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# The Elementary Particles of Narrative

**Philip Pullman**

It seems to me that it might be interesting to look at the matter of narrative in terms of its smallest possible units, just as physics has studied the elementary particles that make up matter. I don't want to push comparisons too far, and I don't expect to find an exotic zoo of narrative quarks and leptons and neutrinos and so forth, but there are some interesting things going on down there in the realm of the very small. These narrative particles are not lifeless or inert; they can act on what surrounds them, they can carry various kinds of charge, they can spread out like waves and appear in more than one place.

I became interested in looking at these things when I read Mark Turner's fascinating book *The Literary Mind*, in which he discusses the notion of image schemas. An image schema is a recurring skeletal pattern of experience based on the way in which our bodies interact with the world around them. The whole notion of image schemas, and the work of Turner and Mark Johnson (*The Body in the Mind*) and George Lakoff and others, is something I find immensely appealing because of its rootedness in physical experience. Our minds are embodied, and the way we process information is profoundly and inextricably bound up with that fact.

Mark Johnson, in *The Body in the Mind* offers this list of image schemas:

CONTAINER	FULL-EMPTY	LINK
BLOCKAGE	ITERATION	NEAR-FAR
ENABLEMENT	SURFACE	MERGING
PATH	BALANCE	MATCHING
CYCLE	COUNTERFORCE	CONTACT
PART-WHOLE	ATTRACTION	OBJECT
COMPULSION	CENTRE-PERIPHERY	SUPERIMPOSITION
RESTRAINT REMOVAL	SCALE	PROCESS
MASS-COUNT	SPLITTING	COLLECTION

Not all image schemas are dynamic. The notion *container*, for example, which involves the ideas of an inside, an outside, and a boundary between them, exists without reference to time or movement. Those schemas that are dynamic, on the other hand (merging, splitting, iteration, and the like) are good candidates for the elementary particles that larger and more complex narratives are made of. They are almost abstract; they are emotionally neutral and toneless; in their native state, they carry no charge.

What I'm going to say here, however, is not an examination of image schemas as such. Others have done that far better than I could. I'm interested in the way in which we tell stories, and it seems to me that by looking at the tiniest possible events, like those dynamic image schemas, we might learn something interesting.

The little particle of narrative I'm going to consider in this essay is the one pictured here:



Figure 1. Jan Vermeer, *The Milkmaid* 1658–60. The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

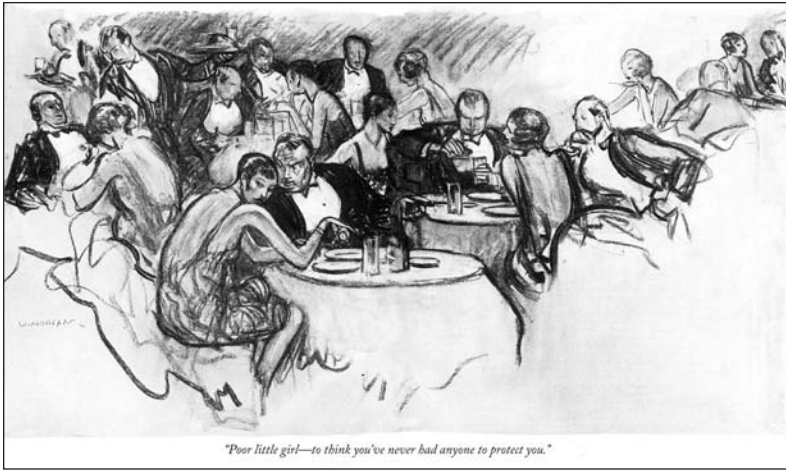


Figure 2. The New Yorker Collection 1926 Wallace Morgan from cartoonbank.com. All Rights Reserved.

It's the action that involves pouring something out of a container. The milk (water, wine, blood) is *here*, and we pour it out. And the next example I want to look at is one where this action is taken purely literally.

There's a lot going on in this not especially amusing cartoon (Figure 2). The scene is a club or a restaurant (there are waiters carrying food and drink) and it's crowded. The stout gentleman in the foreground is flirting laboriously with the young woman at his table, but the action we're concerned with is happening at the table behind him, where another customer is pouring something out of a flask. Why would he need a flask of liquor, when presumably the waiters could bring him any refreshment he asks for? Because the date is 1926, and this is a cartoon from the *New Yorker*, so the scene is an American city during Prohibition. What the narrative particle is doing here is providing background: it's not the main story, but this is the sort of thing you'd see going on in this sort of scene. In fact it's merely corroborative detail, intended to give artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative. It carries so little charge by itself that we need the context (Prohibition) to help us see what it means, but once we have that, it does its job with unobtrusive effectiveness.

