The last battle

Fergus Crow

Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, Scholastic £14.99

Writer John Updike responded to criticism of his most recent novel *Gertrude and Claudius*, a rather esoteric interpretation of the affair that precedes the opening of *Hamlet*, by suggesting it was the limitations of the reading public that had conspired to keep his work from being appreciated. 'People read less', he argued. 'They're less comfortable with the written word. They're less comfortable with novels. They don't have a backward frame of reference that would enable them to appreciate things like irony and allusions.'

Updike's claim cuts to the heart of the debate that currently occupies critics of children's fiction. The idea that people are 'less comfortable with the written word' is a reference to elements of modern culture (particularly broadcast media) that are seen as eroding our ability, or desire, to engage in more highbrow pursuits – those Matthew Arnold famously described as 'the best that has been thought and said in the world'. Updike implies that such a 'backward frame of reference' is lacking because we are constantly diverted by the popular art forms: television, film, pulp fiction. So, is a more thorough canonical education the answer?

Critic Anthony Holden's attack on Joanne Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels last summer further confused the debate. 'We are a country with dramatically declining standards of literacy,' he wrote, 'increasingly dragged down to the lowest common denominator by the purveyors of all forms of mindless mass entertainment. The success of the Potter books is just another dispiriting proof of the Murdoch-led dumbing down of our lives ...' His argument, again, centres on a sense that popular is bad, and therefore worthless.

Certainly we are right to be concerned about the quality of what children read. But perhaps we might look at a child's introduction to reading, whatever that might

entail, in a more positive light, as a precursor to developing their own literary vocabulary? Beyond good models of language use and stimulating themes, there is a vital need for children to have fun reading. They must learn to be comfortable with their own imaginations; modern education's obsession with results and statistics has lead to a glut of formulaic English teaching in schools that can, and does, stifle the child's enjoyment of reading and writing.

Enter then Philip Pullman, whose latest book for children, *The Amber Spyglass*, is the final piece of a compelling tale that unravels over three extraordinary novels. Updike would approve; *The Amber Spyglass* is brimming with literary allusion. Indeed, each fresh chapter is introduced by a quotation. The title of the sequence it completes, *His Dark Materials*, is itself a reference to Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*. At its essence is an exploration of Great Ideas: the paradoxes of Heaven and Hell, the nature of God, of Man, of being. Here, at last, is a writer who is prepared to challenge his young readers, to excite and confound them.

The Amber Spyglass opens on Lyra, the feisty girl around whom Pullman has woven all three novels. 'In a valley shaded with rhododendrons, close to the snow line, where a stream milky with melt-water splashed and where linnets flew amongst the immense pines ...' she is held captive in a mountainside cave.

Her disappearance at the close of *The Subtle Knife* was the hook on which readers of the second novel were caught. Now Pullman reveals the identity of her captor: Mrs Coulter, his elegant, enchanting villain, servant of The Oblation Board, a wing of the cancerous Consistorial Court of Discipline (a thinly veiled Catholic Church), and Lyra's mother. Lyra's companion Will, the boy in possession of the Subtle Knife that cuts between parallel worlds, has been tracking the girl. The rescue of Lyra, driven by her father Lord Asriel, and the liberating forces he has been amassing since the first pages of *Northern Lights*, sets into motion a chain of events that will eventually lead to the death of the Church, the death of God, and the inception of a new human order.

The Amber Spyglass moves at the gripping pace that Pullman has effortlessly maintained since the opening of *Northern Lights*. This ability to maintain motion in his narrative is one of his greatest skills as a writer. The reader is never bored, nor allowed much time for reflection. Pullman's imagination is inexhaustible, and he draws from every corner of his universe in evolving his story. This technique relies on the position of Pullman's narrator, an omniscient storyteller whose knowledge is infinite, whose scope of vision and insight is limitless. Pullman recently

lamented the loss of the adult reader's ability to 'accept that the writer knows everything'. It is only in children's fiction, he says, that we still find a truly unselfconscious narrative. His approach demands the narrator serve not the reader, nor the writer, but the story; consequently, Pullman details his characters' joys and sufferings with equanimity throughout *The Amber Spyglass*.

