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**Holistic Principle and Motives of Re-Union:
(Re-)Enchantment in Philip Pullman's Religious Fantasy,
*His Dark Materials***

Theses of the Ph.D. Dissertation

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The Topic of the Dissertation

The object of this doctoral dissertation is a fictional oeuvre where deep religiousness is slyly embedded within bold anticlericalism, where stark realism artfully lurks within boundless imagination. It is the fantasy trilogy, *His Dark Materials* (abbreviated as HDM), written by Philip Pullman (19 October 1946-), one of the most influential contemporary writers of English children's and young adults' literature distinguished by a unique fictional world-building ability. The three volumes of saga – *Northern Lights* (renamed as *The Golden Compass* in North America) (1995), *The Subtle Knife* (1997), and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000)¹ – are based on (both canonized and apocryphal) Judeo-Christian mythic narratives, and hence offer readers food for thought about theological-philosophical dilemmas, besides narrating the epic adventures of two preadolescent protagonists, Lyra Belacqua and William Parry. Behind the two protagonists' exciting adventure story, by openly retelling the Judeo-Christian myth of the Fall of Man (with Lyra and William as the second Eve and Adam), Philip Pullman has the unconcealed intention of criticizing Christian religion, doctrines, organizations, and believers, and offering another alternative based on humanism, too. Not surprisingly, because of his impulsive assertions during and after the publication of HDM, Pullman has acquired a reputation of being an uncompromising enemy of God and Christians.

Although Pullman has been severely criticised by conservative Christian groups for radically revising the Judeo-Christian myth of the Fall of Man and the death of 'God,' yet the fictive world he created in his three novels is far from atheism. On the contrary, in the depth, a scholarly reading may uncover a religiosity inspired by Western literary, theological, and philosophical thought. Pullman, an erudite author who had graduated at Oxford University, and used to work as teacher of literature before turning into a full-time writer, created a monumental literary work grounded in a complex network of intertextual references to seminal texts of the Western cultural canon ranging from the Old Testament and the New Testament, John Milton's (1608-1674) *Paradise Lost* (1667), William Blake's (1757-1827) visionary poetry, to the Christian fantasies of J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973) and C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), as well as the writings of Pelagius (AD 360-420), Socrates (469-399 BC), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), just to mention the most important sources of inspiration. The international success of HDM (the Carnegie Medal for children's fiction in 1995, the Swedish government's Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award for children's and youth literature in

¹ In Hungary, the first two novels of HDM trilogy were published in Mária Borbás' translation in 1997 and 2002, respectively. The third novel was published in Zsuzsa N. Kiss' translation in 2003.

2005, the Whitbread Book of the Year award in 2011, and adaptations for radio, theatre, and film) made Philip Pullman a professionally recognized and unanimously canonized writer.

The Aims of the Dissertation

The overall aim of my dissertation is to prove that HDM is a deeply (re-)enchanted literary work of art. Because more and more contemporary Westerners are becoming surfeited with disenchantment (the negation, the transformation or the dissolution, and the secularization and the rationalization of the enchanted world), re-enchantment seems to be the most dominant operative force in the everyday life of the West. According to Christopher Partridge, ‘re-enchantment’ refers to the ongoing transformation of traditional Christian religion into those new forms and new ways of religiousness (non-, even anti-Christian alternative spiritualities) that are becoming more and more attractive to Western people (*Re-Enchantment of the West, Vol. I, 3*). Examples are Oriental religions, Eastern spirituality, mystical religions, Theosophy, New Age spirituality, Paganism, Satanism, Gaia consciousness and eco-spirituality, alternative science and medicine, and contemporary popular myths of UFOs. The nineteenth-century Romantic period in England is considered a (or the first) re-enchanted era (Jenkins). Since the twentieth century, popular culture, which has gained more and more ground to the disadvantage of elite culture, has provided an arena for re-enchanted processes (Nelson). Due to their recycling, re-use, and mixing up of elements from different religious and mythological systems, most fantasy (and science fiction) literary work simultaneously originates from and contributes to re-enchantment.