In the next cartoon (Figure 3), we can see the narrative particle doing something else.

Because of the way we integrate this little pouring-something-out story into what goes on around it, by means of the effortless work (effortless to our conscious minds) done by all the neuronal secretaries and filing



Figure 3. “Boiling Oil” cartoon from the 21 December 1946 issue of *The New Yorker*. © Charles Addams with permission Tee and Charles Addams Foundation.

clerks and so on in the offices of our brain, we can look at a picture and see beyond the moment that’s being depicted. We can see what’s going to happen next, and what has led up to it. In order to understand this, which we all effortlessly do, we call on our memories not only of what we’ve seen happen when you tip over a container of liquid, but of such things as carol singing—we know why there is a group of people standing in the snow, and what they’re doing, and we contrast the innocent purity of their intentions

with the wicked mischief being planned by Morticia, Gomez, and the rest of the Addams family on the roof; and we understand graphic imagery, too—we interpret the wispy trail of white leading from the container as meaning that this isn't just cold water, it's hot. It's probably boiling oil. And all this resides in a subtle framework of ironical understanding that lets us laugh instead of recoiling in horror. This is a cartoon. It's not real. It's situated in a tradition of mock-Gothickry with which the very name Charles Addams is synonymous. What's more, in this cartoon, unlike the first one, the act of pouring isn't just scenery, it is the very joke itself. And look how important it is to get the timing right. This split-second is the funny one; a split-second earlier or later would not be.

The action of pouring something out of a container is in itself, like every other such elementary particle, emotionally neutral. It can take any tone, any emotional coloring; it can be light-hearted, for example. These photographs from Eadweard Muybridge's great studies of *The Human Figure in Motion* happen to make people laugh when they see them projected on a screen, although that wasn't Muybridge's purpose in taking the pictures. His photographs (Figure 4a-e) in this series showed men and women running, jumping, throwing things, walking, standing up and sitting down, with photographs taken a fraction of a second apart—a great and previously unavailable resource for artists concerned with the human figure. I'm not sure that any artist in previous centuries had ever really wondered what it would look like when you tipped a bucket of water over a young lady in the bath, but just in case, here is the evidence.

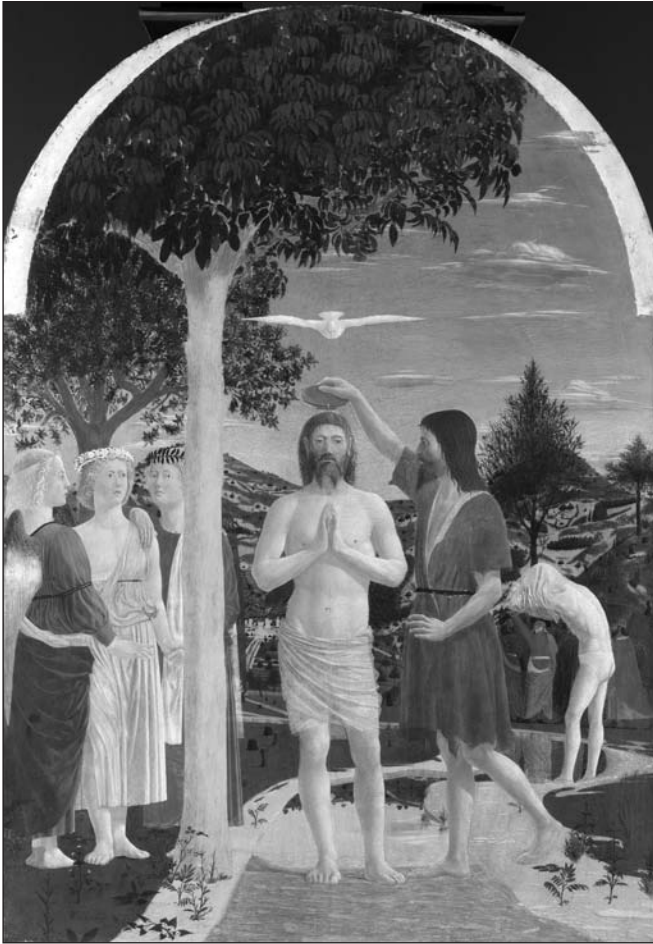
This little sequence, like all the others in Muybridge's great work, is actually hugely significant in the history of storytelling. In Muybridge's studies, and in the work a little later of the Lumière brothers, which were the real beginnings of cinema, it became possible for the first time for pictures to show time passing without the intervention of language. A sequence of pictures could embody and depict time itself, without any words being used. You could make sequences of pictures before then, of course, but people seldom did, because it was so laborious: you had to draw every one separately. This, by comparison, was effortless. Its effect was colossal, truly enormous: cinema, television, comics, they all came out of these early experiments with the photography of motion. And among all the hundreds and thousands of photographs that Muybridge made of living creatures in motion, there was room for a splash.

