

# Forms of Death in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea*, and Garth Nix's *Old Kingdom* Novels

**Alice Mills**

## **Introduction**

As soon as fantasy writers make factual statements about the nature of their fictional worlds, limits come into play. If this is a world ruled by one omnipotent deity, it is going to be tricky to introduce the Greek gods later on; if magic works by a certain set of rules, it cannot work by conflicting rules without the need for justification; if ghosts exist, some explanation will be required when the narrator asserts that no-one comes back from the dead. This paper explores and evaluates ways in which three contemporary fantasy writers set up and dissolve such limits with regard to the after life. Each of these writers has produced an extended, multi-volume fantasy opus amply establishing rules and limits for its fictional world or worlds: Ursula Le Guin in her six-volume *Earthsea* series, Philip Pullman in his trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, and Garth Nix in his *Old Kingdom* series of novels (four volumes to date). Each of these writers sets up what I shall term a 'first death' and a 'second death'; the second death is presented in their fictions as a final stage of being while the first death, although it may initially seem permanent, turns out to be transitional. Each of these fictions ultimately dissolves the limits that seem to have been set up in the first death, but their strategies of release are arguably not always as liberatory as claimed.

## **Death in Garth Nix's *Old Kingdom* Series**

An elegant example of this dissolution of limits is to be found in the third volume of Garth Nix's *Old Kingdom* series, *Abhorsen*.<sup>1</sup> In this series Nix establishes an *Old Kingdom* where magic works (in opposition to the technologically-powered country to its south) and where the spirits of the dead travel down nine stretches of the river of death before reaching a point in the ninth precinct from which they cannot return. This point of no return marks what I am calling the 'second death', with the river functioning as the

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<sup>1</sup> Garth Nix, *Abhorsen* (London: HarperCollins, 2003).

topography of the first death. The dead retain consciousness as they traverse the river and, provided that their bodies still exist in the world of the living, the evil dead can exert their will to reverse their own journey down the river and re-emerge among the living as magically-enhanced revenants; they can also force other dead spirits to return to become their zombie-like slaves. In Nix's fantasy world, the Abhorsen's hereditary task is to patrol the region of the first death and, while still alive, to traverse the river of death in order to force would-be revenants and other malign magical beings to travel beyond the ninth gate. Alone among human beings, the Abhorsen can return against the river's flow without causing his or her body to become deformed and bestialised, as happens to the evil dead. Nix takes until late in the third volume fully to describe the nine stretches of the river and their gates, as the Abhorsen Sabriel and her successor, Lirael, perform their necromantic duties. Until this point, the novels sit comfortably within the genre of Gothic horror. The forces of good are opposed to the forces of evil with little ambiguity or complexity, and the figure of the Abhorsen is a memorable reworking for good of the conventionally wicked necromancer, lord of the evil dead. The bestialisation of the revenants, worsening the further down the river they have gone, implies a hierarchy of being, with humanity superior to all other animals. The first eight stretches of the river with their gates and the mystery of what lies beyond the ninth gate invoke the nine circles of Dante's hell, whose inhabitants within each deepening circle are guilty of worse sins.<sup>2</sup> From all this evidence, the reader can be forgiven for extrapolating a hell awaiting the monstrous evil dead and a heaven awaiting the good dead when they reach the second death, the place of no return, beyond the ninth gate.

At the end of volume one, Sabriel travels too far down the river of death while attempting to expel her great enemy, Kerrigor. She can only return to the world of the living with the help of her dead Abhorsen ancestors who speak to her and give her the strength to return. They prove able to lift her body even though they have all passed the ninth gate and their own earthly physical bodies have long been consumed by fire or decay. Nix is not, however, concerned in the *Old Kingdom* series to explore the physicality of this afterlife, only its alignment with good. This episode suggests a duality at play not only among the living (good versus bad) and those in the first death (good attempting to reach the second death, bad attempting to avoid it) but also in the realm of the second death. If there exist shining figures of the good dead, able to perceive and rescue their descendants (analogous to Christian saints), there are likely also to exist souls in torment beyond that mysterious ninth gate,

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<sup>2</sup> Kaufmann Kohler, *Heaven and Hell in Comparative Religion with Special Reference to Dante's Divine Comedy* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), pp. 134-148.

especially given the Dantean overtones of Nix's topography. Dante is invoked again in Nix's first volume when Sabriel summons a temporary guide from the second death, who manifests as a shining and unblemished figure of light above the river of death. While acknowledging that this being may be no more than a magical protection left by her dead mother, Sabriel believes that it is truly her mother in spirit. It seems, then, that the final death is not utterly irreversible for Abhorsen and their kin.

