The Golden Compass: sources for Pullman’s title.

In Raphael’s account of the creation, the Son employs “golden Compasses, prepar’d in God’s Eternal store, to circumscribe This Universe, and all created things” (Paradise Lost, VII 225-27).

The late 18th century poet and engraver William Blake translated this phrase into visual terms for one of his most famous images of God; unlike Pullman, Blake imagines the compass as a drawing instrument rather than as a directional aid.

To view Blake’s image:

- Go to the William Blake Archive.
- At the bottom of the Archive home page, there’s a “click to enter” button, US Home.
- Go to “Works in the Archive” > Illuminated Books/ Europe a Prophecy/ copy#/ object 1. (Blake hand-colored his engravings, such that each physical copy of his works was unique; view any copy).

For more Blakean fun, click on Search/ Image Search/ Object/ Compasses. You’ll find several other appearances of the compasses in other contexts; the “Marriage of Heaven and Hell” has a specific reference to Milton’s Paradise Lost.

To view the site, I’ve had best results using Internet Explorer (rather than Firefox); see the site Help page for more on “Known Hazards and Most Favorable Conditions.” If you open the image of a poem but are having trouble bringing up the image, try the “non-Java” button at the bottom of the page. To use all the features of the site (most importantly, viewing textual transcription), you will need to enable pop-ups.

For true compass fans, John Donne’s early 17th century poem, "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning", combines the drawing and directional functions of the compass in a single image.