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"A Dread Mystery, Compelling Adoration": Olaf Stapledon, *Star Maker*, and Totality

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“And yet I worshipped!”—Olaf Stapledon, *Star Maker* 256

Science-fictional efforts to model history in terms graspable by the human mind often become hyperbolized as attempts to narrate the full billion-year history of the entire cosmos—in the process reducing the history of the human species, and even the history of the Earth itself, to a small and unremarkable moment, a footnote to a footnote. Few texts have taken up this paradoxical tug-of-war between humanistic significance and anti-humanistic insignificance with more enthusiasm than Olaf Stapledon’s *Star Maker* (1937), which seeks to schematize all possible systems for social organization that might ever exist in the universe precisely by imagining *Homo sapiens* as only one very marginal and very unhappy case in the larger cosmic order. *Star Maker* has long enjoyed well-deserved admiration for the incredible scope and scale of its cosmic imagination; the novel, undoubtedly, is transcendent, a dizzying achievement, and rightly beloved. But *Star Maker*’s unflinching confrontation with the immensity of the cosmos as it was revealed by early twentieth-century physics—a radical decentering of the human that can be felt across the emergence of sf as a genre more broadly—has implications that are as darkly unsettling as they are liberating and exhilarating; the book ultimately blocks any hope for the political future of the human species at the same time that it undermines the theological comforts of the spiritual realm, leaving both writer and reader uncertain where *any* sort of consolation might be found in an infinite and indifferent universe. What separates the Stapledonian “cosmical tragedy” (*A Man Divided* §12, loc. 4213) from Shakespearean or other traditional representations of tragedy is its repeated assertion of the *impossibility* of renewal and rebirth following the tragic fall—or, worse, the sense that any apparent renewal and rebirth will simply be the staging ground for some even more relentless and brutalizing tragedy still to come. Narrative catharsis thus works somewhat differently for Stapledon than it does for other crafters of tragedy: we do not pass through his cosmic tragedies satisfied by the ups and downs of our emotional journey, but rather become stuck, unable to find the exit, trapped inside.

In this article I read the totalizing ambitions of *Star Maker* in the context of Stapledon’s broader career as a writer and speaker (using some texts now available only in the Olaf Stapledon archive at the University of Liverpool) to demonstrate that despite its ample artistic merits, the book did not ultimately fulfill Stapledon’s hopes for a vision of the cosmos that might solve the political, philosophical, and theological crises he saw all around him. Instead, *Star Maker*’s articulation of totality, for all its creativity and expansive imagination, and despite its many pleasures, is fundamentally depressive: the

problems that preoccupied Stapledon and provoked the writing of the book only grow more and more pronounced with each hyperbolic leap upwards from planet to star empire to multiverse and beyond.

“Trying to Get a Formula for the Whole Universe.” Stapledon acknowledges his interest in totality in his preface to *Star Maker*, where he notes the importance of maintaining and expanding, even in an age of crisis, what may be called metaphorically the “self-critical self-consciousness of the human species,” or the attempt to see human life as a whole in relation to the rest of things (4). This was, in fact, a lifelong obsession. In the Stapledon archive at the University of Liverpool, which houses Stapledon’s manuscripts, letters, and personal papers, one can find among his childhood papers a truly astounding document titled “Comparative Time Chart of Political, Constitutional, Literary, and Economic History in England and Also of Important Foreign Events.”¹ This appears to be a young Olaf’s attempt to write down literally everything that has ever happened, beginning “before 500 AD” and advancing by fifty-year increments. The chart finally ends dozens of pages later around 1900—that is, at roughly the year of the document’s own creation (OS/II/5). In this sense Robert Crossley can say that “*Star Maker* was a book [Stapledon] had been rehearsing all his life” (*Olaf Stapledon* 228). Through his relentless pursuit of a radically extended temporal perspective far beyond the scale of any individual human life, Stapledon was ultimately pursuing the science-fictional cognate of the cognitive mapping work that Fredric Jameson identifies in conspiracy narrative in his influential essay “Totality as Conspiracy.” Jameson describes “the famous and seemingly gratuitous” tracking shot in *All the President’s Men* that “literally rises from the very small (the reading-room call slips) to the social totality itself”: “For it is the impossible vision of totality—here recovered in the moment in which the possibility of conspiracy confirms the possibility of the very unity of the social order itself—that is celebrated in this well-nigh paradisaical moment” (“Totality as Conspiracy” 78-79). With only a few changes Jameson might have been talking about the paranoid cosmic logic of *Star Maker*, which similarly takes the “architectural order” of a *literally* astronomical totality as its own paradisaical glimpse into the totality of all history. In *Star Maker*, we begin on Earth, and then spiral up and out, into larger and larger systems that each produce, in turn, the desire for some higher order still.² *Star Maker* might well be thought of as a kind of galactic conspiracy novel—an attempt to break through the incomprehensibility and incoherence of the present to find the hidden system lurking underneath that finally explains everything. This is indeed the very criticism that H.G. Wells launches at Stapledon in a letter in June 1937 (the year *Star Maker* was published): “Essentially I am more positivist and finite than you are. You are still trying to get a formula for the whole universe. I gave up trying to swallow the Whole years ago” (Wells 47).

Stapledon was the first to admit that the book he designated “the Cosmos-book” (Crossley, *Olaf Stapledon* 228) had a form and ambition that went beyond the typical novel, humbly conceding in the book’s preface that “Judged

by the standards of the Novel ... [*Star Maker*] is remarkably bad. In fact it is no novel at all" (*Star Maker* 4). Perhaps Stapledon would have smiled at Brian Aldiss's later praise that "*Star Maker* stands on that very remote shelf of books which contains huge foolhardy endeavors, carried out according to their authors' ambitions.... Hardy's *Dynasts* stands there, the writings of Sir Thomas Browne, C.M. Doughty's epic poems, and maybe Milton's *Paradise Lost*" (198). And yet, despite its highly idiosyncratic form the novel has been tremendously influential for the generations of sf novelists that have followed it. Stapledon, with Asimov, is a primary developer of what legendary Golden Age editor Donald A. Wollheim would later call the consensus cosmogony of science fiction, its common futurological vision, which depicts the rise, fall, and rise again of a Galactic Empire—though Stapledon's is relatively unusual insofar as his Galactic Empire is not human-led, and indeed contains few humanoids at all.³ Wollheim's system is an eight-stage cycle that begins with the human exploration of the solar system (#1) and then moves out to the extrasolar planets (#2), resulting in the rise of the first Galactic Empire (#3-4), which then collapses (#5), goes through a sometimes lengthy Dark Age (#6), followed by the rise of a second Empire that is imagined to be perfected and permanent (#7) (42-44). To run through each of the first seven stages, as these narratives typically do, requires a temporal perspective of at least several thousand years; Asimov's FOUNDATION series (1942-1993) spans several hundred millennia, while Stapledon's spans billions of years across multiple universes.

