple strata of symbolic meaning while actively working to construct the relationships connecting them (107). Alternatively, Andrew Leet argues the alethiometer is inherently connected with Lyra's evolution from innocence to experience. He states that Lyra's ability to read the alethiometer stems from her "youthful innocence and inexperience with life [allowing] her to remain in tune with herself... without major questions or spiritual issues to distract her" (183). Experience forces her to lose her natural gift, and "she can no longer read the alethiometer because simple compassion no longer surfaces as her center of truth" (183). Having a similar amount of critical discussion as the alethiometer, the amber spyglass exemplifies what Lauren Shohet considers a key principle to a reader in that "perceiving consciousness requires double, separated, over-layered reading" (30) much like the amber spyglass's own structure. In turn, *His Dark Materials* acts as the amber spyglass being a "separation of the refracting lenses—like the gaps between a traditional text and a new text that engage it at a hand's remove—[which] intensifies what it represents beyond mere quotidian reality" (31).

Unlike the alethiometer or amber spyglass, the subtle knife is discussed only in passing or in addition to another argument. Both Burton Hatlen and Karen Patricia Smith refer to the knife as a means to traverse Pullman's fantastical worlds. Smith explores the significance of the titular device as nothing more than a curious weapon and transit device, offering that "the knife is subtle... only inasmuch as one cannot actually see the cuts it makes" (141), and that Will "with its help enters many worlds" (141). Moving beyond the subtle knife as simply a means of travel,

Millicent Lenz views the subtle knife as one side of the good and evil binary. She argues, "*His Dark Materials* dramatizes the struggle between these destructive forces... and human aspirations toward greater awareness, aliveness, expanded consciousness, and self-transcending love" (6) with the destructive forces being "metaphorically expressed in the subtle knife and the Specters" (6). But in her decision to focus solely on the destructive attributes of the knife, Lenz ignores the necessary place the subtle knife occupies in terms of the preservation of Dust and all consciousness.

Where Millicent Lenz places the subtle knife on one side of the good and evil binary, I argue the subtle knife acts as the pharmakon at the centre of *His Dark Materials*. Moreover, representing the inherent neutrality of both the poison and the cure, the subtle knife dismantles the binaries of good and evil in Pullman's trilogy. As the pharmakon, the subtle knife comes to dismantle the binary of good and evil within both the protagonists' multiverse and Pullman's trilogy as a whole. At the outset, Lyra and her allies appear to be negotiating "the powers of this world" (*Golden Compass* 73) propelling men and women "by tides much fiercer than you can imagine" (73), manifesting as Lord Asriel, seemingly good, on one side and Mrs. Coulter, seemingly evil, on the other. Lyra still seems to be driven by that conviction when she proclaims: "You can't investigate Shadows, Dust, whatever it is, without thinking about that kind of thing, good and evil and such" (*Subtle Knife* 96). But the subtle knife transcends the divided notion of good and evil as it transcends its function as a tool because "not even its makers knew what it could do" (312). The bear-king Iorek Byrnison is immediately wary of the blade, knowing there is more to the subtle knife than is possible to understand, reasoning: "The intentions of a tool are what it does. ... They are what it is made for. But sometimes a tool may have other uses that you

don't know. Sometimes in doing what you intend, you also do what the knife intends, without knowing" (*Amber Spyglass* 181).

Most telling of the subtle knife's unknown and paradoxical power as the pharmakon comes from the alethiometer's attempt to answer Lyra's question as to whether or not the subtle knife should be repaired after Will manages to break it when his mind is not solely focused on using it. The alethiometer expresses doubt, even hesitation when Lyra reports it saying, "the knife could be harmful or it could do good, but it was so slight, such a delicate kind of a balance, that the faintest thought or wish could tip it one way or the other" (*Amber Spyglass* 181). It continues to tell Lyra that "the knife would be the death of Dust, but then it says it was the only way to keep Dust alive" (183) and warns again and again that "it was dangerous" (183). The danger in the subtle knife lies in its power to destroy yet preserve Dust: simultaneously the poison and the remedy, what Jacques Derrida, in "The Father of Logos from Plato's Pharmacy," refers to as either the pharmakon or the supplement. To Derrida, the supplement is that thing which makes possible while simultaneously corrupting and/or ruining that which it makes possible (927). David H. Richter further explains the supplement's relationship to that which it is meant to supplement:

