

Science Fiction: Olaf Stapledon's 'Star Maker' and Arthur C. Clarke's 'Childhood's End'

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Abstract:

Science fiction has appeared in every medium of artistic creation, from the popular song "The One-Eyed, One-Horned, Flying Purple People Eater" to Frankenstein's Monster Halloween masks. Most notably, we find science fiction in the comics and in the three modern technological entertainment media: film, radio, and television. When science fiction in one medium has relatively unpopular, its popularity for other audiences through other media has helped to maintain the interest in science fiction. In passing through a filmic stage, or a comic book stage, science fiction not only retained and audience but created an audience, and the audience created by science fiction film, for example, brought new demands to science fiction in other media, such as novels. This dialectic has been significant in the development of science fiction in all media. Functioning as it does in every major artistic medium, science fiction is itself a major force in the continuing development of our culture.

Every work to be taken here shows the marks of its own time, the values and concerns of its particular era. And taken as whole, these works illustrate a great search for values. In this study the selected works of "literary merit," such as might be studied in a historical survey of science fiction.

INTRODUCTION:

There is something in the study of the great literatures of the world that opens the mind, inspires it with noble sentiments and ideals, cultivates and develops the intuitions and reaches and stamps the character to an extent that is hopelessly beyond the reach of science. Until science is mixed with emotion and appeals to the heart and imagination, it is like dead inorganic matter; and when it becomes so mixed and so transformed it is literature.

The history of science fiction is also the history of humanity's changing attitudes towards space and time. It is the history of our growing understanding of the universe and the position of our species in that universe. The history of fiction is the story of humanity's development from a mythic way of seeing the world to a rational or empirical way of seeing it. As human science developed, human fictions changed with it. The history of fiction can be seen as a steady movement away from myth toward realism.

Olaf Stapledon's "Star Maker":

Olaf Stapledon (1886-1950) used science fiction to generate myths and mythic truth. In *Star Maker* Stapledon achieves a monumental power by exploiting a contrast that only science fiction can accommodate completely: that between men and the stars. In this change of scale, in his spiritual search, Stapledon finds "something other, which the dire contrast of the star and us signified to the heart." *Star Maker* is a supreme attempt to use the art of science fiction to "construct an imaginative sketch of the dread but vital whole of things."

The book begins with the unnamed narrator seated at midnight among the heather on a hill overlooking his middle-class English suburban home. We come to know that the finest thing in his life is the "community" he feels with his wife, though tonight he feels a "bitterness":

I sat down on the heather, Overhead obscurity was now in full retreat. In its rear the freed population of the sky sprang out of hiding, star by star.

On every side the shadowy hills or the guessed, featureless sea extended beyond sight. But the hawkflight of imagination followed them as they curved downward below the horizon. I perceived that I was on a little round grain of

rock and metal, filmed with water and with air, whirling in sunlight and darkness. And on the skin of that little grain all the swarms of men, generation by generation, had lived in labour and blindness, with intermittent joy and intermittent lucidity of spirit. And all their history, with its folk-wanderings, its empires, its philosophies, its proud science, its social revolutions, its increasing hunger for community, was but a flicker in one day of the lives of the stars.[1]

Stapledon uses change of scale to awe his readers, and give them some of the feeling he purports, like Dante, to have experienced in a cosmic voyage.

The technique of change of scale is supplemented by powerfully inventive metaphor and analogy. A "married couple" is

like two close trees whose trunks have grown upwards together as a single shaft, mutually distorting, but mutually supporting.[2]

The narrator claims that he uses figurative language because,

though human language and even human thought itself are perhaps in their very nature incapable of metaphysical truth, [there is] something I must somehow contrive to express, even if only by metaphor.[3]

This something is a growing understanding of the whole of not only our cosmos, but of the universe of universes which is the object of creation and contemplation for the Star Maker. A partial understanding of the Star Maker is as an "effulgent star" which

was the centre of a four-dimensional sphere whose curved surface was the three-dimensional cosmos. The star of stars, this star that was indeed the Star Maker, was perceived by me, its cosmical creature, for one moment before its splendour seared my vision. And in that moment I knew that I had indeed seen the very source of all cosmical light and life and mind; and of how much else besides I had as yet no knowledge.[4]

Although pleased to borrow metaphors from Christianity, this blinding is not such as Paul's on the road to Damascus. First, the Star Maker, unlike Christ, is beyond benevolence; and second, the narrator, unlike Paul, grows as far beyond his revelation as his revelation was beyond that suburban hillside.

