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The Urth list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 25 May 2001

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Alice Turner — 25 May 2001, 21:27

Bear growled:

At 20:56 2001-05-24, algawrote:

Virtually everyone--no, strike that, every grown-up person--feels the failure of the third book. We're trying to make it work, and I am specifically struggling with how to explain Dust (and the Specters) in terms of Manichaeian Light and Dark and a logical world-view (pretty damned hard to do when there are infinite worlds).

[waves to Copperhead thread!]

It doesn't need to be Manichean, does it? The Authority doesn't have the power of Creation that he claims, after all. The Spectres are kind-of believable, as is Dust leaking into the abyss through the windows. I'm not sure a strictly logical world-view is helpful, because then you might wonder whether Dust could cross between worlds (and if so, how) or if not, why the window from the land of the dead couldn't open onto a world without intelligent inhabitants. It will be interesting to see how the Book of Dust copes with all this!

It will indeed be interesting. And maybe I'll have to wait. Your points are completely apt, and why the book's structure is so hard to cope with. Perhaps I'm being too hardline in trying to match Dust with Zoroastrian/Manichaeian Light/Dark. I think, though, that the Authority did create the world (this world--which?); he is the Demiurge, who is nowhere given much credit for anything good. The difficulty comes in then saying, with Nietzsche, that God is dead. Which god, then, and if he is dead, is this not a good thing? (I sound like Martha Stewart.)

Another loose end is the super-Dickensian-and-Wolfian-put-together degree of coincidence required for the plot of The Subtle Knife. Will just happens to find that window? Then happens to walk into the one room in a deserted city in the particular world where Lyra is hiding? Clearly not coincidence, but I don't recall anything being said about it - apart from them remarking on the unlikelihood! It must be something like the shaman summoning Lee, or Bilbo finding the Ring, but it would be nice to be told.

Well, Lyra, from the beginning, is known to be Predestined, though she must also exercise Free Will (the latter being another thing I feel is not resolved well enough). The Master of Jordan, the gypsies and the witches all know of her cosmic predestination, and that she must choose eventually and fatefully. So Will's arrival falls under that plan, which I think is okay. What bothers me far more is that though she makes the choice to part from him ostensibly under Free Will she seems actually to be bullied into it. And I *really* don't like the implication that Original Sin is averted by the physical impossibility of loving young sex. (Much as the kids on the fan fiction site thrill to the romantic sadness of it all.)

The kids seem to adore it in a tearjerker way. Is that because my daemon has settled and theirs have not?

. That's confirmed by Pullman himself at the readerville

site Adam posted, in the message that breaks off "She is the one who will tell him how to imagine his way into o". It's quite an interesting site. He says that Will and Lyra have to be parted, and some readers agree that it brings closure to the story.

[She is Mary.] Yes, I read this, and it is indeed interesting. But I still do not see why they must be parted except in the more distasteful religious terms. As an adult. I wonder what the kids who love the romantic sadness are thinking. If they are thinking. Pullman is such a good writer that I suspect he has them feeling without thinking. Just Say No is an awfully stupid slogan and I hate to see it applied to Original Sin.

Eli wote:

That didactic purpose I can appreciate, but he weakens it by forcing the story. He tried to set up "Cold Equations"-style plot mechanism which threatens global disaster to _coerce_ Will and Lyra's decision -- rather than letting us see what their own wisdom leads them to decide.

That's

a lesser story.

Yes, and all the hoohah about Lyra's having this cosmic decision to make, which must not be influenced in any way, becomes trivial if she *is* influenced, which she certainly is.

I remember that my reading experience when I hit this was not one bit high-mindedly didactified, but was on the same mechanical level as his setup: but but but the Dust ecology is not at risk, because brief openings don't leak on the scale of the natural influx we've seen, and creating Specters is no problem with a little help, since the angel has said she can deal with those. If it had occurred to Will and Lyra that the obstacles were not absolute, they could have gone on to ask more interesting questions: what if everybody did it? are we special, to justify it? And the question Pullman didn't dare to ask them: even if we can, should we?

In a way, he did quite right. I don't know that they would have answered the way he wanted. The honest story, I want to call it though I really shouldn't, might be a tragedy.

I'm not quite clear on what you mean with the above. Who is "he?" Pullman? Or "they?" And "ecology" is difficult when you are dealing with multiple worlds. Oh, dear.

-alga

on 5/25/01 8:27 PM, Alice Turner at pei047 at attglobal.net wrote:

I think, though, that the Authority

did create the world (this world--which?); he is the Demiurge, who is nowhere given much credit for anything good.

No. "Balthamos said quietly, '...He was never the creator. He was an angel like ourselves--the first angel, true, the most powerful, but he was formed of Dust as we are, and Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself....He told those who came after him that he had created them, but it was a lie.'" (TAS, 31-32) So the Authority is not the Demiurge, because matter pre-existed him.

Actually, the Authority is "lower" even than that. Dust is not the first conscious matter, as I mistakenly stated in my earlier post; it is brought into existence by conscious living beings. (TAS, 451; this is the passage I couldn't locate in my previous post about how the vanishing of Dust would be the end of consciousness.) So the angels, including the Authority, are dependent for their existence upon fleshly consciousness already existing. Angels are lower, not higher, than humans in Pullman's cosmology, reflecting his high valuation of matter (see TAS, 375; also a passage I can't find at the moment, where somebody talks about how much the angels wish they had bodies).

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then saying, with Nietzsche, that God is dead. Which god, then, and if he is dead, is this not a good thing? (I sound like Martha Stewart.)