A former teacher and lecturer, Pullman clearly understands his readers, and manipulates them shamelessly, primarily through his mastery of narrative but also through the introduction of a fine cast of supporting characters, among them the daemons that accompany the inhabitants of Lyra's world. These daemons are Pullman's greatest creation, a representation of the soul in animal form. Lyra's daemon Pantalaimon is an essential part of her being; their separation is agonising, both for Lyra and the reader.

At the heart of this epic story is the impending confrontation between man and god, flesh and spirit, that *The Amber Spyglass* is charged with concluding. Pullman's controversial Church, the Consistorial Court, is one of the most sinister creations in children's fiction. Beyond the Court is The Authority himself, Pullman's lying God, a deceptive, angelic being whose waning powers are soon to be assumed by the malignant Regent of The Kingdom, Metatron, 'a being whose profound intellect had had thousands of years to deepen and strengthen itself, and whose knowledge extended over a million universes'. This is a character infused with malevolence and brooding evil, a descendant of Adam, a fallen man. His lusts and desires for flesh, for sin, still drive him, and this weakness is finally exposed by Mrs Coulter, as temptress, whose dry seduction leads to his annihilation.

The confrontation that closes Pullman's story is a classic struggle between good and evil, between purity and sin, as Metatron's forces seek the destruction of the dangerous Lyra, herself the embodiment of a remarkable prophecy. This extraordinary, climactic sequence follows a moving and complex episode in which the children descend into the world of the dead. There they confront the myth of death, and of Heaven itself. They find their way through it, but not without error, and not without consequence. It is a vital episode, and one that brilliantly accelerates the closing of the adventure.

Both Lyra and Will are children who have been, to some extent, parentified by their experiences of childhood. Lyra is effectively orphaned at the start of *Northern Lights*. She relies on herself, and on her daemon for support. Pullman's cruellest revelation is Lyra's discovery that her mother is the evil Marisa Coulter: her first

introduction to the woman, in *Northern Lights*, is under terrifying circumstances.

Mrs Coulter's unexpected redemption, through her discovery of the love she has for her daughter, is one of *The Amber Spyglass's* key moments, and the narrative demands that she prove her change of heart with a sacrifice. This sacrifice salvages her daughter's life, and extinguishes her own with honour. For Lyra, as for all children, the world is a transient, unsettled place, and her experience tells her she is alone. But she, like her mother and father, is endowed with a sense that her destiny is to be extraordinary. Her growth, from wild-eyed, fiery girl into a young woman with a developing sexual awareness (an aspect Pullman handles tactfully as he describes her changing relationship with Will) is as much a focus of the narrative as the struggles going on around her.

Will's mother is mentally ill; his father is dead. He is a modern child burdened by adult responsibilities, coping with the pressures of providing for an ill parent while working out how to grow into his own skin. Pullman writes of Will with care, teasing out his sensitivity and his intelligence, letting his bravery and his adulthood flower. Will's partnership with Lyra is pivotal, and his coming of age is tainted by the sadness he faces as he is finally separated from her. But Will is not abandoned, and when he returns inevitably to his life in his own world he is given as confidante the character of Mary Malone, whose role in *The Amber Spyglass* until this point has been the least convincing.

The Amber Spyglass is an extremely complex exploration of some very big ideas. On another level, it is a marvellous story of adventure; a gripping fight between good and evil that leads the reader away into another world, and the concluding part of a fairytale that has taken us into realms both beautiful and sinister. Equally, it is an exploration of how children relate to the world that surrounds them, and how they forge their relationships with the adults that inhabit it, the adults that they will one day become.

The Amber Spyglass is an exquisitely crafted novel, exceptional in its execution, and a model for those learning both how to read, and how to write. For adults, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* is a gift and a wonder, and a sobering reminder that, when all the writing and talking is done, it is the decision taken by a child to turn from page one to page two, and from page three to page four, that tells us whether or not a story has done its work properly.

An empty cigar case?

