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On Lying / La bugia

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Dirk ex Machina: Douglas Adams' Saga and Holistic Detection as Religious Satire

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ABSTRACT – Douglas Adams, in his *Dirk Gently* series, presents his protagonist as a “holistic detective”. Following in the tradition of Sherlock Holmes, the detective bases his claims on scientific evidence and always succeeds in his enquiries. However, the mechanics of his comically random detecting behavior clash with the conclusiveness of the plot, casting doubt on the control of the protagonist over his method. A study of these mechanics as inherently computer-like elicits an interplay between the openness of a holistic postmodern pastiche and the reassuring closure granted by the appeal to science. An analysis of these core concepts, and of the influence of the New Atheist movement on the author, leads to an underlining of the satiric elements of the series. As satires of religion, these novels attack false systems of belief in favor of an enjoyment of uncertainty that waits for the answers of science.

KEYWORDS – Dirk Gently; holism; *Deus ex machina*; satire; religion.

1. DIRK GENTLY AND HOLISM

Very little has been written academically about Douglas Adams' *Dirk Gently* trilogy. The series comprises three books: *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* (2012a [1987]), *The Long, Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* (2012b [1988]), and the incomplete and posthumous *The Salmon of Doubt* (2012c [2002])¹ which was published as a collection of essays, letters, interviews and other material by the author. The fluctuating fortune of the character has led recently (for the third time in a thirty-year span) to a new adaptation on the popular streaming platform Netflix that was discontinued in 2018 in spite of its average success. The author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

¹ Hereby indicated respectively as HDA, LDTS and SOD. Passages from Adams 2002 will be referred to as HGG.

depicts his *Holistic Detective* Dirk Gently as a clumsy, lightheaded, self-recognized impostor. His story is that of a man who, by the sheer act of being in the right place at the right time, somehow manages to solve crimes that involve not only the past, but also the future, magic, science, gods, ghosts, aliens, robots and seemingly anything a work of fiction may contain. These stories are about a detective who effortlessly solves crimes because the universe provides the solutions for him, and creates the amazement of a full-blown fantasy world, in spite of their being rich in scientific references to quantum theory, chaos theory, and computer science. In every edition of the series, on the back cover of the first novel, the author describes the first episode of the saga as “a thumping good detective-ghost-horror-whodunnit-time travel-romantic-musical-comedy-epic”. These are to be taken as bookshop categories that, interestingly enough, cover most of the genres of the British lowbrow tradition. Comedy, editorial self-consciousness and pastiche are the elements involved in this quote. Right from the cover, we find ourselves asking how all of this could possibly fit in one story; and, at the same time, we are directed to the comedy and suspension of disbelief that will ultimately be its cohesive agents.

Douglas Adams' *Dirk Gently* series is in fact a display of utterly brazen hyper-conclusiveness. To make this apparatus work, Adams makes it revolve around an idea: holism. There are many possible definitions of holism. One, perhaps the most pedestrian, is the idea that to solve a problem you should consider everything that surrounds it. We borrow this definition from controversial disciplines such as 'holistic medicine' in which all the habits and physiology of the patient, as well as biologically unproven, untestable or even supernatural factors are taken into consideration when treating an illness. This connects to another idea, which is holism as opposed to reductionism. That is to say, the philosophy that refuses the idea that everything can be reduced to a principle or to a sum of principles. A third is the general idea that “everything is connected” as it percolates in mass culture through the popularization of disciplines such as quantum physics, chaos theory, complexity theory and cybernetics. An example of this is the phenomenon of quantum entanglement, in which particles influence one another in a yet unexplained way, even at great distances, which has become pivotal to many pseudo-sciences, suggesting an idea of deep interconnection in the universe that is often used to explain spiritual practices. Timothy Morton provides a clever definition of holism when he formulates what he calls *the interdependence theorem*, which he divides into two axioms:

Axiom 1 states that things are only what they are in relation to other things. [...]
Axiom 2 states that things derive from other things. [...] *Nothing exists by itself and nothing comes from nothing.* (2011, 23; my italics)

Following Morton's suggestion, we can boil holism down to either a statement about diachronic causality (everything is the cause of everything), or about synchronic ontology (everything exists as connected to everything else). For the sake of this analysis, we will argue that this idea is roughly the same as what we find in the great narratives of the 19th century, from Dickens's "Golden Thread" to the French *adagio* "tout se tient"². We can keep these formulations in mind when we come to terms with the philosophy that sustains Dirk Gently's world. In this essay I will interpret Adams' series as a satire against religion. To do so, the bulk of the essay will be dedicated to a description of the works in question in order to present them and elicit the philosophical premises that inform them. In the first chapters I will try to explain the machinery behind Adams' Holistic Detective, and I will try to demonstrate that the term machinery works both as an explaining metaphor and as a tool to understand the plot of these novels. By comparing Dirk Gently with Sherlock Holmes, I will underline the fact that machinality is the core concept at the foundation of these novels, in terms of both plot structure and ideology. A study of these mechanics will elicit an interplay between the openness of a holistic postmodern pastiche and the reassuring sense of closure granted by the appeal to science. An analysis of these core concepts, and of the influence of the New Atheist movement on the author, will lead to the reading of the series as a satire of religion that plays on the contrast between scientific truth and dogmatic falsehood. In this context, I will underline how Adams' novels use irony to attack religion as a false system of belief that provides easy answers to the great philosophical questions of humankind.

