

On Stapledon's "Star Maker" ("Le Créateur" d'étoiles de Stapledon)

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## Stanislaw Lem

### On Stapledon's *Star Maker*\*

*Translated by Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.*

Stapledon intended *Star Maker* to be the *summa* of cosmic SF; and indeed SF could nourish itself for years on the treasures in this essay (it can hardly be called a novel). Yet, considered as a whole, *Star Maker* is a rather monstrous torso. The narrator, who leaves his English home each evening to marvel at the stars, ascends in spirit one night into the cosmic void, and embarks on an odyssey among the stars. He learns to insert himself for intervals into the minds of beings on other planets, and through their eyes and minds he comes to know the innumerable civilizations of the Milky Way: beings with human forms, "plant men," "underwater men," "flying men," intelligent insects, crabs, a bird-like race with a collective intelligence, etc.

In the course of his wanderings he expands to greater and greater magnitude; soon he's describing not individual worlds but whole classes and categories of them. He contrasts "unified" civilizations with "insane" ones. He depicts species in which different sense organs dominate sense-experience and which therefore construct different images of deity ("God as the Most Perfect Flavour"—for those beings who have extraordinarily highly developed organs of taste and scent). But that is not all. Once the universe has become densely populated by civilizations, the stars begin to destroy the life in their ecospheres with a series of nova-explosions. Some even emit long, horrible protuberances from their chromospheres that wipe their planets clean of life. What does it all mean? It so happens that the stars are also endowed with spiritual-intellectual life. They are born, they mature, and they age, since they are organisms, and indeed sentient organisms. And when the narrator begins to travel in time as he had in space, returning to the distant past of the universe, he understands that there was consciousness already awake in the very first galactic dust and gas clouds, before the stars had emerged from them. But not even this is enough. All these rungs in the cosmogonic ladder imply ever more clearly the existence of One who creates them all—the "Star Maker," to whom Stapledon devotes his last chapters.

*Star Maker* is a journey to the Last Things. Like the expanding vista viewed from an ascending balloon, an ever more monumental panorama of

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\*This essay forms the bulk of the chapter "Cosmogonic Science Fiction" in Lem's *Fantastyka i futurologia* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1970). The present translation was made from Beatrix Muranyi's Hungarian version (Budapest: Gondolat, 1974).

cosmic objects and projects extends before us. There are some sacred places in this cosmo-psychogony—as well as some merely strange ones (the grotesque image of stars angrily sweeping the life from their planets' surfaces with their protuberances reminds one of a feather-duster). Stapledon depicts a mass of psychozoic monsters, because he pays no attention to the evolutionary law by virtue of which the emergence of reason—as an extraordinary accelerator of adaptation, compared with the results of natural selection—makes the outgrowth of any sort of wings quite impossible (since it would take millions of years to occur by evolution, while the art of flying can be mastered a thousand times faster by technical means). But these are not the book's most serious flaws. After all, they are merely steps in the progress of thought in its ascent to the figure of the Star Maker.

This Highest Being had Its own callow youth, during which, playing at creation, It constructed a multitude of “unsuccessful” universes, as it were. In different stages of Its life, good and evil elements collided within It with different results, as did also Its tendencies toward active intervention in Its creations and passive contemplation of their processes. This is the concept of the Developing God, which necessarily assumes the original imperfection of the god. It implies the existence of laws to which the Creator of the Cosmos is subject, since if It can develop and mature, then It Itself could not have given itself these qualities. Stapledon therefore turns out to be mystical system-builder, although the logical character of his system is quite dubious.