I mentioned the neutrality, the uninflected tone of the fundamental particle itself, which enables it to lend itself to any emotional purpose. We've seen it being funny, and now here is a complete difference of tone.

I wonder what the intelligent but uninformed spectator would make of Piero della Francesca's painting of *The Baptism of Christ* (Figure 5)? What-



Figures 4a–4e. Eadweard Muybridge, *The Human Figure in Motion*



**Figure 5.** Piero della Francesca, *The Baptism of Christ*. © The National Gallery, London.

ever is happening here, no one could mistake the fact that it is of profound importance; our narrative particle here is about as central as any pictorial element could be in a picture, and because of the surrounding activity, the air of ritual, the calm and dignified purpose of all the participants, the pouring of water here carries a charge of great gravity. Whatever the man is doing as he pours out the water, it isn't a trivial business.

As a matter of fact, here we see the elementary particle acting in a way we haven't seen before. Early Christians, and Eastern Orthodox Christians





Figure 6. Rembrandt, *Belshazzar's Feast*. © The National Gallery, London.

still, believe that only total immersion counts as valid baptism: “If the person to be baptised is so ill that immersion would endanger his life, then it is sufficient to pour water over his forehead; but otherwise immersion must not be omitted,” says Timothy Ware in his book *The Orthodox Church*. The Western churches—or most of them—let the act of baptism by pouring, the elementary particle, as it were, be a small part that stands for the whole. This is a picture of a synecdoche, where the meaning resides not just in the action it depicts, but also in all the implications of what that signifies.

The next picture (Figure 6) is by Rembrandt (about 1635) and it shows the moment when King Belshazzar sees the writing on the wall foretelling that he will be killed and his great city sacked and ruined. Here the little story of ours, our elementary particle, plays a different part in the drama, and has a very different emotional coloring. In his alarm at seeing the mysterious writing appear, the king turns around hastily and knocks over a golden vessel, spilling the wine. Actually there are two inadvertent spillings going on: the woman in the right foreground is also losing the wine in her goblet. Unlike the pouring of water in the Charles Addams cartoon, these accidents are not the central action of the picture. They are

part of the scenery here, like the hip flask in the first *New Yorker* cartoon, but there's a difference: here they function as metaphors as well as scenery. These are the very vessels of gold and silver that Belshazzar's father Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple at Jerusalem, and their presence in the picture, and the spilling of the wine, can be read as standing for excess, for the loss of control and order and temperance: they foretell the spilling of blood that will happen later that very night.

Now this is the point at which the real power of the pouring-out story, begins to become apparent. Because it doesn't only mean what it seems to mean; it can mean something else as well. Some of the elementary particles of matter carry an electrical charge. Elementary particles of story, like this one, can carry a metaphorical charge.

Sometimes that charge is incorporated effortlessly into the drama of the whole picture, the whole story, and sometimes it forms the main subject itself. Only a few years after Rembrandt was painting *Belshazzar's Feast*, the French artist Laurent de La Hyre completed a series of allegorical depictions of the Seven Liberal Arts.

