

Review of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy and its BBC adaptation

Roger Kingdon
December 2019 – January 2023

Abbreviations

Book/adaptation:

- NL Philip Pullman, *Northern Lights* (1995), 2005 edition
TSK Philip Pullman, *The Subtle Knife* (1997), 2005 edition
TAS Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass* (2000), 2005 edition
HDM *His Dark Materials* BBC adaptation (s1 2019, s2 2020, s3 2022)
snem HDM series *n* {1-3} episode *m* {1-8}

Parallel world/universe:

- CW Cittàgazze World
DW Dæmon World
EW Earth World
HR Republic of Heaven
LD Land of the Dead
MW Mulefa World
OW Other World(s) (visited *en route* between the main worlds)

Contents

1. Notes made after watching HDM s1, Dec 2019
2. Notes made while watching HDM s2, Nov-Dec 2020
3. Notes made while watching HDM s3, Dec 2022
4. Notes made while reading NL, Jan 2023
5. Notes made while reading TSK, Jan 2023
6. Notes made while reading TAS, Jan 2023
7. Review summary, Jan 2023

In each case quotations from the subject matter are delimited using < >, while quotations from elsewhere are delimited using ‘ ’ or “ ”.

If all you want is a brief summary then go directly to section 7 at the end.

References

References to various Word (*.doc) documents are for my own use (if ever I'd need to trace back my thought processes), so they can be safely ignored with no loss of information.

Hyperlink references to other web pages may not work just by clicking on them, but if their URLs are copied-and-pasted into the browser address box then they should connect as intended.

1. Notes made after watching HDM s1, Dec 2019

[Email to Arjun, 25/12/19, copied from PullmanTalk.doc]

Dear Arjun,

On Monday I watched the first four episodes of *His Dark Materials*, and yesterday I watched the remaining four episodes. I found it compelling, with great acting and storytelling, and amazing CGI: how the animals all appeared so lifelike is truly magical. And I found myself believing in/caring for the principal characters, which is a feeling I never got from the film version. (Of course this is one of the potential benefits of having a series with a long running time, but some films achieve it, *e.g.* *Paddington* and *Paddington 2*, while some series fail to achieve it, *e.g.* the recent BBC *War of the Worlds*.) On this occasion it looks as if there's going to be a second series, which I fear will be a great disappointment, for two related reasons:

(1) One of the reasons this adaptation worked for me was that it stuck closely to the book (and the beginning of the second book). This will encourage the producers to do the same for subsequent series, but in my view that would be disastrous. When I read the books I was taken along by *Northern Lights*, disappointed by *The Subtle Knife*, and ceased caring during *The Amber Spyglass*. In my view whatever happens in the second and third books should be combined into a single series, and rewritten to make a better story. If the second series is based just on the second book, and a third series is inevitable, then I really do fear the worst.

(2) Pullman's 'universe', with dæmons and multiple parallel worlds, is fascinating and exciting to explore on the experiential/sensorial level, but if one digs too deep then one quickly unearths its absurdities and self-contradictions, and consequently one is no longer able to suspend disbelief. In my case this 'crisis of disbelief' happens about midway through the second book. Maybe this is because I have a particular dislike for the hypothesis put forward by one or two physicists that there are an infinite number of parallel universes. But maybe it's because Pullman isn't such a good storyteller. Having introduced these potent and controversial ideas he simply can't interpret them in a way that tells a good story. And again by a 'good story' I mean one in which I care about the characters and what happens to them.

It's instructive to compare Pullman's universe with other imaginary worlds. The usual comparator is C S Lewis's *Narnia* stories, but in my view this is not so interesting, as they are both based on Christian theology (with which I am familiar, and therefore contemptuous). A more novel comparison is with David Mitchell's books that explore reincarnation, in particular, *Ghostwritten*, *Cloud Atlas*, and *The Bone Clocks*. That is, Mitchell's universe is based on ideas more commonly found in the East, in particular, in Hinduism. Using the same criterion of 'caring about the characters', how does Mitchell compare? For me, *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas* are brilliant, but *The Bone Clocks* is a crashing disappointment, for much the same reasons as in (2) above. Thus I prefer Mitchell's storytelling and/or universe to Pullman's, but in both cases disappointment awaits, sooner or later. The other obvious comparison is with J K Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, which for me is superb throughout: which just goes to show how lucky you were to be growing up (and to be of roughly the same age as HP) as the books were being written and published!

What did you think of *His Dark Materials*?

All my love,

Dad xxxxx

2. Notes made while watching HDM s2, Nov-Dec 2020

s2e1 Lyra's introspection

What Lyra wishes to know from the alethiometer	Mode	IDEAL
<I'd ask if my mother is still following me>	Contingency planning	Theorist
<Who my father was>	Existential orientation	Idealist
<What this place is>	Curiosity	Empiricist
<If Roger would forgive me>	Moral compass	Conformist
<What should I do now>	Reactive urge	Activist

None of this appears in TSK.

s2e4 John Parry's philosophy

Parry: <I stepped out of my world many years ago, left them behind: my wife, my son. I thought my work was more important. Such a fool! For years I tried to get back to them, but the way I came had disappeared. I became a scholar and a shaman to find a way, but it seems my world is closed for me. But there were other doorways, other discoveries to be made. Imagine my astonishment to learn that part of my nature is female, bird-formed, beautiful!>

Scoresby: <So you've given up?>

Parry: <Not given up, just made peace – with my limitations. If I want to be a father that's good, proper now, I need to leave a world behind me for him where he's able to think for himself, where he's free. That's why I need to help Asriel.>

The latter statement is what I meant by 'Will's Dad's herd-quitting Stoicism' (PullmanTalk.doc, text to Arjun, 29/11/20). I don't recall Parry saying this, or anything like it, in TSK. If he did then clearly I've not read the book with sufficient care and I should give it another go. In any case it's just the kind of rewriting that I was felt was needed (and was fearing wouldn't be done), see my review of HDM series 1 (PullmanTalk.doc, email to Arjun, 25/12/19).

Later, having read TSK: Parry's earlier comments are in the book, but not his later comments reflecting his 'herd-quitting Stoicism'. This is one of several indications that Pullman is simply not interested in the characters that he's created. As soon as stock supporting characters have played their part in advancing the plot they're marginalised (Will's mother, Angelica, Boreal) or killed-off (Paradisi, Scoresby, Parry) with no second thought. In TSK we don't get to know the thoughts or feelings of anyone other than Lyra and Will, whereas HDM touches on the back stories of Coulter and Scoresby, and even of minor characters such as Boreal, MacPhail and Lanselius. Finally, and critically, while in TSK even Lyra and Will rarely express or try to work through their feelings, in HDM Lyra clearly evinces grief and remorse over Roger's death (s2e1), and is horrified that in being violent and angry she is behaving exactly like her mother (s2e5), while Will keeps a watch on both Lyra and his mother in a way that shows true care and consideration. HDM's scriptwriter clearly cares about all of the characters, to the extent that I find them believable, and can empathise with them. That is, I've been drawn into caring for them too, which is something that I simply couldn't do from just reading the book. And this is my definition of a 'good story', see PullmanTalk.doc, email to Arjun, 25/12/19. (Interestingly, now that I'm watching HDM, I'm finding it much easier and more enjoyable to read TSK. But that doesn't make Pullman a good storyteller all-of-a-sudden. On the contrary, it shows how much better his books would've been if only he'd cared about his characters.)

Having seen s2e1-s2e4

Question: If angels are made of Dust (= spirit, s2e4), what are Spectres made of? My answer: Pullman's basic ontology is taken from Christianity, which I guess would see both angels and Spectres as comprising disembodied souls. But then Pullman complicates matters by setting up one world, Lyra's, in which people have dæmons (= embodied souls). I suspect that this generates all sorts of contradictions, which simply wouldn't arise in Christian theology (or for me, since one of my five 'models of the soul' is a ghost, see ideas4.doc 9/11/20). And I suspect that this is the reason Pullman has introduced further contrivances, such as a distinction between Spectres and ghosts, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Races_and_creatures_in_His_Dark_Materials#Spectres.

s2e5 dialogue

Zoe: <You aren't going back to the convent, are you?>

Mary: <No! You were right though, about my life. Something happened at work. It means taking time away from my research.>

Zoe: <Finally! You really need a break. Taking some time is a great idea. We have friends with a cottage in Devon?>

Mary: <Um ... I was considering somewhere a little bit further than Devon ...>

Zoe: <Abroad?>

Mary: <I might just see where life takes me. I don't know yet.>

I love the reference to "a cottage in Devon"! Naturally, none of this appears in TSK.

Relevant extract from WritingIdeas.doc, 8/12/20

On 20/5/12 I asked, "how can I create a self-contained separate world that frames the story in a convincing way, without that world becoming contrived or alien or simply too-difficult-and-boring to describe? C S Lewis used a wardrobe, J K Rowling used a train, Philip Pullman used a subtle knife, Daphne du Maurier used drugs ...", and I found an answer, "I could go into the computer!" Then on 9/12/14 I declared, "I'm thinking of writing a fictional adventure", but concluded, "On reflection I find myself returning to the idea of 20/5/12, above. But I bet someone has done this already!" Now, watching *His Dark Materials* has prompted me to revisit this topic, and I realise that the *Jumanji* films implement my intended transition device, firstly through a board game (1995), and later through a computer video game (2017, 2019); and they do this in a way that I find very satisfying. Another plausible transition mechanism is writing or storytelling, e.g. *Inkheart*; or, for that matter, *The Seven Vales*, which I wrote before *Northern Lights* came out!