a dominant entity is defined by a form of presence... next to its supplement..., which is defined by a corresponding absence as inferior and marginal. But the distinguishing qualities of the marginal entity are in fact the defining qualities of the dominant. The result is that the rigid hierarchy of the dichotomy dissolves: As we consider the matter, it is no longer clear which is dominant and which is marginal. (828)

Meaning within the binaries then is challenged because, to paraphrase Derrida, "one must thus proceed to undertake a general reversal of all metaphorical directions, no longer asking whether [evil] can have [good] but understanding that what [good] claims to be [good] cannot go without the essential possibility of [evil]" (930). Within the binary of good and evil, good denotes the presence of evil, or the absence of good. The paradox of the subtle knife decentres good and removes it from its privileged position in a hierarchy relative to evil.

The neutrality of the knife as the pharmakon forces Will, Lyra, and their allies to abandon their reliance upon the Authority. But in its use, the knife, severing the reliance on the Authority, separates man from divinity and through that division threatens an apocalyptic collapse of reality. With an abyssal void existing in the absence of divinity, good and evil fall upon the choices and consequences of the protagonists' actions, especially those of Will Parry. Similar to the emphasis on the alethiometer in comparison to the subtle knife, Will Parry is often overshadowed by Lyra's significance within *His Dark Materials*. There is no doubt that throughout the trilogy "Lyra has a part to play in all this, and a major one" (*Golden Compass* 31) and, likewise, there is much that is valuable in Lenz's position that "Lyra becomes the novel's major exemplar of the power of the creative imagination to shape the aforementioned dark materials into meaningful stories, thereby making more 'dust'—expanding consciousness" (7). But in Lyra's celebration, Will's part is overshadowed as the bearer of the knife who comes literally to hold the balance of the universe in his hand.

In terms of other figures representing masculine power in Pullman's trilogy, Will comes to parallel Lord Asriel on his quest to destroy the Authority. In attempt to "find the Authority and kill Him" (*Subtle Knife* 47), Lord Asriel's bridge into different worlds comes to "have a bearing on a war being waged at the present between some witches and various other forces, some in the

spirit world" (*Golden Compass* 189) and "possession of the bridge, if it ever existed, would give a huge advantage to whoever held it" (189). Lord Asriel's means to breach "the barrier between the universes" (377) comes at the cost of Roger's life and the sacrifice of an innocent. As Burton Hatlen argues, "Asriel becomes a kind of Nietzschean *Übermensch*, willing to go beyond good and evil in quest of his goals, yet we respond not with sympathy but with horror" (88). If Lord Asriel ascends to the position of *Übermensch* through his sacrifice of Roger to create his bridge, then Will, who is able to create a "hole in the fabric of this world and into another" (*Subtle Knife* 15), comes to also represent the Nietzschean *Übermensch* in his role as the knife-bearer.

In the same way Lord Asriel rises above the average man through his undeniable power and aspiration, Will Parry as the wielder of the subtle knife parallels Nietzsche's *Übermensch* in rising above good and evil with the potential of action through the subtle knife. As the *Übermensch*, Lord Asriel understands "man only desires the truth in a similarity restrictive sense" (Nietzsche 454), and knows the populace "is indifferent to pure knowledge, which is not consequential, and even hostile to possibly harmful and destructive truths" (454). Therefore both Lord Asriel's and Will's tasks are all the more difficult and dangerous as both man and boy seek out "the origin of all the Dust, all the death, the sin, the misery, the destructiveness in the world" (*Golden Compass* 377). As Lord Asriel and Will transcend human limitations through their manipulation of the world around them, they come to realize the Authority's claim to power and oppressive rule has been perpetuated by a false truth with "a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms" (Nietzsche 455).