This speculation is confirmed at the end of *Abhorsen* when Nix reveals the long-delayed secrets of what lies beyond the eighth gate. Here Lirael finds herself drawn up to the starry heavens where her loving ancestors await her beyond the boundary of the ninth gate. Unlike the wicked dead, the living Abhorsen is able to resist this pull and choose to return to the world of the living: this is not a form of personal immortality but the ability to choose her own time of death (provided she still has a living body to return to). There exists, then, one anomalous family that can go to and fro between life, first death, and second death without penalty or the usual limitations. Nix counters possible objections to this breach of the afterlife rules by stressing the cost of acting as Abhorsen; this self-sacrificial role (with overtones, in Sabriel's case, of the sacrificial death of Jesus) is the opposite of the self-seeking pursuit of personal immortality by the wicked traversers of the river of death.

More surprising is the revelation of what happens to the dead at the ninth precinct of the river. The wicked Hedge is drawn up to the starry heavens despite himself: it seems that, despite the book's echoes of Dante, no hell awaits him with an eternity of torment. Instead, as with all the dead, the limitations of the first death dissolve and he is assumed into "the overwhelming feeling of peace and rest offered by the stars".<sup>3</sup> Hedge arrives at this stretch of the river burning with inner hell-fire but, "with a single glimpse of those beckoning stars, it was all stripped away".<sup>4</sup> Such, it appears, is the eventual fate of all human beings, however evil their deeds have been on earth.

In creating these final elements of the afterlife, Nix provides a release not only for his characters, but also for many limiting assumptions a reader may have brought to the book, whether derived from the conventions of the Gothic genre or from religious teachings. Specifically, Nix's heaven repudiates the representation of heaven by Augustine, Aquinas and other Church fathers as an abode of the virtuous dead who take delight in perceiving the torments of the damned below. Nevertheless, it subscribes to the Christian ideal of perfection in these ultimate moments of release.

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<sup>3</sup> Nix, *Abhorsen*, p. 366.

<sup>4</sup> Nix, *Abhorsen*, p. 375.

Lirael despatches the evil Hedge to the starry heavens:

Now, with a single glimpse of those beckoning stars, it was all stripped away. Hedge's hands fell back. Starlight filled his eyes with glowing tears, tears that slowly quenched his internal fires.<sup>5</sup>

Nix, it is now evident, is espousing the value of perfection (though not the Christian notion of strenuous spiritual effort on the part of the soul to become admissible to heaven) and suggesting a spiritual force that reshapes the dead from the outside.<sup>6</sup> To become acceptable as a denizen of the starry heavens is forced upon all souls eventually at the boundary of the first death, however hard and long they may struggle against this destiny. Indeed, perfection is attained by an irresistible force that strips away the imperfections of the soul. So delightful is this moment of release after three volumes of Gothic menace that the presuppositions within it may not register with a reader – but that is exactly the nature of presuppositions and limiting beliefs, that they appear to be necessary truths.

### **Death in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* Trilogy**

Nix explores the afterlife no further than this, nor does he provide evidence either for or against the existence of a god who might preside over the starry heavens of the second death. Apart from the minor mystery of the Abhorsens' privileges before and after death, Nix's model of first death and second death is ultimately simple, and as such it can help reveal some of the difficulties that arise in Pullman and Le Guin's versions of the afterlife. Philip Pullman's trilogy, also positing a double afterlife of first death and second death, is far more oriented towards theology. In this universe there exists a host of angels and their nominal ruler, the senile Jehovah. Though this self-styled god and his angels have long busied themselves with war in the worlds of the living, at some time in the past Jehovah constructed a first death, a death-camp region of torment for "every ... kind of conscious being who had ever been punished by the Authority with exile and death".<sup>7</sup> From this death-camp no release into a second death proves possible until Pullman's hero and heroine, Will and Lyra, open the way to the dissolution of dead spirit into everything that is. These children are no necromancers and they make only one arduous journey across the mournful plain of the first death in the course of Pullman's third volume, *The Amber Spyglass*, though they are promised a second journey when their

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<sup>5</sup> Nix, *Abhorsen*, p. 375.