The narrator's growth begins with his "hawk-flight" which ends on what he calls The Other Earth, the world in our galaxy most like his own. Eventually we learn that the narrator's miraculous exploration as a "disembodied viewpoint" is controlled by his ability to understand the world toward which he would wish to travel. Since our Earth is in a "world crisis" which will either bring us under or anneal us for a further step toward world community, "I" is attracted involuntarily to another humanoid world at a parallel moment. Here he telepathically inhabits the Other Men who are much like us, and therefore occasion much pointed satire in the manner of all travel stories from Gulliver's Lilliput to Golding's Lord of the Flies (1954). The special variety of Stapledon's satire arises from his strictly Wellsian extrapolations. For example, by assuming that

taste played as important a part in their imagery and conception as sight in our own.

Stapledon creates a whole new set of metaphors which pokes fun at Earthly foibles:

Each race tended to believe that its own flavour was characteristic of all the fine mental qualities, was indeed an absolutely reliable label of spiritual worth.

And

In the congested and unhealthy industrial centres a new gustatory and olfactory type had appeared, apparently as a biological mutation. In a couple of generations this sour astringent, and undisguisable flavour

dominated in all the most disreputable working-class quarters. To the fastidious palates of the well-to-do it was overwhelmingly nauseating and terrifying.

And, punningly and inevitably,

my hosts regarded themselves as the very salt of the earth.[5]

By learning the ironic lessons of this world, especially with the aid of a cooperative native host, a philosopher named Bvalltu, the narrator grows sufficiently to explore more radically non-human worlds. Bvalltu, or his disembodied viewpoint, joins the narrator. Indeed, as the exploration goes from world to world, more creatures join the journey and the exploring "viewpoint" grows into an ever more capacious and understanding composite entity. With extraordinary invention and detailed imagination, Stapledon gives us the sociology of a world of Nautiloids, living, sentient, ship-size creatures who skim their ocean world by spreading membranous sails before the wind. On this planet, the accident of port or starboard birth has led to the typical science fiction "two nations" which is precipitating a world crisis. The journey continues through world after world, "echinoderm humans" and worlds of "minded swarms" where consciousness has developed telepathically among an aggregate of literal bird-brains too small to achieve consciousness independently.

One of the greatest worlds, which "I" is now psychologically able to visit, is that of the telepathically and physically symbiotic ichthyoids and arachnoids, the fish partners being contemplative whale-like animals and the spidery partners being active, scientific animals. In first regarding his own home from the hilltop, "I" had observed that

There, under that roof, our own two lives, recalcitrant sometimes to one another, were all the while thankfully one, one larger, more conscious life than either alone.[6]

With Bvalltu,

each of us came to feel that to taste the flavour of life in isolation from the other was to miss its richness and subtlety.[7]

Observing the symbiotic ichthyoids and arachnoids,

Interspecific communion, which every individual knew in immediate domestic experience, became in time the basic experience of all culture and religion.[8]

Like all life in Star Maker, this symbiotic life strives toward community Unlike life on most planets, however, these symbiotic creatures achieve it. Indeed, at later times of galactic history, their intervention saves our entire Milky Way.

In dizzying progression, Stapledon has his explorer go beyond simple symbiosis to inhabit vicariously on planets that have achieved a world consciousness. And then inhabit world-minds that are joined in a system mind around a sun. And then join system-minds participating in Sub Galactic minds. And then into minds of symbiotic worlds and living stars. And then into Galactic minds. And then into the mind in which the very Galaxies are units, the Cosmic mind. It is as the Cosmic mind that the traveller has his vision of the Star Maker, a vision which he names the Supreme Moment of the Cosmos. And in the aftermath of that vision, he has a dream in which he senses even more about the Star Maker, and sees him making the infinite cosmoses which are the actualization of his own inherent potentiality and, in aggregate, the object of his contemplation. Each stage of this spiritual odyssey is worked out with extrapolative detail, metaphorical brilliance, and a breathtaking contrasting of scales of magnitude of both time and space. This ultimate vision of the cosmoses, he realizes, has as its aim, "to include...community and the lucid and creative mind"-just like his marriage.