Star Maker, then, can be said to anticipate in miniature any number of later works of cosmological sf in its attempt to exhaust all possible patterns of interaction among the individual, the collective, and the larger universe, and thereby fashion all human/universal history into a singular, massive totality. Indeed, Wollheim takes Stapledon as a key early anticipator of this cosmogony before it had fully begun to concretize in the popular imagination, and bemoans the never-realized tradition of stories that might have followed had Stapledon's, rather than Asimov's, imagination of the future become dominant (36). But, despite his affinity with the consensus cosmogony, Stapledon is also singular in his engagement of these themes. Typically, as Brooks Landon and Andrew Ross have noted, the fantasy of galactic colonization was "implicated in the language of nationalistic destiny" (Landon 79), where "adventure, as always, was imperialism's accomplice" (Ross 112). Stapledon's vision of the colonization of space is quite different from this. First, it is fiercely anti-imperialist; his commitment to cosmopolitan inclusivity is such that he is reluctant even to declare an allegiance to *humanity*, much less to Britain in particular: "I am loyal to man but not because *Homo sapiens* is my species, but simply because Man is the best thing I know. If Martians arrive, and prove better than Man, I put them first" ("World Citizenship" OS/F2/3). Second, and perhaps more crucially, Stapledon's use of the stars has a much different philosophical orientation than most galactic empire fictions; in accordance with Cornell Robu's insistence on the importance of the sublime in sf, Stapledon uses the infinite not as a means of anticipating future human triumphs but as

a means of accessing tragic catharsis (Robu 24-25). Where much cosmic sf is predicated on an imperial fantasy of civilizational and species immortality—that there should be “some corner of another world that is forever mankind,” in the words of the speech William Safire prepared for Richard Nixon during the Apollo 11 mission “in event of Moon disaster”(Safire)—Stapledon instead sought in his science fiction psychological or philosophical consolation for a universe in which all things are and shall always be mortal. The second empire is neither perfected nor permanent—and it too will collapse. Totality for Stapledon is thus two-faced: it is “dread but vital,” with the first term threatening always to swamp the second at every turn (*Star Maker* 4).

Intriguingly, Wollheim identifies the eighth and culminating step of the Galactic Empire cycle as the “Challenge to God,” describing moments such as the climax of *Star Maker*:

The effort to match Creation and to solve the last secrets of the universe. Sometimes seeking out and confronting the Creative Force or Being or God itself, sometimes merging with that Creative First Premise. The end of the universe, the end of time, the beginning of a new universe or a new time-space continuum. (44)

But in *Star Maker* this confrontation with the Creative Force is ultimately as abortive as it is generative; restoration and renewal prove incomplete, perhaps even impossible. In *Star Maker*—in a dialectical pattern seen repeatedly in sf—the attempt to imagine a stable future of human flourishing instead breaks down, necessarily summoning forth its structural opposite: the depressive realization that in an entropic universe *nothing* can be truly permanent. Vital, but dread; dread, but vital. *Star Maker* is written to confront this crisis of the spirit, but the solution to this problem eludes Stapledon even in *Star Maker*, the moment of his most ecstatic artistic triumph. He would compose his later works still in pursuit of this longed-for philosophical synthesis.

“A Fledgling Caught in a Bush-Fire.” Although this article will focus primarily on Stapledon’s *Star Maker*, I would be remiss to omit his *Last and First Men* (1931), published seven years earlier, the book for which he first rose to prominence as a writer of fiction and for which he was best-known during his life (and which takes place in the same fictive history as *Star Maker*). *Last and First Men* aims at nothing less than a total history of the human race, beginning with the near-term history of an anticipated second world war and ending in the inconceivably distant future on a Neptune occupied by humanity’s evolutionary successors, the doomed Eighteenth (and Last) Men.

Stapledon foregrounds the familiar sf tension between prediction and allegory in the novel’s earliest pages, when he gives *Last and First Men* two forewords: a “preface” and an “introduction.” Stapledon’s stated artistic goal in the *preface* is the creation of “true myth,” which “within the universe of a certain culture (living or dead), expresses richly, and often perhaps tragically, the highest admirations possible within that culture” (9). For Stapledon, as Kinnaird has remarked, this myth is always located at “some intersection of the

human and the cosmic" (34). This intersection is commonly thought about in terms of the sublime encounter with deep time that characterizes so much of early sf's engagement with apocalyptic fantasy. Stapledon thus draws a stark contrast between himself and those writers of "future romances" whose visions are but (bad) utopianism; he turns instead to the other axis of possibility, the "repugnant" thought that "[civilization] may decay and collapse, and that all its spiritual treasure may be lost irrevocably," and a second tragedy alongside that first one, that "our race will destroy itself" (*Last and First Men* 10). By its end the preface morphs, unexpectedly, into a kind of prayer: "May this not happen! May the League of Nations, or some more strictly cosmopolitan authority, win through before it is too late!" (10-11).

But the second introduction—written from the perspective of one of the Eighteenth Men, working backwards in time to control Stapledon's pen—denies the possibility of positive historical intervention. In the hands of this second narrator the story takes on something of a predictive character after all; it is said to be not fancy but the literal truth. Stapledon's own reflective writings on *Last and First Men* indicate the extent to which the posture of the introduction towards the text represents something more than mere flourish; he was delighted by the scientific rationality at work in his own book, and later in life would excoriate himself for failing to anticipate the rise of fascism within *Last and First Men's* pages.⁴ But the turn to prophecy goes hand in hand with a kind of total fatalism; to the extent that we imagine *Last and First Men* to be true we necessarily lose any hope for "the future to turn out more happily than I have figured it" (10). The novel becomes instead the finalized and deeply tragic history of an always already doomed human race that hits the limits of expansion in the furthest reaches of the solar system and then utterly disappears—a history that is not a triumph or a "paradise" but a long series of "huge fluctuations of joy and woe" (13), petering out finally in the permanent tragedy of species extinction. That overarching doom recurs, fractally, at every level of history, beginning with "that little period which includes the culmination and collapse of [our] own primitive civilization" (15).