<sup>6</sup> Compare the stripping away of Eustace's dragon skin by Aslan in C. S. Lewis' *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), which is preceded by Eustace's change of heart.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass* (London: Scholastic Children's Books, 2000), p. 337.

bodies finally die. Lyra's freeing of the dead is her destiny as much as the Abhorsens' all too frequent duty of patrolling of the river of death in Nix's work.

So finely imagined is Pullman's first death where human spirits cower and whimper under the verbal lash of the harpies, and such is the joy of these spirits' ultimate release, that it takes some effort on the reader's part to stand back from the narrative and consider the limits set by Pullman on the afterlife and the life of the living. While Nix's characters are given two components to their being, body and spirit or soul, Pullman's humans have four, not counting the Dust generated by their consciousness:<sup>8</sup> the body which dies a material death, the ghost which goes on to the underworld of the first death, the internal soul or external daemon which dissolves into everything on death, and the personal Death which is born with the person, accompanies her or him throughout life and can function as a guide to the point of embarking on the ferry of death. The rules governing which species has these four parts and this afterlife and which species simply dissolve into everything on death are not clear. The mulefa spirits can be found in the first death but the sentient, speaking polar bears have a manufactured soul in the form of their body armour, and on death they dissolve into all that is. This is puzzling information, given that the polar bears are now warring against Jehovah's angels and should therefore be consigned to his prison camp first death (it also raises a further query as to what happens to the armour when a bear dies: are these souls transferable?)

There are further oddities about the explanation of the first death put forward by the angel Balthamos early in the third volume: "It is a prison camp", said Balthamos, "The Authority established it in the early ages".<sup>9</sup> How is it that the pseudo-god Jehovah has power to modify the afterlife and enforce its laws, since there is no indication that the victorious rebel angels have the power to modify it back to its original state and remove the death-camp? If Jehovah's purpose was to punish his enemies, why not condemn to its hell the rebel angels and any other species that oppose him? Why should these angels dissolve on death into panpsychic union with all? And if some form of spiritual testing is deemed necessary, once Lyra and Will have made a passage through the first death to the second death, why does this time of testing apply only to those species who had been consigned to the first death by Jehovah? Why not,

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<sup>8</sup> Pullman mentions also the very rare case of a human being who becomes an angel on death, an angel which can then itself die and on death dissolve into all that is. Other angels were created out of concentrated Dust, that product of consciousness.

<sup>9</sup> Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, p. 35.

for instance, include sentient polar bears, who are as capable of living an unstoried life as humans are?

Further questions crowd around Lyra and Will's heroic actions in placating the harpies and releasing the spirits of the dead from the first death. Where do these harpies, creatures from classical Greek myth, fit into a universe nominally ruled by a senile parody of the Old Testament ancient of days? Were they created by Jehovah? Why can they not be released from the terrain of the first death just like the spirits they so long tormented? Having adapted details from the classical Greek and Virgilian underworlds to build his first death, a place of sorrowful multitudes, Pullman follows Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in transforming the tormentors of the dead into careful guardians – but this entails the continuation of the first death in his fantasy universe, while Aeschylus's Athene promises the vengeful goddesses a place of honour among the living.

The final outcome of Will and Lyra's descent to the underworld can be questioned further. Will has to travel a long way across the terrain of the first death to find a place higher up where his knife can cut through above the surface of another world, and it makes good sense for all the multitudes of the dead currently suffering in the first death to find release through this opening; but why should Will not also open a way of release for the newly dead before their ferry trip, their descent to the death-camp, so that the first death can utterly cease to be? Freeing the tormented dead is a moving act of compassion, but why allow a place of testing to remain where some of the dead will still be doomed to the harpies' torments? The main problem with the outcome Pullman provides for the dead is that, while proclaiming the rightness and joyfulness of panpsychic dissolution, he allows a form of spirit torture to persist, if only for some unstoried beings. The prison camp has not been fully liberated. Torture is still endorsed.