Both Lord Asriel and Will no longer adhere to human limitations as *Übermensch* and taking up the original rebellion against God, "it would be a close fight, but Lord Asriel would win, because he is passionate and daring and he believes his cause is just" (*Subtle Knife* 273).

However, Lord Asriel, like those before him, is doomed to fail because "without Æsahættr, he and all his forces will go down to defeat" (273). As the wielder of the subtle knife, Will surpasses Lord Asriel and rises to a Promethean position holding God-like power (and the means to destroy God) in the knife's seemingly limitless destructive capabilities as "nothing, no one, matter, spirit, angel, air—nothing is invulnerable to the subtle knife" (312). Moreover, while the full potential of the subtle knife is hinted at, Will comes to understand the blade more intimately as he gains mastery of it.

Will's use of the subtle knife isolates the violent and explosive reaction of Lord Asriel's severing Roger and his daemon into a singular and precise event at the end of the first book in the series. Lord Asriel's almost cataclysmic sundering of boundaries between worlds is contained within the blade of the subtle knife and controlled, no less, by a prepubescent boy. What takes Lord Asriel months, even years to study and prepare, is executed in mere seconds with the knife's power. Though not as violent as Lord Asriel's killing of Roger, the process of "delicately searching out the gap between one stitch and the next with the point of a scalpel" (*Subtle Knife* 185) is nevertheless a breach of the universe. Thus it may not manifest as "a great rending, grinding, crunching, tearing sound reached from one end of the universe to the other" (*Golden Compass* 393), but the consequences of each cut echoes into the abyss. Unlike Lord Asriel's singular cataclysmic event, "these little invisible gaps were anywhere, but not everywhere, or any slash of the knife would open a window" (*Subtle Knife* 194) and the invisible gaps are particular areas where the boundaries between the worlds are weakest.

Such isolated power is unnatural and dangerous, though its destructive force is limited to a chosen and skilled wielder as the knife's "power is unlimited, but only in the hands of the one who knows how to use it" (*Amber Spyglass* 61). Will comes to understand "some of the true

power of the knife" (19) in that he is able to travel to any world within the multiverse by navigating the incision points that represent a different universe. In his hand, he holds a tool allowing him access to a vast array of worlds with each incision point having "a different quality: this one was hard and definite, that one cloudy; a third was slippery, a fourth brittle and frail..." (19). Moving through parallel universes at his choice, Will comes to understand "that enormous scaffold and framework of concepts to which the needy man clings for dear life is merely a stage and plaything for the boldest feats of the liberated intellect" (Nietzsche 458). But his knowledge and power as a Nietzschean *Übermensch* holding the pharmakon has almost infinitely cataclysmic results to humankind's understanding. Will must be cautious and controlled with the power at his disposal, and if the barriers between universes are the frameworks of reality, understanding and manipulating them as such demands a certain discipline from the knife-bearer.

Tasked as the bearer of the subtle knife, Will's responsibility only becomes more apparent as he understands the knife's true power. Upon winning the knife he is given firm instructions from the previous knife-bearer, a kind of code of conduct by which past bearers were to live: "First, never open without closing. Second, never let anyone else use the knife. It is yours alone. Third, never use it for a base purpose. Fourth, keep it secret" (*Subtle Knife* 187-188). The first and arguably most important rule is executed as easily as cutting a window into the fabric of the world and Will simply needs to "pinch it together" (185). As the knife-bearer, "only Will [can] feel exactly where the edges were" (*Amber Spyglass* 173) and in time he is able to close the windows "cleanly and quickly" (173). While relatively consistent with his own openings, Will comes to realize the countless windows left open by past bearers more careless and less discriminating than he. His responsibility is thus drastically increased, not only mastering his own use of the knife but repairing the misuse and damage done by those in the past.