2. DIRK EST MACHINA

Dirk Gently is a self-declared holistic detective. We find the most exemplary display of his detecting practices in the third volume of the series. The detective is here represented in the act of not knowing how to solve a multiple

² This basic idea of interconnectedness, deriving from Couvier's "loi de corrélation organique", has been one of the earliest pivots of the study of detective fiction as we find it underlined in Messac (1975 [1929], 34-36, 213-14).

mystery: he has to find the name of a dog forgotten by its owner, retrieve the inexplicably missing rear half of a still living cat, and discover who is sending \$5000 a week to his bank account and why. As Adams writes,

[...] someone was paying him to do something, but what he had omitted to say. [...] Dirk felt that he should respond to this generous urge to pay him, that he should do something. [...] what private detectives did when they were being paid was mostly to follow people. So that was simple. Dirk would follow someone. (SOD, 223)

The detective chooses to follow the first person he comes across and, in spite of choosing at random, he finds himself exactly where he is meant to be. When confronted with the absurdity of this behavior, he responds by repeating his recurring formula: "Have I mentioned that I believe in the fundamental connectedness of all things?" (SOD, 231). Adams' interest in science is beyond dispute. One would not have to look any further than in the series itself to find connections between Dirk's method and quantum mechanics. In the first adventure of the series, he says this to the man who hires him:

The possibility that [Schrödinger's Cat] is alive, and the possibility that it is dead, are two different waveforms superimposed on each other inside the box. [...] Well, some researchers were once conducting such an experiment, but when they opened up the box, the cat was neither alive nor dead but was in fact completely missing, and they called me in to investigate. I was able to deduce that nothing very dramatic had happened. The cat had merely got fed up with being repeatedly locked up in a box and occasionally gassed and had taken the first opportunity to hoof it through the window. (HDA, 141-42)

It is evident that Dirk Gently's comedy relies extensively on his radical take on science. His forensic technique is based on a literal interpretation of the metaphors of science divulgators followed by their literal, comedic application to reality. In Gently's world, Schrödinger's cat is not a metaphor, it is a 'real' experiment. The cat gets fed up with it and simply decides to leave. In the second volume, the same kind of association connects the detective's method to chaos theory:

My methods are holistic and, in a very proper sense of the word, chaotic. [...] The beating of a butterfly's wings in China can affect the course of an Atlantic hurricane. If I could interrogate this table-leg in a way that made sense to me, or to the table-leg, then it could provide me with the answer to any question about the universe. I could ask anybody I liked, chosen entirely by chance, any random

question I cared to think of, and their answer, or lack of it, would in some way bear upon the problem to which I am seeking a solution. (LDTS, 99-100)

Here, both of Morton's axioms are at play. Things are connected and they causally interact with each other to the point that if we want to know anything, we could theoretically direct our attention anywhere and the answer could come to us, provided that we asked the right questions. However, in every novel, we feel the weight of the conditional ("If I could ask this table leg...") in the fact that Dirk apparently lacks all control over this method and denies being able to deploy it at will. He is never aware of when or how (and hardly aware of why) he finds the answers to the impossible mysteries that are presented to him. In the novels, we see him compromising between a job based on a self-declared fraud and the inevitable disrepute that follows it. In one hilarious passage in the first book, he recalls how he came across the phenomena around which he built his career:

The exam papers Dirk produced under hypnosis, by means of automatic writing, he had, in fact, pieced together simply by doing the same minimum research that any student taking exams would do, studying previous exam papers, [...] and making intelligent guesses about what might come up. He was pretty sure of getting (as anyone would be) a strike rate that was sufficiently high to satisfy the credulous, and sufficiently low for the whole exercise to look perfectly innocent. As indeed it was. What completely blew him out of the water, [...] was the fact that all the exam papers he sold turned out to be the same as the papers that were actually set. Exactly. Word for word. To the very comma. (HDA, 23)

In addition to this, we see him charging clients for expensive vacations with the excuse that "everything is connected" and we see them obviously refusing to pay. We also see the crushing debt that inevitably follows and his unpaid non-secretary quitting almost right away. Nevertheless, he keeps a positive attitude and ultimately ends up bumping into the next holistic case that he invariably succeeds to solve. The *Dirk Gently* series presents many analogies with the epitome of the detective genre: Sherlock Holmes. In fact, one of the main characteristics of Arthur Conan Doyle's work was its constant appeal to science and method within the framework of Positivism. This makes Holmes the perfect touchstone against which to compare Dirk Gently to understand his place in the world. To address the detectivesque issue of reconstructing narrations, we can quote a famous Sherlock Holmes story ("The Five Orange Pips", 1987 [1891]) in which the detective cites Couvier, founding father of paleontology, as follows:

As Couvier could correctly describe a whole animal by the contemplation of a single bone, so the observer who has thoroughly understood one link in a series of incidents, should be able accurately to state all the other ones, both before and after. (Doyle 1987 [1891], 112)

In Dirk's world, not only can we reconstruct a dinosaur from the bone, but also from literally anything else in the universe, even a table leg³. Within this method, he manages to weave narratives that can relate a homicide to the origin of life on earth, to Coleridge, to alien robots and to a couch impossibly stuck in a flight of stairs. Gently and Holmes, therefore, share the same appeal to science as the explanation of their worlds and methods, the same instinctive discredit by their supporting characters and, for most of Doyle's novels, the rate of success in their investigations. What Gently lacks in respect to Holmes is the ability to apply his own method willfully and consciously. He can only paradoxically define himself as a detective by abdicating his control over the resolution of a case, by ironically negating (and, therefore, pointing right to) his involvement in his own success:

He seemed more like a succession of extraordinary events than a person. [...] People gravitated around him, drawn in by the stories he denied about himself. [...] By means of an ingenious series of strategically deployed denials of the most exciting and exotic things, he was able to create the myth that he was a psychic, mystic, telepathic, fey, clairvoyant, psychosassie vampire bat. [...] It was his own word and he vigorously denied that it meant anything at all. (HDA, 21)

The statement about Dirk being a succession of extraordinary events is to be taken literally. He cannot account for his own ability in any way other than with his ideas on holism, which he apparently elaborated over his successes while Holmes did the opposite. The reasons of Dirk's success are quite literally *beyond* him. While Holmes perfectly mastered his method, Gently appears not to have any power over what he does. One thing seems to govern his adventures: coincidences, or better yet, the total absence of them. To better understand this, we shall look at another famous book by Adams: *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Here we can read of an engine called the "infinite improbability drive" which propels a spaceship that instantly

³ Many philosophers (notably Leibnitz, Laplace and Spinoza), had expressed variations on the same concept before, suggesting that the idea that "everything is connected" belonged to earlier forms of rationalism linked to the idea of "the great chain of beings" (Lovejoy 2001 [1933]).

carries the protagonists from one side of the universe to the other, at the price of their not being able to choose where and in what form they will find themselves at the other side. Common sense tells us that the fact that the characters end up where they need to be is indeed 'infinitely improbable' (HGG, 78). This makes the "infinite improbability drive" an evident example of a plot-contriving device, a *Deus ex machina* that makes the plot function. However, it is sufficient to shift the perspective in order to understand both the engine and Dirk Gently: the characters do not always end up where they want to be, but the place in which they appear eventually *becomes* the one that makes the story continue. Here is a dialogue between Kate Schechter, the protagonist of the second novel, and Dirk, who meet for the first time when they happen to have a car accident as Dirk was using his "Zen Navigation" method:

"You are a driver [...] meaning merely somebody who occupies the seat of [...] a car while it's proceeding along the road, of stupendous, I would even say verging on the superhuman, lack of skill." [...] "[it's] A Navigational technique of mine [...] My own strategy is to find a car [...] which looks as if it knows where it's going and follow it. [...] I think you will agree, Miss Schechter, that my methods of navigation have their advantages. I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I ended up where I needed to be." (LDTS 137-42)

In fact, while the infinite improbability engine and the characters in the story may be clueless of where they are heading, the story in itself is not. While the detective might not know where he is going, the story does. The issue of accountability was notably posed by critics such as Umberto Eco, Marcello Truzzi, Thomas Sebeok (and, independently, Leonardo Sciascia) and produced an aura of skepticism about the real capabilities of a detective. Dirk's theories, despite all the efforts to link them to actual science, are only accountable for within its fictional world. As Roland Knox would have put it, there is no "fair game" for the reader to try to solve the case before the detective according to the principles of common rationality (Symons 1975, 150). Within the narration, the character has super-powers *de facto* and every reconstruction that marks the end of an episode serves only as a fill-in-the-gaps of the story.

It has been written that classic detective fiction reflects the bourgeois faith in man as the maker of its own destiny – the so-called liberal humanism on which the episteme of modernity rests. The controlling agency of Sherlock Holmes is beyond doubt, his action-man side is well known. His intelligence underscores his value as an individual in opposition to the collective, mostly faceless, established law enforcement. In spite of claiming his art to be scien-

tific and, therefore, universally applicable, and constantly pushing his sidekick to learn, his abilities appear singularly attached to his persona. In contrast, Dirk Gently is a completely passive bearer of the anthropological principle of the hero⁴. He is no hero. He is no detective either. The only thing he does in our eyes (and negates being able to) is knowing that he will succeed. What is important from a literary point of view is the hermeneutical loop into which he pushes us as readers. We have to suspend our judgment on his powers: is he acting, or do external forces drive him? The basic philosophical rumination on intentionality and freedom is here in full display. Like Quinn in Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (2015 [1985]), Dirk roams space like a situationist, open to whatever stimulus could attract his attention. Dechêne (2018, 89-90), through the suggestions of Benjamin, has already associated the figure of the detective with that of the Poeian *Man of the Crowd* and the Baudelairian *flâneur*. Gently is the ultimate *flâneur*. Someone that made a profession out of following random people in the street waiting for the forces of the universe to provide him with a solution. The manipulation of clues in the hard-boiled genre and the interpretation of absent patterns in classics of Metacognitive Detective-Fiction such as Borges' "Death and the Compass" (1942) and Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980) are both very good examples of detectives driven astray by external forces. However, in both cases, the willfulness of the detective is not in question. He may be deceived by an external player (namely the villain) or by his own sense of order, but he remains present, like a Cartesian *cogito* against a deceiving evil daemon. In the adventures of Dirk Gently, the detective is no *cogito*. He has no control, nor is he intelligibly acted through. He has no encompassing knowledge; he only computes what he is given.