As Pullman’s humanism manifested in HDM only seemingly excludes the trilogy’s connection to re-enchantment (or contemporary Western occulture), I wish to prove the linkage of HDM to re-enchantment with the principle of *holism*. The word, *holistic*, literally means “of the whole” (Hexham and Poewe 96). According to the holistic theory, parts of a whole are in intimate interconnection with each other. Thus, they can neither exist independently of the whole, nor be understood without reference to the whole. The whole is therefore regarded as greater than the sum of its parts. On this basis, my dissertation works with three hypotheses.

The First Hypothesis of the Dissertation

The inspiration that led to the birth of this paper had come from my early disagreement with Philip Pullman about the basic pattern of HDM. On the basis of his humanism, he interprets his trilogy in the light of the symbol of number ‘Two’ (Pál and Újvári). Consequently, he does not only place emphasis on the motives of splitting, disconnecting, cutting, struggling, and suffering, but he also identifies the explicit theme (the central idea or message) of HDM with growing up, i.e. change, endeavour and motion embedded into the mythic narrative of the Fall of Man (hence the two pre-adolescent child protagonists). While I see the sense of Pullman’s conviction, I would like to prove the *raison d’être* of another interpretation based on the primacy of the symbol of number ‘One.’

And this is my first hypothesis: I aim to prove that as the holistic principle permeates the structure of HDM, the other, implicit theme of Pullman’s trilogy is the ambition to re-unite. (This ambition to re-unite derives from the synthetizing endeavour of Western Esotericism.) HDM seems to propagate that ‘unity is strength.’ Accordingly, the positive consequences of the motives of uniting to the fictive universe of these novels reside in the fact that, as every problem comes from the disconnection of what belongs to each other, the solution is, or will be, the re-connection of what has always belonged to each other.

The Second Hypothesis of the Dissertation

By now a part of the contemporary British literary canon, HDM has attracted the attention of scholars of the humanities ever since its publication. A massive corpus of critical interpretations published between 2001 and 2010 established the research field now called ‘Pullman-studies’ which, in scope and in variety, is still a relatively new and niche phenomenon in academia. Scholarly interpretations of Pullman’s trilogy can be divided into two, more or less overlapping groups in the humanities: literary studies and theology (combined with philosophy).

I wish to localize the hypotheses of my dissertation in the context of the Pullman-reception. While my doctoral dissertation is devoted to a research of the interplay between literature and religion, it aims to reflect on literary studies. For this reason, my dissertation is backed up by two collections of scholarly interpretations: *His Dark Materials Illuminated* (2005) edited by Millicent Lenz and Carole Scott, and *Critical Perspectives on Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials* (2011) edited by Steven Barfield and Katharine Cox. Written

by literary critics, these anthologies deal with literary traditions and trans-textuality (Antique literature, the Bible, John Milton, William Blake, and Heinrich von Kleist), theories of genre (children's literature, young adult fiction, epic, romance and fantasy fiction), and some literary critical theories (feminism, post-colonialism, post-structuralism, and reader-response criticism).

I find it necessary to complete the Pullman-literature with more interpretation. The problem with the academic works of Donna Freitas and Jason King (*Killing the Imposter God: Philip Pullman's Spiritual Imagination in His Dark Materials*, 2007), Hugh Rayment-Pickard (*The Devil's Account: Philip Pullman and Christianity*, 2004), and Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate (*The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11*, 2010) is the narrowness of their research perspective: their focus is only on HDM's interlacement with/inseparability from Christianity.

For this reason, besides of acknowledging the relevance of their interpretation (and building on their views), my dissertation attempts to reveal an indirect linkage between HDM and contemporary alternative spiritualities by systematizing all symbols of oneness (unity of man and the divine, unity of man and woman, unity of man and nature) in HDM. This is exactly my second hypothesis: I wish to prove that with its implicit theme (the ambition to reunite), HDM embodies a criticism of/a reaction to not only mainstream Christian religion, but also alternative spiritualities. To my knowledge, this investigation of the way alternative religious paradigms are promoted as well as opposed in HDM is so new in Pullman-studies that my dissertation will enlarge the critical perspective/reception of HDM in the direction of cultural history.