In Star Maker is recorded the wars of planets against planets; of suns consciously exploding to wipe out the planet vermin surrounding them. One can barely suggest the richness of this "voyage of astronomical and metaphysical research" which aims to tell "the kind of truth that we sometimes find in myths." But one can recognize that Stapledon has taken

science, extrapolation, religion, invention, art, and a sweeping imagination and combined them to give a history of the universe. He knows that energy will run down and that ultimately there will be no men. In this book, we learn to communicate with living systems of stars, and to die with them at the ends of aeons. Yet the very voyage gives consolation. Two lights for guidance. The first, our little atom (marriage) of community, with all that it signifies. The second, the cold light of the stars, symbol of the hypercosmical reality, with its crystal ecstasy. Strange that in this light, in which even the dearest love is frostily assessed, and even the possible defeat of our half-waking world (the coming war) is contemplated without remission of praise, the human crisis does not lose but gains significance. Strange, that it seems more, not less, urgent to play some part in this struggle, this brief effort of animalcules striving to win for their race some increase of lucidity before the ultimate darkness.[9]

Arthur C. Clarke's "Childhood's End":

Although the dystopian works of Huxley and Orwell have achieved wider critical acclaim, the more devoted regard of fans is reserved for works such as Issac Asimov's *I, Robot* (1950) and Theodore Sturgeon's *More Than Human* (1953), works which show the emergence of utopias. Of all utopian science fiction, the most widely respected and enthusiastically read is *Childhood's End*. In this novel, Arthur C. Clarke offers not only a dramatized report of the emergence of man's ultimate utopia, but he shows how man passes to that utopia through a series of temporary utopias. In this case, ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. *Childhood's End* is both a particular story and a survey of the development of utopian thought, thereby defining a substantial portion of the range of science fiction.

As Clarke's story begins, mankind is on the verge of space flight, a projected manned journey to the moon. Suddenly, huge saucers appear in the skies above the Earth's major cities. All these ships but one, it turns out later, are illusions; but in that one is Karellen, an incredibly advanced and long-lived representative of a race which humanity comes to call the Overlords. By manipulating his illusions, and using astonishingly little real force, Karellen awe mankind into obedience. This obedience requires consolidation in world government under the United Nations, an easy consolidation since the presence of the Overlords makes national war seem absurd. Karellen meets with Secretary General Stormgren, and through him instructs mankind. The only instruction of consequence is that the idea of space flight be abandoned. "The stars are not for man."

In return for this obedience, Karellen provides the now-safe global community with advanced technologies so that

for the first time in human history, no one worked at tasks they did not like..... Ignorance, disease, poverty, and fear had virtually ceased to exist.[10]

The first third of the novel "Earth and the Overlords," is devoted to the description of the establishment of this centralized, materialistic utopia. In addition, we have pointed glimpses of Karellen's relationship with Stormgren, whom he calls by his child-like given name, Rikki. Karellen brings about utopia through Stormgren, but never lets himself be seen. Instead, he speaks from behind an opaque screen with a voice

like a great organ rolling its notes from a high cathedral nave.....its depth and resonance gave the single clue that existed to Karellen's physical nature, for it left an overwhelming impression of sheer size.[11]

This awe-inspiring size has its desired effect on mankind, creating a sort of humility which, coupled with freedom from want and easy trafficking from place to place, produces an homogenized and relatively unprejudiced population.

The middle section of the novel, "The Golden Age," gives us detailed descriptions of life in this utopia. In addition, we see that human beings can develop friendly, though distant, relations with the Overlords. However, within the happy majority culture we find some who are troubled by

the supreme enemy of all Utopias-boredom..... When the Overlords had abolished war and hunger and disease, they had also abolished adventure.[12]

Some of these people decide to found New Athens.

The description of the life and history of New Athens comprises much of the last section of the novel, "The last Generation." The people of this society believe that

beyond this island..... the human race has lost its initiative. It has peace, it has plenty--but it has no horizons.... Everybody on this island has one ambition.....to do something, however small it may be, better than anyone else. Of course, it's an ideal we don't all achieve. But in this modern world the great thing is to have an ideal. Achieving it is considerably less important.[13]

Thus, New Athens is an island, reminiscent of Atlantis perhaps, in which everyone tries cooperatively to excel. The population is limited by rule so that everyone may know everyone else in his own field and some small percentage of the remaining population as well. The open-air concerts are the finest, the sculpture the best, the philosophy the most inventive.

It hoped to become what the old Athens might have been had it possessed machines instead of slaves.[14]

But, as in the rest of the world, with the constant reminder of Overlord technology, there is no progress at all in science.