The phenomena of precognition, or the apparent creation of coincidences *ad libitum*, are never represented as a willful action of Dirk, nor are they of anybody or anything discernibly. They simply happen around him and, somehow, 'in-coincidence-to' him. They have no visible origin apart from Dirk's twisted appeal to science. These phenomena are consequently interpreted by the other characters as powers attributed to him. All this is blatantly unjustified from every point of view – be it the author's (who plays on this lack of ultimate explanation), the character's (who is as puzzled as we are) or the reader's (whose curiosity is thus titillated and frustrated, creating an indefinite tension). In the saga of Dirk Gently, we see the extremization of

⁴ I am roughly referring to the concept of *vocation* of the hero as used in Campbell (2008).

the principle that the detective's success is ultimately a choice of the author, true ruler of its internal universe. The author is post-modernly taking control of the premises of the game and caricaturing them. If detective fiction is the resolving genre *par excellence*, then in Adams' work any narrative incident may lead to the solution. This arbitrariness inflates to the point of swallowing the pseudo-hero's agency into a pit of systematic doubt. The theme of the consciousness of the act is addressed in Searle's famous Chinese Room Argument as it pertains to the distinction between man and machine (Searle 1980). The difference between the two, in Searle's formulation, lies in the consciousness a human mind has about its own knowledge. In this parallelism, having no consciousness about what happens 'through' him, Dirk is more machine than human. Dirk, therefore, *is* an "infinite improbability drive" that makes the story work. He *is* a detective/plot device, a *Deus ex machina*. *Dirk est machina*.

3. DIRK EX MACHINA

As we have seen, Adams' comedy relies heavily on the confusion between actual science and the metaphors used in its divulgation – think of Schrödinger's cat or Lorentz's butterfly effect. Borrowing Slavoj Žižek's terminology, we could affirm that this comedy lies on the line that separates what he calls the *Imaginary* from the *Scientific Real* (2006, 86-87). The Dirk Gently series can, therefore, be read as a comedic *mise en scène* of the truths that are shared with us by science popularizers. Let us take another passage into account:

The things by which our emotions can be moved -- the shape of a flower or a Grecian urn, the way a baby grows, the way the wind brushes across your face, the way clouds move, their shapes, the way light dances on the water, or daffodils flutter in the breeze, the way in which the person you love moves their head, the way their hair follows that movement, the curve described by the dying fall of the last chord of a piece of music – all these things can be described by the complex flow of numbers. That's not a reduction of it, that's the beauty of it. Ask Newton. Ask Einstein. (HDA, 168)

A posteriori we could say: "Ask Carl Sagan, Ask Neil deGrasse Tyson"⁵. In the passage, which is the reported reading of an article by character Richard

⁵ Arguably the two most popular science divulgators in the English language of the 1980s and the early 2000s.

Mcduff (whose job is building a software that turns business' spreadsheets into music), the line between reality and mathematics is studied from the point of view of a computer scientist. The use of the term 'reduction' in the passage is not anodyne. As we have seen, the accusation of reductionism is, in fact, one of the main arguments a 'holist' may put in place against a mathematician. While holists, to achieve their explanation, may wish to watch the picture as a whole, a reductionist may try to break it into smaller pieces instead. The idea is that the synthetic formulations achievable by mathematics do not exhaust the 'being' of things: they may explain a lot of its features perfectly, but they will never be a worthy image of what a phenomenon really is. In Adams, not only can mathematics explain reality, but in mathematics themselves lies its esthetic pleasure. The quoting of Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth paradoxically abjures the romantic awe for the irrational in favor of an awe of nature as mathematical, computable rationality.

Mathematical analysis and computer modelling are revealing to us that the shapes and processes we encounter in nature [...] all these things in their seemingly magical complexity can be described by the interaction of mathematical processes that are, if anything, even more magical in their simplicity. Shapes that we think of as random are in fact the products of complex shifting webs of numbers obeying simple rules. The very word 'natural' that we have often taken to mean 'unstructured' in fact describes shapes and processes that appear so unfathomably complex that we cannot consciously perceive the simple natural laws at work. They can all be described by numbers. (HDA, 166)

The shapes that dominate nature – here taken as an objectified, apparently random context – are in fact controlled by simple mathematical equations. If we accept this as the reality that lies under Dirk Gently's world, we may as well think he might not be a holist at all, at least not in the sense of holistic medicine. This mathematical way of thinking dominates his narration in every point; in other passages, various voices explain how instinct and the unconscious work in this context:

Someone who might have difficulty consciously trying to work out what $3 \times 4 \times 5$ comes to would have no trouble in doing differential calculus and a whole host of related calculations so astoundingly fast that they can actually catch a flying ball. People who call this 'instinct' are merely giving the phenomenon a name, not explaining anything. (HDA, 167)

In the past, people would [...] stare at the sea. The endless dancing shapes and patterns would reach far deeper into our minds than we could manage by reason

and logic. [...] The stuff we sometimes call information, but which is really just a babble rising in the air. (SOD, 230)

Intuition is nothing but deep mathematics in the brain corresponding to deep mathematics in the outside world. This depth of mind is one with the scientific subtext of the novels. It is the matrix code allowing the unaccountable intuitions which are the functioning of the hero⁶. This is Dirk Gently's holism: the idea that patterns may raise correspondences between external reality and inner thoughts. Everything is connected by mathematics⁷. The mechanism that Dirk represents makes sense in a universe in which such deep connections, somehow drive him where he needs to be. In a sense, this was also true for Sherlock Holmes: we could only account for his scientific claims in a world in which his truths coincided with reality itself. In other words, we can only believe that Sherlock is a scientist if he succeeds experimentally in reconstructing the past. In Dirk Gently the mechanism is more radical. He, like Searle's computer, can only compute solutions unconsciously, but he still needs the world around him to function according to his 'guesses' for us to have a conclusive plot. He needs the universe to somehow lead him to the truth, otherwise he will not. In a world of pure mathematics, in which brains are computers built to calculate it, he finds his justification. Quoting Adams:

The computer is actually a modelling device. Once we see that, we ought to realise that we can model anything in it. Not just things we are used to doing in the real world, but the things the real world actually prevents us from doing. (SOD, 92)

This idea pushes the boundaries of the stereotype of the detective as 'thinking machine' – like Futrelle's Professor Van Dusen and Sherlock Holmes –

⁶ This idea of intuition as "inner computing" is present in Carlo Emilio Gadda and in the *Sherlock* BBC TV series (2010-2017), the idea of human rationality corresponding structurally to the world can be traced back to Spinoza and further. See Giovannoli (2007) and Antonello (2005).

⁷ The TV series *Touch* (2012-2013) displays a similar connection between mathematics and holistic connections. In the series, a child affected by autism is able to perceive underlying numeric patterns in reality that represent the pain of other characters. His father, believing in the powers of his son, gets involved in the lives of the other characters to solve the "irregularities of the world" that lead to their unhappiness. This focus on patterns and a strong underlining of the human elements of suffering, healing and faith, represent differences between *Touch* and the *Dirk Gently* series which relies chiefly on the comic unpredictability of the connections often overshadowing the human element.

to a deeper level. In Dirk Gently, we see a perfect correspondence between a smaller computer-character (Dirk) and the big machine that is his world. Inside a computer, we can simulate any other type of computer. In the same way, in literature, we can realize “the things the real world prevents us from doing”, namely this *immediate* correspondence between the mathematics behind the fictional world and the fictional hero. Following this analogy, we could interpret both Dirk and his world thinking of virtual computers inside a computer system: computers within computers, both written in the same code. In this view, Dirk not only is a machine, but he is justified by the computerness of his own reality: the actual nexus that combines *Deus* and *machina*. He is a machine inside a machine. *Dirk ex machina*.

4. DEUS EST MACHINA

After Chesterton, many critics have associated the figures of the detective and the priest. Dale Ahlquist notes how the very concept of mystery in detective fiction connects to the concept of the sacred: “the connection between the two kinds of mysteries – the detective mystery and the ultimate mystery – is the same connection between faith and reason” (2013, xvi)⁸ the difference lying in their experience:

There is the mystery that is a puzzle to be solved, the temporary mystery, and there is the mystery that is a marvel to be contemplated, the permanent mystery. Solving the puzzle, the temporary mystery, satisfies us, but it only satisfies us once. The eternal mystery is endless, and yet in contemplating it we are endlessly satisfied. (2013, xv)

As W. H. Auden noted, in solving case after case, the detective experiences individual monads of the ultimate mystery. In this capacity, the detective story becomes a literary tool that allows the reader to contemplate the mystery of death and evil by addressing the problem one single evil deed at a time (1980, 15-24). Within this philosophical framework, the detective, as a paladin of

⁸ This association is actually very complex. In the first translations of the Pauline tradition the Greek concept of *μυστήριον* (sacred mystery) has been linked to the Latin concept of *sacramentum* (sacrament), connecting the concepts of knowledge, divine destiny and salvation (Bouyer 1986).

reason, embodies a heroic principle that transcends his positivist manifestations becoming a metaphysic embodiment of the idea of good. After all the idea that “Reason is from God, and when things are unreasonable there is something the matter” (Chesterton 1985 [1927], 565) has belonged to the Christian tradition since the Thomists. In this perspective, for some critics, the detective becomes a sort of priest or a holy knight: a person of knowledge, abnegation and sacrifice, with the mandate of connecting us to higher mysteries (see Truzzi 1988 [1983]). As a convinced atheist, Adams offers completely opposite philosophical premises:

I really do not believe that there is a god – in fact I am convinced that there is not a god (a subtle difference). I see not a shred of evidence to suggest that there is one. It's easier to say that I am a radical Atheist, just to signal that I really mean it, have thought about it a great deal, and that it's an opinion I hold seriously. (SOD, 96)

Adams is part of a group of intellectuals known as the New Atheists that made the struggle against religion one of their main points of debate – people like comedian Stephen Fry, essayist Christopher Hitchens and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, many of them being personal friends of the author. To these thinkers, religion is nothing but a set of highly detrimental falsehoods of a very specific type⁹. In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins writes (2006, 5):

The dictionary supplied with Microsoft Word defines a delusion as ‘a persistent false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence, especially as a symptom of psychiatric disorder’. The first part captures religious faith perfectly. As to whether it is a symptom of a psychiatric disorder, I am inclined to

⁹ A false statement that is believed to be true by the speaker is not coherent with most definitions of the terms ‘deception’ or ‘lie’ given by philosophers (Mahon). To explain this, Chisholm and Feehan (1977, 148) quote Aquinas: “the essential notion of a lie is taken from formal falsehood, from the fact, namely, that a person intends to say what is false; [...] Consequently if one says what is false, thinking it to be true, it is false materially, by not formally, because the falseness is beside the intention of the speaker; so that it is not a perfect lie, since what is beside the speaker’s intention is accidental, for which reason it cannot be a specific difference. If, on the other hand, one utters a falsehood formally, through having the will to enunciate what is false, even if what one says be true, yet in as much as this is a voluntary and moral act, it contains falseness essentially and truth accidentally, and attains the specific nature of a lie.”. According to this definition, from a New Atheist perspective the assertion that there is a God, even if it is genuinely believed by the speaker, is nevertheless false materially and this justifies judgement, notably on moral and political grounds.

follow Robert M. Pirsig, author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, when he said, 'When one person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion it is called Religion.'