The power that arises with mastering the subtle ways of the knife comes at a price to Will, both physically and emotionally. Upon winning the knife in a struggle with a deranged thief, Will realizes the first sacrifice he is forced to make for possession of the knife: losing his ring and pinky finger on his left hand. His physical loss is a signal of his true right to wield the blade, a kind of blood tithe as “the badge of the bearer” (*Subtle Knife* 180). The wound is as subtle and deadly to the knife-bearer as the knife’s blade would be to an enemy and “the pain was dull and unrelenting, but at least the cuts were clean, and having seen what the knife could do, he knew that no cuts could be cleaner; but the stumps where his fingers had been were bleeding freely” (190). The loss of his two fingers also presents a powerful symbol of his bond to the knife; having lost his left ring finger, Will has, in a sense, been wedded to his task as the knife-bearer. Will and the knife become merged as weapon and wielder, and he is an integral aspect of the knife's ability to cut into worlds as “it's not only the knife that has to cut, it's [his] own mind” (182). Will’s knowledge of the knife is power “with every increase in his knowledge came a gain in strength” (*Amber Spyglass* 20).

Becoming intrinsically connected to the subtle knife forces Will into a precarious role as wielder of the pharmakon and his choices and intentions come to affect the binary of good and evil. Promoted to the Nietzschean Übermensch or even a Promethean figure through the power of the subtle knife, Will's personal and private conflicts are projected onto a cosmic scale; if his fears and doubts consume him, his fears and doubts consume the world. He initially fears and hates the knife and attempts to reject the knife and the role forced upon him: “I didn't want it! I don't want it now!” Will cried. “If you want it, you can have it! I hate it, and I hate what it does—” (*Subtle Knife* 320). But his role is undeniable as “The knife knows when to leave one hand and settle in another” (180). The knife chooses him, and he is much a tool for the knife’s

power as the knife's power is a tool for him. So intrinsically connected to the knife, his doubt becomes detrimental to the knife when "the knife [comes] up against something it couldn't cut, and because [his] mind was pushing it through and forcing it back both at the same time, it snapped" (*Amber Spyglass* 192).

Will constantly battles between his new duty as the knife-bearer and his duty to his mother whom he abandoned to take up his new role. Torn between these conflicting responsibilities, Will initially ignores Iorek's warnings and has ulterior motives for repairing the knife. Instead of fully concerning himself with the innate connection the fate of the knife has to the fate of Dust, he worries "if the knife was not repaired, he might never get home, never see his mother again" (*Amber Spyglass* 182). It is only through realizing his true significance as the knife-bearer after the knife is repaired that Will heeds Iorek's warning: "If you want to succeed in this task, you must no longer think about your mother. You must put her aside. If your mind is divided, the knife will break" (194).

With the power of the pharmakon in his possession, Will's personal turmoil becomes the dividing line between good and evil and, as Burton Hatlen notes, "for [Pullman] the words "good" and "evil" (lowercase now) describe certain potentials mixed together in every human being, and the relationship between them is worked out within the human heart" (80). The subtle knife, as the pharmakon, belongs not to one side of the good and evil binary but exists as the binary itself; Will's choices and actions create both negative or positive consequences for the entire multiverse. Will must neutralize his desires to truly harness the subtle knife for fear and doubt only manifest the knife's dark consequences, whereas discipline and drive allow for balance to be restored to Dust and, in turn, the multiverse.