Having seen s2e1-s2e6

TSK/HDM s2 has strong similarities with *The Two Towers*/LotR e2. It has an overburdened and miserable object-bearer (Will, Frodo); a steadfast supporter/cheerleader (Lyra, Sam); a twin antagonist (The Authority and the Magisterium, Sauron and Saruman); a no-nonsense hero (Lee Scoresby, Aragorn); a wise mystic who never really dies (John Parry, Gandalf); a perpetually-cheerful good-old-Oirish-idiot who provides light relief (Mary Malone, Pip and Merry); a mysterious-but-sinister conflicted character with a weird face who may be both good and bad (Mrs Coulter, Gollum); and an aggrieved-and-bereaved younger sibling with a weird face who is pretty useless at practical things like fixing-up a lynch-mob or map-reading (Angelica, Faramir). This explains a lot! Both TSK and *The Two Towers* are intermediate bridging tomes that move the pieces on the board to where they can have a big fight at the end. Of themselves they have little dramatic development and merely portray one damn thing after another, like in *Gulliver's Travels*. HDM is much better than TSK because of its empathetic and moving characterisation (e.g. it even portrays Angelica's sister asking Mary for a hug), but both are handicapped by Will's unrelenting miserablism. That's not the fault of the script, or the actor, it's the fault of the story arc. And that's why I have difficulty reading TSK, and why I've never been able to read LotR (despite several attempts). It's not good storytelling; and in this respect the absurdity of Pullman's many-worlds universe is of secondary significance. Again, see PullmanTalk.doc, email to Arjun, 25/12/19.

Having seen all of s2

Like s1, s2 is faithful to the book in terms of its final outcomes. However, it differs from the book in a number of specific but important ways. In particular, Parry has a decent conversation with Will, and dies protecting his son rather than in the meaningless fashion portrayed in the book. Because of this and similar small adjustments Parry's death is much more moving and significant in HDM than in TSK. Nevertheless there remain two major problems in the book which can't be hidden by sympathetic characterisation or small changes to the action: (i) Episodic plot evolution, 'one damn thing after another', with several parallel storylines just left hanging at the end; (ii) Christian theology, culminating in the absurd revelation that Lyra is the new Eve, such that we are now in pure fantasy territory, like in *The Matrix* sequels. Accordingly, while my 25/12/19 prediction that this second series "will be a great disappointment" is wide of the mark, the entire burden of resolving these flaws now rests on the adaptation of TAS. I predict that it can't be done without radical alterations to key parts of the story. I guess we'll find out!

IDEAL learning style mapping based on HDM s1-2 and my recollection of the books

[Note added Jan 2023: This mapping isn't particularly helpful, as subsequently I've altered it considerably, but I've left it in for completeness.]

Character	IDEAL learning style		
	Major	Minor	Disposition
Lyra Belacqua	Empiricist		Light
Will Parry	Empiricist	Theorist	Light
The Authority	Idealist		Dark
Lord Asriel	Idealist	Activist	Dark
Iorek Byrnison	Activist		Light
Lee Scoresby	Activist	Empiricist	Light
Marisa Coulter	Activist	Idealist	Dark
Lord Boreal	Activist	Conformist	Dark
Magisterium	Conformist		Dark
Metatron	Conformist	Activist	Dark
Mary Malone	Theorist	Empiricist	Light
John Parry	Theorist		Light

3. Notes made while watching HDM s3, Dec 2022

[Having re-watched s1 and s2 in sequence, but not yet re-read the books]

Characters and worlds

In s3 there are five main characters: **Lyra** Belacqua; **Will** Parry; Lord **Asriel** Belacqua; Mrs **Marisa** Coulter; Dr **Mary** Malone.

s3 supporting cast: MacPhail; Gomez; Fra Pavel; Alarbus; Metatron; Baruch; Balthamos; Ogunwe; Roke; Iorek Byrnison; Ruta Skadi; Serafina Pekkala; Roger.

Principal worlds:

- Lyra, Asriel, and Marisa come from DW;
- Will and Mary come from EW;
- Commander Ogunwe comes from a region which appears to be inland from Cittàgazze (CW);
- Asriel's base is in HR;
- Mary ends up in MW;
- Lyra and Will visit LD.

With particular reference to the five classic storytelling archetypes†, over the course of HDM s1-s3 the five main characters of s3 develop as follows:

- Lyra goes from Empiricist (s1) to Activist (s2) to Idealist (s3);
- Will goes from Conformist (s2) to Theorist (s3);
- Asriel goes from Idealist (s1) to Activist (s3);
- Marisa goes from Theorist (s1) to Conformist (s3);
- Mary goes from Empiricist (s2) to Conformist (s3).

These transitions modify/refine my earlier IDEAL mapping. It remains to be seen whether the same transitions can be detected in the books. Indeed this would be a good test of Pullman's skill as a storyteller (of which I remain unconvinced). Accordingly I've ordered the trilogy from Amazon.

† See Review05.pdf, now on my website at <http://www.idealectic.com/idealectic/Review05.pdf>.

Having seen s3e1-s3e6

s3e1: Ogunwe has a dæmon in TAS p.208 (=> DW), but not in HDM (=> CW).

s3e1: Ama lives in DW, in the Himalayas in TAS, but on Fair Isle in HDM.

s3e2: Mary walks inland from Cittàgazze and arrives in Ogunwe's land without noticeably stepping through any windows (=> CW).

s3e3: Mary steps through a window into what turns out to be MW. It's unclear how the window was made, or who made it.

Mary seems laughably simple and naïve. (But then so was the ant building the bridge to Lanka.) She appears to be the only ordinary undamaged soul, and as a result she is unusual in her lack of hate and her degree of compassion. It's unclear whether her I Ching sticks are just for navigation, or whether they also open windows between worlds.

Asriel is full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse. It appears that his <intention craft> can take him between worlds.

HDM is notable for its compassion for all creatures. But I haven't detected the same compassion in any of the books, which seem heartless in comparison. One test of this criticism – and of my prejudice/suspension of disbelief – will be whether one of the cats that follow Will also turns out to be his dæmon. I just can't remember whether or not this happens in TAS.

It feels as if there are as many plot holes as there are windows between worlds! In particular:

- If there are infinite worlds – universes, rather – then any one of them will be vanishingly insignificant. So how come the story is restricted to just a small handful of them? How does Will always find the world he’s looking for? Conversely, having found the right world, how is it that sometimes he isn’t in precisely the right location? And however do Lyra and Will find Roger and Scoresby amongst the uncountably many inhabitants of LD?
- How come all the worlds have Earthlike characteristics, *e.g.* with similar gravity, terrain, and atmosphere, and that their humanoid inhabitants all speak English?
- Often it’s never entirely clear which world we’re in, or how the assembled characters got there; and this presents a major challenge to the suspension of disbelief. (Compare *Inception*, which identifies each ‘world’ using a variety of easily-recognisable cues, such as music, terrain, climate, personnel, equipment, and dialogue, *e.g.* Ariadne’s clever prompt, “Whose subconscious are we going through?”)

Having seen all of s3

s3e7: Indeed, Will’s dæmon is a cat; but was it one of those that followed him in EW and/or CW?
s3e8, Mary’s philosophy: <We have the stupid idea as humans that we’re the pinnacle of creation>; <When you feel that way, you have to grab it>; <Is that really all it took? Something so small and ordinary?>. Is any of this from TAS? This is another test of the book; and of me.

Concluding thoughts on HDM s1-s3

It’s easy to see how Pullman’s ‘universe’ can be a challenge to Christians, with its reinterpretations of souls as dæmons, spirit as Dust, sin as love, and heresy as consciousness. It’s less of a challenge to Bahais, who see the afterlife as a continuum of states rather than heaven-or-hell, but still they have theological difficulties with the nature of the soul, and practical difficulties with their handling of free thinkers. And to me it’s no challenge at all, since I consider that in my various writings (in particular, *How to Make a Mind, My Philosophy*, and its five-year review) I’ve established beyond reasonable doubt the case against the existence of souls, and spirit, and multiple worlds. Accordingly I’ve felt free to experience and judge HDM simply on aesthetic grounds, that is, according to my definition of a ‘good story’ as ‘one in which I care about the characters and what happens to them.’ And by that measure it gets 10/10: I was ‘emotionally labile’ (*i.e.* wept like a baby) throughout much of e5-e8. Indeed, watching and analysing HDM has inspired my ideas5.doc entry of 25/12/22, “The good life comes to those who embrace their suspension of disbelief.” Whether I feel the same way on re-reading the books remains to be seen. As I found with TSK, it may be that my seeing its HDM adaptation vastly improves my experience of TAS. I came to a similar conclusion on re-reading *Nostromo*, see *NostromoNotes2022.doc*. I’m not convinced that in writing his story Pullman cared about his characters anything as much as Conrad cared about his; but until I’ve re-read the books I’ll withhold judgment on that one. One thing I will be looking out for is Mary’s ‘philosophy’ (as expressed in s3e8, see above quotes). This is a two-edged sword: on the one hand, her incisive verdict that <We have the stupid idea as humans that we’re the pinnacle of creation> is spot-on; on the other hand, it’s directly contradicted by her assigned role in MW, where she’s nothing more than a sci-fi missionary, Taking Boldly Up The White Man’s Burden Across The Multiverse. But just because she’s a lesbian lapsed nun, that don’t make it right! Indeed, hers is an utterly immoral role: and it happens to be at the very core of HDM; and Pullman’s trilogy; and monotheistic religion; and modern Western society.

4. Notes made while reading NL, Jan 2023

Narrative perspectives

The narrative is told in the third person by a non-intrusive and omniscient storyteller, with frequent reference to Lyra's inner perspective, except for these few scenes in which she does not appear:

pp.31-33: A conversation between the Master and the Librarian of Jordan College.

pp.40-46: The abduction of children by Marisa and other Gobblers.

pp.175-176: A conversation between Farder Coram and Dr Lanselius.