These variations on the human deeply unsettle the fantasy of a universal human subject that has been (and remains) a typical assumption of sf. Here we have multiple *humanities*, multiple Men, none with a claim on the ownership of the totality of history that is stronger than any other's. Indeed, from this hyperbolic temporal perspective, the "First Men"—our own version of *Homo sapiens*—is but a minuscule and deeply failed fraction of the overall human story. This is what the present looks like from the standpoint of evolutionary time, a view so radically detached from contemporary concerns or individual human lives that it becomes coolly alien.

The tension between optimism and pessimism that will be at work across Stapledon's oeuvre can already be felt quite strongly here. Over the million-year history of *Last and First Men*, humanity evolves wholly new forms to adapt to changing surroundings, both socially and biologically. At one point, the reign of the Seventh Men, human beings even sprout wings and fly—a bold figure both for the radical alterity of our possible futures and for the power of

sf to shock us out of our comfortable cognitive habits and ideological blindspots. At the same time, however, the various civilizations of the Men of the future all inevitably hit a limit point and fail, culminating in the Eighteenth Men, doomed to confront icy death at the edge of the solar system, unable to avert their tragic fate or even to find reliable consolation in art or the spirit.

The book ends in a homily from the very last human being, the last person born before humanity realized it was doomed and stopped reproducing. Our narrator tells us the (very) last man's quiet demeanor is how "despair wakens into peace": the effect of the Very Last Man's speech is that the Eighteenth Men's sad "hearts are mysteriously filled with exultation. Yet often his words are quite grave" (245). The Very Last Man concludes that despite humanity's collective ambitions to become the lords of creation, it has instead not risen above the level of "a fledgling caught in a bush-fire": "the music of the spheres passes over him, through him, and is not heard." Each attempt to name some humanistic value that might reconcile humanity to its fate, or offer solace, is thrown into doubt:

But does [the music of the spheres] really use him? Is the beauty of the Whole really enhanced by our agony? And is the Whole really beautiful? And what is beauty? Throughout all his existence man has been striving to hear the music of the spheres, and has seemed to himself once and again to catch some piece of it, or even a hint of the whole form of it. Yet he can never be sure that he has truly heard it, nor even that there is any such perfect music at all to be heard. (246)

The last paragraph seeks to cut back to consolation again, having the Very Last of the Last Men tell the others that "man" is beautiful, and that "it is very good to have been man," and that "we go forward together" (into universal extinction!) "with laughter in our hearts," before finally concluding with an unhappy, almost unbidden characterization of the "music that is man" as "brief" (246).

Beyond his own questions and doubts, the Very Last Man's words are further undercut by the novel in a second and more devastating way. During their long decline the Eighteenth Men have been embarking on a project of "seeding" the universe with their essence so that other sentient species might someday arise. They find this task "forlorn" and "uncongenial," even "repugnant" (241), but nonetheless the Eighteenth Men come to see "the Scattering of the Seed" as "the supreme religious duty" (244). An astounding *twenty-thousand years* pass on page 241 of the Dover Publications edition of the novel, but with scant progress towards this goal; over these millennia the situation of the Eighteenth Men worsens considerably, as their civilization falls into radical ecological collapse and their very minds begin to break down into degeneracy and madness (242-43). Worse, they no longer understand why the Scattering of the Seed is so important, beyond fidelity to an idea they had had "in a former and more enlightened state" (244); they feel now that even if they succeed in their mission their successor lifeforms will surely die as well, "if not swiftly in fire, then in the ultimate battle of life against encroaching frost.

Our labour will at best sow death an ampler harvest” (244). To careen, as we do, from this maximum hopelessness to the Very Last Man’s call for heroic stoicism in the face of extinction a page later seems more like denial than proper psychological acceptance; even the narrator scarcely seems able to bring himself to believe. As becomes common in Stapledonian resolutions, the book wants to have it both ways, declaring with one breath a total love for the universe, as cruel as it is, and with the next letting slip the prayer that some escape hatch from death might yet be found.

Here the difficulty of the scalar interplay between locality and totality is memorably symbolized: the widened perspective of totality necessarily carries with it the somber pronouncement of a final doom that flattens out all hope. The Whole, the Absolute—death—is triumphant over all mortal things. The even more ambitious *Star Maker* only intensifies *Last and First Men*’s sublime decentering of the human; in the cosmic history of *Star Maker* human achievement counts for absolutely nothing at all. The entirety of *Last and First Men* is ultimately summarized in but a single paragraph of *Star Maker*—now moving at maximum narrative speed, at maximum perspectival distance—and punctuated by this final epitaph: “All this long human story, most passionate and tragic in the living, was but an unimportant, a seemingly barren and negligible effort, lasting only for a few moments in the life of the galaxy” (*Star Maker* 184). There is no mention of the project of the Scattering of the Seed whatsoever, and in fact Stapledon specifically rules out the possibility that the various aliens of *Star Maker* are the longed-for descendants of the Eighteenth Men: life arises in the galaxy *both* “before and after man’s troubled life,” and in each case “a new planetary birth” is paired with “fresh disaster” (184).

We find here, then, the fullest articulation of what Jameson calls the “vast social melancholy” of Stapledon’s cosmic vision, which “alternates with a joy of existence and productive activity” at a syncopating rhythm that somehow always seems to leave melancholy the victor (*Archaeologies* 126). Indeed, the aesthetic of doomed striving in Stapledon led Kinnaird to call him the last Romantic poet (5), as he echoes, in a twentieth-century futurological register, the mournful view from extinction to be found in such works as Shelley’s “Ozymandias” (1818) or Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1820). Looking upon our works from the perspective of a million million years hence, it is hard to do anything but despair.

“Humanity Must Unite or Perish.” The plot of *Star Maker* (such as it is) is far too long and far too varied to adequately summarize in close detail. The basic structural logic of the novel is that of a continual cosmic zoom-out, beginning with a single man standing on a hill in England stewing after a fight with his wife (as expressed in the novel’s first line: “One night when I had tasted bitterness I went out on to the hill”) (7). The man—wondering how anything on a human scale can have any significance when our entire lives are “but a flicker in one day of the lives of stars” (11)—is unexpectedly pulled out of his terrestrial context and begins to travel through the interstellar void by

way of a kind of astral projection. The novel begins, as it will eventually end, with this transcendent vision of the entire globe, “far more lovely than any jewel”:

Its patterned coloring was more subtle, more ethereal. It displayed the delicacy and brilliance, the intricacy and harmony of a live thing. Strange that in my remoteness I seemed to feel, as never before, the vital presence of Earth as of a creature alive but tranced and obscurely yearning to wake. (15)

The sublimity of this imaginative vision is all the more remarkable in that he is writing both before the emergence of the Gaia theory and before spaceflight; such is the miraculous scope of Stapledon’s vision.