The Third Hypothesis of the Dissertation

Thanks to his efforts to distance HDM from the Christian fantasies of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, namely *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Pullman is celebrated as an innovator of fantasy genre by scholars of literature. However, the arguments of Millicent Lenz, Burton Hatlen, and Karen Patricia Smith for Pullman's contributions to the fantasies of alternative worlds with HDM are too weak to be convincing enough. In spite of being definitely anticlerical and sacrilegious (but only seemingly atheist, as I show), HDM is not as unconventional as it seems to be at the first (and even the second) reading.

As my third hypothesis, I claim that because of the re-enchanting principle of holism, Pullman's fantasy repeats the conventions of religious fantasy genre. In this way, HDM is not only anti-Christian, but it also presents itself as a pre-Christian religious fantasy.

The Structure and the Methodology of the Dissertation

In the following, the "Theoretical Background" details the concept and development of re-enchantment. Chapter II.1. unfolds Pullman's more open attitude to enchantment (Nietzschean, materialist, agnostic, and egalitarian). Chapter II.2. describes the enchanted roots of the genre of HDM, fantasy (medievalism, Roman Catholicism, German fairy tales, quest myths).

The "Textual Analysis," which deals with the first and the second hypotheses of my dissertation, is devoted to the examination of holism in Pullman's mythopoetic representations (as symbols and motives) of oneness in HDM. With the method of close reading, these representations are compared to their (supposed) origins (in Platonic, Gnostic, and Judeo-Christian mythological systems) to see how Pullman modified the original element for the sake of his own mythopoetic purposes. For this reason, light is shed on the motives of uniting, combining, joining, bonding, cooperating, integrating, and completing. Holism is considered to be a heterogeneous unity because all of these motives are categorized into three dimensions of unity: unity of man and the divine; unity of man and woman; unity of man and nature. In accordance with this, the "Textual Analysis" consists of three chapters in which I explore how characters with mythic attributes support the principles of holism. In Chapter III.1., I study the motives of uniting man and the divine (also man with himself), which are manifested in the mythic figures of the divinity and the demiurge (as Dust and angels), the intermediaries (as daemons), and the world to come (as the Republic of Heaven). In Chapter III.2., I investigate the motives of uniting man and woman, which are connected to the mythic figures of Satan and the Serpent (as Mrs. Coulter and Lord Asriel, Xaphania and Mary Malone), Eve and Adam (as Lyra Belacqua and William Parry). In Chapter III.3., I analyse the motives of uniting man and nature/cosmos, which I identify with the mythic embodiments of Mother Nature (as Dust and the Republic of Heaven), ecological role models (the *mulefa*), the hubris of science (as the subtle knife), and eschatology (as cosmic recycling). These three chapters are organized on the basis of a widening (spatial) perspective: I start with the harmony of the *psyche*, then I continue with the harmony of *society*, and finally I finish with the harmony of the *cosmos*. The examination of the mythopoeia of HDM covers every part of

Pullman's re-interpretation of the quest myth, from the beginning (cosmogony), the present (cosmology), to the end (eschatology).

The "Genre Analysis" offers scope for the elaboration of the third hypothesis of my dissertation. Chapter IV.1. presents how the principle of holism in HDM revives the Romantic and re-enchanted yearning to a desired harmony in the past by the trilogy's textual connections to Romantic literary traditions. Chapter IV.2. reveals the way the principle of holism makes it possible for HDM to function as a moral guide in the life of its readers. Chapter IV.3. highlights that by the principle of holism, HDM propagates the overall importance of the community to the detriment of the individual.