Jane Desmarais

Adam Phillips, *Promises, Promises: Essays on Literature and Psychoanalysis*, Faber & Faber, £10.00

A deliberate ambiguity pervades the marketing of Phillips' public image and writing, and this latest production, a miscellany of previously published essays and talks, is no exception. Throughout, he is the voice of both analyst (purposefully non card-carrying) and anti-analyst, less a critic on the inside, more a critic with inside information. In the summer 1996 issue of *Soundings*, Angela McRobbie noted Phillips' effective and subtle ability to speak 'continually in favour of ambivalence and uncertainty', together with a refusal of 'the kind of authority of interpretation which has made psychoanalysis so often exclusive, forceful and reductionist'. Certainly, Phillips brings a breath of fresh air to psychoanalytic writing through his popular approach and lithe intelligence. His perceptions are often provocative and unencumbered with theoretical jargon; but the ease with which he articulates the psychological and social benefits to be gained from words is sometimes too practised to be convincing or moving. Phillips is a voluble writer who manages to keep his tongue in both cheeks. So to speak.

This dual perspective allows him a certain enviable flexibility, and enables him to argue reflexively and persuasively, but it also creates unresolved tensions and ambiguities. For example, Phillips claims in the preface to be more interested in processes and incremental progress; he writes that his version of psychoanalysis 'values truthfulness but not truth ... and ... prefers small gains to revelations'. This modest agenda is somewhat undercut, however, by his repeated moralistic calls for a new humble, democratised psychoanalysis, broadcast via journalism and non-specialist papers (best exemplified by Phillips himself). He advises that 'the ethos of psychoanalysis would be greatly improved if it was more widely acknowledged that one can no more institutionalise psychoanalysis than one can institutionalise poetry' (a view promoted by Jacques Lacan, the subject of one of the essays). Moving deftly in and out of focus, therefore, between a self-styled 'impressionistic approach'

and a more prescriptive realism, *Promises, Promises* is, in many ways, a book for browsing rather than devoted study.

This lucky dip of essays, reviews, case studies and revised talks is divided into relatively short sections without the academic paraphernalia of footnotes. Catchy titles abound – 'Bombs Away', 'Minding Out', 'Smile', 'Narcissism, for and against', 'Sameness is All', 'Doing Heads' – as do the provocative questions and seductive-sounding phrases which have become Phillips' trademarks. In the first essay, 'Poetry and Psychoanalysis', Phillips wonders aloud about the 'rivalry and the collaboration' between the poet and analyst and invites us to be curious about their relationship:

> What are poetry and psychoanalysis good for? In what sense are analysts and poets on about or doing the same thing? Should the patient become, through internalisation, or identification, the poet of himself, the poet of his own life?

This interrogative style, not dissimilar to the child always asking 'why', is balanced by less fatiguing ruminations on the nature of story-telling and poetic form, and an attempt to bring psychoanalysis up to size. 'What does poetry seem to have or to be', Phillips asks, 'that psychoanalysis might want?' On the whole, this style of raising rather than addressing points serves the miscellaneous scheme of the collection well.

Praiseworthy are essays which vitalise the banal. In 'Clutter: A Case History', for example, Phillips provides an engaging discussion of creativity and our need to create order/disorder; and in 'Bombs Away' he writes about the uses to which British psychoanalysts put the Second World War, and the ways in which the metaphors of bombs, evacuation, invasion, and the Blitz became integral to the post-1940s language of psychology:

> War reminds us, like a prompt, of our early selves; and our early selves are terrorised by the mysterious workings – the 'silence' Freud called it; and a silent war is indeed a terrifying notion – of the death instinct inside us.

The absence and suspension of language make rare appearances in this book, but Phillips is more interested in the presence of words than the space that fits around and defines them. Paradoxically, he writes, 'I had so much to say that I couldn't think of anything to say'. Well, more or less. Or, to draw on Freud, sometimes an

empty cigar case is an empty cigar case.