The present universe, which is also the creation of the Creator in question, is a foundry of gigantic forces that alternately give birth to civilizations and annihilate them. The dizzying number of collapses, annihilations, injuries, and evolutionary and social anomalies is appropriate for the gigantic scale of the universe, with its metagalaxies and stellar nebulae. The Star Maker does not strive to give Creation psychic life directly; instead, It instills the evolutionary possibility of it. This is why consciousness came about in protoplanetary vortices just as it did in the great stars, in the biospheres of the cool heavenly bodies, and on the shells of stars dying heat-deaths. All these minds, in so far as they do not stray, or die, or perish at the hands of other minds, finally arrive at the degree of enlightenment at which they can make contact with others. In this process—from the battlefields of different forms of consciousness—a Cosmic Mind gradually comes into being. What It will think about, we do not know.

My greatest reservations about the logic of the book concern the double psychic nature of its ontology. Stapledon isn't satisfied with the fact that mind becomes embodied in material systems—from insects through humans to the nebulae. Above the whole of matter he places the Star Maker, whose activities can be interpreted in two ways. Since It creates the worlds, and then merely contemplates them patronizingly, there are two possibilities. (Stapledon does not want Its activities to be interpreted like this, and he tries to prevent the reader from having such thoughts by stressing that the Creator's motives are incomprehensible by human beings.)

The first possibility is that the relation between the Creator and Its creation is determined exclusively by the Creator's decisions, and therefore these decisions manifest Its axiology (after all, It does nothing It doesn't want to

do; I am excluding as trivial the possibility of a feeble-minded deity). And this is a fairly peculiar axiology since It exposes its creatures to infinite torment, even if only indirectly. It has prepared only a this-worldly existence for us. Once, long ago, It created the Trinity of "linked universes," in which It connected This-Worldly Existence with Paradise and Hell; but that was only a local prototype and it was not generalized. Thus, no "generalized transcendence" awaits the conscious beings of the universe. There will be no other-worldly measure, inventory and payment. In this case, the Creator chose freely.

Alternatively, not even the Maker is completely free. Its actions are constrained by some secret force, or the (religious?) axioms embodied in It, and therefore It *must* act the way it does and not otherwise.

The first interpretation leads to a sort of "behavioristic teleology," whose theses sound rather chilling. By "behavioristic teleology," I mean simply that we can only reconstruct the axiomatics of choices relevant to the highest values from the Star Maker's behavior. Although we don't know what the Maker is thinking, we at least know what It is doing. Obviously, It places the maximizing of variety among panpsychic phenomena above the happiness of Its creature—i.e., Mind. Therefore, Its relationship with Nature does not consist of ethical considerations. The relationship is *ludic*, or *aesthetically* determined. Its actions seem to indicate It believes that the greatest good lies in creating as much as possible. And when we compare two independent universes, like the one in which only Good exists and the one in which even Evil may become manifest, the phenomenal world of the former appears to be considerably poorer and less varied than the latter's. Thus, even if the Star Maker is not an unequivocally Sadistic Creator, It nevertheless does subordinate the ethical criteria of actions to criteria from which ethical qualities are absent. It is more important for things to happen in ever more various ways than for the creatures' fates to become ever better. Accordingly, It is not an omniscient experimenter. It is not really very pleasant to live in a world ruled by a lord like this.

The second interpretation leads to a hierarchy of gods, or rather to infinite regression, for it implies the question: Who created the laws that determine the behavior of the Maker? Who established the axioms for It? Who instilled the elements of Good and Bad in It? If the higher authority responsible for all this is also imperfect and unfree, then there must be a still higher authority, and so on. Stapledon anticipates this interpretative snare, and he tries to escape it by circumscribing the terms of inference. He shows, for example, that if a mind condemned to annihilation is sufficiently advanced, it feels neither anger at its fate nor fear. Certain magnificent civilizations, foreseeing the physical destruction brought on by the invasions of the "evil," "insane" worlds, don't even try to fend the threats off; they go to the slaughter serenely. Such civilizations, which are already capable of establishing spiritual contact with every mind in the universe, view themselves as leitmotifs in the gigantic symphony of the cosmos. By gaining an ever greater distance from themselves, they understand that they are only single notes in the magnificent music—infinesimal notes, but constitutive parts of the whole.