This one (Figure 7) is *Allegory of Grammar* (about 1650). The view of Grammar depicted here is not the one currently held by (for example) the UK government's Department for Children, Schools and Families, which is that grammar is a set of facts about which children must be drilled and tested so that their school can be ranked in order in a league table. The painting shows a more humane proposition, which happens to be expressed in terms of the metaphor of watering something to make it grow: "Like young plants, young brains need watering and it is the duty of Grammar to undertake this." So says Cesare Ripa's seventeenth-century *Iconologia*, the source book for countless allegorical paintings and poems. Education seems to lend itself to variations of this metaphor. When I was training to be a teacher, we were told that in the old days children used to be thought of as empty vessels and it was the teacher's job to fill them with knowledge. "But of course we don't think that any more," we were told very firmly. That wasn't quite the same as this one, which sees the pouring out of water as nurturing something that's already there, rather than filling up a sort of brutish vacancy.

This way of using the elementary particle is all clarity and light—provided, of course, that we understand what it's supposed to signify. When we don't, the light fades into darkness, the clarity into a troubling and ambiguous obscurity, as in this painting by Goya (Figure 8).

A man who might be a priest is pouring what must be oil into a lamp held by a demonic figure, in a setting that seems to teem with darkness and supernatural threat. He's got his hand over his mouth as he looks at



**Figure 7.** Laurent de La Hyre, *Allegory of Grammar*. The National Gallery, London.

us, as if to say that he knows he's taking part in some forbidden ceremony, or making some evil bargain, and wants us to keep silent about it. The picture is full of that eerie witchiness, that grim and enigmatic sense of supernatural dread that Goya was so good at evoking. It could be a scene in the progress of a damnation.

And once again the pouring-out is not mere scenery here, it's the subject of the whole picture. This is all about the filling of the lamp from the jug of oil. The difference between this and the Rembrandt is that although the pouring of the oil into the lamp is rich with significance, we don't know what it means. It's enigmatic and paradoxical. Light is proverbially symbolic of good, and filling a lamp symbolic of care and prudence: we think of the wise virgins, who had enough oil for their lamps, and the foolish ones who didn't, and who missed the wedding feast. Filling a lamp, bringing light, is a good act, and yet here it seems to be haunted by guilt and fear. Is this lamp going to light the way to evil, or to show us things better left unseen? Is that what it means? The metaphorical charge is clearly working, it's clearly doing something, but what is it?



Figure 8 Francisco de Goya, A scene from *El Hechizado por Fuerza* (*The Forcibly Bewitched*). © The National Gallery, London.

Our experience of looking at this picture—mine, anyway—is a useful reminder that these days most people must feel similarly puzzled in front of the Rembrandt. People of my generation, in whose background the Bible figured largely, are at home with Belshazzar; we know what’s going on. But for many people Rembrandt’s painting must be as weird and enigmatic as the Goya—until they read the caption on the gallery wall beside it, or under the reproduction in a book. And when we read the caption to this painting, we learn that in fact it illustrates a scene from a comedy, a play by Antonio de Zamora called *The Forcibly Bewitched*, and

it shows the foolish and timorous Don Claudio replenishing the lamp on which he's been led to believe his life depends. He's a dupe, he's a gull. It's a debatable point whether the explanation diminishes the impact of the picture; for my money, it does. There are some stories that are more rich and powerful unexplained.

By this time our little narrative particle has moved from the realm of the literal, where there is a physical container with something physical in it, water or bootleg hooch, and you pour it out, and there it is, in a story or a picture—into another realm, which is the metaphorical. We project that idea onto activities that are not in any way concerned with literal pots and literal jugs, literal water, or literal wine.

But there's no hard-and-fast division between one kind of picture, or story, and another. We've seen that some of the literal pouring-out can be read metaphorically as well, and as the great scholar of symbols and iconography Ernst Gombrich says, "Our language favours this twilight region between the literal and the metaphorical. Who can always tell where the one begins and the other ends? (125).

This fluidity, this twilight region, is the medium through which these elementary particles lend themselves to metaphor. Consider these expressions, some of which we scarcely recognize as metaphors:

Pouring oil on troubled waters  
 Pour cold water on something  
 She's poured money into the venture  
 A drop in the ocean  
 The accountant poured scorn on the idea  
 She poured her heart out  
 He's feeling absolutely drained  
 Her cup is running over

And finally there is the point at which the full reach of this particular elementary particle is revealed, in the image of *La Source*, the spring, personified by a nymph pouring an endless stream of water from a vessel. Countless artists have depicted this; perhaps the most perfect expression of the idea appears in the painting by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres of 1856 in the Musée D'orsay (Figure 9). Two other ideas arrive at once: a nursing mother, her breasts full of milk, and the image of Christ's blood: "This is my blood of the New Testament, which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins; do this, as oft as ye shall drink it, in remembrance of me" (Matthew 26:28). The essence of the source, the spring, is *something good coming out of something else*—something that is useful, fertilizing, refreshing, nourishing, life-giving.