The negative consequences of the subtle knife exemplify the knife's dark intentions and the subtle knife's dark powers bring into being that which is only thought to exist in nightmares. The grim consequence of the subtle knife's power manifests the dark and destructive results of knowledge's misuse and further reflects the severing of human with daemon and the Specters. The knife's negation of the natural reflects gothic aspects of the trilogy in the combination of both the knife's otherworldly power to sunder the boundaries between universes and the Freudian Uncanny of the nightmarish results of the knife's power in the Specters and severed children. From the severed children to the Specters, the knife's own intentions to reveal the abyss become uncanny and destructive--a perversion of the beautiful aspect of Dust's pure potential for intellectual awareness and creation. What the Dust attempts to perpetuate becomes consumed by the nightmarish influence of the abyss. The silver edge of the subtle knife shares the same materials and intrinsic quality of severing the natural bonds of Dust as that of the "Maystadt anbaric scalpel" (*Golden Compass* 273), which Lyra also recognizes when she proclaims: "That's the same as the blade they was going to cut me and Pan apart with—that's just the same" (*Subtle Knife* 181). The alloy of manganese and titanium literally becomes the material that allows a blade to sever soul from body. Its creation in itself is unnatural but its ability is wholly abominable. The silver edge of the subtle knife is a self contained "Maystadt anbaric scalpel" (*Golden Compass* 273), exaggerating the act of severing a child from his or her daemon and, instead, severing the universe from itself--dividing Dust from itself. In turn, the perversion of the natural occurrence of the human-daemon bond, or of the intricate connection of Dust with itself, produces an equally perverse and terrifying reaction.

Severed children are the first hints of the knife's negative consequences as "something uncanny and unnatural" (*GC* 210). Shells of their former selves, severed children are children

literally sliced from their daemons--the animal representation of the soul--by "a kind of guillotine... made of manganese and titanium alloy" (273). The result is horrifying because, in Lyra's world, "a human being with no daemon was like someone without a face, or with their ribs laid open and their heart torn out: something unnatural and uncanny that belonged to the world of night-ghasts, not the waking world of sense" (214). This terror is grounded in the uncanny. Sigmund Freud explains "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced" (528). In conjunction with the uncanny, a severed child reflects Freud's accounts for several sources of experiencing the uncanny, particularly "in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts" (526). Severed children are piteous shadows of once thriving human life, but without their daemons--their souls--they are hollow ghosts desperately seeking solace in any semblance of warmth and comfort. These children are feared and left to wander the frozen north until they eventually expire, having nothing left without the means or the will to survive. Though the severed children are a result of the torture inflicted at the hands of the Magisterium, the subtle knife's counterpart is innately linked to the severed child but wholly more terrifying in that unlike the severed children, the Specters possess a seemingly malicious intent.

Much like the severed children are a product of intercision, the Specters are products of dust being sundered apart by the knife's blade. These nightmarish entities are "a strange kind of ghoul or apparition... something deadly and implacable" (*Subtle Knife* 213). Specters are the negation of the knife's utility—a kind of negative being—but through that negation still a presence intrinsically connected to Dust and being. Ripped from the fabric of the world, the Specters become isolated Dust manifest. The haunting of the Specter is driven by Dust's own desire to know itself. The Specters have an undying desire to be whole, to once again know

themselves and are thus as much Dust as a severed child is human. In this sense Specters are metaphysical severed children obsessively trying to return to a state of completeness through the vampiric act of consuming human consciousness. Now separate and unable to return to being, the Specters become a perverse inversion of their origin. They are negative Dust, not all curious but all consuming. Upon catching a victim, "the Specters feast as vampires feast on blood, but the Specters' food is attention [which is] a conscious and informed interest in the world" (280) with the result being an empty, thoughtless shell "alive but not alive... indifferent to everything" (*Subtle Knife* 292). The specters are a product of the wielder's carelessness and without sentient consciousness--being the negation of consciousness--they are not malicious. Their intent is simply to find what they do not have, only with tragic and horrifying results.

While Lenz's position that "the terrible reality that the subtle knife creates Specters" (8) is not unfounded, the Specters are only that: "a terrible reality" (8). Dangerous for all the reasons Lenz posits, being that they "devour human consciousness, and creativity, aspects of the soul or daemon, leaving in their wake zombies who have no minds of their own" (8), Specters are nonetheless a consequence of intention or carelessness. These terrifying creatures are not what Carole Scott considers the subtle knife's "evil emanation" (104) because the subtle knife, as the *pharmakon*, is a neutralizing agent in that it reveals the ultimate neutral aspect of the trilogy: the abyss.