The second death of blissful release in Nix's fantasy includes one anomaly, the special powers of (or grace afforded to) the dead Abhorsens to repass its boundary and help their living kin:

Something grabbed her arms and legs, picked her up out of the water and set her down on her feet.

"This is not your time", said a voice, a voice echoed by half a hundred others.

Sabriel blinked, for there were many shining human shapes around her, hovering above the water... Everyone was an Abhorsen.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Pullman's second death of blissful release is also anomalous. The dead released from their prison camp rejoice as their identities dissolve into all that there is, flower, stone or star:

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<sup>10</sup> Garth Nix, *Sabriel* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 326.

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“This is what’ll happen”, she said, “and it’s true, perfectly true. When you go out of here, all the particles that make you up will loosen and float apart, just like your daemons did. If you’ve seen people dying, you know what that looks like. But your daemons en’t just *nothing* now; they’re part of everything. All the atoms that were them, they’ve gone into the air and the wind and the trees and the earth and all the living things. They’ll never vanish. They’re just part of everything... part of everything alive again”.<sup>11</sup>

This idea (guaranteed to be true because it comes via the alethiometer) of the particles of ‘you’ permeating all things, sits uneasily with the concept of specific individual entities reuniting with one another after death. One or two of Pullman’s dead humans seem able to retain their identity as both daemon and spirit/ghost, so that they can choose the location of their second death particles and reunite the two parts of themselves:

the last of Lee Scoresby passed through the heavy clouds and came out under the brilliant stars, where the atoms of his beloved daemon Hester were waiting for him.<sup>12</sup>

And, more of a hope than a guarantee:

“...when I find my way out of the land of the dead I’ll drift about for ever, all my atoms, till I find you again...”

“I’ll be looking for you, Will, every moment, every single moment. And when we do find each other again we’ll cling together so tight that nothing and no one’ll ever tear us apart. Every atom of me and every atom of you...”<sup>13</sup>

Prior to their release, all the human dead (and presumably also the non-human) in the underworld of the first death long inconsolably for their lost daemons or souls, as the living Will, Lyra and spies long for their separated daemon and souls. Why should all but a few be denied the consolation of conscious reunion, or why should any be afforded it? Perhaps, like Nix’s Abhorsens, the shaman Lee and the children have gained powers beyond all others, but the fine pathos of the children’s promise to one another that I have just quoted is undercut by the clear account of spirit dispersal earlier in the book, as translated by Lyra from the alethiometer.

Within the land of the first dead, Pullman is careful to acknowledge the presence of dead spirits belonging to all the species that oppose Jehovah and his angels (perhaps the absence of polar is due to their having only very recently taken up arms against the ancient of days); but by the time Lyra and Will are leading the hosts of the dead through difficult terrain towards freedom,

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<sup>11</sup> Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, p. 335.

<sup>12</sup> Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, p. 440.

<sup>13</sup> Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, p. 526.

the non-human no longer seem to be in evidence. Every dead spirit is now described as human, with arms, legs and breasts. This can be read as a covert organisation of the first death dead into a hierarchy in which humans are the most important.

A more troubling kind of hierarchy can be discerned among the living daemons and also, potentially, in the internal souls of humans from Will's world, given the temporary manifestation of his soul as an external daemon. Naomi Wood comments that:

Pullman suggests the same chain-of-being value hierarchy that Lewis assumes; thus "higher" servants have more impressive dog daemons than "lower" ones do, and you can tell much about individuals' personality by what kind of daemon they have... This suggests that you can perceive a person's substance just by looking at them.<sup>14</sup>

These daemons, having attained fixed form, function among Lyra's people as an embodiment of someone's personality and, at least for some, give a good indication of their likely occupation. Such a sorting process has overtones of Plato's *Republic* but with no allowance given to the prospect of intellectual or moral development during an adult's lifetime. While for Lyra and her people, childhood permits delighted speculation as to what form the daemon will eventually settle to, the concept of a character and occupation unalterable throughout one's adult life may not appear so appealing to the reader. There appears to be no prospect, for instance, for lower servants to move up the hierarchy and become upper servants, let alone to move out of the servant class. Thus the novels' marvellous invention of a second self, an intelligent, loving, life-long daemon friend, can be understood as gilding a set of limitations for the duration of each character's adult life.