Because it would be of no value, it would have no meaning, if it were poured out where it was not needed. It comes as a gift, something not



Figure 9 Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *La Source* (1856).

paid for, something given freely, from a fullness to an emptiness—from an ever-replenished abundance to a scarcity—life to the lifeless, drink to the thirsty, water to the parched earth. How often the image of dryness stands for emotional or spiritual death: T. S. Eliot is full of it:

thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season;

(“Gerontion” 75)

And

where the sun beats,

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

And the dry stone no sound of water . . .

(“The Wasteland” 22–24)

And one place where we see this pouring out of refreshing, life-giving blessedness in action is the situation of the artist, the painter, composer, poet, novelist, in need of, and seeking, and sometimes gaining, the favor of the Muse. Work *without* inspiration is possible, of course. The only way to become a professional artist of any sort is to learn how to work efficiently when you're not feeling inspired in the least.

But there are periods of dryness, of deadness, of despair, which are not like the usual drudgery. Then we need something more. We need the waters of the spring Hippocrene, struck by the hoof of Pegasus from the flanks of Mount Helicon.

That wasn't the only spring that did the trick, of course; there were several. There was the Pierian Spring on the slopes of Mount Olympus that did the same: "A little learning is a dangerous thing," says Pope in his "An Essay on Criticism"; "Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring (Book II, 11.15–16)."

Now the business of inspiration is a subject I'm a little superstitious about. Perhaps it's dangerous to talk about it; perhaps the spring will dry up if you make it too public. But I know people are curious about the process of composition, because the question I and other writers get asked more than any other is "Where do you get your ideas from?" Another question from the same center of feeling is, "How can I become inspired?"

And like many other writers, because I don't know the answer to these questions I tend to be unhelpful or evasive about my answers. "Where do you get your ideas from?" they ask, and I say, "I don't know where they come from, but I know where they come to: they come to my desk, and if I'm not there, they go away again."

But let me try and describe briefly what it's like to feel inspired in the way that I think people mean when they talk about inspiration. It feels like discovery, not invention. It feels as if the story I'm writing already exists, in some Platonic way, and that I'm privileged from time to time to gain access to it. The curtain twitches aside for a while; the moon comes out from behind a cloud, and illuminates a landscape that was previously invisible; something happens, and there's a moment or so of clarity in which I see all kinds of possibilities and connections and patterns and correspondences that I never suspected were there in the great clumsy bundle of darkness and confusion that is the story I'm trying to write. I see the way out of a narrative cul-de-sac. I see what I must do in order to bring these two people together. I see a way of resolving the problem of the ending. I see a perfection of form that makes it worth continuing to struggle with the intractable material I have to shape it out of.

It doesn't last very long, this feeling of inspiration, or whatever we want to call it, but it doesn't really have to; all you need to do is see the possibilities, and that cheers you up, and you go back to work with a will.

And it does feel like a blessing, precisely like the sense you get when you're walking in a mountainous bit of country on a hot day and your bottle is empty, and you come across a spring of fresh water. A little poem from the *Greek Anthology* by Leonidas of Tarentum perfectly expresses this sense of refreshment, gratitude, blessedness:

Traveller, don't drink here; the water's warm  
And muddy from the torrent. Climb the hill  
There where the heifers graze, go on a step or two,  
And by the shepherds' pine you'll find a spring,  
A fountain bubbling through the generous rock,  
Its waters colder than the northern snow.

(Book XVI, no.230)

That's what it feels like. And it's always accompanied by a sense that *there's more where that came from*—that somewhere there's an inexhaustible source of strength, truth, meaning, encouragement, blessedness. It feels like being blessed. Something has come from somewhere else to refresh and strengthen me. And it's not given parsimoniously; I'm not offered just a drop or two, and told that's all I can have because they're running short, and other people need it too, and I have to make it last, and I can't expect any more in this financial year. There's always enough. And that feeling itself is a great source of hope and strength. A *source*, you see: the image enters the language. There's the elementary particle again, almost too hard to see, except when we look.