The rich intersections of literature and psychoanalysis are repeatedly and well demonstrated, and Phillips' confidence in synthesising disparate material is reminiscent of R.D. Laing's classic text, *The Divided Self*, first published in 1959. Much of *Promises, Promises* is fashioned around reviews and reconsiderations of Phillips' literary and psychoanalytic heroes (there aren't many heroines) – Martin Amis, Wilfred Bion, Hart Crane, T.S. Eliot, Leslie Farber, A. E. Housman, Jacques Lacan, Jonathan Lear, Herman Melville, Vaslav Nijinsky, Walter Pater, Fernando Pessoa, J. H. Prynne and Donald Winnicott, to name quite a few. Phillips loves to read and it is a real pleasure to follow him on part of his literary journey, across a Borgesian landscape which takes in the soaring heights of Shakespeare and the smaller byways of poets like Frederick Seidel.

Literature and psychoanalysis are both concerned to push language to its limits. Both involve a giving and a receiving of words, and hopefully some understanding and appreciation in the process. We might, as Phillips does, describe the analytic relationship as one between analyst and poet, but we might also consider other literary collaborations as, for example, between author and editor, or between correspondents. There are as many ways of metaphorically describing the analytic process as there are individuals who undertake it. Poetry is chosen by Phillips for the way the fullness and excesses of meaning are contained within strict forms, but he waves literature around not so much as a cure, more as a reflection of our own states of mind, as a kind of mirror 'hospitable to interpretation'. Phillips refers psychoanalysis back to the *poet's* couch, and shows very convincingly the ways in which talking and storytelling are vital to our wellbeing in what he calls 'group life'. To paraphrase him in a recent radio interview, through conversation and gossip we 'metabolise' each other; and his essays provide numerous demonstrations of the ways in which literature and its undernourished sibling, psychoanalysis, feed off one another. His writings do not merely describe the links between literature and psychoanalysis; they argue for recognition of the rich reciprocity between the two disciplines. Like the clever child, however, literature is held up for public approbation, while psychoanalysis, like the less talented half-sister, is more often than not found wanting and inarticulate.

There are occasions when Phillips' intellectual insights and psychological-mindedness come up hard against his aphoristic, popularising style. In his analysis of Herman Melville's short story 'Bartleby', for example, he fails (in the words of

James Wright) to 'say something humanly important instead of just showing off with language'. Phillips is not the first critic to see in 'Bartleby' a study of anorexia, but his observations betray a generalised reading of the tale and an insensitivity to Melville's highly crafted use of language. Comparing the character Bartleby with an anorexic fifteen-year old called Chloe who briefly came to him for therapy, Phillips prescribes self-sacrifice and dissociation as ways of holding the suffering of one who deprives herself of food. But in Melville's story, we are shown the complicated effects of Bartleby's *preferring not to* on a range of other characters, some of whom fast and binge, others of whom are blatantly epicurean, while the lawyer-narrator experiences a panoply of feelings towards his clerk. The paradoxical condition of anorexia as evoked in 'Bartleby' is radically simplified by Phillips' glib interpretation. Phillips candidly declares his inexperience in treating what he calls 'card-carrying anorexics' (whatever or whoever they are) and goes on to say, rather clumsily, that working with them 'is a graveyard for the more zealous forms of psychoanalytic optimism'. We are reminded at this point of the worst kind of journalism, which never writes to its subject, but always about its subject to an ignorant readership. Moments like this are disappointing, to say the least.

As Phillips says, assisting language to create the fullest meaning possible must be the preoccupation of all, whether we are good, good-enough or indifferent poets of life. And he persuades us with flair and wit to read for our lives. Language must be crafted to meet the target of exquisite expression, and we can only concur with Phillips' earlier recommendation that psychoanalysis 'needs more good sentences' (including that one?). Reading these essays is generally a pleasure, but we must be vigilant in metabolising the slick and ready summaries of what are complex, delicate issues, and aware of the shifting perspectives and tones adopted by Phillips. With these provisos in mind, *Promises, Promises* is a thought-provoking series of meditations on the undeniable and immense good that may come of reading, writing and talking.