Read-through quotes and notes

p.37: <That was Lyra's world and her delight. She was a coarse and greedy little savage, for the most part. But she always had a dim sense that it wasn't her whole world; that part of her also belonged in the grandeur and ritual of Jordan College; and that somewhere in her life there was a connection with the high world of politics represented by Lord Asriel.>

Lyra is a noble savage (Empiricist).

pp.44-45: <They had never seen a lady like this; she was so gracious and sweet and kind that they felt they hardly deserved their good luck, and whatever she asked, they'd give it gladly so as to stay in her presence a little longer. ... The lady stood on the jetty and waved till she could see their faces no more. | Then she turned back inside, with the golden monkey nestled in her breast, and threw the little bundle of letters into the furnace before leaving the way she had come.>

Marisa is clever, deceitful, and completely untrustworthy (Dark Theorist).

p.115: <He wore a plain canvas jacket and a checked shirt, like many gyptian men; there was nothing to mark him out but the air of strength and authority he had. Lyra recognized it: Uncle Asriel had it, and so did the Master of Jordan.>

Lord Faa, Lord Asriel, and the Master of Jordan each have manifest authority (Idealist).

pp.128-129, Lord Faa: <I see the Master as a man having terrible choices to make; whatever he chooses will do harm; but maybe if he does the right thing, a little less harm will come about than if he chooses wrong. God preserve me from having to make that sort of choice.>

Relative to one another, the Master is a conflicted Conformist/Theorist (like Angus McBadger, "Well I ... err ..."), while Lord Faa is an Activist ('Just Do It').

p.137, Lord Faa: <Nicholas Rokeby, I'm a-putting you in charge of finding a vessel, and commanding her once we sail. Adam Stefanski, I want you to take charge of the arms and munitions, and command the fighting. Roger van Poppel, you look to all the other stores, from food to cold-weather clothing. Simon Hartmann, you be treasurer, and account to us all for a proper apportionment of our gold. Benjamin de Ruyter, I want you to take charge of spying.>

Their IDEAL mapping works nicely: {Empiricist = Roger van Poppel, procuring; Idealist = Nicholas Rokeby, commanding; Activist = Adam Stefanski, fighting; Conformist = Simon Hartmann, accounting; Theorist = Benjamin de Ruyter, spying}.

p.167, Lyra and Able-Seaman Jerry: <"Why do dæmons have to settle?" Lyra said. "I want Pantalaimon to be able to change for ever. So does he." | "Ah, they always have settled, and they always will. That's part of growing up. There'll come a time when you'll be tired of his changing about, and you'll want a settled kind of form for him." | "I never will!" | "Oh, you will. You'll want to grow up like all the other girls. Anyway, there's compensations for a settled form." | "What are they?" | "Knowing what kind of person you are. Take old Belisaria. She's a seagull, and that means I'm a kind of seagull too. I'm not grand and splendid nor beautiful, but I'm a tough old thing and I can survive anywhere and always find a bit of food and company. That's worth knowing, that is.>

And when your dæmon settles, you'll know the sort of person you are." | "But suppose your dæmon settles in a shape you don't like?" | "Well, then, you're discontented, en't you? There's plenty of folk as'd like to have a lion as a dæmon and they end up with a poodle. And till they learn to be satisfied with what they are, they're going to be fretful about it. Waste of feeling, that is." | But it didn't seem to Lyra that she would ever grow up.>

This is a beautifully clear and succinct way of describing an important phase of life.

p.175, Dr Lanselius: <The witches have talked about this child for centuries past ... Because they live so close to the place where the veil between the worlds is thin, they hear immortal whispers from time to time, in the voices of those beings who pass between the worlds. And they have spoken of a child such as this, who has a great destiny that can only be fulfilled elsewhere – not in this world, but far beyond. Without this child, we shall all die. So the witches say. But she must fulfil this destiny in ignorance of what she is doing, because only in her ignorance can we be saved.>

Although she cannot know it, this is Lyra's destiny as the saviour, in effect the next manifestation of God, the promised return of 'The dying and rising king' (Rebirth, Idealist).

p.187, Kaisa: <Witches have known of the other worlds for thousands of years. You can see them sometimes in the Northern Lights. They aren't part of this universe at all; even the furthest stars are part of this universe, but the lights show us a different universe entirely. Not further away, but interpenetrating with this one. Here, on this deck, millions of other universes exist, unaware of one another...>

Which to me is totally unbelievable; but which I'll tolerate just as long as it doesn't get in the way of what otherwise is shaping up to be a 'good story'.

p.191: <A bridge between two worlds... This was far more splendid than anything she could have hoped for! And only her great father could have conceived it. As soon as they had rescued the children, she would go to Svalbard with the bear and take Lord Asriel the alethiometer, and use it to help set him free; and they'd build the bridge together, and be the first across...>

Lyra's self-image as the indomitable saviour (Activist) of her visionary father (Idealist).

p.226, Lyra and Iorek Byrnison: <"I bet you could catch bullets," she said, and threw the stick away. "How do you *do* that?" | "By not being human," he said. "That's why you could never trick a bear. We see tricks and deceit as plain as arms and legs. We can see in a way humans have forgotten. But you know about this; you can understand the symbol-reader." | "That en't the same, is it?" she said. She was more nervous of the bear now than when she had seen his anger. | "It is the same," he said. "Adults can't read it, as I understand. As I am to human fighters, so you are to adults with the symbol-reader." | "Yes, I suppose," she said, puzzling and unwilling. "Does that mean I'll forget how to do it when I grow up?" | "Who knows? I have never seen a symbol-reader, nor anyone who could read them. Perhaps you are different from others.">

In its own narrow domain, honed instinct (System 1) will always outperform systematic planning (System 2). And in our teenage years we often lose much of the former precise skill-set while developing the latter general-purpose capability. It's all part of the human condition!

p.247: <It wasn't Lyra's way to brood; she was a sanguine and practical child, and besides, she wasn't imaginative. No one with much imagination would have thought seriously that it was possible to come all this way and rescue her friend Roger; or, having thought it, an imaginative child would immediately have come up with several ways in which it was impossible. Being a practised liar doesn't mean you have a powerful imagination. Many good liars have no imagination at all; it's that which gives their lies such wide-eyed conviction.>

But this duality (of sanguine and practical versus imaginative and risk-averse) is contradicted by Lyra's careful planning which led to her procurement of the spy-fly in the fake alethiometer tin, which indeed shows that her imagination is in excellent health and perfectly-suited to the occasion. I don't think it's particularly helpful to categorise people using such crude dualisms; which is one of the reasons I've formulated *five* IDEAL learning styles.

p.332: <The idea hovered and shimmered delicately, like a soap bubble, and she dared not even look at it directly, in case it burst. But she was familiar with the way of ideas, and she let it shimmer, looking away, thinking about something else.>

This is what I've called 'de-focusing', described in *How to Make a Mind* (HMM) as a "sudden subconscious instinct, just when the focused analytical part of my mind was away with the vortices" (p.35), and as the "phenomenon of relaxation-induced inventiveness ... which I suppose is the result of my Systems 1 and 2 working together without stress-induced conflict" (p.65). In any case it shows that Lyra is capable of the kind of frame-breaking original thinking that is the hallmark of System 2 cognition.

p.337, Lyra to Iofur Raknison: <I *can* become your dæmon ... but only if you defeat Iorek Byrnison in single combat. Then his strength will flow into you, and my mind will flow into yours, and we'll be like one person, thinking each other's thoughts; and you can send me miles away to spy for you, or keep me here by your side, whichever you like. And I'd help you to lead the bears to capture Bolvangar, if you like, and make them create more dæmons for your favourite bears; or if you'd rather be the only bear with a dæmon, we could destroy Bolvangar for ever. We could do anything, Iofur Raknison, you and me together!>

This sounds like something straight out of *The Golden Bough*. Marvellous stuff!

p.355, Lyra and the bears: <It turned out that Iofur Raknison's dominance over them had been like a spell. Some of them put it down to the influence of Mrs Coulter, who had visited him before Iorek's exile, though Iorek had not known about it, and given Iofur various presents. | "She gave him a drug," said one bear, "which he fed secretly to Hjalmur Hjalmurson, and made him forget himself." | Hjalmur Hjalmurson, Lyra gathered, was the bear whom Iorek had killed, and whose death had brought about his exile. So Mrs Coulter was behind that!>

Pullman's meticulous plot-construction appears to be completely watertight.

pp.369-370, Pullman's amendments to Genesis chapter 3, including references to the dæmons of Adam and Eve, are masterful, as is Asriel's summary: <And that was how sin came into the world, ... sin and shame and death. It came the moment their dæmons became fixed.>

p.375, Asriel and Lyra: <"You saw Dust pouring into this world from the Aurora. You've seen that city yourself. If light can cross the barrier between the universes, if Dust can, if we can see that city, then we can build a bridge and cross. It needs a phenomenal burst of energy. But I can do it.

Somewhere out there is the origin of all the Dust, all the death, the sin, the misery, the destructiveness in the world. Human beings can't see anything without wanting to destroy it, Lyra. *That's* original sin. And I'm going to destroy it. Death is going to die." ... He stood up, and so did his dæmon, proud and beautiful and deadly. Lyra sat still. She was afraid of her father, and she admired him profoundly, and she thought he was stark mad; but who was she to judge?>

Lyra is quite right: this is Idealist monomania taken to its self-contradictory extreme; and Asriel is <stark mad>. But in HDM s1e8 he says something quite different: "You've seen Dust pouring into this world from the Aurora. If light can cross that barrier between the universes, if Dust can, if we can see that city up there in the sky, then we can build a bridge and we can cross ... Let's go to the source. Let's ask what Dust is. Maybe we'll find out that it's something else entirely. Maybe we'll find out that it *is* sin. How d'you like the sound of that?" And this seems much more balanced.

p.378: <Now Lyra's head was full of a roar, as if she were trying to stifle some knowledge from her own consciousness. ... She had just realized what she'd done. | She had struggled all this way to bring something to Lord Asriel, thinking she knew what he wanted; and it wasn't the alethiometer after all. What he wanted was a child. | *She had brought him Roger.* ... Oh, the bitter anguish! She had thought she was *saving* Roger, and all the time she'd been diligently working to betray him...> Now I understand the 'betrayal'. Duh!

pp.393-394, Marisa's reasons for not going with Asriel to another world are ambiguous and unclear: <I daren't>; <No Asriel – my place is in this world, not that>; <We couldn't work together, you and I>; <If I don't come, you'll try to destroy me>. By comparison, in HDM s1e8 she says, "Our child is in this world, and my place is with her. That is not a lie. ... I want her with everything I have. This is your journey, not mine. Goodbye, Asriel."

pp.395-396, Lyra and her dæmon: <Pantalaimon went on: | "We've heard them all talk about Dust, and they're so afraid of it, and you know what? We believed them, even though we could see that what they were doing was wicked and evil and wrong... We thought Dust must be bad too, because they were grown-up and they said so. But what if it isn't? What if it's –" | She said breathlessly, "Yeah! What if it's really *good*..." | She looked at him and saw his green wildcat-eyes ablaze with her own excitement. She felt dizzy, as if the whole world were turning beneath her. | If Dust were a *good* thing... If it were to be sought and welcomed and cherished... | "We could look for it too, Pan!" she said. | That was what he wanted to hear.>

Lyra hits on a new perspective (Empiricist) and straightaway conceives her next mission (Activist). HDM s1e8 sets up a similar quest, but associates it with Lyra's sense of guilt. As Pantalaimon says to Roger's body, "We'll make sure your death is not in vain."