The image of inspiration as a spring, and its connection with storytelling, is vividly present in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's two great poems "Kubla Khan" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." "Kubla Khan" is structured around the image of a river, the sacred river Alph, which runs "Through caverns measureless to man Down to a sunless sea."

In the central section of the poem Coleridge describes the "deep romantic chasm," which is:

A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
By woman wailing for her demon-lover! (14–16).

Now the woman wailing for her demon-lover appears just once, and out of nowhere, and is never more than a figure for comparison. There is an old Scots ballad called "The Demon Lover," which Coleridge must have known (he was well read in the Scots ballads), though in that, the situation between the woman and her demon lover is quite different from the one in Kubla Khan. But the woman here, who is the sort of person you might well see in a deep romantic chasm, is a figure from a story (something must have led her to this; something will follow in consequence) even if



it's a story we don't know. And it's right in this story-haunted place that the river bursts out of the earth:

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,  
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,  
A mighty fountain momentarily was forced: (17–19)

The river makes its way from the fountain where it emerges, *Five miles meandering with a mazy motion*, to the cave where it sinks again. Half-way between them Kubla built his pleasure-dome:

Where was heard the mingled measure  
From the fountain and the caves (33–34)

The river itself is bountiful, life-bringing: along its course

. . . there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,  
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree; (8–9)

When the river has run its five-mile course, and reaches the caverns measureless to man, it “sinks in tumult to a lifeless ocean,” but as it pours down it evokes yet more stories, this time stories of the future: “And ’mid this tumult Kubla heard from far Ancestral voices prophesying war!”

In the final section of the poem, the speaker describes how he once had a vision of an Abyssinian damsel singing and playing a dulcimer, and says:

Could I revive within me  
Her symphony and song,  
To such a deep delight ’twould win me,  
That with music loud and long,  
I would build that dome in air, (42–46)—

In other words, I would speak about it in such a way that my words alone would bring it into being:

That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!  
And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise (47–54)

I wonder about that milk of Paradise: where does milk emerge from? Whose breasts are there in Paradise to give this milk? Whose udders? Is there a sacred cow of Paradise?

In “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” where of course we are at sea for most of the poem—“Water, water everywhere, Nor any drop to drink”—the spring appears at the very moment of the mariner’s greatest torment, and it brings a blessing, literally. The mariner is alone on the still ship, alone with the albatross around his neck, tormented by his guilt and his anguish among the bodies of the dead sailors, and unable to pray for forgiveness. The moon shines on the still sea, and:

Where the ship’s huge shadow lay,  
The charmèd water burnt alway  
A still and awful red. (269–71)

And in the shadow he watches the water-snakes:

Within the shadow of the ship  
I watched their rich attire:  
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,  
They coiled and swam; and every track  
Was a flash of golden fire.

Oh happy living things! no tongue  
Their beauty might declare:  
A spring of love gushed from my heart,  
And I blessed them unaware:  
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,  
And I blessed them unaware.

The self-same moment I could pray;  
And from my neck so free  
The Albatross fell off, and sank  
Like lead into the sea. (277–91)

Love comes as a spring, and makes his redemption possible. He finds his way home and visits the hermit good who lives in the wood, who hears his story and gives him absolution; but ever afterwards he has to tell the story again.

I pass, like night, from land to land;  
I have strange power of speech;  
The moment that his face I see,  
I know the man that must hear me:  
To him my tale I teach. (586–90)

As if his story, as if all stories, were something contained, something carried carefully from here to there, like a vessel full of precious liquid; you don’t want to spill any of it, you don’t want to let it leak away or evaporate fruitlessly, and then when you’ve found the right place you

release it in a controlled flow: “he poured out his story,” we say. I found myself using this image once quite instinctively to someone who wanted me to interrupt my work and go to America to speak at a conference or something: here I am, I said, with this story, this bowl brim-full that I have to carry precariously through a field strewn with obstacles, and you throw more rocks in my path. . . .

Finally, of course, it makes a great difference what it is that’s being poured out. In each of my fairy tales *I Was a Rat!* and *Clockwork, or All Wound Up*, the elementary particle turns up near the beginning and again near the end, with a very different effect in each case. In *Clockwork*, the troubled apprentice Karl is offered a glass of brandy poured by the mysterious clockmaker Dr. Kalmenius, with disastrous results; and when the events of the story have almost run to their end, the young storyteller Fritz, whose tale somehow brought them all into being, pours himself a glass of brandy to drown the guilt and apprehension he feels. The pouring of the strong drink, once near the beginning and once near the end of the story, sets up and reinforces a pattern of feelings to do with desperation, danger, intoxication, confusion, perhaps even oblivion.