American ways

Ludovic Hunter-Tilney

Greil Marcus, *Double Trouble: Bill Clinton and Elvis Presley in a Land of No Alternatives* Faber, £9.99

The most requested item from the National Archives in the United States isn't a copy of the Declaration of Independence or the Bill of Rights or any other glorious historical document. Instead it's a photograph of two men shaking hands: Elvis Presley and Richard Nixon, posing for the camera and clasping palms during the singer's visit to the White House in 1970.

In retrospect this meeting seems so strange that it might have been hallucinated by the American public. In fact it was prompted by a letter Presley sent pleading to be made a Federal agent-at-large – so that he could do his bit to help save society from deviants, degenerates and radicals. 'The drug culture, the hippie elements, the SDS, Black Panthers, etc. do not consider me as their enemy or as they call it the establishment,' he explained. 'I call it American and I love it.' But he wasn't simply a concerned patriot; Elvis was qualified for the job, as he went on to point out: 'I have done an in-depth study of drug abuse and Communist brainwashing techniques and I am right in the middle of the whole thing where I can and will do the most good.'

Of course there was a terrible irony here: Presley's in-depth study of drug abuse extended to his having first-hand experience of the problem, via the vast pharmacopoeia of pills to which he became hopelessly addicted. But Nixon wasn't to know this, and – besides – the president was in the midst of prosecuting a high profile war against drugs, one which had targeted pop music in particular. So the King was a useful ally; Nixon gladly accepted his gifts (family snaps, a World War II-era Colt 45 pistol) and made him an honorary narcotics agent. It was a role Presley took seriously: according to one writer, he 'even planned to have a local [heroin] dealer eliminated in *Death Wish* style'. No doubt Nixon would have approved.

What gives this encounter, over thirty years later, its ongoing allure? It could

be that the combination of the charismatic singer and the crooked, creepy-looking president tells us something about the way people continue to imagine Presley – namely that there is a Good Elvis and a Bad Elvis – and that both are drawn out by Nixon's corrupting presence in the same photo frame. As rock critic Greil Marcus puts it, citing Presley's desire to become a narcotics officer: 'Elvis contained multitudes; he contradicted himself every time he opened his mouth or took a step'. Slender, young Elvis or fat, drug-addled Elvis, reactionary Elvis or revolutionary Elvis, and so on: there's a Presley to suit almost any mood or metaphor. According to Marcus, he's nothing less than 'the country's most extreme embodiment of possibility and disruption, of renewal and defeat'.

This protean significance was a topic partly explored by Marcus in his superb first book, *Mystery Train*, and subsequently at greater length in *Dead Elvis*. He returns to the theme in *Double Trouble*, a collection bringing together articles written for magazines and newspapers between 1992 and 2000, loosely grouped around the theme of Elvis and his influence on American politics. But the Nixon-Presley love-in barely gets a mention in this book, for Marcus is fascinated by another president, whom he believes to have had a much more meaningful relationship with the King: Bill Clinton.

The Elvis-Clinton identification was originally made during the 1992 election campaign. Both white, male, southern, from poor backgrounds, the pair's similarities were used as a convenient way of tagging an initially unknown politician from Arkansas. Clinton was happy to encourage it, and the comparison soon became a media cliché. Even George Bush joined in, making laboured jibes about his rival's 'Elvis economics'. ('America will be checking into the "Heartbreak Hotel"', elaborated the doomed then-president.)

In one of the book's best pieces, 'Bill Clinton: Hound Dog or Teddy Bear?', Marcus reveals the moment when he thinks this Elvis connection truly flared into life. The occasion was Clinton's appearance on the Arsenio Hall chat show in June 1992, a time when he appeared to be slipping out of the electoral race, thus having nothing left to lose. Wearing dark glasses and toting his saxophone, he blew a version of 'Heartbreak Hotel', seeming – in Marcus's words – 'as if to say, *All right. Who cares. Let's rip it up*'. 'The spirit of freedom in Elvis's best music is a freedom of self-discovery,' Marcus adds: 'this night, Clinton accepted the gift, or seized it'.

But his Presleyan epiphany was short-lived. Having won the election, Clinton

put his saxophone away and made a leaden-footed entry into the actual business of government; 'the Elvis identification vanished when his mastery as a campaigner could not translate into mastery as a chief executive'. The kinship remained dormant, until suddenly resurfacing mid-way through Clinton's second term – activated by his affair with Monica Lewinsky and the subsequent attempt to impeach him.