The abyss lacks intention or motive; it is the antithesis of Dust or the negation of consciousness. As "the children of the abyss" (*Amber Spyglass* 486), much like the severed children, the Specters are orphans of sorts; displaced from consciousness, they seek that which they do not and cannot possess. It is ironic then that severed children, while feared and repulsive, are eventually viewed with sympathy; the specters, on the other hand, are loathed and

hated despite being as much displaced as severed children as manifestations of the abyss. Much like the severed children, the Specters are forced into being by the subtle knife's metaphysical wound it creates on the multiverse--a kind of passage through the nether space framing the countless parallel universes called the abyss. Feared and loathed as "ethereal vampires" (79) from the terrifying and wholly dissonant abyss, the specters are truly uncanny. Called from the abyss by the dark intentions of the subtle knife, the Specters "ought to have remained secret and hidden but [have] come to light" (Freud 517).

The abyss, "a vast black emptiness, like a shaft into the deepest darkness" (*Amber Spyglass* 355), comes to represent the most terrifying and harmful aspect of Pullman's multiverse as it is the death of Dust. Will immediately recognizes its danger when the children discover it:

It's the same kind of thing as when I cut a window. The same kind of edge.

There's something special about that kind of edge; once you've felt it you never forget it... But that big space down there, that's not another world like all the others. It's different. I don't like it. I wish I could close it up. (357-358)

The abyss is to existence as the specters are to consciousness, being "darker than darkness itself" (401) as a vortex of reality, Dust is pulled into it "pouring ceaselessly down" (401). As "Dust has been leaking out of the worlds and into nothingness" (484), the multiverse has been losing the pure potential of creation and "if it wasn't stopped, all conscious life would come to an end" (451). With the utter loss of Dust, "thought, imagination, feeling, would all wither and blow away, leaving nothing but a brutish automatism; and that brief period when life was conscious of itself would flicker out like a candle in every one of the billions of worlds where it had burned brightly" (451). Here lies the darkest consequence of the pharmakon: left to its design, all hierarchies and binaries would be supplemented, inevitably destroyed, including being and non-

being. The ability to transcend binaries comes at a steep price and the void of collapsed binaries can only be resolved with sacrifice.

As the pharmakon, the negative consequences of the subtle knife are then able to be neutralized through the tool's intrinsic connection to the preservation of Dust and all consciousness. In its neutrality, the knife can be used to repair the damage it has caused through the knife-bearer's ability to close the windows, undoing the harm it inflicts. Just as the knife is able to manifest the destructive misuse of knowledge and power, the knife is the only weapon capable of destroying the oppressive and false Authority. In destroying the Authority, the protagonists are able to create the Republic of Heaven as an equalitarian social order meant for the cultivation of knowledge. Then, as a revision of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the titular tool becomes the necessary device to allow a new age of rebels to successfully defeat the Authority first attempted by Satan in Milton's epic. It becomes apparent through Lord Asriel's ambition what Pullman strives to accomplish through his trilogy: succeed where the original rebellion in Milton's *Paradise Lost* fails. Pullman looks to destroy the personified God, the lie perpetuated through the Church and, like Lord Asriel, he requires the subtle knife to achieve his ultimate goal. Pullman raises the subtle knife's prominence above that of the other two tools, designating the subtle knife as the weapon able to alter the war against the Authority and if they fail, they "shall all be destroyed, and cruelty will reign forever" (*Amber Spyglass* 208). But unlike the almost comic war of angels in Satan's rebellion where angelic warriors "Cannot but by annihilating die; / Nor in their liquid texture mortal wound / Receive, no more than can fluid air" (Milton 6.347-349), the subtle knife allows its wielder the capacity to destroy angels.