New Athens, we learn, had been founded by a Jew named Ben Salomon. Francis Bacon (1561-1626) had written a utopia called *The New Atlantis* (publ.1627) in which a residential college of scientists rule for the benefit of each other and mankind in the House of Salomon. The Hebrew word ben means son of. Clarke, then, in the *New Athens*, offers a Baconian corrective to the centralized and materialistic Golden Age. The democratized utopia has always been the alternative to the centralized utopia, regardless of the possible attitudes toward technology. But in Clarke's novel, neither a centralized nor a democratized utopia emerges as a final answer for man.

The Overlords, we finally learn, have been sent to act as "midwives in the birth of a new humanity; hence, in ending our current humanity we achieve childhood's end. The Overlords are the emissaries of an "Overmind"; which somehow knows that the human race, if it can be kept from killing itself, can undergo an important evolution. The Overlords have helped in this process for two reasons: first, it is their duty to the Overmind; second, they hope that by studying man's evolution, as indeed they have studied that of other races they have midwived, they will learn to compensate for a deficiency in their own nature:

We [Overlords and humans) represent the ends of two different evolutions.....Our potentialities are exhausted, but yours are still untapped.[15]

Despite all the talk of evolution, however, and despite the detailed significance throughout the novel of the selective application of technologies, man's next step breaks every rule of Darwinian evolution. Instead of mutation occurring at conception, as modern science requires, mutation occurs to living humans. Further, mutation does not occur and then spread by natural competition; rather, all children under the age of about ten are, one after the other, affected by an "epidemic" of change. This very unscientific event produces what is essentially a new race: children who through mind energy alone can remain in wordless communication with each other, draw sustenance directly into their bodies from the universe about them, and flourish naked in the dark of interstellar space. The last we see of this new mankind, they are floating off, an immortal and all-powerful group entity, made into a god. When this epidemic first begins, the father of the first mutant asks an Overlord, "What shall we do about our children?" He answers, "Enjoy them while you may..... They will not be yours for long." This has always been so, "but now it contained a threat and a terror it had never held before."

Such poignancy indicates why, of all science fiction utopias, *Childhood's End* is the most widely admired. Classically, there have been three foci for utopian thought: society centralized, society democratized, and society apotheosized. Just as the antecedents of the first two types of utopia can be found in early non-science fiction literature, so we can find antecedents for the third type as well. The outstanding example in Western culture of the utopia of society apotheosized is the Bible. Karel, with his "sheer size" and "voice like an organ" upon whom "no man may look and live" (Exodus 33:19) is God to Stromgren's Moses. Just as man is finally superior to the angels, because, unlike them, he can still win to immortality, so the children of man are superior to the Overlords, despite any technology they may possess. The "epidemic" of mutation sweeps the world, in a wholly unscientific way, giving godlike power only to the uncorrupted young. This mutation descends like Grace, and the event, which the Overlords have learned to call "Total Breakthrough," parallels the Second Coming. In a real sense, those no-longer-humans floating off into space are entering a heaven. Clarke, who happens to be the scientist who first proposed the use of communications satellites, has used science fiction to go beyond our worship of science. He has exploited modern utopianism to revive our ancient hopes. He has, in one novel, travelled the whole utopian range of science fiction, and at its center left an unscientific monument to man's continual spiritual yearning.

One might think of comparing Clarke's *Overmind* with Stapledon's *Star Maker*. But Stapledon's creation is vaster. Mary Shelly projects ambivalence toward science. Stapledon, writing in a world that had learned from Wells to use hard scientific extrapolation, accepted science, and used it as a justification for parts of his wider scheme; but Clarke, who himself acknowledges the influence of fellow Englishman Stapledon, has moved yet a step further. He has, in his series of utopias, transcended science, expanding the range of science fiction. Simultaneously he draws into it some of the oldest and most potent ideas of our culture.

CONCLUSION:

There is no more serious work of science fiction than *Star maker*. Olaf Stapledon used science fiction to generate myths and mythic truth. In *Star Maker* Stapledon achieves a monumental power by exploiting a contrast that only science fiction can accommodate completely: that between men and the stars. *Star maker* is a supreme attempt to use the art of science fiction to "construct an imaginative sketch of the dread but vital whole of things." In *Star Maker* is recorded the wars of planets against planets; of suns consciously exploding to wipe out the planet vermin surrounding them. One can barely suggest the richness of this "voyage of astronomical and metaphysical research" which aims to tell "the kind of truth that we sometimes find in myths." But one can recognise that Stapledon has taken science, extrapolation, religion, invention. Art, and a sweeping imagination and combined them to give a history of the universe. He knows that energy will run down and that ultimately there will be no men. In this book, we learn to communicate with living systems of stars and to die with them at the ends of aeons.

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