Now, however, it was as if he'd added Bad Elvis to his repertoire: critics excoriated his vulgarity and tut-tutted about his behaviour. 'Both Elvis Presley and Bill Clinton reaped all the awards available in American society except one,' claims Marcus: 'moral citizenship'. Instead they remain yardsticks by which Americans judge that quality: 'Our attraction to both is inseparable from our need to prove to ourselves that we are different from them – to prove that if we will never rise so high, we would never sink so low'. In such a way Presley and Clinton personify 'their country's most unresolved notions of what it means to be good, true, and beautiful – and evil, false, and ugly'.

Alongside the various essays exploring the development of this *doppelgänger* effect are articles about other, often unrelated, aspects of American popular culture in the 1990s. Their quality is variable: Bob Dylan's esoteric career trajectory through the decade receives suitably gnomic attention; an obscure film called *Pleasantville* inspires insightful comments about how the 1950s ('the haunted house of the American century') are remembered in the US; and contemporary performers – especially grunge icon Kurt Cobain – propel Marcus down some fairly verbose avenues. Making sense of his allusive prose on such occasions can be like scrabbling through air – although thankfully, when not indulging in these linguistic riffs he shows a great knack for turning out pithy, punchy phrases.

Winding through his scattershot reflections is a sense that politics and popular culture have collided irrevocably. 'Today the pop market is made,' he states: 'it's cut up like a kiddie-toy version of the electoral market, with stars and genres targeted like politicians' soundbites'. And the process works the other way too, for – post-Ronald Reagan, aka the Great Communicator – 'a president is now powerful politically to the extent that he is real culturally'. So, back again to Clinton and Presley: 'Bill Clinton is a man able to effortlessly convince whoever is speaking to him that it is only that person's voice he hears – just as Elvis convinced so many that, from a hundred rows away, he was singing only to them.'

But if Clinton the politician was an embodiment of Presley the performer, then did his policies live up to Elvis's legacy – namely his songs, at least the earlier ones, in which the young singer made visible, yet also harmonised, various deep divisions in post-war American life – such as those to do with geography, race, class and sex? Yes, responds Marcus, Clinton was indeed a worthy successor:

> Just as, in the mid-'50s, Elvis Presley revealed one America to another – revealed America to itself, and in so doing made the country a bigger place than it ever was before – I think many people feel at home in the United States, feel part of it, feel they have to make no argument to justify that feeling, who did not feel the same before Clinton was president.

So here's the answer to a question Neil Young once phrased in a song title: 'Are You Ready for the Country?'. The people who twice voted Clinton to the White House were ready, but the political and social establishment in Washington – which Marcus condemns for being snobbish and elitist – wasn't. And here also is an answer to those who criticise Clinton for turning politics into a branch of the entertainment industry – well, Marcus seems to imply, if that's the case then he shared with the best entertainers (i.e. Elvis) an ability to positively transform the world around him. And that surely is no mean thing to do.

But as Clinton shuffles off into what one assumes will be, *pace* Presley, his Las Vegas years (book-writing, lecture tours, etc), he leaves behind a country fissured along all manner of lines. Half of those who can don't vote; the rest fall virtually 50-50 into opposing political camps. The prison population is at an all-time high; the chasm between rich and poor has widened. And so the list goes on, providing a disquieting undercurrent to Marcus's eulogy of Clinton as a true, inclusive American patriot. You can only reach such an upbeat conclusion by contrasting him (as Marcus does) with the boot-quaking ghastliness of his Republican opponents – who, after all, tried to hound an elected president from office. A fair comparison, then; yet making it turns the Clinton-as-Elvis phenomenon, about which Marcus otherwise writes so interestingly, into something of a red herring. For he can only bring out Clinton's goodness by holding up something irredeemably worse, a process in which twinship with Elvis doesn't feature at all. But perhaps, with Presley's visit to the Oval Office in mind, we could call it by another name: the Nixon effect.