This organicist, vitalist totality of the globe, into which all local human life is subsumed (if not obliterated altogether) is, in many ways, the central insight of Stapledon’s life, and the source of his deepest political commitments. In *Archaeologies of the Future* Jameson is quite taken with the sense that, for Stapledon, collectivity is a matter of widening the locus of interest into wider and wider spheres; as Stapledon’s narrator extends himself in both space and time—and as the novel goes on, in consciousness as well—Jameson notes that the narrator actually begins to merge with the abstract notion of “collectivity” as such (*Archaeologies* 8). One of the central paradoxes of *Star Maker* is the way our unnamed narrator remains recognizably human even as he becomes a seemingly eternal group mind consisting of a multitude of beings so radically different from the human that they can only be described by analogy; he ultimately merges, in a sense, with the general idea of “intelligent life” as such, but not to an extent that makes him frightening, or unable to communicate with his readers.

The dream of a genuinely just, genuinely collective social order appealed to Stapledon in more pragmatic terms as well. In what is still the most detailed biography of Stapledon available, Robert Crossley details Stapledon’s commitment to cosmopolitan globality during the period in which he was writing *Star Maker*. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia, the last independent nation in Africa, so disturbs Stapledon and so moves him to action that it nearly derails the project of writing the book altogether. He became politically active in anti-colonial activism and anti-war pacifism, frequently giving lectures that called for an end to both fascism and British imperialism and the development of a World Federation (Crossley, *Olaf Stapledon* 231).

In his 1930s speeches Stapledon frequently argued for disarmament, insisting that “today nearly all men want peace” except “frustrated vindictive perverts and dupes” and “those who make arms for profit” (“The Seven Pillars of Peace,” OS/F2/2).⁵ He attempted in his work to establish nonviolence as an important, if not absolute, principle for national politics, and pacifism as a key plank in a larger goal to reorganize the world polity into a socialistic World Federation (“Seven Pillars”). To the question of whether such a policy would be practical, his answer was that this was “the only practicable direction to work in” and “the only possible one to succeed” (“Pacifism” OS/F6). In lectures of the period during which he was writing *Star Maker* he insisted that

the historical moment of imperialism was now, necessarily, at its end: “We can’t keep it up,” he wrote; “we don’t *want* to keep it up” (“World Order” OS/F2/1). Writing of the economic consequences of imperialism—exploitation of people and raw materials, the securing of foreign markets in which to sell finished goods—Stapledon proclaims that “these privileges are doomed” and that “a new future must be found for Britain” (“World Order”). The vision is at its core a salvific one, that the empire might yet be absolved of its criminality and redeemed, before it is too late. Over and over again, in lectures delivered across the whole of his adult life, he writes that “humanity must unite or perish”; “science makes nonsense of tribalism, and makes it lethal” (“Federation and World Order” OS/F2/8).

This humanism included strident anti-imperialism and anti-racism. In both the zoom-out at the beginning of *Star Maker* and the zoom-in at the end, there is an intense visual focus on the colonial sphere and the need for worldwide equality—and this is even more important in the first drafts of the novel, which anticipate the politics of post-World-War-II decolonization. “Far to the south,” Stapledon writes in an ultimately excised passage, “where Dutch and English thrive on the negro millions, I heard it whispered, ‘The Blacks are waiting’” (OS/B1/21/1). (This strident anticipation of the coming politics of decolonization is significantly flattened in the final text, which puts aside the twinned questions of race and coloniality and only offers Africa “vague dreams of freedom” [*Star Maker* 261].)

Stapledon calls not only for worldwide political union but also for a transformation of worldwide values. Stapledon imagines the world, both the industrialized nations and the colonial sphere, organized around rational, mutually beneficial cooperation; his definition of “world citizenship” entails “a community of diverse peoples containing diverse sections and diverse individuals” (“Education for World Citizenship” OS/F7/1). This is a cosmopolitan liberalism in which Britain is enhanced and transformed by its relationship with other cultures, if not *exactly* decentered from its self-proclaimed spot at the apex of human history, and united by a shared commitment to collective life.

Frequently the problem of the future is framed as a choice between “a worldwide totalitarian anti-state”—“Hitler’s [world]—robot humans, dictatorship by the privileged, restraint of intelligence (because it points the other way)”—or else “a fully human world—the first ever” (“Education and the New World Order” OS/F7/5). The end of World War II and the development of the nuclear bomb only made him more apocalyptic, adding a third choice that leaves humanity at the moment of final decision between “a well-tilled garden world with glorious cities” or else cataclysmic war and universal death (“World Citizenship” OS/F2/3). Atomic power comes to symbolize the knife’s edge between these two alternative destinies for Stapledon, as he argued at the Wrocław Peace Conference in 1948:

Today we live in one of the greatest moments of man’s career. From the beginning of our species, some twenty thousand human generations ago, right up to the advent of science, which began about fifteen or twelve generations

ago, man's power over the environment was slight. Science has given him great power, but not wisdom. Today, we are the first generation of the atomic age, which promises power beyond man's wildest dreams. In the future, if disaster does not intervene, this planet may well be habitable some millions of generations hence. But now for the first time man clumsily grasps an instrument which, we are told, may put an end not only to civilization but to the human species, and even to all life on earth. Yes, but also this dangerous instrument makes possible for the first time the creation of an entirely new kind of world society, in which every individual will have the chance to develop his human capacities fully, and to exercise them happily and loyally in the great common adventure of mankind. ("Address on Peace and Culture" OS/D1/22/14)⁶

At times he seems deeply and bitterly uncertain which path humanity will choose. "We must rediscover a high purpose in life," he writes in one speech of this transformation of values. The alternative is "suicide of the species (and good riddance!)" ("World Citizenship" OS/F2/3).