In *I Was a Rat!* the old childless couple Bob and Joan open the door at night to discover a lost little boy who claims that he used to be a rat. They take him in, and feed him and wash him with hot water from the kettle (Figure 10).

The kettle, because we’re in a world where modern things like hot water taps would be out of place. In the fairy-tale world, we know what kettles do: they sit on kitchen ranges quietly steaming away, or at the edge of a fire in the hearth. They suggest warmth, cosiness, domesticity, nourishment: “Polly put the kettle on.” So at the beginning of that story Joan pours the hot water into the sink in order to wash the little boy, not only the milky face he’s acquired in the kitchen but the grubby hands he came in with as well. The kettle is a vessel of cleanliness and order, of domestic harmony, in contrast to the wild outside, where rats live among the dirt.

And at the very end of the story, after all Roger’s adventures, after we’ve seen him brought almost to the point of death by the greed and fear and ignorance of those outside, only to be rescued by a princess and restored to his new-found family, the three of them are in the kitchen once more. Roger is telling Bob and Joan what he’s learned about the difference between rats and people:

“You have less trouble being a rat,” he says, “except for being sterminated. I wouldn’t want that. It’s hard being a person, but it’s not so hard if they think you *are* a person. If they think you ain’t a person, then it’s too hard for me. I think I’ll stick to cobbling.”



Figure 10. Kettle (of the kind imagined for *I was a Rat*) from *Puzzlecap's Amusing Riddle Book* (Devonport: Samuel and John Keys, C. 1835) as reproduced in Iona and Peter Opie, *The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book* (Oxford UP, 1973):61.

“That’s a wise decision,” said Bob. “There’s always a demand for good craftsmanship. If I hadn’t made them slippers, well, I don’t like to think what would have happened.”

The kettle came to the boil, so Joan made them all a cup of tea, and Bob toasted some cheese, and they all sat down comfortably around the hearth. The world outside was a difficult place, but toasted cheese and love and craftsmanship would do to keep them safe. (Pullman, *I Was a Rat*, 64–65)

And once again the image recurring makes a pattern that reinforces the feeling. The kettle, and what you do with it, what you pour out of it, is a signifier of all that safety and warmth and nurturing domestic happiness.

To sum up, then, we’ve followed this little narrative pattern, this elementary particle, through various appearances and transformations and contexts, and seen some of the ways in which it works. Those who know *His Dark Materials* can find yet another elementary particle underlying that long story, and that’s the one in which two things that are closely bound together split apart and go their separate ways. That little pattern turns up over and over again in the story—quite without my intending it to; I only saw it there when the story was finished.

And finally I should explain why I’ve found these little elementary particles of narrative so rich and rewarding to think about. It’s because

of their groundedness in physical experience, in the actions and sensations of our bodies as we interact with the world—as we pour water out of a jug, or as we walk along a path, or as we open a door and go into a room: simple basic physical experiences that underlie so many metaphors and so much understanding. If I could name one idea I'd like readers of *His Dark Materials* to retain when they finish the book, it would be the emphasis the story puts on the value and centrality of bodily experience. The angels envy the vivid and intense sensations that we have through our nerves and senses. As Will says at the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, “Angels wish they had bodies. They told me that angels can’t understand why we don’t enjoy the world more. It would be sort of ecstasy for them to have our flesh and our senses (439)”

We need to remember that we are not a ghost in a machine; we don’t sit in our heads like an astronaut in a command module. We are our bodies. Body and mind are one. Or as William Blake put it, “Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that calld Body is a portion of Soul discerned by the five Senses” (“The Voice of the Devil,” *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 34).

As I say, there are many fundamental particles of this kind, and it would be possible to say a great deal about each one of them; but I thought it better in this paper just to focus on one.

*Philip Pullman’s new book, Once Upon a Time in the North is a prequel to His Dark Materials trilogy—the series that revitalized the genre of fantasy for the twenty-first century. He is also the celebrated author of fantastic illustrated short novels and stories including I Was a Rat! and Clockwork, or All Wound Up.*

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