Summary observations and conclusions

Pros:

- 'Pullman's meticulous plot-construction' ensures that NL is very satisfying from a structural point-of-view. There is an intriguing exposition (introducing Lyra and her dæmon, and Asriel and his discoveries), exciting climax (Lyra's near-incision at Bolvangar), and devastating denouement (Roger's death and Asriel's bridge) which relates directly to the opening scenes. Thus https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dramatic_structure#Freytag's_pyramid is clearly involved, the story is fully-resolved, and by the usual rules of storytelling we're on familiar territory: we know when to gasp, when to cry, when to cheer, when to sigh, and when to laugh. Furthermore, I've always got a sharp eye for plot holes, and I can't find any here (unlike in the *Harry Potter* books, for example).
- Pullman clearly knows about archetypal characters ('Lyra is a noble savage'), classical mythology ('This sounds like something straight out of *The Golden Bough*'), and what I call 'the human condition' ('This is a beautifully clear and succinct way of describing an important phase of life'). Again, for me this presses the right buttons, gives me something to relate to, and enables me to understand and care about the characters even when they haven't been described in any detail.
- Pullman's innovations – dæmons, Dust, parallel worlds – are highly original, and it's very interesting to investigate their alternative explanations for commonplace experiences.

Cons:

- While I accept (as a classical trope) that Lyra must fulfil her destiny in ignorance of what she is doing, that doesn't mean that *we* (who have an omniscient storyteller to guide us) should also be kept in suspense. In relation to this, even before the beginning Pullman includes an obscure quote from *Paradise Lost*, presumably because it's the source of the phrase <*His dark materials*>, but nowhere in the text is this phrase or its source discussed or explained, which leaves me wondering why on earth it's there. Only after extensive background reading about

Pullman himself do I get any sense of its relevance – or *irrelevance*, given that he turns out to be a very ordinary sort of bloke – but should that extra effort be necessary? I think not.

- Take it from me, Pullman’s many-worlds cosmology is complete bollocks. Enough said.
- As I wrote to Arjun on 25/12/19, when I first read NL I was ‘taken along’, that is, I felt that the pros outweighed the cons. But now in comparison with HDM its weaknesses are more apparent. For example, NL makes Asriel out to be a complete nutter, and Marisa out to be an evil genius (or “one of the best villains in all literature,” to quote Terry Jones in the blurb), while in HDM both of these key characters are much more nuanced (see above, p.375 and pp.393-394 respectively). HDM takes similar care with the minor characters: for example, while in the book the journalist Adèle Starminster is introduced and dismissed almost mechanically, a bit like a NPC (non-player character) in a video game (thank you *Jumanji*), in HDM s1e2 her summary execution by Lord Boreal is genuinely shocking. Neither is this scene gratuitous, as it also establishes Boreal’s role and character, which in turn is exploited in s1 to introduce further characters who otherwise feature only in the later books (in particular, Will Parry, MacPhail, and Fra Pavel). By this means HDM does a much better job of setting up the overall story arc, as indeed is absolutely necessary if one is to follow it through twenty-three hour-long episodes; or, indeed, three weighty tomes.
- Also on 25/12/19 I compared ‘Pullman’s universe’ unfavourably with J K Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. The preceding analysis sharpens this criticism by highlighting Pullman’s failure in NL to set up an overall story arc, without which its sequels ‘have little dramatic development and merely portray one damn thing after another, like in *Gulliver’s Travels*’ (to quote my earlier argument likening TSK/HDM s2 to *The Two Towers/LotR e2*). In comparison, Rowling’s brilliant device of making each story in her series to be the account of an academic year at Hogwarts provides just the kind of timeline that we need in order to keep turning the pages. For Pullman’s universe this deficiency is largely addressed in HDM; but not entirely so. In the end there’s no getting away from the fact that his world-view is founded on medieval Christian theology, which in my view is utterly bogus, and no more relevant to modern life than the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), for example.

Overall:

- There’s nothing in NL which hasn’t been taken into account, and improved upon, in HDM s1.

5. Notes made while reading TSK, Jan 2023

Narrative perspectives

The narrative is told in the third person by a non-intrusive and omniscient storyteller, with frequent reference to the inner perspectives of Will and/or Lyra. This includes chapter 13 (which also refers to the inner perspectives of Jutta Kamainen and Serafina Pekkala) and chapter 15 (which also refers to the inner perspective of Lena Feldt), but excludes the following chapters in which Will and Lyra do not appear:

Chapter 2: Refers to the inner perspective of Serafina Pekkala.

Chapter 6: Refers to the inner perspectives of Lee Scoresby, Serafina Pekkala, and Ruta Skadi.

Chapters 10 and 14: Refer to the inner perspective of Lee Scoresby.

Chapter 12: Refers to the inner perspective of Mary Malone.

Read-through quotes and notes

pp.1-4: In EW, Will leaves his mother with Mrs Cooper, his piano teacher. Presumably she's not related to Dr Cooper of Bolvangar in DW; but why didn't Pullman eliminate this potential confusion by choosing some other name?

p.9: <from the moment in the supermarket when he realized he had to pretend in order not to worry his mother, part of Will's mind was always alert to her anxieties. He loved her so much he would have died to protect her.>

This is 'storge', and Will is a classic Conformist.

p.21, Will and Lyra: <"So why did you come here?" | "I'm looking for Dust," she said.>
Lyra's Activist quest.

p.27, Lyra regarding Will: <How much easier if his dæmon had been visible! She wondered what its form might be, and whether it was fixed yet. Whatever its form was, it would express a nature that was savage, and courteous, and unhappy.>

Being courteous and grim are Conformist traits. As for savagery, perhaps Lyra is mistaking Will's instinct to defend those he loves.

p.42, Lanselius about Asriel: <He is a scholar ... but scholarship is not his ruling passion. Nor is statemanship. I met him once, and I thought he had an ardent and powerful nature, but not a despotic one. I don't think he wants to rule...>

p.47, Thorold about Asriel: <He's a-going to find the Authority and kill Him. ... Lord Asriel is just a man, with human power, no more than that. But his ambition is limitless. He dares to do what men and women don't even dare to think. And look what he's done already: he's torn open the sky, he's opened the way to another world. Who else has ever done that? Who else could think of it? So with one part of me, Serafina Pekkala, I say he's mad, wicked, deranged. Yet with another part I think, he's Lord Asriel, he's not like other men. Maybe... If it was ever going to be possible, it'd be done by him and by no one else.>

Asriel abandons his natural role as lord and master and father (Idealist), in favour of pursuing his limitless ambition (Activist).

pp.88-89, Mary to Lyra: <Well ... our particles are strange little devils and no mistake. We call them shadow-particles, Shadows. ... You know what? They're conscious. That's right. Shadows are particles of consciousness. ... they know we're here. They answer back. And here goes the crazy part: you can't see them unless you expect to. Unless you put your mind in a certain state. You have to be confident and relaxed at the same time. You have to be capable – where's that quotation ... '...capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and

reason –’ You have to get into that state of mind. That’s from the poet Keats, by the way. I found it the other day. So you get yourself in the right state of mind, and then you look at the Cave ... Oh, sorry. The computer. We call it the Cave. Shadows on the walls of the Cave, you see, from Plato. ... Once you’re linked up to it, if you *think*, the Shadows respond.>

See <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/negative-capability> for a discussion of this Keats quote. It’s another description of ‘de-focusing’, see my above comments for NL p.332. As for Plato’s allegory of the cave, I’ve touched on this (and dismissed it, to my satisfaction) in HMM and Review05.pdf, as follows.

HMM pp.117-118: “Russell’s paradox arises because ‘naïve’ (pre-ZFC) set theory maps predicates directly to defined sets. ZFC repeats this mapping but avoids the paradox by making each such mapped set the subset of some other set (which itself is ‘unmapped’, so to speak). ... The trick of this ... is that we don’t need to give a precise definition of the new ‘unmapped’ superset. That is, while it is our instinct to specify this superset ... this specification makes no difference to the mathematical logic. All that matters is that there is such a set, not what it’s called or the identity of all its members. It’s as if every defined set has a ghostly shadow, which doesn’t add or alter anything, but is always in attendance. One way of understanding this simile is to interpret the sets in Russell’s paradox as being the book catalogues in a library, whereupon their ‘shadows’ are their descriptions in some other book catalogue elsewhere in the library. Amongst librarians the accepted general term for these catalogue descriptions is ‘metadata’, which is less creepy than ‘shadows’, so I’ll go along with that.”