This apparent misanthropy—a basic, irresolvable doubt in humanity's capacity to change even in the face of necessity—appears alongside his utopian cosmopolitanism in nearly every case. Just as the Very Last Man's homily found itself spinning back and forth between the call to life and the tragedy of universal annihilation, *Star Maker's* transcendent vision of the earth as a vital totality is balanced out by cosmic dread in the very next paragraph:

From this high look-out the Earth would have appeared no different before the dawn of man. No visiting angel, or explorer from another planet, could have guessed that this bland orb teemed with vermin, with world-mastering, self-torturing, incipiently angelic beasts. (15)

This is a frequent concern of Stapledon's; he is preoccupied with the notion that humanity's ultimate cosmic status may be no better than "rats in the cathedral" (*Star Maker* 20)—ruiners and corruptors of the spirit, defilers of paradise.

"The Familiar Crisis." Leaving the earth behind and traveling out into the interstellar void, Stapledon's astral narrator visits first a place he calls the Other Earth, where this anxiety over humanity's progress is first played out. The planet has inhabitants much like ours; the primary difference is that (in a quiet anticipation of Marshall McLuhan) their sensory matrix is dominated not by the visual or the auditory, but by taste and smell. (This is especially important to Stapledon as a satire on the racism of his moment; their racism is as irrational as ours, simply keyed to different sensory input.) The unnamed narrator observes these Other Men for years before finally finding a mind with which he can converse, co-inhabiting this Other Man's body and experiencing life there at first hand. The Other Earth is at the dawn of the age of mass communication, and he watches as the planet's capacity for higher-order civilization more or less shuts down in the face of the instant and uncomplicated pleasures of radio: "During my last years on the Other Earth a system was invented by which a man could retire for life and spend all his

time receiving radio programmes” (43). Radio, while advocated by its proponents as a solution to all of humanity’s problems and indeed an end to war, is corrupted by selfish nationalists on the planet looking to generate and preserve markets for their products, as well as to consolidate their own power by promoting racist hate against other nations (45). Eventually the degradation of thought in this civilization spurred by mass media catapults the society into a suicidal world war, and the results are unspeakable:

I shall never forget how the populace plunged into almost maniacal hate. All thought of human brotherhood, and even of personal safety, was swept away by savage bloodlust. Panic-stricken governments began projecting long-range rocket bombs at their dangerous neighbors. Within a few weeks several of the capitals of the Other Earth had been destroyed from the air. (46)

The disaster, caused by a fundamental imbalance in the relationship between individual and community, turns out to be only the latest in a cycle of the rise and fall of civilizations that closely matches our own, there caused by unknown forces speculated to range from “cosmic rays” to some intrinsic flaw in the nature of the Other Men themselves. Whatever the precise cause, civilization on this planet always collapses once it hits a moment of technological modernity parallel to Earth’s twentieth century. Geologists on the other Earth even discover “a fossil diagram of a very complicated radio set,” suggesting that a parallel technological civilization had risen into technological modernity and collapsed before, even in the planet’s deep prehistoric past (56). In the view of Bvalltu, the man with whom the narrator shares a body on the Other Earth, “man had climbed approximately to the same height time after time, only to be undone by some hidden consequence of his own achievement” (57).

The cycle is not a perfect repetition, however, but fundamentally and inexorably entropic, due to a problem with the atmosphere of the Other Earth. Each cycle of history brings them closer to the final end, though the ecological crisis might potentially have been fixable through advanced science before the onset of the next age of barbarism, if not for the war: “This slender hope the war had destroyed by setting the clock of scientific research back for a century just at the time when human nature was deteriorating and might never again be able to tackle so difficult a problem” (57). This is only the first of the novel’s many similar scenes, but it can stand in for what happens in nearly every other episode in the book: civilization arises briefly on a world, only to be eventually undone by either retrograde human stupidity, unyielding entropic breakdown, or both disasters acting in concert.

Bvalltu and the narrator now merge into a shared consciousness and leave the doomed Other Earth together, ultimately visiting dozens and perhaps hundreds of such worlds, each time hoping to discover some version of humanity that can pass through the crucible and survive the nightmare years of the twentieth century, an era in which “man has gained power but not wisdom” (“Address on Peace and Culture” OS/D1/22/15) and in which the once-glittering promise of science has “turned to poison,” to quote his lectures again (“Frustration of Science” F11.21). In the excised glossary to *Star Maker*,

unpublished in the first edition, Stapledon defines this crucial moment of civilizational collapse as “the familiar crisis,” the one through which the human race “is now passing”: “the struggle to emerge from an individualistic, uncoordinated world order to one that is consciously planned for world community” (272).

Each time the group visits and leaves a planet, they add more and more travelers to their growing communal mind, gaining new powers of empathy and imagination that allow them to visit stranger and stranger worlds in their search for a system that can survive the crisis. They encounter an immense, almost indescribable panoply of biological possibility, from intelligent starfish to super-insects to “nautiloids,” living ships, to a planet where intelligent life is encoded in the dynamic patterns of flocks of birds. Jameson has mapped much of the novel’s individual set pieces onto a Greimas square that marks the dialectic between the one and the many (on the one hand) and between dualism and non-dualism (on the other) (see *Archaeologies* 131). Thus we find that each of Stapledon’s many planets describes one possible instance of the structural relationship between the individual and the community, while the novel as a whole aspires to describe *all* of them. On a planet of echinoderms living in deep-sea “colonies,” a perfectly realized communism exists simply as a consequence of their alternative biology; there, the fantasy that one might be an individual, all alone, is the most transcendent utopian impulse (82). On the planet of symbiotes the Other is not external, but always inside oneself; a mature symbiote has a healthy relationship with its own divided self-difference (100-111). A world of plant beings experiences the daily global ecstasy of contact with the divine whenever the sun is out, and must find a way to go about the business of living as rational, atomic subjects at night when it is not (120-30). On the planet of intelligent flocks of birds, individuality itself is a stable, but temporary, property of emergence; any too-close contact with another flock will cause the two to merge in unpredictable and irreversible ways (111-15).

“Human” “civilization”—both terms must be used quite loosely—on nearly all of the worlds they visit ultimately ends in disaster, apocalypse, and extinction, though every so often they catch a glimpse of a species that is able to survive, losing sight of it just as it passes out of the crisis beyond their own twentieth-century level of enlightenment. When the group mind finally has a cognitive breakthrough and is able to transcend the psychological limitations of twentieth-century humanity, it discovers that the cycle of rising and falling civilizations it has been witnessing over and over—an inflection point that most planets and species, including our own, never survive—is only a tiny sliver of an *even more* hyperbolic cycle of galaxy-scale civilizations. (Crucially, none of these advanced civilizations reflects anything like our combination of biology and social institutions; primate life, perhaps all mammalian life, appears fundamentally unsuitable for galactic expansion.)