Results and Contributions

The objective of my dissertation was to prove that HDM is both a (re-)enchanted and a (re-)enchancing literary work of art. It fulfils our desire for enchantment by calling attention to the importance of imagination and belief in a secularised material reality because (either religious or irreligious) fantasizing helps us to seek and to find the meaning of existence. My research was backed up by the enchanted attitude of the trilogy's humanist author (Nietzschean, materialist, agnostic, and egalitarian) and the enchanted roots of Post-Modern fantasy genre (medievalism, Roman Catholicism, German fairy tales, quest myths).

The Textual Analysis demonstrated the first hypothesis of my dissertation: as the holistic principle permeates the mythopoetic structure of *HDM*, the primeval ambition to re-unite is the implicit theme of Pullman's trilogy. Because the mythopoeia of HDM functions according to a holistic principle in which each and every part is subordinated to the whole, the reader recognizes in Pullman's trilogy endeavours for balance; the ultimate unity of all things; the abolition of any distinction between subject and object, animate and inanimate, the self and the universe. It turned out that while HDM as a Post-Modern novel builds on gaps, ambiguities, open endings, and ruptures, (re-)connection (represented by Dust, daemons, Republic of Heaven, couples of Lyra and William, Mrs. Coulter and Lord Asriel) predominantly supports the outcome/implicit message of the plot; disconnection (made by churches, the subtle knife, the Abyss and Specters) does not. Disconnection, which offers catharsis for the reader by the combination of fear/pity/fascination, does not fit the trilogy's basic plot pattern focusing on reconnection and union. The temporariness of disconnection means that in the end all disconnection is subordinated to the holistic principle of re-connection (for example, in the spirit of re-union, it is left to the reader's imagination whether

after their death the atoms of Lyra and William will re-join, as a possibility of a happy ending realized in the future). As the disconnection of what belong to each other causes all problems, what have always belonged to each other need to be re-connected sooner or later.

The Textual Analysis also proved the second hypothesis of my dissertation: HDM unintentionally criticises alternative spiritual movements (occulture) with its ambition to re-unite. While holistic thinking is the common point between HDM and alternative spiritualities, there are ambivalent interfaces. The principle of holism prevailing in HDM is incompatible with the ideology of New Age and Satanist movements which centre on the self as separated/isolated from the dogmatic expectations of the community. For example, the Satan-characters of Mrs. Coulter and Lord Asriel, who are represented as self-centred rebellious figures above society, sacrifice themselves in their fight with Metatron for the sake of (cosmic and trans-world) community in the end. At the same time, the principle of holism prevailing in HDM is compatible with Neo-Paganism because of the common similarities based on a criticism of institutional religion, a linkage to nature, and a preference to the community. HDM presents itself not only as an anti-Christian religious fantasy (because of Pullman's negative portrayal of a false god, the hypocrite clergy and their believers), but also as a pre-Christian one (because of the parallel between HDM and Pre-Modern Paganism's interpretation of nature, because of the identity of Dust with Pantheism teaching about the omnipresence of God in all living and non-living entities, and the absence of a dividing line between creator and creatures). By pursuing unity/oneness on every thematic and structural level, Pullman's trilogy is a social critical statement on the fashionable self-centred occultural trends formulated in fictional terms. As a religious fantasy, HDM problematizes the questions of belief/faith by reflecting and commenting on re-enchantment itself. My interpretation of HDM as a criticism of alternative religious movements enters into a dialogue with the seminal research findings of Donna Freitas, Hugh Rayment-Pickard, Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate, and enriches the scope of Pullman-studies. Both the ecocritical and the thanatological analyses of Pullman's texts in my dissertation strive to fill in a gap in the Pullman-studies, and call attention to the contemporary relevance of the HDM on the basis of the observations made by Rosemary Jackson and Peter Hunt about fantasy literature's reflection on current issues and problems in reality.

