The idea of the duality of an individual is not new, and has a history in philosophy, metaphysics, psychoanalysis and literature, but never has it been presented in a more compelling form, by turns playful and heart-rending, than in the creation of the daemons in Philip Pullman's 'His Dark Materials'.

Philip Pullman has said that the idea of daemons was the best one he ever had, and I think most readers would emphatically agree. The impact on myself when I first grasped the relationship between Lyra and her daemon, Pantalaimon, in *Northern Lights*, volume 1 of 'His Dark Materials', was one of immense excitement and delight. It was simply thrilling to enter a world in which each character appeared in two manifestations, had two voices, a mind in continuous dialogue with itself, two vertices of experience. The brilliance of the invention resides in the passion and liveliness of the ongoing conversation and physical intimacy between self and daemon. The question I will try to explore is how we can understand the ideas about human beings which Pullman chooses to express through this device? or, to put it another way, why was it such a stroke of literary magic? To set the scene, we must remind ourselves of the basic facts about daemons. All the characters in *Northern Lights* possess one. This is one way in which its heroine Lyra's world differs from the contemporary world we are introduced to in volume 2, *The Subtle Knife*? the Oxford of Will, her travelling companion. A daemon has the form of an animal or bird, usually opposite in gender to its human counterpart. Lyra's daemon has his own name, Pantalaimon (meaning ?all merciful? in Greek as Nicholas Tucker has pointed out*) though others are referred to only in relation to their human partner. Person and daemon must stay close, and great anxiety and pain is occasioned when they are separated. Daemons have a quicksilver quality and can change their form at will, disguising themselves and evading any fixed shape and identity, and they take great pleasure in this aspect of their being.

**The exploratory potential of the child**

The plot of *Northern Lights* turns on another crucial fact about daemons. Their malleable ever-changing character only persists while their human partner remains a child. At puberty, a person's daemon assumes a final form? the white leopard of Lyra's father Lord Asriel or the golden monkey of her mother Mrs Coulter, for example. So the daemon of an adult lacks the potential for playfulness and fluidity, and no longer represents the as yet undefined exploratory potential of the child. Pullman explains that the hugely powerful flow of energy linking child and daemon is related to the mysterious matter of ?Dust? which is of such interest to the scientists and theologians of Lyra's world. An imagined church hierarchy, hostile to the free expression of human sexuality and feeling, has conceived a plan to free the world of ?original sin?, to tame and order sexuality through solving the problem of ?Dust?. To this end, experiments to separate children from their daemons are in progress, thus eliminating a core element of individual consciousness. The horror this notion elicits in the story makes it evident that Pullman is describing something quasi-sacriligious, and indeed the Bolvanger experimental station has powerful echoes of Nazi medical atrocities. A daemon is something like a child's soul, and without it, as the children subjected to ?incision? at Bolvanger reveal, one is less than human.
The relationship between self and daemon is represented as essential to being alive. Certainly one can be sure that if the link is destroyed, spiritual death ensues. In this sense, we are presented with an understanding of human personality in which there is an absolutely necessary dynamic relationship between many parts of the self. The changing form of the child’s daemon allows us to imagine the enormous range of feelings, perspectives and values which add up to the mind of one individual. Pantalaimon can be Lyra’s protector, her baby, her spy, her conscience, her memory, and is always her beloved friend with an absolute loyalty of commitment to her above all else. We might suggest that the origin of a relationship of such total reliability lies in the human infant’s earliest relationship with mother. A child’s belief in a completely trustworthy source of inner support is achieved in ordinary development through the internalisation of a relationship to a loving and reliable parental figure. In Pullman’s hands, this conception has been turned into the living form of a daemon, a part of the self that can be trusted to be present and loyal to the child’s best interests at all times. It is pertinent to note that the story is full of very intense relationships between its characters? Ma Costa’s distress at the loss of her son Billy, Lyra’s passionate involvement with Roger, Mrs Coulter’s horror when she realises it is her own daughter Lyra who is about to be subjected to ?incision?. The evocation of the lost and desperate condition of Tony Makarios, one of the children who has been separated from his daemon, is one of the most poignant images of Northern Lights. He is wandering, searching for his lost daemon, clutching a piece of dried fish as a pathetic source of comfort. His kindly rescuers take this from him, and without this last vestige of attachment to the source of life, he dies.