In the concluding conflict of the trilogy, the subtle knife, the pharmakon, both physically and metaphysically destroys the Authority through exposing the illusions used to perpetuate

control. It is discovered through “angelic knowledge... that the Authority is not the creator” (*Amber Spyglass* 210). While it is uncertain if “there may have been a creator” (210), it is clear that “at some point the Authority took charge, and since then, angels have rebelled, and human beings have struggled against him” (210). Nonetheless, the subtle knife's finishing blow to the Authority is not the literal removal of the Ancient of Days from his stasis chamber but the metaphorical disposal of the Authority when Will cuts out of the world of the dead, freeing the souls from the Authority's oppressive regime. Will comes to understand that the only way to negate the loss of Dust caused by the knife is to “open this world and let the ghosts out [now knowing] that's what [he's] got the knife for” (310). Freeing the dead from the eternal holding cell being as “the land of the dead isn't a place of reward or a place of punishment. It is a place of nothing” (320) is “the greatest blow [one] could strike” (310) because death is the Authority's only true threat over mortals allowing him power. The land of the dead is the worst kind of punishment being a world “with no hope of freedom, or joy, or sleep, or rest, or peace” (320). Death, the Authority's iron fist, is thus transcended when the souls of the dead are able to return to Dust and the collective living consciousness that Dust represents when the ghosts escape to the open air, dissolving and becoming “part of everything alive again” (319).

Indeed, the Authority is left powerless after the release of the ghosts, but unbeknownst to Will and Lyra, the Ancient of Days has been decaying for millennia and is only a shell of his once former power when the children finally find him. An entity now having “the impression of terrifying decrepitude, of a face sunken in wrinkles, of trembling hands, and of a mumbling mouth and rheumy eyes” (*Amber Spyglass* 396), the Authority is now as pathetic as he was once terrible. So weak and vulnerable, the children offer him sympathy “because he was so old, and he was terrified, crying like a baby and cowering away into the lowest corner” (410). There is no

combat and instead of using the subtle knife as a weapon upon meeting the Authority, Will uses the blade to cut through the crystal stasis that has been both the sanctuary and prison of the feeble and decrepit angel. Like the ghosts before him, the Authority finds solace in his demise:

in the open air there was nothing to stop the wind from damaging him, and to their dismay his form began to loosen and dissolve. Only a few moments later he had vanished completely, and their last impression was of those eyes, blinking in wonder, and a sigh of the most profound and exhausted relief. (410-411)

The Authority's freedom and release from an age unknowable is tragic and serene, perhaps too merciful for his oppressive rule over humanity in the prime of his being, but nonetheless he finds atonement and grace at the hands of the children and the subtle knife.

The Lord Regent, Metatron, who inherits the rule over the Kingdom of Heaven from the aged Authority, does not meet the same fate as his master. His lust for power and punishment begins to eclipse the Authority's old regime as "he intends to intervene directly in human life" (*Amber Spyglass* 374), establishing "a permanent Inquisition, worse than anything the Consistorial Court of Discipline could dream up" (373-374). Drastic intentions are met with drastic action; unlike the Authority, Metatron is only defeated through force and sacrifice. He engages in hand-to-hand combat with Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter, and is finally bested when "Lyra's mother stood and found her footing and leapt with all her heart, to hurl herself against the angel and her daemon and her dying lover, and seize those beating wings, and bear them all down together into the abyss" (409). But both entities are undone by choice, by intention, by action. Having once been the representatives of good and evil in Lyra's world, Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter come to sunder their own expressions of good and evil to transcend the angelic threat. Able to inspire both Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter to sacrifice themselves for Lyra and

Will, the knife—and what Lyra and Will come to use it for—becomes a symbol of resistance, the pharmakon dissolving binaries and hierarchies, a weapon capable of destroying that which had claimed Godhood.