To a New Atheist, faith is akin to any particularly persistent belief in something that has been repeatedly proven false. In this, it is undistinguishable from a psychiatric disorder. Science, and its standards of debate, are the touchstone against which these beliefs are shown to be false. The influence of Dawkins' manifests in Adams as the belief that there is a 'simple' mechanical explanation for the acts of man, which subverts every openness towards an external design. As Adams wrote commenting on his feelings about Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*: "The awe it inspired in me made the awe that people talk about in respect of religious experience seem, frankly, silly beside it. I'd take the awe of understanding over the awe of ignorance any day." (SOD, 99). The mechanical character of the gene that chemically forces species and individuals to be what they are is Adams' great mystery, which is, of course, not a mystery but a scientific truth. In other words, in Adams' novels not only *Deus ex* (comes from) *machina*, but there is no God, God *is* the machine. *Deus est machina*. This particular connection between atheism and scientism manifests itself structurally in his plot devices. The fact that Dirk works as a machine and that his world itself is made of the same code, annuls the distance between subject and object to the point of collapse. This is why there is no real subjectivity in Dirk for us to identify with. *Dirk est machina*. The absurd conclusiveness of the plot is a product of the quantum-mechanical nature of its protagonist. It is the triumph of the awe of understanding. In this context, if a case is going to be solved no matter how randomly but invariably, the very idea of "great mystery" simply vanishes. Destiny and plot (which is its narrative counterpart) lose their divine aura in one move. There is no fulfilling meaning or finality in the world for us to unveil. All is code and code is not sacred. In the mind of Adams, unknown formulas governing our world are not the secret language of God. They are just parts of a map that is yet to be completed. If 'not knowing' is nothing but 'not knowing yet', the great mystery of death and evil does not exist. Nor does its customary tone, the tragic. Therefore, they are both removed from the scope of the novels. In this context, the use of the term holism does not evoke a consideration of unproved or untested factors in the computation of the causes of an event, it is instead but another manifestation of the author's irony, and of his intent to bring the inclusive spirit of the holistic-spiritual mode of thought back to a

strictly scientific comprehensibility. That is, to the affirmation that below phenomenal reality the mathematical laws of the world are what actually make it a holistic whole.

In the panorama of postmodernist detective fiction, many plots still rely on the openness of the ending. In these plots the case is not solved, it leaves humanity alone in the face of unanswered questions, charged with consequences and anxieties: let us think of the late modernist *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* (1957 [2015]) by Carlo Emilio Gadda, Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49* or Auster's *City of Glass*. In all these novels, there is still a space for the sacred in this 'charged' suspension of knowledge. Perhaps an awe towards the immensity of chaos or the smallness of the subject; bearing witness, as Bischi and Darconza (2018) so perfectly describe, to the *distancing* between the abstract mathematical structures of the world and our experience of it as a labyrinth of infinite solutions. The world in these novels appears to the detective and to the reader as an only apparently meaningful façade filled with nothing but randomness. The emotional reaction to this discovery is to fall onto one's knees contemplating failure. This reminds us of Adams' "awe of ignorance".

In today's scientific philosophy, many thinkers treat the problem of God as substantially *passé*. In Adams the same happens for the great question that he famously called "of life, the universe and everything" to which he notably gave the answer: 42¹⁰. Irony dominates every address to the higher questions that historically belong to religion. We might think that quantum physics is somehow inherently unpredictable and therefore inherently mysterious, but

¹⁰ In the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, rats – that are actually a super-intelligent alien race – build a gargantuan computer called Deep Thought designed to find the answer to the question "of life, the universe and everything". After eons of calculations the computer produces the answer '42', stating that the unclear nature of the question could never have led to any satisfying answer. Disappointed by the results, the builders of Deep Thought decide to create Earth, a planet-computer designed to elaborate the 'right' question to which perhaps they could find the answer someday. The ironic subtext engages with the concept of creation and hints at one of the most common reductionist arguments: if something is inexplicable, it is because we failed in posing the right question. Every question has to be broken down into simpler questions. The only questions that are answerable are the ones expressed in synthetic mathematical terms that we can compute logically to perfection. In a passage of HDA, Richard McDuff says, "If you really want to understand something, the best way is to try and explain it to someone else. [...] The more slow and dim-witted your pupil, the more you have to break things down into more and more simple ideas. And that's really the essence of programming." (HDA, 22).

as we learn from its actual suggestions, there is no such thing as ‘true randomness’, just various degrees of randomness that we can manipulate and upon which we can study (Calude 2017). This is the kind of quantum physics involved in *Dirk Gently*, not the distant enigma outlined by Bischi and Darconza. Irony does not hide any distance between science and perceivable reality. In Adams science perfectly bridges the space between man and the ultimate truths of the world, the distance between them is not a sacred threshold and therefore does not need a priest-like figure to be accessed. There is no contradiction between surface and depth to cancel the detective like a crashing computer screen going black. *Dirk ex machina*. Therefore, in this world of fantasy, as long as there is a multiple-world interpretation of quantum physics, Thor might as well be there to explain why a kiosk in an airport suddenly explodes.