As far as I can tell, there is no God in Pullman's world. The Authority dies on pp. 410-11, and yes, it's a very good thing (even for the Authority). And the absence of God also seems to be portrayed as a good thing.

What bothers me far more is that though she makes the choice to part from him ostensibly under Free Will she seems actually to be bullied into it. And I *really* don't like the implication that Original Sin is averted by the physical impossibility of loving young sex. (Much as the kids on the fan fiction site thrill to the romantic sadness of it all.)

[snip]

But I

still do not see why they must be parted except in the more distasteful religious terms. As an adult. I wonder what the kids who love the romantic sadness are thinking. If they are thinking. Pullman is such a good writer that I suspect he has them feeling without thinking. Just Say No is an awfully stupid slogan and I hate to see it applied to Original Sin.

Okay, now I see what you meant by saying you objected to the Eve thing on moral and religious grounds. But I think you have hold of the wrong end of the stick. The cosmic choice, the choice it is Lyra's destiny to make and must make freely, is not the choice to give up Will. It is her choice to love Will and show her love. The Church's values are the opposite of Pullman's, but the Church can read the alethiometer; and according to the Church, it is Lyra's giving into "temptation," not her rejection of temptation, which will lead to the triumph of "Dust and sin." (TAS, 68) And since Dust is good, and the Church is bad, Lyra's "temptation" is good. Recall also that the Dust, speaking through Mary's computer, tells Mary she must "play the serpent," which she does by telling Lyra of her love affair and awakening Lyra's sexuality. Original Sin is not "averted": in Pullman's metaphysics, it doesn't exist. The "Fall" is good, since it leads to greater consciousness: recall the mulefa's story of the serpent.

Granted, Pullman muddies the waters by requiring Lyra and Will to make another decision later, in which they do have to resist "temptation"; but, as I discuss below, if they make the wrong

decision at that point, it will not destroy the world. And reading the end of Chapter Thirty-Five, in which Lyra and Will express their love (TAS 470), it's clear that this is when the world is saved.

Eli wrote:

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That's a lesser story.

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In a way, he did quite right. I don't know that they would have answered the way he wanted. The honest story, I want to call it though I really shouldn't, might be a tragedy.

But the decision that Lyra and Will have to make at the end is not to close up all the windows: the angels tell them to do this. The decision they have to make is to resist the temptations, first for one of them to go to the others' world and have ten years of happiness and then death; and then to use the extra Dust they will create to keep a window open for themselves instead of keeping their promise to the dead. These decisions they do make without being coerced by threats of cosmic disaster.

(I'm not saying I find this part of the book well worked out. Your objections are valid. Also, it makes little sense for Xaphania to first tell Will that there is a way he can learn to travel to other worlds, which will take him a lifetime to learn; and then say that they can't leave any natural windows open because if they did, Will would spend a lifetime searching for it (TAS, 494-495). And come to think of it, couldn't Xaphania leave one natural window open, and then tell Will where it is? I'll have to go back and look at the readerview discussion, because the more I think about it, the stranger Pullman's insistence on their separation seems.)

--Adam

eli+ — 29 May 2001, 19:57 · follows Adam Stephanides

Alice Turner wrote:

In a way, he did quite right. I don't know that they would have answered the way he wanted. The honest story, I want to call it though

I really shouldn't, might be a tragedy.

I'm not quite clear on what you mean with the above. Who is "he?"
Pullman? Or "they?"

I meant "he" to be Pullman, and "they" to be Will and Lyra. That is, I think Pullman brute-forced the ending because if he hadn't, Lyra and Will wouldn't have stayed apart the way he wanted them to.

Eli Brandt | eli+ at cs.cmu.edu | <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~eli/>

eli+ — 29 May 2001, 20:50 · follows eli+

Adam Stephanides wrote:

But the decision that Lyra and Will have to make at the end is not to close up all the windows: the angels tell them to do this. The decision they have to make is to resist the temptations, first for one of them to go to the others' world and have ten years of happiness and then death; and then to use the extra Dust they will create to keep a window open for themselves instead of keeping their promise to the dead. These decisions they do make without being coerced by threats of cosmic disaster.

I'd forgotten the details, so I reread it, and yup, they did. Though as Will said, the first temptation isn't much of one, since how could one suffer the other to do that. And the second is contrived: if Lyra and Will help everyone in their worlds to be wise and kind and patient and curious and other good laundry, it will balance the Dust lost through precisely one (1) window? Pullman did leave them with a decision, but it's so narrowed and so rigged....

(The quibbler in me is now thinking that if the angels can so easily handle the Specter created with each door, you could set up a schedule, whereby 0.1% of the time you close the Hades window and then open one between Will's and Lyra's worlds, maintaining the one-window invariant. I'm consequently picturing the little sign you'd hang up then next to the out-of-order endpoint in Hades.)

Also, it makes little sense for Xaphania to first tell Will that there is a way he can learn to travel to other worlds, which will take him a lifetime to learn; and then say that they can't leave any natural windows open because if they did, Will would spend a lifetime searching for it (TAS, 494-495). And come to think of it, couldn't Xaphania leave one natural window open, and then tell Will where it is?

Yeah. I imagine Pullman wanted the two ways of traveling to stand in for some other pairing he made a moral distinction between -- creative imagination versus fantasy, nah, I really don't know. But whatever the logic is at _that_ end of the metaphor, it doesn't translate to the in-the-story end. We're left with this distinction and no apparent difference.

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