The death of the Authority and his Lord Regent manifests as a profound victory for humanity throughout the multiverse, but the final and most detrimental threat to conscious life is the loss of Dust to the abyss. Here lies the final and most powerful sacrifice. In order to stop the flow of Dust into the emptiness of the abyss, Will and Lyra know “all the windows must be closed” (*Amber Spyglass* 485). But in order to maintain the window out of the world of the dead, they are tasked with teaching their separate worlds “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” (492). This becomes the necessary means to “renew enough [Dust] to replace what is lost through one window” (492). Lyra and Will come to the painful realization they must close all but the remaining window between the Eden-like paradise and the world of the dead. Closing all but the one window inevitably forces Lyra and Will to part ways because their souls “can spend a little time, but not a long time” (485) outside of the world in which it originates. Having only one window open between those two worlds forces Lyra and Will to sacrifice their love and desire to be together—experience subsumes innocence. Their duty to the dead not only severs Lyra and Will from each other but also from the innocent state of grace they were allowed prior to realizing their separate paths. In his final duty as the knife-bearer, Will teaches the angels how to close the windows in order to stop the loss of Dust and ensure “the worlds would all be restored to their proper relations with one another” (503). The knife’s power through the bearer and his disciples allows for the survival of Dust, the sealing of

the abyss, and the countless windows shattered throughout the multiverse. The pharmakon comes full circle: having neutralized the Authority's rule and the threat of the abyss, Will is forced to destroy the subtle knife and, after parting with Lyra for the final time, he breaks the blade and "with a wrenching crack, the knife [shatters] and the blade [falls] in pieces to the ground" (512).

As the pharmakon, the subtle knife transcends the simplistic nature of being merely a weapon and a tool. On one side, the subtle knife performs as a means of traversing parallel universes, a transitive function for both Will and Lyra, and symbolizes the means to destroy the Authority and Metatron, a symbolic function as a herald of victory over oppression.

Dualistically, the subtle knife disassembles the divisions and binaries of arbitrary human constructs, especially the binary of good and evil, and offers the means to empower Will, the knife-bearer, as an *Übermensch*, which, in turn, relocates these collapsed divisions of good and evil into choice and consequence. The knife can both make and undo; it allows its wielder pure potential. In Pullman's trilogy, the subtle knife is capable of exposing the negative consequences of the abyss, of the negation of Dust, but steeled discipline not only allows for the survival of Dust but reveals the means to which all beings of the multiverse can ensure Dust flourishes. It literally and metaphorically cuts through binaries, forcing the protagonists to understand the binary collapse not as annihilation but as the opportunity for a new ideology: the Republic of Heaven. The subtle knife exemplifies the forward thrust required for a world without binaries, Pullman's Republic of Heaven, and Will as the knife-bearer is a proto-citizen of this new age.

Disposing of the authority creates in itself a void much like the abyss but where the absence (or presence) of the abyss negates consciousness by consuming Dust, the absence of the Authority allows for new growth. Ancient and arbitrary constructs are dismantled, with the *Übermensch* leading the way, and a new order is established. And with the construction of the

Republic of Heaven, the subtle knife, the pharmakon, ceases to have purpose; it now presents only a potential threat to a new order. The subtle knife is infinitely dangerous because it threatens all order; it is the key to the abyss, the all-consuming void. The subtle knife is broken through Lyra and Will's sacrifice to abandon their love in order to establish the Republic of Heaven in their own worlds together but nevertheless apart. The knife's final act is their sacrifice: the ultimate man/woman binary of the new Eve and the Übermensch is removed to usher in a new age. Change comes from their sacrifice and the subtle knife, in its glory as the pharmakon, is the ceremonial blade. Such a complex and encompassing aspect of the subtle knife moves Pullman's trilogy beyond mere fantasy and beyond the constraints of literature for children. The pharmakon is dangerous, a double-edged blade, but it has the potential to inspire and create change. The subtle knife can close the consuming void and sunder constraining binaries to allocate responsibility to the denizens of a world without oppression, without hierarchies, and without binaries.

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