For the remainder of this paper I shall be terming this kind of limited state of being among the living, the third death. In *His Dark Materials*, a more obvious candidate for the third death than the fixed form daemon is the doom awaiting all worlds into which openings have been cut, should all their Dust of consciousness be sucked away; but this danger is in process of being removed by the end of the trilogy. What persists as an unchanging feature is the fixed daemon (and presumably the fixed form soul). The animal hierarchy revealed in these settled forms is comparable to the second death animal hierarchy of the evil dead in Nix's *Old Kingdom* books, in which it is evil will and the distance that the dead soul travels down the river of death and back again, that determine its degree of bestialisation. Bestialisation may seem too harsh a term

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<sup>14</sup> Naomi Wood, 'Paradise Lost and Found: Obedience, Disobedience and Storytelling', *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 32, no. 4 (2001), p. 250.

to apply to Pullman's cherished daemons, but even the most delightful of fixed states, as Pullman's much-quoted Blake argues, is a prison for the human spirit.

### **Death in Ursula LeGuin's *Earthsea* Novels**

Pullman acknowledges his debt to the *Oresteia*, and his depiction of the sad crowd of ghosts or spirits who have been ferried across to a featureless underworld borrows more generally from Greek myths of the underworld. Ursula Le Guin borrows from the same source in her *Earthsea* books when she describes the quiet city of the dead who can no longer remember who they were or recognise one another:

For he saw the mother and child who had died together, and they were in the dark land together; but the child did not run, nor did it cry, and the mother did not hold it, nor even look at it. And those who had died for love passed each other in the streets. The potter's wheel was still, the loom empty, the stove cold. No voice ever sang.<sup>15</sup>

This afterlife, its dry terrain as desolate as Pullman's, is marked off from the world of the living by a low wall of stones and is inhabited only by the human dead.<sup>16</sup> For the first three volumes, it is represented as all that the afterlife can offer a human being. Wizards make a long dusty descent whenever they attempt to restore the dying to life. Like Nix's necromancers, these wizards must take care not to join the dead irreversibly, and they too can occasionally heal someone who has not travelled too far.

Book by book in the *Earthsea* series, Le Guin challenges and dismantles the limiting beliefs set up in her first volume,<sup>17</sup> but it is not until the fifth novel, *The Other Wind* (last in chronological sequence of events) that this afterlife is revealed to be only a first death, a prison camp imposed on the human dead. In volume three, *The Farthest Shore*, a door is opened between the worlds of living and dead by a wizard seeking immortality, and the effects of opening the barrier are calamitous. Magic is sucked out of *Earthsea*, and the living become the living dead:

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<sup>15</sup> Ursula Le Guin, *The Farthest Shore* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975[1973]), p. 190.

<sup>16</sup> William Gray notes in passing the likely debt Pullman's version of the first death owes to that of Le Guin in his 'Pullman, Lewis, MacDonald, and The Anxiety of Influence', *Mythlore* (2007), p. 5: "More significantly, the ghosts escaping from the world of the dead (which incidentally seems to owe something to the conclusion of Ursula Le Guin's *The Farthest Shore*) are seen to achieve a kind of blissful release in a moment of mystic pantheism that is again rather hard to reconcile with a rigorous this-worldly atheism".