Review05.pdf p.3: “And once an idea has been expressed *in writing* it may be comprehended in just the same way as any other percept. Thus our use of language effectively renders obsolete the traditional philosophical distinction between ‘universals’ and ‘particulars’, and with it the ancient belief that abstract ideas exist independently as Platonic ‘forms’, or that they are bestowed by God. I refute it thus!”

p.135, Joachim Lorenz: <Cittàgazze. The city of magpies. You know why it’s called that? Because magpies steal, and that’s all we can do now. We create nothing, we have built nothing for hundreds of years, all we can do is steal from other worlds.>

Likewise the Kingdon coat of arms features magpies; and there is no new thing under the sun.

p.142: <Another night came, and still the angels flew on. And at some point the quality of the air changed, not for the worse or the better, but changed nonetheless, and Ruta Skadi knew that they’d passed out of that world and into another. How it had happened she couldn’t guess. | “Angels!” she called, as she sensed the change. “How have we left the world I found you in? Where was the boundary?” | “There are invisible places in the air,” came the answer, “gateways into other worlds. We can see them, but you cannot.”>

Ruta Skadi flies with the angels from CW to HR. Pullman’s plotting is as immaculate as ever.

p.157, Lyra: <And Will, please, I done something very bad. Because the alethiometer told me I had to stop looking for Dust, and I had to help you. I had to help you find your father. And I *could*, I could take you to wherever he is, if I had it. But I wouldn’t listen. I just done what I wanted to do, and I shouldn’t...>

Lyra’s mission crisis has arisen because she’s flipping wildly between her instinctive insights (Empiricist) and reactive urges (Activist) without having developed a coherent world-view by which she could make sense of it all (Idealist) and/or adopted a fixed set of values (Conformist). It’s all part of growing up ...

p.183, Will: <This time he forced his mind to do what Giacomo Paradisi said, gritting his teeth, trembling with exertion, sweating. Lyra was bursting to interrupt, because she knew this process. So did Dr Malone, and so did the poet Keats, whoever he was, and all of them knew you couldn't get it by straining towards it. But she held her tongue and clasped her hands.>

As above, pp.88-89.

p.199, Lord Boreal/Sir Charles telling Marisa about EW: <It is one of millions. There are openings between them, but they're not easily found. I know a dozen or so, but the places they open have shifted, and that must be due to what Asriel's done. It seems that we can now pass directly from this world to our own, and probably to many others too. Previously, there was one world that acted as a sort of crossroads, and all the doorways opened into that. So you can imagine how surprised I was to see you, when I came through today, and how delighted that I could bring you here directly, without the risk of going through Cittàgazze.>

Presumably CW was <a sort of crossroads> because their Guild used the subtle knife to make the doorways. Again, it's clever plotting from Pullman. All the same, if at any point in space there are infinite worlds (or even just a few million of them), how does the knife-bearer always find the world he's looking for? I guess Pullman would say that the knife is directed by the thoughts of its bearer – and we'll see whether he gives this kind of explanation in relation to Asriel's 'intention craft' in TAS – but still this grossly underestimates the enormity of the task, pitting a single mind against not just one limitless universe but a vast (possibly infinite) number of them.

p.223, Will and Lyra: <“You better ask the alethiometer what to do next,” he said. “Have you asked it anything yet?” | “No,” she said. “I'm only going to do what you ask, from now on. I thought of doing it last night, but I never did. And I won't either unless you ask me to.” | “Well, you better do it now,” he said. “There's as much danger here as there is in my world, now. There's Angelica's brother for a start. And if –” | He stopped, because she began to say something, but she stopped as soon as he did. Then she collected herself and went on: | “Will, there was something that happened yesterday that I didn't tell you. I should've, but there was just so many other things going on. I'm sorry...”>

Lyra is trying very hard to be a Conformist like Will. This is superb writing.

p.226, Lyra and Will: <“I'm going to ask about your father,” she said, “and how we can find him. See, I put the hands to point at –” | “No. Ask about my mother first. I want to know if she's all right.”>

I'm impressed: Pullman does allow Will to have normal balanced emotions, after all!

p.238, Mary to Oliver Payne: <But suppose something happened thirty, forty thousand years ago. There were Shadow-particles around before then, obviously – they've been around since the Big Bang – but there was no physical way of amplifying their effects at *our* level, the anthropic level. The level of human beings. And then something happened, I can't imagine what, but it involved evolution. Hence your skulls – remember? No Shadows before that time, lots afterwards? And the skulls the child found in the Museum, that she tested with her compass-thing. She told me the same thing. What I'm saying is that around that time, the human brain became the ideal vehicle for this amplification process. Suddenly we became conscious.>

No: what we call consciousness originated not 30k-40k years ago, but more like 3k years ago with the invention and use of the alphabet by the ancient Greeks; see Review05.pdf p.3. Just because prehistoric folk had brains like ours, that doesn't mean that they used them as we do. Neither is cave art or evidence of ritualised social practices such as trepanning any proof of the presence and use of higher intelligence.

p.242, Lord Boreal/Sir Charles to Mary: <Well, I understand that you've made some fascinating discoveries in the field of consciousness. Yes, I know you haven't published anything yet, and it's a long way – seemingly – from the apparent subject of your research. Nevertheless, word gets around. And I'm especially interested in that. I would be very pleased if, for example, you were to concentrate your researches towards the manipulation of consciousness. Secondly, the many-worlds hypothesis – Everett, you remember, 1957 or thereabouts; I believe you're on the track of something that could take that theory a good deal further. And that line of research might even attract defence funding, which as you know is still plentiful, even today, and certainly isn't subject to these wearisome application processes.>

Pullman has been watching too many sci-fi conspiracy movies.

p.249 screen text dialogue

Mary: <Angels are creatures of Shadow-matter? Of Dust?>

Angel: <Structures. Complexifications. Yes.>

Mary: <And Shadow-matter is what we have called spirit?>

Angel: <From what we are, spirit; from what we do, matter. Matter and spirit are one.>

I don't understand what this means. But I doubt it's anything important.

p.250 screen text dialogue

Mary: <I don't understand – why me? And what's this journey?>

Angel: <You have been preparing for this as long as you have lived. Your work here is finished.>

Mary's mission quest thing <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbLlxxj-LN8> (Empiricist).

p.269, Ruta Skadi about Asriel: <I think he must have been preparing for this for a long time, for aeons. He was preparing this before we were born, sisters, even though he is so much younger... But how can that be? I don't know. I can't understand. I think he commands time, he makes it run fast or slow according to his will.>

Well, if you can have parallel universes, then they can run at different speeds, I guess!

p.279, Grumman/Parry: <The Spectres feast as vampyres feast on blood, but the Spectres' food is attention. A conscious and informed interest in the world. The immaturity of children is less attractive to them.>

This is great fun. Complete nonsense, but great fun.

p.280, Scoresby and Grumman/Parry: <“You have a strange way about you, Dr Grumman. You ever spend time among the witches?” | “Yes,” said Grumman. “And among academicians, and among spirits. I found folly everywhere, but there were grains of wisdom in every stream of it. No doubt there was much more wisdom than I failed to recognize. Life is hard, Mr Scoresby, but we cling to it all the same.”>

Five purveyors of wisdom: {Empiricist = Witches; Idealist = Spirits; Activist = Scoresby; Conformist = Academicians; Theorist = Grumman/Parry}.

pp.298-299, Scoresby about Lyra: <I love that little child like a daughter. If I'd had a child of my own, I couldn't love her more.>

The adventurer-explorer (Activist/Empiricist) has a soft spot after all (Conformist).

pp.306-307, Will: <He wiped the sweat out of his eyes with his right hand. What he couldn't say was that he longed for his father as a lost child yearns for home. That comparison wouldn't have occurred to him, because home was the place he kept safe for his mother, not the place others kept safe for him; but it had been five years now since that Saturday morning in the supermarket when the pretend game of hiding from the enemies became desperately real, such a long time in his life, and his heart craved to hear the words, "Well done, well done, my child; no one on earth could have done better; I'm proud of you. Come and rest now...">

What Will wanted.

p.313, Marisa, on hearing that Lyra is the new Eve: <Why, I shall have to destroy her ... to prevent another Fall... Why didn't I see this before? It was too large to see...>

Compare HDM s2e7: "She is Eve. Eve before the Fall. This time she must not Fall. I'll see to that."

p.320: <And then Stanislaus Grumman, Jopari, John Parry hesitated. | He was painfully aware of the oath he'd sworn to Lee Scoresby, and he hesitated before he broke it; but break it he did.>

Parry betrays Scoresby, and Lyra. I'd like to think he wouldn't have done this, if he'd had the time to add a caveat or two.

pp.320-321, once the shaman has lit a lantern so that he can see the knife-bearer properly:

<The shaman saw a boy even younger than he'd thought, his slim body shivering in a torn linen shirt and his expression exhausted and savage and wary, but alight with a wild curiosity, his eyes wide under the straight black brows, so like his mother's... | And there came just the first flicker of something else to both of them. | But in that same moment, as the lantern light flared over John Parry's face, something shot down from the turbid sky and he fell back dead before he could say a word, an arrow in his failing heart. The osprey-dæmon vanished in a moment.>

What Will got. Compare with what Will wanted, pp.306-307, and the same scene in HDM s2e7, in which John Parry has just told Will that he must take the subtle knife to Asriel:

Will: "And then we go home."

Parry (first shaking his head, then nodding and smiling): "And then we go home. All right? And then we go home."

Will (breaking away): "I can't. I'm not capable."

Parry: "You fought for the knife. Yes? Yes? It chose you. It chose you. Argue with anything else, but don't argue with your true nature."

Will: "I'm not strong enough."

Parry: "Both of us were brought here. Do you understand? You with the knife, and me to tell you what to do with it, Will, Will, Will, listen to me, this is, this is your duty ..."

Will: "Your duty was to be my father!"

Parry: "Will ... I'm so sorry ... but look what you've become ... without me! You're a warrior, Will. You're a warrior!" (Parry is shot while protecting his son)

Will: "Dad ... Dad ..."

Parry: "Let me look at you ... the night is full of angels ... they will guide you now ..." (dies)

p.324, Will and the angels: <"You were with my father all the time?" | "Every moment." | "Did he know?" | "He had no idea." | "Why didn't you stop the witch, then? Why did you let her kill him?" | "We would have done, earlier. But his task was over once he'd led us to you." | Will said nothing. His head was ringing; this was no less difficult to understand than anything else. | "All right," he said finally, "I'll come with you. But first I must wake Lyra.">

This is an extraordinarily meek response from someone who has just seen his father murdered at close quarters and who loved his mother so much that <he would have died to protect her>.

I simply don't believe that Will would have behaved in this way.