The space-faring worlds themselves eventually fall into cataclysmic conflict. Some of them reflect a utopian/cosmopolitan “community of worlds” (*Star Maker* 137) while others are perverted “mad empires” (169), racing across the

galaxy subduing and subjugating uncontacted worlds with the relentless fervor of a Cecil Rhodes finally making good on his dream to “annex all the planets”(qtd. in Rhodes 190). Crossley is right to read this sequence as the book’s most extended parable on the current world situation, reading fascism as a “mass neurosis” “ineffectively resisted by a defensive ‘League’ of sane worlds” (*Olaf Stapledon* 246). But finally this level of conflict, too, is ultimately transcended, through the rise of a race of telepathic ichthyoid-arachnoid symbiotes that are able to pacify the mad empires and make them sane again (170). A true galactic utopia is founded, existing for a long time in glory—until, that is, the war with the stars begins. (Hyper-intelligent and indescribably old, the stars are so radically other it takes the citizens of the galaxy untold eons to even notice they are alive.) And so on, and so on, as larger and larger socio-historical totalities are constructed, reach their ultimate limit, and finally fail.

We can see this obsession for scale replicated in the comparative timelines published at the back of the book as appendices; in the archive one can even find the even more intricately detailed, sometimes poster-sized versions of the future timelines for *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker* Stapledon made for his own reference. Mirroring the zoom-out logic of *Star Marker*’s text, the charts feature cosmic timelines at incredibly hyperbolic scales: 1" = 300 light years, 1" = 30,000 light years; 1" = 400 years, then 1" = 4,000, 1" = 400,000, and so on up to 1" = 400 billion.⁷ In a handwritten note in the margin of one the charts, at 10 trillion years, Stapledon notes optimistically that “Earth would still be habitable (apart from accidents)” —which isn’t scientifically accurate, but a wonderful expression of the extreme hyperbolic timeline about which he thought the human project needed to be thinking (OS/I/1). The events of *Star Maker* are primarily concerned with what Stapledon labels Time Scale 1, which ends when the “last galaxy dies” (267)—but Time Scale 2 reveals that the silence of this last death brings us only to roughly half the life of the universe. At the bottom of Time Scale 2 we find that our universe in fact ends in “Complete Physical Quiescence,” the final and total triumph of entropy, from which there can be no possible escape in the realm of matter (268). The group mind’s search for permanence simply cannot be found in this universe, which ends in universal extinction; it must look further still.

By this time our narrator and his collective mind have grown so large that they are now a truly *cosmic* mind, almost a spirit of the universe as a whole. As Adam Roberts notes, the novel’s narrative trajectory “dramatize[s] the ongoing accumulation of knowledge. And the novel builds towards a tremendous, terrifying climax when knowledge becomes almost overwhelming” (170): this is the moment of a fully realized cosmic sublime. And so the cosmic mind begins to perceive at the final end of this incomprehensibly vast historical process a cycle of entire universes, each playing out the same pattern of rise and fall, progress and collapse, internally within themselves; the appendix labels this Time Scale 3. The mind passes through all these stages, too, experiencing countless universal histories. Only at the end of this indescribable process of cognitive totalization does it finally encounter the

long-sought-after Star Maker, the God-like spirit of love whose magnificence could justify all this failure, pain, destruction, and misery, the being who might somehow make *sense* out of the cycle. But they discover that the Star Maker is not in fact a spirit of love at all, but instead regards its creation only with icy contemplation:

It was with anguish and horror, and yet with acquiescence, even with praise, that I felt or seemed to feel something of the eternal spirit's temper as it apprehended in one intuitive and timeless vision all our lives. Here was no pity, no proffer of salvation, no kindly aid. Or here were all pity and all love, but mastered by a frosty ecstasy. Our broken lives, our loves, our follies, our betrayals, our forlorn and gallant defences, were one and all calmly anatomized, assessed, and placed. True, they were one and all lived through with complete understanding, with insight and full sympathy, even with passion. But sympathy was not ultimate in the temper of the eternal spirit; contemplation was. Love was not absolute; contemplation was. And though there was love, there was also hate comprised within the spirit's temper, for there was cruel delight in the contemplation of every horror, and glee in the downfall of the virtuous. All passions, it seemed, were comprised within the spirit's temper; but, mastered, icily gripped with in the cold, clear, crystal ecstasy of contemplation.

That this should be the upshot of all our lives, this scientist's, no, artist's keen appraisal! And yet I worshipped! (256)

His encounter with the Star Maker remains ineffable, even horrible: “a dread mystery, compelling adoration” (257). (We might think here of the way that Cthulhu, or another of Lovecraft's Nameless Horrors, might similarly “compel” your adoration.) This is the sublime as a shocked “recoil” (in Csicsery-Ronay's terms [146]) or as “pleasure in pain” (in Robu's [22]); rather than as unifying or redeeming, the Star Maker's dark majesty is deeply unsettling, and incomprehensibly vertiginous.⁸ The final encounter with the Star Maker, the moment of the cosmos's becoming fully aware of itself, does not here lead to some new paradigm of understanding or spiritual consolation, but instead rather starts the ineffable dance of creation and destruction anew—in the meantime kicking the narrator all the way back to the English hill on which his journey began.

“How to Face It All?” In this, *Star Maker* suggests itself as something transcending both novelistic writing and generic sf: it is a new myth of creation and eschatology, even a new religion for a post-imperialist, post-capitalist age. It seems the culminating move of Stapledon's lifelong preoccupation with reconciling Christianity to both science and Marxism.⁹ He himself called the novel a “confession of faith as a pious agnostic” (Crossley, *Olaf Stapledon* 228). Jameson too reads the novel in this light, declaring *Star Maker* “the Divine Comedy of Utopia, returning to us as a sacred text or scripture mysteriously catapulted from out of the future into our own fallen present, as though it were the enigmatic writing destined to secure a continuity across the barrier of time and historical transformation” (*Archaeologies* 124-25). Little wonder that Brian Aldiss, bemoaning the fact that “the funeral masons and

morticians who work their preserving processes on Eng. Lit.” have ignored Stapledon’s genius, calls *Star Maker* “the one great grey holy book of science fiction” (197).