<sup>17</sup> Le Guin's lecture, 'Children, Women, Men and Dragons', published as *Earthsea Revisioned* (Cambridge: Children's Literature New England, 1992), documents her rethinking of *Earthsea* limits up to 1992.

he knew in his heart that reality was empty: without life, or warmth, or colour, or sound: without meaning. There were no heights or depths. All this lovely play of form and light and colour on the sea and in the eyes of men, was no more than that: a playing of illusions on the shallow void.<sup>18</sup>

The breach between life and death and its effects have similarities to the multitude of openings between the worlds in *His Dark Materials*, each of which sucks out the precious Dust and threatens to destroy that world's potential for consciousness. The Archmage Ged's supreme act of self-sacrifice, risking his life and spending all his powers on closing the rift, is akin to Will and Lyra's self-sacrifice as they enable the lethal openings between worlds to be closed; but for Ged, at the end of the third volume, the silent city and the dry land are still the only afterlife and the their enclosure is represented as essential, for the sake of all the living.<sup>19</sup>

*Tehanu* explores what at first seems a personal, private, unique third death endured by Ged when he returns to the world of the living and retreats to his home island, now that his powers as a wizard have gone. This book of *Earthsea* is in part a moving account of how Ged comes to realise that his previous life as a wizard imposed on him unnecessary limits, in particular that of celibacy, and that he had unwittingly invested his whole sense of self-worth and identity into wizardry. It is not only Ged himself who makes this mistake: with few exceptions, the entire society of Earthsea agrees upon a hierarchy of being for humans, from Archmage to worthless woman. Eventually, with Tenar's help, he finds that what had seemed a lamentable state of living death can be a life of increasing fulfilment and wholeness.

By the conclusion of *The Other Wind*, not only have the presuppositions of Earthsea's wizards been called into question, but the dry land afterlife has been entirely reinterpreted as a death-camp, a self-imposed first death:

“... They made a wall which no living body could cross, neither man nor dragon. For they feared the anger of the dragons. And their arts of naming laid a great net of spells upon all the western lands, so that when the people of the islands die, they would come to the west beyond the west and live there in the spirit forever.

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<sup>18</sup> Le Guin, *The Farthest Shore*, p. 134.

<sup>19</sup> Ged's impassioned statement to Cob at the end of *The Farthest Shore* cannot be reconciled with this storyline, since here he asserts that at least one of the human dead “is the earth and sunlight, the leaves of trees, the eagle's flight. He is alive. And all who ever died, live; they are reborn, and have no end, nor will there ever be an end”, p. 197) Here, well before the breaking down of the barrier in *The Other Wind*, there appears to be nothing holding the human dead in the first death; and yet, for the remainder of the book, all the human dead linger in the silent city.

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“But as the wall was built and the spell laid, the wind ceased to blow, within the wall. The sea withdrew. The springs ceased to run. The mountains of sunrise become the mountains of the night. Those that died came to a dark land, a dry land”.<sup>20</sup>

As in Pullman’s *The Amber Spyglass* (and possibly under his influence), the dead can be released from the prison of the first death when the living make a breach in their enclosing stone, and once released, most of these dead dissolve into a “wisp of dust, a breath that shone an instant”.<sup>21</sup> These folk, according to Alder (who knows more than most about the afterlife), have been yearning to unite with the earth again in true death, the state that I have been terming the second and final death. Yet when Alder dies and rejoins his dead wife, they are said to have “crossed together into the sunlight”.<sup>22</sup> It remains unclear whether these and all the other human dead released from the first death gain a place on the other wind as joyful conscious beings with individual identities or whether their freedom amounts to a dissolution of their self into all that there is.

It is likely, however, that these humans, at least, now cease to exist as individual entities, as the reader has been told of an initial bargain between Earthsea humans and dragons in which the humans foreswore immortality. The last pages of the novel are crowded with versions of this story and information about other choices made by other groups. The dragons chose immortality, “a timeless realm, where the self might be forever”,<sup>23</sup> the afterlife realm that would be the second death in my schema, available to dragons both alive and physically dead. There is another story that only those who know the language of the making can attain immortality, but it is not clear whether this applies to dragons as well as humans. There are some human beings who believe that on dying they are reincarnated in this world and another group that have lost the language of the making and cease to exist when they die.

It remains unclear just what the afterlife is for humans, now that the first death has been dismantled. Do those whose ancestors renounced the language of the making now have an opportunity to reverse that choice and gain immortality? Is there now any prospect of human and dragon sharing, in death if not in life, the joyful immortality of the other wind? Or is that second death forever lost to humans because of the bad choices of their ancestors? Or is another fateful choice in the making? The dragon Kalessin puts a final choice to all dragons living in the world of human beings, and also to the last of all human-dragons:

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<sup>20</sup> Ursula Le Guin, *The Other Wind* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), pp. 227-228.