Summary observations and conclusions

The above quotes and notes give strong support to my earlier observations and conclusions, having also read this book in Nov-Dec 2020, and having seen all of HDM (several times, for s1 and s2). Indeed these may now be developed further, as follows:

- As he showed with NL, Pullman knows all about plot-construction, archetypal characters, classical tropes, and so on; and these are all deployed here as well. But because TSK is the middle book of a trilogy, the purpose of which is to ‘move the pieces on the board to where they can have a big fight at the end’, it relies much more on good characterisation to sustain the reader’s interest. Pullman *can* do good characterisation, see *e.g.* p.223 and p.226, but equally he can do poor characterisation, *e.g.* mad Asriel and bad Marisa are so extreme that they’re simply unbelievable. The main problem, confirmed in this latest reading, is that Pullman simply doesn’t care about his characters. Not only does he hire-and-fire minor characters as if they’re NPC cannon-fodder, in this book he also subjects his main protagonist to the most appalling grief, with absolutely no prospect of closure. But, as the HDM adaptation shows, it didn’t have to be this way: Will *could* spend some time with his father, and it *wouldn’t* wreck the story arc; on the contrary!
- Why is Pullman so cruel to his characters? I suspect that, for all his atheistic posturing, see *e.g.* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Pullman#Perspective_on_religion, he’s been so steeped in the blood of Christ that he simply can’t see the world save through the red-tinted lenses of sin and suffering. But from a Hindu or Buddhist or Zen perspective the Christian fixation with a corpse on a cross is weird to the point of perversion. And from my perspective (as a free thinker who’s well-aware of the various different models of the human condition) it’s time to grow up and move on. As indeed has happened with HDM.
- Pullman’s Christian perspective also underlies his unexamined implicit assumption that as well as the singular material universe there’s a spiritual world which somehow is the natural environment of ‘souls’ (human essences) and ‘forms’ (abstract ideas). And once you have two domains, why stop there? Why not three, four, five, a million, infinity? For this reason the many-worlds hypothesis is as attractive to religious devotees as a turd is to flies. My view is that “much of contemporary cosmology should be treated with considerable scepticism because it still takes its inspiration more from ancient religion than from modern science”, see Review05.pdf. But in a way Pullman has done us all a service by enshrining the many-worlds hypothesis at the core of his fictional universe, where its sheer impossibility is on display for all to see, *reductio ad absurdum*.
- To be fair to Pullman, it’s clearly not easy to write several individually-resolved stories that all contribute to an epic story arc. Either they don’t hang together, or they’re so complicated and voluminous that readers have ceased caring whether they hang together. It may be that the portrayal of multiple perspectives only really works on the screen, not in print. My view, based not only on HDM but also LotR (Peter Jackson’s adaptation of *Lord of the Rings*) and various BBC adaptations of classic works (in particular, *I, Claudius*, *Middlemarch*, and *Nostramo*), is that *both* media are required, each complementing the other. It’s all to do with the feeling of conviction and insight that arises when one considers a subject from several different perspectives; again, see Review05.pdf.
- To conclude, I’ll simply reiterate my earlier verdict: “now that I’m watching HDM, I’m finding it much easier and more enjoyable to read TSK. But that doesn’t make Pullman a good storyteller all-of-a-sudden. On the contrary, it shows how much better his books would’ve been if only he’d cared about his characters.”

6. Notes made while reading TAS, Jan 2023

Narrative perspectives

The narrative is told in the third person by a non-intrusive and omniscient storyteller, with reference to the inner perspectives of many different characters, several of whom are moving between different worlds, as follows:

Chapter 1: Marisa (DW Himalayas)

Chapter 2: Will (CW, DW, OW)

Chapter 3: Serafina Pekkala (DW); Iorek Byrnison (DW, CW)

Chapter 4: Ama (DW Himalayas)

Chapter 5: {Baruch, Sentry, Roke, Asriel}, all fleetingly (HR)

Chapter 6: {Fra Pavel, Father MacPhail, Dr Cooper, Father Gomez}, all fleetingly (DW Geneva)

Chapter 7: Mary (CW, MW)

Chapters 1-7: Lyra dreaming

Chapters 8, 9: Will (DW)

Chapter 10: Gomez (CW); Mary (MW)

Chapter 11: Ama, Will (DW)

Chapters 12, 13, 14, 15: Will, Lyra (DW, OW)

Chapter 16: Asriel, Marisa, Ogunwe (HR)

Chapter 17: Mary (MW); Gomez (CW)

Chapter 18: Lyra, Will (OW, LD)

Chapter 19: Lyra (LD)

Chapter 20: Mary (MW); Gomez (CW, MW)

Chapters 21, 22, 23: Lyra, Will (LD)

Chapters 24, 25: Marisa, Roke (DW Geneva)

Chapter 26: Lyra, Will (LD)

Chapter 27: Mary; Gomez (MW)

Chapter 28: Asriel, Marisa (HR)

Chapter 29: Lyra, Will (LD, HR)

Chapter 30: Marisa; Asriel; Lyra, Will (HR)

Chapter 31: Marisa, Asriel; Lyra, Will (HR)

Chapters 32, 33: Lyra, Will, Mary (MW)

Chapter 34: Mary (MW)

Chapter 35: Lyra, Will; Gomez, Balthamos; Mary (MW)

Chapter 36: Serafina Pekkala, Pantalaimon, Kirjava; Mary (MW)

Chapter 37: Lyra, Will (MW)

Chapter 38: Lyra, Will, Mary (MW, CW, EW, DW)

Read-through quotes and notes

Chapter 1: How did Marisa get to the Himalayas so quickly? Nowhere is this explained, and it's a significant plot hole. Certainly it contributed to my irritation with this book on the several previous occasions I tried to read it. As for Iorek's/Will's subsequent overland journey from the Arctic to the Himalayas, for me this strains credibility beyond breaking-point. HDM s3 addresses both of these logistical impossibilities by switching the action to Fair Isle (between Orkney and Shetland): the reassuring memory of which enables me to set aside my annoyance, and read on.

p.27 <The knife was good for cutting between worlds, but it couldn't abolish distance within them.> Why on earth not? What connects two worlds, anyway? Frazer's 'sympathetic magic' is just as plausible as any pseudo-scientific speculation; in which case, why not go the whole hog and assume that the knife has the power of finding precisely the right location, if the bearer wills it?

p.139, p.142, p.143, Will regarding Marisa: <She sounded so kindly, and there was such sad wisdom in her eyes, that Will's mistrust deepened. He felt that every word she said was a lie, every action concealed a threat, and every smile was a mask of deceit.>; <He found himself liking her, because she was brave, and because she seemed like a more complicated and richer and deeper Lyra. He couldn't help but like her.>; <He had been captivated by Mrs Coulter. All his thoughts referred to her: when he thought of Lyra, it was to wonder how like her mother she'd be when she grew up; if he thought of the church, it was to wonder how many of the priests and cardinals were under her spell; if he thought of his own dead father, it was to wonder whether he would have detested her or admired her; and if he thought of his own mother...>.

Marisa is now an out-and-out Conformist, which is completely at odds with her behaviour in the previous two books, see *e.g.* TSK p.313, but no surprise to those who know her character from HDM. This is the best bit in the book thus far, when two key characters meet for the first time, and sparks fly. It's a pity it doesn't happen more often! Indeed, given Asriel's grand plan to go to war with the Authority, there really ought to be a gathering of *all* the main characters, building up to a spectacular climax in which they're all interacting with one another, with sparks flying in every direction. Ever since the *Iliad* we've come to expect this kind of set-piece; *Nostromo*, *Casablanca*, *The Seven Samurai*, *The Alamo*, *The Jungle Book*, *Robin Hood*, *For A Few Dollars More*, *Indiana Jones*, *Harry Potter*, *Lagaan*, *Inception*, *Mamma Mia*, *X-Men*, *Knives Out*, and various MCU films all excel in this respect; and in my opinion the recent *Jumanji* movies do it best of all. But Pullman can't go all-out on this because he's made Lyra the new Eve, who being unique won't ever feature in an all-star spectacular climax. So TAS is saddled with two distinct types of story ('Overcoming the Monster' and 'Rebirth', see HMM p.174) which never fully mesh with one another. LotR has a similar problem, with Frodo absent from all the big fight scenes because he has to take the ring to Mount Doom. So these parallel subplots feel somewhat disjointed and incidental to one another – as indeed they are – with a resulting reduction in the overall dramatic impact.

p.166, Will and Lyra: <“This place where the dead are. Is it a world like this one, like mine or your or any of the others? Is it a world I could get to with the knife?” ... “Yes,” she said, “but it's a strange place, Will... So strange... Could we really do that? Could we really go to the land of the dead? But – what part of us does that? Because dæmons fade away when we die – I've seen them – and our bodies, well, they just stay in the grave and decay, don't they?” | “Then there must be a third part. A different part.”>

Three parts of a person is medieval theology *reductio ad absurdum*. And both Will and Lyra appear to have regressed to Blyton-esque parodies, planning on going on a jolly picnic (no doubt with lashings of ginger beer) to the LD. Sorry, no: I'm finding it impossible to take this seriously.

pp.170-171, Lyra regarding Will: <Lyra sat down beside him, with Pantalaimon cat-formed and warm in her lap. How lucky Will was that she was awake now to look after him! He was truly fearless, and she admired that beyond measure; but he wasn't good at lying and betraying and cheating, which all came to her as naturally as breathing. When she thought of that she felt warm and virtuous, because she did it for Will, never for herself.>

Lyra, the charming trickster (Empiricist).

p.181, Iorek and Will: <“The intentions of a tool are what it does. ... Sometimes in doing what *you* intend, you also do what the knife intends, without knowing. Can you see the sharpest edge of that knife?” | “No,” said Will, for it was true: the edge diminished to a thinness so fine that the eye could not reach it. | “Then how can you know everything it does?” | “I can't. But I must still use it, and do what I can to help good things come about. If I did nothing I'd be worse than useless. I'd be guilty.”>

Will, the ant building the bridge to Lanka (Conformist).

pp.199-201: Asriel and Marisa argue. As with Will and Marisa, pp.139-143, this is terrific stuff; but it doesn't remove the need for an all-star spectacular climax.

pp.204-206: Marisa convinces Asriel's commanders that she always wanted to protect Lyra, in contradiction with TSK p.313. Here the perspective is a little confusing: at times it appears to be subjective, but it isn't ascribed to any of those present. This instance lends support to the view that the prose-form novel simply isn't suited to conveying multiple simultaneous perspectives; and indeed this may have been one of the reasons I lost patience with this book, before seeing HDM s3. A movie or a play can convey so much more, often without any words at all.

p.206: Asriel isn't convinced. Indeed, once a person is thought to be cleverer than others then they find it virtually impossible to be taken at face-value. They are doubted, distrusted, feared, shunned, and opposed. Such is the lot of a Theorist; I know it well!

p.208: <Ogunwe drew his coat around him and rested his hand on his cheetah-dæmon's head.> Whereas in HDM he had no dæmon.