Barry Dainton saw in some formulations contained in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* the germs of the philosophical theory of Digital Metaphysics that describes our universe as the result of a super complex digital ‘simulation’:

And this computer, which was called the Earth, was so large that it was frequently mistaken for a planet – especially by the strange ape-like beings who roamed its surface, totally unaware that they were simply parts of a gigantic computer program. (HGG, 191-92)

The philosopher agrees that this idea opens to the disquieting quasi-Beckettian perspective of the universe being under the control of a program automatically playing a video game, making everything if not meaningless, surely demeaning and possibly terrifyingly precarious (Dainton 2012, 166-71). However, instead of engendering a claustrophobic vertigo, Adams’ comedy style results into a Monty-Pythesque display of playfulness leaving the reader with the sobering sensation that we may be content with the beauty of science. *Dirk Gently* seems to tell us that science does not have to be straightforwardly clear nor absolutely ‘other’ to work as an epistemological tool. The same comforting yet riveting feeling we may draw from a Carl Sagan book or documentary.

These novels make their twin objects – literature and science, epistemology and ontology, narratives and substance – as close as they can be. As we can read on the cover, *Dirk Gently’s* novels are made of novel-clay, just literary mash-ups. However, these are not the only elements to them that we typically find in postmodern literature. As Kathleen Belin Owen wrote:

The strong presence of narrative humor and a metaphysical solution within the Dirk Gently novel make it 'postmodern' rather than 'modern.' [...] Like that of his predecessors, his epistemological inquiry determines the ontological solution he pursues. [...] [T]he postmodern novel turns the rules inside out; readers become aware of their assumptions of reality and laugh at them. From this perspective, not only can the impossible be the answer, but also the nature of knowledge can encompass a broader ontological range of solutions by suspending the limits of what the mind has been taught. (1977, 73-84)

While it is true that the series manipulates the rules of the 'game' of detective fiction, the use of irony in it is problematic. It creates a constant tension between the absurd solutions of the plot and constant absence of accountability of the protagonist. The appeal to 'scientific' holism becomes the trope that allows the breaking of the rules of non-contradiction. It allows the existence of a world in which a formally powerless detective can solve impossible crimes in impossible ways. Literature in Adams thus becomes the *lieu* in which imagination can bend the suggestions of science into shaping any impossible plot. In *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective's Agency*, the poetry of Coleridge plays a central part. In the novel we discover that life on earth was started by an alien engineer who made a mistake while repairing his spaceship. The ghost of the alien then roams through history trying to find a way to go back in time and fix his mistake. It is under the possession of the ghost that the poet, in what we discover is an alternate reality, finishes *Kubla Khan*, of which the now missing second part concerns the memories of the engineer about the explosion of his spaceship and the way to get back to it and repair it. The protagonists, who initially decided to help the alien ghost, soon realize that repairing the ship in the past would mean the end of life in their original present and decide to make an intervention to prevent the history to unfold. Dirk thus ends up becoming the famous "man from Porlock" who prevents Coleridge from finishing *Kubla Khan*. This changes history sufficiently to ensure that the ghost can never fulfill his plan, thus saving humanity. It is shared belief that Coleridge separates the world of imagination from the world of understanding (Radley 1966, 77-78). While in Coleridge's system the thinker is able to move from one world to the other through poetry, in Adams the enjoyment of art seems to lie rather in the *tension* between the imagination and understanding, order and disorder, the plurality of fantasy and the singularity of the solution. The element of mathematics and science seems to be the thread that connects the couples. Adams wrote:

When we see images of the strange mathematical beasts lurking at the heart of the natural world – fractal landscapes, the infinitely unfolding paisley whorls of the Mandelbrot Set, the Fibonacci series, which describes the pattern of leaves growing on the stem of a plant, the Strange Attractors that beat at the heart of chaos – it is always the dizzying, complex spirals of Bach that come to mind. Some people say that the mathematical complexity of Bach renders it unemotional. I think the opposite is true. As I listen to the interplay of parts in a piece of Bach polyphony, each individual strand of music gathers hold of a different feeling in my mind, and takes them on simultaneous interweaving rollercoasters of emotion. One part may be quietly singing to itself, another on an exhilarating rampage, another is sobbing in the corner, another dancing. Arguments break out, laughter, rage. Peace is restored. The parts can be utterly different, yet all belong indivisibly together. (SOD, 79)

These parallelisms evoke the computer scientist's quote in the first novel. Here the author instinctively connects a plurality of contradicting parts and the indivisible unit of the work of art to its mathematical complexity. It is my opinion that we can better understand the connection between the postmodern comedic emotional tone of the series and its mechanical self-resolving side by reflecting on the role of science in the style of comedy the series displays.