Living with the contradictions of your nature

However, Pullman is also interested in the idea that the parts of the human personality are not just many and various but are also in a necessarily dynamic relationship, which includes conflict. I think we can understand the interesting fact that person and daemon are of opposite genders as not only being a neat representation of human bisexuality ? the mix of ?masculine? and ?feminine? elements which is in each of us, as Freud described, an idea revolutionary 100 years ago, but now something of a commonplace ? but also a way of heightening our awareness that a complete person will be one able to live with the contradictions of his or her own nature. None of us is all good or all bad, all kind or all cruel, all brave or all cowardly. Pullman embraces with enthusiasm the recognition of the complex human condition. His hostility to the Church as it features in the trilogy is very much based on the Church’s false belief in the absolutes of good and evil.

Lyra is a great story-spinner, indeed a great liar, as the terrifying harpies of the underworld she visits in The Amber Spyglass don’t let her forget. Much of the time it is Pantalaimon, therefore, who keeps her in touch with the truth she is so keen to embroider, evade, or otherwise put to one side. The truth-seeking potential of the mind is dependent on the self’s relationship to its daemon, because the two voices ensure that all claims and observations are open to question. A splendid scepticism about what is really true is kept in place by the knowledgeable comments of the daemon who knows all the secrets of the heart.

Here there is another of Pullman’s good inventions to take account of, the alethiometer, the instrument which helps Lyra to resolve crucial problems. Consulting this magical source of true knowledge (aletheia = truth in Greek) is a vital resource during her adventures. We might see this as representing Lyra’s need to depend on resources outside herself and thus to become aware of the limits of her omnipotence, just as Will has to rely on the ?subtle knife? he is given. Pullman is clear that one’s daemon is limited in the precise respect that it can only give one access to one’s own qualities. It can contain elements of oneself one is out of touch with and in that way help in re-integrating temporarily lost aspects of the self, but the alethiometer and the subtle knife offer something to Lyra and Will beyond their own capacities.

Perhaps this is related to another fact about daemons ? you can?t make them, they are created, as we are, by the intercourse of parents and the creation of new life. Lyra understands this fact quite well and is able to exploit the foolish grandiosity and ambition of the impostor bear-king by promising to give him a daemon, as if it were a possession he could acquire. Her insightful trick leads to his downfall ? it is only the Bear who can inhabit to the full his Bear-nature (Lyra’s great friend Iorek Byrnison) who is fit to be king.

However, not all human beings are aware of the presence of their daemon. We learn how surprised Will’s father was to
meet up with his daemon for the first time? to become capable of recognising her after his journey to the North.

?Can you imagine my astonishment at learning that part of my nature was female, and bird-formed and beautiful?? he tells Lee Scoresby, the balloonist. Indeed Will is to meet his own daemon towards the end of the third volume, but that does not happen until after the momentous climax of the visit to the underworld in search of Roger, the child Lyra feels she betrayed. To cross into the underworld, she has to leave Pantalaimon behind. This is a mutually excruciating separation with the possibility of never finding each other again, and it exposes Lyra to most terrible discoveries about herself. Without Pantalaimon?s wise counsel, she is carried away by her story-weaving and provokes by her fantastic tales the cruel wrath of the Harpies. What she comes to understand (without either alethiometer or Pantalaimon to help her at this point) is that the stories she could tell to hearten the thousands of dead she encounters are not going to be any use unless they are true. When the stories are true, they can magically enliven and free the burdened spirits of the dead.

Of course this is Pullman?s credo. He speaks of himself as a realist, not a writer of fantasy, and I think this is a well-based claim if we see it as his aspiration to write about psychological reality, and to tell the truth about growing up through his stories. His concept of ?the republic of heaven? (his rewriting of Paradise Lost) is that it is constituted by the way we live our lives in the present, because a daemon ?can only live its full life in the world in which it is born?. That, of course, is why the children cannot stay together at the end of the story, because their full lives have to be lived in the two different real worlds from which they come, worlds that got mixed up because of the disasters brought about by mistaken human ambition. A person in touch with his daemon is at home with himself, and finding the way home is one of the tasks achieved at the conclusion of their adventures.

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* Darkness Visible: Inside the World of Philip Pullman, Nicholas Tucker, Wizard Books 2003, 1 84046 482 8, £6.99 pbk

Northern Lights (0 590 66054 3), The Subtle Knife (0 590 11289 9) and The Amber Spyglass (0 439 99358 X) are published by Scholastic at £6.99 each.

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