pp.210-211, Ogunwe: <Mrs Coulter, I am a king, but it's my proudest task to join Lord Asriel in setting up a world in which there are no kingdoms at all. No kings, no bishops, no priests. The kingdom of heaven has been known by that name since the Authority first set himself above the rest of the angels. And we want no part of it. This world is different. We intend to be free citizens of the republic of heaven.> Stirring stuff! But "Meet the new boss, same as the old boss ...".

p.218, Asriel shows Marisa the intention craft: <"How does it work? What powers it?" she said. | "Your intentions," he said. "Hence the name. If you intend it to go forward, it will go forward."> So the intention craft operates on willpower, just like the knife, TSK p.199. And since the intention craft can take its operator through multiple worlds to the desired destination, why can't the knife do the same? Whatever the mind of man can conceive and believe, it can achieve!

pp.223-224: Mary repeats the TSK p.238 ~30k-years-ago evolution bollocks to the mulefa, who confirm that just the same thing happened on MW. What a coincidence, one year on EW is equal to one year on MW!

p.231, Mary uses her amber spyglass: <Everywhere she looked she could see gold, just as Atal had described it: sparkles of light, floating and drifting and sometimes moving in a current of purpose. Among it all was the world she could see with the naked eye, the grass, the river, the trees; but whenever she saw a conscious being, one of the mulefa, the light was thicker and more full of movement.>

So an animal from another universe which has a functional language ability and can do routine domestic tasks is a <conscious being>, cognitively indistinguishable from humans? But all social animals communicate, and all process their food in one way or another (*e.g.* with several stomachs, or a gizzard). What distinguishes humans is abstract thought; and this is impossible without writing it down using precise text, *i.e.* an alphabet; see Review05.pdf, again.

pp.233-235: After a token whimper of regret (which doesn't come close to her HDM s3e8 philosophy, "We have the stupid idea as humans that we're the pinnacle of creation"), Mary takes up the White Man's Burden with alacrity. First there was *Star Trek*, then *Star Wars*, now Pullman Enterprises brings to the big screen ... *The Great Big Multiversal Empire!* I can't stand it.

p.235: Gomez meets some old folk in CW. But why haven't the Spectres sucked the souls out of the old couple, and why don't they attack Gomez? Another unexplained inconsistency.

p.260, LD denizen: <See, everyone has a death. It goes everywhere with 'em, all their life long, right close by.>

Now there are *four* parts of a person! Paraphrasing *Gandhi*: Whatever rational plausibility Pullman's universe once held was lost on this page.

p.262: <"I'll tell you all about it," said Lyra. | As she said that, as she took charge, part of her felt a little stream of pleasure rising upward in her breast like the bubbles in champagne.>
Lyra takes charge (Activist).

p.266, Lyra: <if I have to *die* to do what's proper, then I *will*, and be happy while I do>
Lyra's will to power (Activist).

p.304: <So they moved on. The whisper *Roger* was spreading out faster than they could move ... Some way off there was a little gyration of activity ... "Roger? Is that Roger?" | He looked up, bemused, nervous, and nodded.>
How Lyra found Roger amongst the uncountably many inhabitants of LD. Lucky he was the only one! "Welease Wodger!" "I'm Roger, and so's my wife!"

pp.308-310: It turns out that Lyra overheard Dr Lanselius tell Farder Coram of the witches' prophecy, see NL p.175. All very Idealist.

p.334: The Magisterium's bomb is aimed at Lyra by means of a hair from her head. This is 'contagious magic', see *The Golden Bough* Chapter 3. (Surely the knife can work the same way?)

p.345: <The energy of the bomb came from cutting the link between human and dæmon>
So why do they need to go to the power station? Methinks this is another plot hole. Is Pullman losing his touch?

p.355, Will's father's ghost: <Cut the short hair off right down to her scalp. Collect it carefully, every single hair. Don't miss even one. Then open another world – any will do – and put the hair through into it, and then close it again. Do it now, at once.>
This is superb plotting. (But however did Scoresby find Lyra amongst the uncountably many inhabitants of LD?)

p.357: <as the dust cleared, more and more of the ghosts were gazing in horror at the abyss>
But then Bill Bailey spoke up: "There's the abyss. We're not in the abyss. We're in the car park and snack area adjacent to the abyss. It's not too bad." <https://youtu.be/V7d79Knc8p4>

p.362, Lyra: <All the words, all the confidence, all the vanity had been shaken out of her.>
Lyra, born again (Idealist origins, like Simba before *Hakuna Matata*).

p.364, Will's father's ghost: <we have to build the republic of heaven where we are, because for us there is no elsewhere>
The moral of the story. On one hand it's a relief that there *is* a moral, after all these pages, and that it's relatively easy to understand. On the other hand, it's easily trumped by the moral of *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle*: "We always only have one life, man. That's how it is." In my opinion.

p.380, Asriel: <I'm going to destroy Metatron. But my part is nearly over. It's my daughter who has to live, and it's our task to keep all the forces of the kingdom away from her so that she has a chance to find a way to a safer world – she and that boy, and their dæmons.>
Asriel is ready to play his part in the eternal myth of the dying and rising king (Idealist).

pp.381-383: The moving reconciliation of not-so-mad Asriel and not-so-bad Marisa.

p.390: <The ghosts clambered out of the earth, pale forms paler still in the midday light. They had nothing to fear any more, and they threw themselves against the invisible Spectres, grappling and wrestling and tearing at things Will and Lyra couldn't see at all.>

This is tremendously silly, but good fun. And it's satisfying to see the mustering of combatants for the all-star spectacular climax. Looking ahead, this also includes the cliff-ghasts (p.401) and the armoured bears (p.414). But not Lyra and Will, who have the sacred duty to live to ~~fight~~ love another day.

p.406, Asriel to Marisa: <We came here to give Lyra time to find her dæmon, and then time to live and grow up. If we take Metatron to extinction, Marisa, she'll have that time, and if we go with him, it doesn't matter.>

Good plan. But it's tragic that Asriel and Marisa don't reconcile with Lyra and Will before their noble self-sacrifice. It *does* matter, because without this reconciliation their family relationships remain permanently unresolved. As E M Forster put it in *Howards End*, "Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer." The HDM scriptwriters fixed it for Will and his father in s2e7; they should have done the same here for Lyra and her parents. I would have loved to have seen the sparks fly between them all! As it is, the 'all-star spectacular climax' is a rather formulaic bish-bash-bosh-athon.

Chapters 30 and 31: Marisa deceives Metatron by playing the part of the serpent (Theorist), even though she is a born-again Conformist.

p.419, Will's father's ghost: <Well done, my boy. Well done indeed>

Which is what Will wanted, see TSK pp.306-307. So the jolly picnic to the LD has resolved Will's cranky and pubescent angst (and the TSK storyline), just as it has for Lyra (and the NL storyline); but only if you believe in ghosts. I don't, so for me this encounter puts TAS at the fairytale end of the storytelling spectrum. And none of this is helpful as a guide to one's own conduct, because it's delusional to suppose that one can seek acknowledgment or forgiveness from others after they've died. In my opinion.

p.434, the ghost and Dr Malone: <You must tell them true stories, and everything will be well, everything. Just tell them stories.>

This calls back to Pullman's maxim, repeated before the beginning of each of the books in this trilogy, "*Stories are the most important thing in the world. Without stories, we wouldn't be human beings at all*". He's wrong: it's *writing* that's made us human; see Review05.pdf, again.

p.440: <"You know," Mary said, "the church – the Catholic Church that I used to belong to – wouldn't use the word dæmon, but St Paul talks about spirit *and* soul *and* body. So the idea of three parts in human nature isn't so strange.">

Pullman breaks cover: for all his 'atheistic posturing' (see TSK summary observations and conclusions) he knows that his world-view is based on medieval Christian theology.

p.454: <Matter *loved* Dust. It didn't want to see it go. That was the meaning of this night, and it was Mary's meaning too. | Had she thought there was no meaning in life, no purpose, when God had gone? Yes, she had thought that. | "Well, there is now," she said aloud, and again, louder, "There is now!" | As she looked again at the clouds and the moon in the Dust-flow, they looked as frail and doomed as a dam of little twigs and tiny pebbles trying to hold back the Mississippi. But they were trying, all the same. They'd go on trying to the end of everything.>

Mary, the ant building the bridge to Lanka (Conformist). Free-association idea: when planning *Gunnerkrigg Court*, did Tom Siddell model 'ether' on Pullman's Dust?

p.460, Lyra: <Like if your dæmon's a dog, that means you like doing what you're told, and knowing who's boss, and following orders, and pleasing people who are in charge. A lot of servants are people whose dæmons are dogs.>

One can have a lot of fun with this kind of thing. Compare, for example, my analysis of Aesop's fables, HMM p.173: "the *Fox* is an Empiricist; the *Lion* is an Idealist; the *Dog* is a Conformist; the *Ass* is a Theorist; and the *Wolf* is an Activist." Or, if domesticated species are preferred, how about {Empiricist = Bird; Idealist = Big/wild cat; Activist = Big/wild dog; Conformist = Small/tame dog; Theorist = Small/tame cat}.

pp.462-463 dialogue

Will: <But there's my mother. I've got to go back and look after her. I just left her with Mrs Cooper, and it's not fair on either of them.>

Lyra: <But it's not fair on *you* to have to do that.>

Will: <No ... but that's a different sort of not fair. That's just like an earthquake or a rainstorm.

It might not be fair, but no one's to blame. But if I just leave my mother with an old lady who isn't very well herself, then that's a different kind of not fair. That would be wrong.>

Will, the taker of multiple perspectives (Theorist, System 2). For the five kinds of fairness see Review05.pdf, again.

p.473: <The Dust pouring down from the stars had found a living home again, and these children-no-longer-children, saturated with love, were the cause of it all.>

Completely fantastical, but great fun.

p.481, Mary: <If you wanted to divert a mighty river into a different course, and all you had was a single pebble, you could do it, as long as you put the pebble in the right place to send the first trickle of water *that way* instead of *this*.>

A novel application of chaos theory (nonlinear dynamics) to explain how Lyra and Will saved the universe(s). Yeah, right.

p.485, quote from Pindar: <*My soul, do not seek eternal life, but exhaust the realm of the possible.*> I like that!

p.492, Will to Lyra: <D'you remember another thing he said, my father? He said we have to build the republic of heaven where we are. He said that for us there isn't any elsewhere. That's what he meant, I can see now. Oh, it's too bitter. I thought he just meant Lord Asriel and his new world, but he meant us, he meant you and me. We have to live in our own worlds...>

Will, the rationalist heartbreaker (Theorist). I know this path well, it follows the same tracks as the *Midnight Train to Georgia*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A0F9lh8TiSM>.

p.496, Xaphania: <Dust is not a constant>

And "complexity only ever gives rise to yet more complexity", see MyPhilosophy03.pdf.

pp.498-499 dialogue

Will: <Baruch and Balthamos told me that they used openings ... to travel between the worlds.