The Genre Analysis confirmed the third hypothesis of my dissertation: HDM repeats the conventions of the genre of religious fantasy due to the principle of holism. Although an undeniably eternal longing for wholeness, fullness, completeness, and totality is implicit in HDM, it is undeniably lurking there as a leitmotif. Among the trilogy's characters, there is no

exception to the principle of holism according to which under no circumstances can a smaller unit be as important as the greater unit. (Even the most individualistic Satanic figures will eventually submit themselves to the interest of the community that is identical with the principle of holism. However, the prime example of self-sacrifice is the pair of Lyra and William.) In other words, unity is always strength, the interests of the individual should always be subordinated to the interests of the community – or rather, the individual and the community cannot succeed without each other (soul and body/immanence and transcendence/man and the divine, man and woman, man and nature). As a matter of fact, HDM's attitude to Unity has an ambiguous nature: Unity is both desired (due to the motivation of holistic universalism, especially after death) and feared (due to the motivation of ruthless power politics and the manipulation of people represented by the Church). Accordingly, the principle of holism manifests Pullman's pedagogical model: unity and oneness are not based on fellowship with particular institutions, but on cosmological interconnections. As the trilogy's didactic, moralizing, pedagogical suggestion for the communal empowerment by unity is turning out to be more and more desirable in the shadow of an impending climate disaster in the readers' reality (a climate crisis is foreshadowed in HDM because of the catastrophic consequences of disrupting the detachment of different worlds), it becomes necessary that Pullman's readership, which mainly consists of adolescents and young adults, respond particularly sensitively to this message of the novels. By embodying Romantic and re-enchanted longing for an idealised past (primarily in the representation of the *mulefa* people), by providing moral guidance with Post-Modern cosmological didacticism, by advertising the strength of the community, HDM did not simply recycle former fantasy traditions; it is a deeply conventional fantasy fiction in a Tolkienesque sense (significance of comradeship, co-operation for the sake of community). In this way, my research contradicts to the interpretation of Millicent Lenz, Burton Hatlen, and Karen Patricia Smith about Pullman as a kind of innovator of fantasy genre with HDM. In spite of these results, HDM is still an outstanding piece of religious fantasy tradition with a bricolage/patchwork of different belief systems invested with updated meaning. The both re-enchanting and re-enchanted HDM has the potential of functioning as the literature of hope by arguing for beneficial potential of belief, for capacity to change your world by recognising your connection with community, and by encouraging empowerment by altruism, empathy, connectivity. However, it is not like L. Ron Hubbard's science fiction novels which have successfully contributed to the birth of a cult or a new religious worldview/a new form of religiousness (namely, sci-fi based scientology).

The third hypothesis of my dissertation suggests that despite the revolutionary intent (atheism/agnosticism, anti-clericalism, and alternative spiritualities) commonly attributed to the trilogy, HDM is eventually repeating the traditionalist formula of high fantasy. However, this does not decrease the literary values of HDM – especially not its multi-layered meaning. It is truly doubtful whether a literary work is able to reform the fantasy genre without ceasing to be a fantasy. The point is, despite Pullman’s failed efforts to distance HDM from Tolkien’s fantasy tradition (because of his harsh criticism of Tolkien for lacking psychological depth, and of C. S. Lewis’ programmatic religious propaganda and thanatological obsession), the humanism Pullman intended to offer in place of Christianity is convincing enough both to build a fictional reality upon and to exercise impact on readers by reinforcing humanistic value. In the (Post-)Nietzschean Godless universe of HDM, where Man is the beginning and the end, he has the chance of aspiring high: yet, instead of self-centredness, it is his self-sacrifice for the sake of others that elevates him to the place left empty by God. This desirable, even required, aspiration for (self-)sacrifice – as the result of becoming one with the community/universe – is far from hubris. Besides of these, the reader is invited to think of a paradox in connection with HDM as the humanistic literature of hope. No one can get rid of the idea of the self for the sake of the community: while you should ameliorate community by forgetting about yourself, you have to believe in yourself to be able to ameliorate community.