But Stapledon himself seemed much less sure of its success. He pored over draft after draft of the novel, abandoning entirely an early version that was eventually published after his death as *Nebula Maker* (1976). In the archives you can see the results of this constant tweaking, with draft after draft of the novel handwritten out with new annotations. A lengthy glossary is written, then cut from the published manuscript; the epilogue changes radically and is stripped of specific reference to current politics of antifascism and anti-imperialism in favor of vague platitudes. The cyclical structure of *Star Maker*’s narrative itself suggests the radical inadequacy of the artist-God as a solution to the problems of infinity, entropy, and species death; the book quite literally returns the narrator back to his original starting place for a short epilogue whose ambiguous mood (like *Last and First Man*’s) careens from “joy” to “dread” to “sublime irrelevance” and back again (258). The last paragraphs of the book pose brooding questions suggesting that existential dread has finally triumphed—“How to face such an age? How to muster courage, being capable of only homely virtues?”—before the final sentence of the novel resigns itself to a muted, “strange” sense that cosmopolitan politics is still somehow “urgent” even though the narrator now knows this is all but the “brief effort of animalcules striving to win for their race some increase of lucidity before the ultimate darkness” (262-63). Even the noble stoicism of the Very Last Man has given way here to something more like clinical depression.

Robert Crossley ultimately sees the *Star Maker* as less Spinoza’s God than “a failed artist, eternally discontent with his work.” He pointedly suggests that this “may have been a projection of Olaf’s own persistent sense of artistic shortcoming” (*Olaf Stapledon* 241). The book itself was mostly a commercial failure, selling only 5000 copies in its first run, and Stapledon put his science-fictional writing on hold for several years as a result. If *Star Maker* is the myth that can finally reconcile Christianity to Marxism, or reconcile optimistic spirit to pessimistic reason, Stapledon himself does not notice; he continues writing on and wrestling with this problem until his death, never happy with his answers. Indeed, as much as Spinoza’s or Marx’s God, the *Star Maker* is *King Lear*’s: “As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport” (IV.1 line 34).

Worst of all is the nagging sense that dogs Stapledon for the rest of his literary career, that the problems have simply not been solved, only pushed deeper and deeper off into the recessive mists of time in a way that is fundamentally unsatisfying. When Charles Elkins reads *Star Maker* through the lens of totality, he sees Stapledon inhabiting the position of the *Star Maker*, rather than the position of the narrator, and sees the purpose of the novel as producing

a totalizing vision which will displace the various contradictions and subsume them within a historical pattern emplotted as myth—as tragedy. Once this has been done, a related project is to overcome the reader’s skepticism and

convince him or her that to play one part in this particular drama has been worthwhile. (59)

I would say instead that Stapledon plays *all* the roles in *Star Maker*, and that the person he is most desperate to “convince” that love or beauty or nobility could be the antidote to “cosmical tragedy” is himself. And to take the evidence of his subsequent works is to conclude that he did not succeed. For everything it accomplishes, *Star Maker* never does uncover entropy’s escape hatch; in fact its manufacture of larger and larger systems, each one requiring yet another secret exit, only proves the relentless inexorability of entropy and the fundamental *impossibility* of escape. In this sense the promise of the future that underlies Stapledon’s critique of the present turns out to be always on very shaky ground. Dialectically, futurity for Stapledon is always also its opposite—every birth always also an inevitable death—and “the future” as a criterion for judgment and a call for action in the present turns out to be always as paralyzing as it is catalyzing.

In 1942 he wrote *Darkness and the Light*, which replicates the story of *Star Maker* on the more limited scale of planet Earth by bifurcating future history into two channels, one nightmarish, the other more optimistic, with the lone hope for humankind emerging not out of imperial or post-imperial England but out of Tibet. But even in the book’s “light” future, the ontology of the universe is essentially tragic; the most advanced scientists of that future world discover “the seemingly ultimate horror” that “the universe ... of galaxies and atoms, of loves and hates and strifes, is no more than a melting snowflake which at any moment may be trampled into the slush by indifferent and brawling titans” (*Darkness and the Light* 162). This “bleak vision” denies the possibility of a transcendent God like the one who organized the *Star Maker* universe; in his place, there is now “only desolation” (164). The denizens of the “light” future determine that a species-wide hunger strike might catapult the entire race to state of “extreme spiritual lucidity” that could (they hope) somehow destroy the titans, even at the cost of all human life, but even in this they are thwarted (172).

In “The Flames” (1947), a novella that in some ways might be the schizophrenic response to *Star Maker*’s paranoia, humanity again makes contact with creatures from the stars, in this case living sunbeams—only these creatures are manipulative and religion-mad, threatening to use their powers to goad the nations of the world into final atomic conflagration if a portion of the earth is not set aside (and set permanently afire) for their personal use. This is an epistolary novel, and neither the writer of the narrative nor the reader who transmits it to us is ever sure whether the Flames are good or evil, or indeed if they even exist at all. In Stapledon’s last novel, *A Man Divided*, published in 1950, the year of his death, the best and worst impulses of humanity are constrained within a single individual, as he returns again to this problem of the justification of humanity in a universe of extinction and entropy:

But let us for the sake of argument suppose that the very worst does happen, and that within a quarter of a century, or a quarter of a year, mankind destroys itself, and lethal radiation turns the whole surface of the earth into a desert, inhospitable to life—what then? Were those who foresaw it fools to remain alive, vainly striving against it? No! Even the destruction of a living world is worth living through, however painful; if one is awake, if one can see the disaster as an episode in the perennial struggle of the spirit in the innumerable successive hosts of individuals in all the worlds. My own life has been mainly a dismal failure, and yet it was infinitely worth living. And if mankind fails, yet mankind has been infinitely worth while. Already, and whatever happens, this planet, this grain that spawned our imperfect kind, is well justified. The solar system, the whole universe, is well justified; yes, even if man is the only, and a sadly imperfect, vessel of the spirit, and doomed. For no tragedy, not even a cosmical tragedy, can wipe out what man (in his low degree) has in fact achieved, through the grace of his vision of the spirit, his precarious and yet commanding vision of the spirit. (loc. 4202-4213)

But this character, too, cannot hold himself to an optimistic reading of history; in the very next sentence he immediately contradicts himself and leaps back to the need for something else, something greater: “But how unlikely that man is the sole vessel! Consider the pregnant stars! Consider the great galaxies! Can any sane mind then suppose that man is the sole vessel?” (loc. 4202-4213). The novel concludes by deeply envisaging possible escape hatch after possible escape hatch, with speculation about survival of the spirit after death and the existence of parallel worlds of “the spirit,” anything that might keep the “cosmical tragedy” of quiescence from ever being realized, anything that might yet keep the moment for the Very Last Man’s resigned stoicism at bay a while longer.