5. A SATIRE OF RELIGION

In the most direct reader's experience, Adams' novels appear as a postmodern playful parody of classical detective fiction. As we know, Linda Hutcheon sees parody as a politicized counter-song to pre-existing dogma, and underlines the power of this genre to question all claims to ultimate truth. Postmodernist parody, in particular, is often the *pars destruens* of an open argument, directed to including multiple truths rather than proposing a new one (1989, 95). It is my contention that rather than aiming at openness, Adams is using parody for a different purpose. Underneath the parody we have a truth – scientific truth – against which the interplay of genres takes place. This truth is at once the weapon against the delusion of faith and the solace of the doubting mind caught inside the maelstrom of causes. Dirk's particular premise of 'scientific' holism becomes the absurd justification for the pastiche of genres that takes place in the series. The formula "everything is connected" is reflected both in the contents of the novels (ghosts, vampires and gods are, of course part of 'everything'), and in its structure, that becomes able to contain con-

traditions and non-solutions (like the non-power of Dirk) in an undivided and conclusive whole. In his novels, conclusiveness and plurality face each other in constant tension. In the chaotic plurality of the pastiche, the tension between the surprise of the solution and the twisted appeal to science acts as a regulating principle. The specificity of the work of Adams that differentiates it from other postmodern detective fiction is in fact its own conclusiveness. To explain its conclusiveness, we can revert to irony to try to elicit the 'scene' on which this irony is built (Hutcheon 1995, 14). Very often in the series, irony gains a particular edge. An example is in the first book of the series, where the plot is sparked off by a faulty robot priest, built to relieve an alien race from the burden of believing in transcendence:

The Electric Monk was a labour-saving device, like a dishwasher or a video recorder. Dishwashers washed tedious dishes for you, thus saving you the bother of washing them yourself [...]; Electric Monks believed things for you, thus saving you what was becoming an increasingly onerous task, that of believing all the things the world expected you to believe. (HDA, 4)

The error of the alien engineer that caused life on earth was due to his use of the Electric Monk to believe that his reparations of the ship were successful. The role of the detective is to reverse the damage caused by an irrational belief in transcendence. The irony is vitriolic and engages religion as a system of false beliefs that becomes a burden to abandon. As Northrop Frye wrote: "The chief distinction between irony and satire is that *satire is militant irony*: its moral norms are relatively clear and *it assumes standards* against which the grotesque and the absurd are measured" (1957, 208). If we take this suggestion to be true for Adams, we can read his fiction in many parts as satiric rather than ironic. It has a militant moral standard underneath, which is the refusal of the lies of religion as viable explanations of reality. To Adams religion cheats in the game of reason, covering its weaknesses by refusing to accept the rules of logical debate in which science lives and thrives.

As a teenager I was a committed Christian. [...] In the years I'd spent learning history, physics, Latin, math, I'd learnt (the hard way) something about standards of argument, standards of proof, standards of logic, etc. In fact we had just been learning how to spot the different types of logical fallacy, and it suddenly became apparent to me that these standards simply didn't seem to apply in religious matters. [...] in history, even though the understanding of events, of cause and effect, is a matter of interpretation, and even though interpretation is in many ways a matter of opinion, nevertheless those opinions and interpretations

are honed to within an inch of their lives in the withering crossfire of argument and counterargument [...] *All opinions are not equal.* (SOD, 97-98)

The communicative relationship between religion and scientism in the eyes of Adams is what he calls “the withering crossfire of argument and counterargument”. Dogma, by relying on faith – and thus refusing to withstand the fire – turns the argument into a power-play to dodge the ‘bullets’ of facts and logic and thus mystify reality with impunity. In this setting, Adams displays his evaluative edge by deploying irony. Against this standard, we can understand the overlapping strata of irony and parody; we can explain the mechanical character of its protagonist and fictional world and we can justify the plot contrivance devices that dominate its narration. The use of satire adds a direction to the tension among its elements. The world in Adams might be mysterious but there is no “great mystery” to contemplate. Truth might be unknown but is not impossible to know. As Dirk once says: “The impossible often has a kind of integrity to it which the merely improbable lacks” (LDTs, 151). We have to accept the real, exciting mystery of improbability and refrain from taking refuge in easy lies. Mystery and fallibility are the door through which belief makes its way into the mind of the reader and thus they are attacked in the same way Dawkins attacks the idea of god: by taking it as an admissible scientific hypothesis ready to be disproved by logic. This process allows Adams to speak the ‘dominant language’ of conclusive detective fiction ironically, to mean that we do not need to bother with contemplation to have a solution to a detective novel. The series itself could be read as a labor-saving device, saving you from the task of believing all the things other detective fiction secretly expects you to believe. The use of the trope of conclusiveness could even be read as arguably un-ironic: Dirk, just like science, *will* ultimately solve every mystery in due time. Admitting this key concept, all the mechanical features at play in the text (*Dirk est machina*, *Dirk ex machina* and *Deus est machina*) can be understood as the playful diversion of science, which can now fully enjoy the pleasure of its own suggestions as the undisputed victor of the debate against religion.

The early positivists that influenced Conan Doyle still thought about science from the perspective of the moral authority of religion. In these authors, science engaged with its questions and was to inherit its rituals once humanity had gotten rid of it. However, New Atheism is different from Positivism and Adams does not think of himself as the prophet of a new religion. To him, the language and the aura of the mystery lose their importance, and so does

the serious tone. These elements become an unacceptable opening to the lies about the alleged irrationality of the world and make people incapable of facing the actual, computable questions which science methodically poses and solves.

However, there are moments in Adams' literature, that still suggest a sense of destiny related to the idea of love and others in which a strict scientific method is confronted by apparently inexplicable truths. One of these is the episode in *The Long, Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* in which a character's ability to communicate with dead physicists contradicts the very laws they are discovering post-mortem (LDTS, 123). A study of those, against the background highlighted in this article is perhaps worthy of follow-up research. In this withering crossfire of contradictions is the beauty of art in Adams. In it, the satire against religion and the elegy of science give its world direction. To Adams, perhaps, art, like science, allows us to enjoy conclusiveness as one with the liberation of fantasy, their beauty lying in the same feeling: the enjoyment of possibility in wait for the awe of understanding.

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