Will angels no longer be able to do that? Will you be confined to one world as we are?>

Xaphania: <No; we have other ways of travelling.>

Lyra: <The way you have, ... is it possible for us to learn?>

Xaphania: <Yes. You could learn to do it, as Will's father did. It uses the faculty of what you call imagination. But that does not mean *making things up*. It is a form of seeing.>

Lyra: <Not *real* travelling, then, ... Just pretend...>

Xaphania: <No, ... nothing like pretend. Pretending is easy. This way is hard, but much truer.>
I like this. See also my 8/1/23 writing idea (1), below.

p.502, Will and Lyra: <He felt her tremble, and then under his hands the delicate bones of her back began to rise and fall and he heard her sob quietly. He stroked her warm hair, her tender shoulders, and then he kissed her face again and again, and presently she gave a deep shuddering sigh and fell still.>

Hence my comment on p.390, above. There is much talk on the internet about this sort of thing. This struck a chord: <https://ladygeekgirl.wordpress.com/2014/10/25/sexualized-saturdays-innocence-and-sexual-maturity-in-his-dark-materials-part-two>.

p.506: The gyptians exchange gifts and pleasantries with the mulefa. Did they also exchange guns, germs, and steel, I wonder? See my previous comments about Mary taking up the White Man's Burden. Thankfully the HDM scriptwriters chose to omit this old imperialist fantasy.

pp.506-507, John Faa: <I've seen a good many folk die; I've sent more than a few men down into the dark myself, though it was always in the anger of battle. To know that after a spell in the dark we'll come out again to a sweet land like this, to be free of the sky like the birds, well, that's the greatest promise anyone could wish for.>

The old spiritualist fantasy.

p.508, p.515: Mary volunteers to help Will fight the cops and the shrinks (Conformist).

p.522, Lyra's introspection: <We have to be all those difficult things like cheerful and kind and curious and brave and patient, and we've got to study and think, and work hard, all of us, in all our different worlds, and then we'll build ... The republic of heaven.>

a.k.a. Jerusalem. This is 'the moral of the story', see p.364. I have no problem with it, but what a roundabout way of getting there! Whereas in MyPhilosophy03.pdf and Review05.pdf I take the direct route, without material-spiritual dualism or many-worlds mumbo-jumbo. Granted, Pullman's account of Lyra and Will falling in love is tender and sweet and erotic and charged and heartbreaking, but for that matter so is my tale of Gala and Raj, which has the additional advantage of brevity, see HMM pp.179-180. On the other hand, Pullman has sold many books, and I haven't. Isaac Newton must've felt like this, when he discovered the law of universal gravitation using his invention of calculus, but had to write up his derivation using the traditional formalism of geometry. Lyra's five virtues: {Empiricist = Curious; Idealist = Cheerful; Activist = Brave; Conformist = Patient; Theorist = Kind}. At last she has a coherent world-view (Idealist), that is, she's taken up her father's mantle (to coin a Biblical phrase, see https://biblehub.com/kjv/2_kings/2-14.htm).

Relevant extract from WritingIdeas.doc, 8/1/23

Writing ideas that came to me while reading *The Amber Spyglass* by Philip Pullman:

(1) A story in which there as many 'worlds' as there are minds to perceive them; which of course is the basis of *Inception*; and straightaway *The Amber Spyglass* seems childishly literal, in comparison! Lao Tsu thought of this first, see

<https://www.songfacts.com/facts/the-beatles/the-inner-light>

<https://genius.com/The-beatles-the-inner-light-lyrics>

(2) A story written partly or wholly in the form of a play or film script, but including each character's inner thoughts, e.g.

Mrs Coulter: *I hate her* "I love her!" *I hate her?*

Summary observations and conclusions

The above quotes and notes support my earlier observations and conclusions, and further elaborate them as follows:

- TAS has several irritating plot holes which in the past have distracted my repeated efforts to suspend disbelief and engage with the story in any meaningful way. That I've been able to get through it on this occasion is a direct consequence of my watching HDM s1-s3. Partly this is because the adaptation has filled some of the holes, for example, by shifting Lyra's captivity from the Himalayas to Fair Isle; partly it's because it helps to have this complicated multi-perspective story presented through a second complementary medium; but mainly it's because HDM's scriptwriters care about the characters in a way that I recognise and respect.
- Now that I've been able to read TAS to a 'proper' standard (*i.e.* one which does justice to both it and me), it's rewarding to note that, irritating plot holes notwithstanding, Pullman *has* maintained his usual high standard of plot-construction, archetypal characters, classical tropes, and so on. Thus in the 'Overcoming the Monster' story we learn the true nature of Asriel and Marisa, kept secret for so long; for the 'Rebirth' story both Asriel and Lyra fulfil their parts to perfection; each storyline is well-tuned to play out within the constraints imposed by the other; and while the former contributes the (all-star spectacular) climax, the latter constitutes the denouement not only of this book but also of the whole story arc, commencing with the prediction that "Lyra has a part to play in all this, and a major one" on NL p.32. Furthermore, I'm particularly pleased that my IDEAL mapping showing the development of the main characters (see section 3 above) has proved to be a reliable and useful guide throughout this subsequent analysis.
- As for whether or not Pullman cares for his characters: he does, according to his own idea of caring; but that's quite different from my idea of caring. As I suspected when reading TSK, Pullman takes a traditional Christian perspective in which the duality of material and spiritual realms is accepted as axiomatic. Thus for him it makes sense to send Lyra and Will to the land of the dead to seek forgiveness from the ghost of Roger and acknowledgment from the ghost of John Parry; and while for me this is utterly delusional, I quite understand how he can view this episode as meaningful and his characters as caring; just as long as my willingness to suspend disbelief and to be moved to tears by the melodramatic pathos isn't misinterpreted as my 'believing' in any of this dualist bollocks. On the other hand, however one rationalises it the absence of any reconciliation between Lyra and her parents introduces an element of cruel tragedy which simply doesn't belong in this otherwise-uplifting tale. In my opinion.
- I've noted previously that Pullman's Christian perspective has preconditioned him to look favourably upon the many-worlds hypothesis. It's also the basis of his simplistic and dangerous conflation of the *physical experience* of the transition to sexual maturity with the *cognitive experience* of acquiring an informed and balanced view of the world. For further discussion on this follow the link cited in my comments on TAS p.502.
- And then there's my beef about Dr Mary Malone and the White Man's Burden. However jarring this felt in HDM, it turns out that the scriptwriters did as much as they could to give Mary a sensitive and receptive outlook and to minimise her impact on the poor benighted mulefa. For TAS not only fails to ascribe to her any of the enlightened 'philosophy' expounded in s3e8, it also trumpets the arrival of the gyptians in this strange land, in a scene straight out of *1492* or *Mutiny on the Bounty*. And we all know how those tales ended.
- Overall, there's nothing in TAS which hasn't been taken into account, and improved upon, in HDM s3.

7. Review summary, Jan 2023

Until recently my attempts to read Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy have been largely unrewarding. As I wrote to Arjun on 25/12/19, "When I read the books I was taken along by *Northern Lights*, disappointed by *The Subtle Knife*, and ceased caring during *The Amber Spyglass*." But watching its BBC adaptation has been a revelation, enabling me not only to enter Pullman's fictional universe and to be carried along by his epic saga, but also to re-read the books with fresh enthusiasm and insight. While there are several reasons for this transformation, discussed above, they all contribute to the *suspension of disbelief* which is the essential mental trick if one is to gain anything from fiction. So the BBC adaptation did that for me; and for much of its twenty-three hours I was in an emotional and conceptual reverie. Two scenes, in particular, stick in my mind as recurring flashbacks: Lyra pigging-out on 'disgusting' popcorn while watching *Paddington* in s2e3; and Marisa reconciling with her golden monkey-dæmon in s3e6.

... BUT ...

Just because I've at last been able to read Pullman's trilogy without giving up in boredom or irritation or disgust, that doesn't mean that I now accept any aspect of his fictional universe as true, or even possible. Not only do I continue to reject the many-worlds hypothesis as false physics, I also reject material-spiritual duality as false metaphysics; and my reading of *His Dark Materials* has only strengthened these opinions. In this context it's instructive to compare and contrast Pullman's world-view with my own. Apparently he has described himself as "a Church of England atheist", see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Pullman#Perspective_on_religion; which cynical oxymoron perfectly encapsulates his self-contradictory views, expressed publicly and in his fiction. So while his leading protagonists in *His Dark Materials* rail against God and the Church, they do so in a fictional universe in which the Christian concept of the soul is not merely tolerated as a possible explanation for certain aspects of the human condition, it is actualised in the material world in the form of a dæmon. The Word made flesh! You can't get more self-contradictory than that. As for me, I take the view that nothing exists other than the singular material universe. I have yet to find any contradictions that arise from this assumption, but if I do then you can be sure that I'll give them my full attention. By definition, contradictions are false, and they have no place in a book or drama that purports to express the truth about human nature. Fine, if you wish to tell an exciting tale with mad or bad characters then include as many contradictions as you like; but then don't expect your readers or audience to treat it as anything other than a fairytale; as indeed they must, through their suspension of disbelief.

... SO ...

Did I enjoy <i>His Dark Materials</i> ?	Yes I did.
Did I learn anything from it?	Not directly, no.
Did it trigger any new ideas?	Yes, e.g. the above extracts from WritingIdeas.doc.
Did it confirm any old ideas?	Yes, e.g. the 'singular material universe'.
So ... was it worth it?	Yes!