In the Stapledon archive one can find an undated document titled “Assorted Jottings for a Possible Book about the Future,” likely dating from around 1932-1934 given its position within Stapledon’s original filing system, its similarities to other Stapledon notes and speeches of the mid-1930s,¹⁰ and its oblique references to Huxley’s recently published *Brave New World* (1932). These appear to be among his first preliminary notes for what would eventually become the future history of *Star Maker*, offering a glimpse into Stapledon’s mind as he set out to write the definitive history of the cosmos (OS/B5/5/4).¹¹ It begins with the usual mania for scale: the “degrees of futurity” outlined on page 1 of the notes defines 100 years as the near term, 5000 years as the middle term, and one million years as the far term. The notes are sparse, and overridden by a sense of melancholic anticipation. One page’s enumeration of the difference between “early loves and later loves, child world and grownup world” recapitulates the sad truth that time only moves in one direction, culminating in a list that abruptly extinguishes possibility: “growing up/growing old and dying.”¹² The near term imagines the decline of capitalism and the creation of a synthesis between the US and the USSR; the far term only asks “will man [fade out] before the earth cools?”¹³ A category labeled “the very far future” has only four words: “doomed world, + universe?” (OS/B5/5/4).

This is the heart of *Star Maker*, the singular philosophical conundrum that drove the writing of the novel and which preoccupied Stapledon all his life: what is the proper scale of human imagining? On what sort of timeline should we live our lives and plan our politics? How can the human mind ponder not only its own extinction, but also the eventual extinction of the nation and the human species and the Earth, and indeed of the entire cosmos? The heading written at the top of the last page of notes—immediately following “doomed world, + universe?”—puts very bluntly the central aesthetic problem of *Star Maker* in one single, sublime, terrible question, to which the novel is intended to find the answer: “How [to] face it all?” (OS/B5/5/4).

But the rest of that page is blank. Even after *Star Maker*, alas, all things born must die.

NOTES

1. It is worth noting that the system of organization used in the Liverpool archive is based upon Stapledon’s own assiduous schematizing of his own papers, further demonstrating his personal devotion to totalizing systems of organization.

2. For more on this point, see Charles Elkins, especially his relation of Stapledon’s narrative moves to Kenneth Burke’s “dialectic of the upward way,” wherein one “overcomes conflict, contradiction, polar opposition by ascending to a higher level of abstraction, to a higher level of generality,” culminating in the encounter with the “god term” (60) past which no further abstraction is possible. *Star Maker* performs this cognitive action on an almost ludicrous scale.

3. See Wollheim. This scheme is further developed in Edward James’s “*Per ardua ad astra*: Authorial Choice and the Narrative of Interstellar Travel.”

4. “By 1947 the early chapters of *Last and First Men* had become obsolete as prediction, and Stapledon was in the position of having sheepishly to submit a scorecard to his audience. If in the aftermath of the death camps and a global war against fascism he had to confess that he had ‘missed Hitler,’ he could at least claim that he got ‘atomic power’” (Crossley, “Olaf Stapledon” 37). Crossley also notes a passage in the preface to *Darkness and the Light* (1942) where Stapledon says “Historical prediction is doomed always to fail” (v), as well as the cutting of the anti-American sections of *Last and First Men* in a 1953 reprinting.

5. This lecture was ultimately revised and published in 1944 as a booklet titled *Seven Pillars of Peace*, with modified wording.

6. Note again the fascination with hyperbolic time scales that range from the deep evolutionary past to “millions of generations hence.”

7. One can find a partial reproduction of one of the *Last and First Men* timelines in Mike Ashley’s *Out of this World: Science Fiction but Not as You Know It* (106-107), the catalog from the 2011 science fiction exhibition at the British Museum. My thanks to one of the anonymous readers of an earlier draft of this essay for bringing this to my attention (and for his or her extremely generous and helpful comments more generally).

8. Csicsery-Ronay in fact singles out Stapledon as a relatively rare example of an sf writer refusing the temptation to “ironize” the sublime through ludic play; Stapledon’s work is instead characterized by “serene, humorless sobriety” that comes closest to “acknowledging the abyss and the force of nature” (155).

9. In fact his original attempt at writing *Star Maker*, posthumously published under the name *Nebula Maker* (1976), ended with a painfully obvious allegorical encounter

between two living nebulae, Bright Heart (standing in for Christianity) and Fire Bolt (standing in for Marxism).

10. See, for instance, the speech called “Man’s Prospects,” which does have a date, March 1934, and which deploys the same near-future/middle-future/far-future structure of the “assorted jottings.” The end of this speech seems to directly anticipate the detached aestheticism of the end of *Star Maker*: Stapledon asserts that “it should not grieve us” if life in the universe has an inevitable end, as (he says) “I want the Cosmical Drama to be enjoyed, duly appreciated and duly completed, by some one: God? Man? Another?” (OS/F13/35)

11. This document suggests the importance of Aldous Huxley in Stapledon’s early thoughts about *Star Maker*. On one page the crossed-out words “Dark God” immediately precede the name “Aldous”; on another, which seemingly describes the sequence of created and destroyed universes that closes the finished text, *Brave New Cosmos* is floated as a possible title.

12. An undated “Letter to the Future” (D1/30/1 in the Stapledon archive) expresses the same emotion even more starkly; it is somberly addressed “to those who will be young when we are dead.” See the uncompleted version of this project edited by Robert Crossley and reprinted as “Letters to the Future” in *The Legacy of Olaf Stapledon*.

13. Stapledon’s shorthand can sometimes be difficult to make out. This may say “pack off.” Regardless, the intended meaning is clear.

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ABSTRACT

Using research undertaken at the Olaf Stapledon archive at the University of Liverpool, this article explores the tension between cosmopolitan optimism and cosmic pessimism that structures Stapledon’s 1937 novel *Star Maker*, and asks whether the novel succeeds in solving the philosophical problems that first spurred Stapledon to write it. I conclude, unhappily, that it does not: while an impressive achievement, and despite a surface optimism, the book’s confrontation with infinity, totality, and the sublime is ultimately depressive rather than generative of a felicitous cosmological order, requiring Stapledon to try again and again to somehow solve this philosophical conundrum in the subsequent books that make up the later portion of his career.