Publications Pertaining to the Topic of the Dissertation

- “Decoding Green Encouragement: Ecocriticism on Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* Trilogy.” Ildikó Limpár ed. *Displacing the Anxieties of Our World: Spaces of the Imagination*. Newcastle upon Tyne (UK): Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017. 200-220.
- “Dreadful Monsters or Self-sacrificing Parents? Satanic Characters in Philip Pullman’s Trilogy, *His Dark Materials*.” *The Round Table, Partium Journal of English Studies*, Volume III (Spring 2013). <http://theroundtable.partium.ro/Current/2013/Literary/ZsuzsannaToth%20Dreadful%20Monsters%20or%20Self-sacrificing%20Parents%20Satanic%20Characters%20in%20Philip%20Pullmans%20Trilogy%20.pdf>.
- “Eve Discovering Adam or the Bloom of Romance: Northrop Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism and Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* Trilogy.” Veronika Ruttkay and Bálint Gárdos eds. *HUSSE 11: Proceedings of the 11th Conference of the Hungarian Society for the Study of English*. Budapest: L’Harmattan Publishing House, 2014. 394-407. http://www.eltereader.hu/media/2014/12/HUSSE_Proceedings_of_the_Hungarian_Society_for_the_Study_of_English_2013_Conference.pdf
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- “I don’t think the world was ever disenchanted. It still is enchanted.’ Excerpts from an Interview with Philip Pullman (Part 1).” *The ESSE Messenger*, Vol. 25.1 (Summer 2016): 147-152. <http://essenglish.org/messenger/web/issue-25-1-summer-2016/>
- “I don’t think the world was ever disenchanted. It still is enchanted.’ Excerpts from an Interview with Philip Pullman (Part 2).” *The ESSE Messenger*, Vol. 25.2 (Winter 2016): 96-105. <http://essenglish.org/messenger/web/issue-25-2-winter-2016/>
- “Mirror-images, or Love as Religion in Philip Pullman’s Trilogy, *His Dark Materials*.” *Romanian Journal of English Studies*, Versita Publishing, Volume 10, Issue 1 (March 2013): 291-299 / 293-301. *De Gruyter Online*. <http://www.degruyter.com/view/j/rjes.2013.10.issue-1/rjes-2013-0028/rjes-2013-0028.xml>
- “(Neo-) Platonism Revived: Literary Imagery of Daemons in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* Trilogy.” *Transregional Iconology 2-3* conference-proceeding, 2016. [Forthcoming]
- “Who are God’s Enemies? Religious Debates on Philip Pullman’s Trilogy, *His Dark Materials*.” Zoltán Peterecz, Judit Szathmári, and András Tarnóc eds. *Trends in American Culture in the Post-1960s Period: Proceedings of the 9th Biennial Conference of the Hungarian Association of American Studies*. Eger: EKF Líceum Kiadó, 2013. 171-184.

Other Publications

- “An Iconological Approach to 19th century Hungarian History Painting.” *The Hungarian Quarterly*, Volume 53, No. 205-206 (Spring 2013): 8-21.
- “Gál, Vilmos. *Hungary at the World Fairs: 1851-2010*. Translated by Richard Robinson. Budapest: Holnap Kiadó, 2010. Pp. 288, illus.” *AHEA: E-Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association*, Volume 5 (2012). <http://ahea.net/e-journal/volume-5-2012>
- “Gregory Erickson: *The Absence of God in Modernist Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 224.” *Helikon Irodalomtudományi Szemle*, Volume 58, Number 3-4 (2012): 633-634.
- “Let’s Keep Our Eyes on What Future Voters Are Reading! A Review of Michelle Ann Abate’s *Raising Your Kids Right: Children’s Literature and American Political Conservatism*.” *Americana, E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary*, Volume VIII, Number 2 (Fall 2012). <http://americanajournal.hu/vol8no2/zstoth-rev>
- “Looking underneath the Surface: A Review of Vincent J. Hausmann’s *Cinema, Technologies of Visibility and the Reanimation of Desire*.” *Americana, E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary*, Volume VIII, Number 1 (Spring 2012). <http://americanajournal.hu/vol8no1/toth-rev>
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