<sup>21</sup> Le Guin, *The Other Wind*, p. 239.

<sup>22</sup> Le Guin, *The Other Wind*, p. 239.

<sup>23</sup> Le Guin, *The Other Wind*, p. 227.

Choose. Come with me to fly on the far side of the world, on the other wind. Or stay and put on the yoke of good and evil. Or dwindle into dumb beasts. 'And at the last Kalessin said: "The last to make the choice will be Tehanu. After her there will be no choosing. There will be no way west. Only the forest will be, as it is always, at the center".'<sup>24</sup>

If there is to be no more communication between this world and the other wind, is all hope now lost for humans to alter the terms of their ancestors' mistaken choices? It all depends on whether, when Kalessin says, "There will be no way west," his statement applies to dragons only or to all living beings. If this second reading is adopted, the humans of this world (disregarding the minor mystery of whether some get reincarnated and others remain doomed to extinction of being) have freed their dead from a first death prison but forever lost the second death to which they once had access, the blissful other wind.

The whole living human world of Earthsea, its magery and witchcraft, its skills and arts, the finding and making of self, its intelligence and ability to love, are all in this reading imprisoned in a third death-in-life. This is not the obvious death of the spirit, the sucking out of imagination and hope, to be found elsewhere in the books I have been discussing. *The Other Wind*'s third death is subtler and sadder than these. It consists of a life that could have had the glory of *draconitas*.

On the other hand, there are a couple of enigmatic sentences at the end of the book that can be read to indicate that the prison-house of the third death may not be completely inescapable. The wizard Sepell, watching Kalessin fly free, comments, "Come, friends... It's not yet our time to go free", and when Kalessin is directly asked if Tehanu will return, he remains silent.<sup>25</sup> Into his silence we can, if we choose, read hope. All of the writers whom I have discussed, in their different ways, give the reader the responsibility of choice. Nix alerts readers to expectations derived from Gothic horror or Christian doctrine. Pullman and Le Guin demonstrate the constructed nature of the first death and invite the reader to scrutinise afresh religious teachings about the afterlife. How far, these writers challenge us to consider, do we build for ourselves, or allow others to build for us, a death-camp after life, a death-camp life?

## Conclusion

Pullman, Nix, and Le Guin all represent human life as constructed and constricted on the basis of assumptions taken as truth, and the first death as a

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<sup>24</sup> Le Guin, *The Other Wind*, p. 152.

<sup>25</sup> Le Guin, *The Other Wind*, p. 241.

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matter of inadequate or false understanding. While Nix arguably inserts the Christian value of perfection into the process of moving from the first death to the second death, Pullman and Le Guin propose the possibility of becoming more whole in two ways, firstly by discarding such limiting beliefs, arduous though the process is, and secondly by attaining a blissful afterlife. These solutions invite comparison with Plato's myth of love in *The Symposium*. Here, each human being is a severed half of a once whole person, destined to a yearning for their lost half. In this myth love is the desire and pursuit of the whole. There is no way for individuals to find wholeness within themselves but there remains at least the possibility of these two severed halves finding one another. In Le Guin and Pullman's work, despite the insistence by so many of their characters that an indicator of what is true is what advantages them, at least a few individuals are laboriously becoming more whole, less warped by false beliefs and assumptions. Yet by the end of *The Other Wind*, it appears likely that no human being can ever return to the original wholeness of the One People, that the dragons have totally withdrawn, and insofar as it lacks dragons, the world of the living is a world of spiritual death. The prospect for any individual human of becoming more whole, less warped by false beliefs and assumptions, is cramped by the severing of the once whole world. Part of the problem that I detect in Pullman's work is that the prospect of that personal reunion of spirit and daemon after death only seems available for a very few individuals, possibly only one. Such a conclusion calls into question the blissfulness of dissolution into the second death for *His Dark Materials*' dead spirits. Both before and after the first death, there is for these writers another, but at what cost?