This is fine as metaphor, but not as metaphysics. From this standpoint, the highest value is the aesthetically True, it is acceptance that is aesthetic, not destruction. But why? Where does its value lie? Apparently in the following: (a) the accepter conquers itself (rather, it conquers its own survival instinct), and (b) it bears witness that it has understood the highest qualities of the Ontological Order. But why is it better to conquer the survival instinct than to conquer the “highest qualities of the Ontological Order”? Even if the Maker did structure the universe as music, why should we help It to make this music ever more harmonious, in tune with the counterpoint the Maker itself composed, rather than ruining it and, incidentally, saving ourselves?

The following logical error burdens *Star Maker*: either existence gives meaning to itself, or it is sanctified by a higher value that does not originate from this existence, and is therefore transcendental. In this latter case, reason, in searching for this sanctification, must step over the bounds of this existence. But the Highest Authority must be perfect if it is to be accepted without resistance. For cognitive reason, perfection means the end of investigation. As soon as we say that the Highest is not perfect, the question immediately arises: What constrains, what injures Its perfection? This question, in turn, immediately implies the hypothesis of an even higher authority. Thus the system, which should have closed on itself to form a whole like a circle, remains open.

But in the alternative case, where existence gives meaning to itself, everything that tries to patronize it from outside, everything that created it—to the degree that it is not a blind natural force but a conscious creative act—calls the immanent value of existence into question. Only someone who has deliberately set his or her own goals can be truly free and sovereign, and if the goals have been predetermined they cannot be entirely a-teleological with regard to the creator. The creator of a conscious being is unconditionally aware of the meaning of the creative act. If it is not aware, it means the Creator did not act intentionally (and therefore it acted accidentally, and once and for all not axiologically).

The first solution leads to the idea of an imperfect god (which I developed half-seriously in *Solaris* and *Memoirs Found in a Bath tub*). Imperfect gods are more or less anthropomorphic. Their imperfection primarily involves limitations on their creative capacities. These limitations must necessarily be situated somewhere—either in a metaphysical hierarchy (in which case there are “increasingly less imperfect,” or “increasingly higher” gods—and their series approaches the perfection of omniscience and omnipotence) or in a purely material system (in other words, the cosmos comes first, with the game-character of blind forces; beings are conceived in this game; and these beings can by degrees be transformed into the gods of other beings. This is actually an anti-teleological “theology,” since the Highest Authority proves to be the material universe, which has no immanent meaning).

It is impossible to derive a consistent image of god from the system of interpretative dichotomies described above. The concept of *Star Maker* is therefore self-contradictory. Stapledon wants to strike a compromise where *tertium non datur* applies. There is no third possibility.

One can analyze the whole problematic either on the level of immanent systems-analysis—investigating the “evolutionary theory of the attributes of god” as a superior concept—or on the semantic level.

In the recent past, Teilhard de Chardin tried to import evolutionism into theology. Every evolution assumes a substrate and an environment, and thus the boundary conditions of the process as well. It childish to say that Good and Evil exist together because it simply cannot be otherwise, and to refer to speculative images from thermodynamics for support, as Teilhard does. He says: just as a motor produces products of combustion, and thus a certain decrease of entropy in one place increases it in another, so Evil, in the processes of existence, appears as product of combustion, the increase of entropy. The silent, but logically ineluctable, premise of these statements is there cannot possibly be any other sort of development than the one actually occurring. How absurd, from the standpoint of the doctrine of god's attributes, according to which the Highest created everything, and consequently also the rules to which every kind of developing process is subject! Why should It have created an imperfect, evolutionary cosmos, approaching Its perfect goal along the curves of the evolutionary spiral like a wind-up toy? Is god some gigantic child, who sets up toy trains and delights in directing them towards a goal? Unfortunately, we cannot pursue further the undeniable parallels between Stapledon's cosmo-psychic mysticism and Teilhard's theological evolutionism.

In Stapledon, both the *Star Maker* and Its creatures are capable of development. Its maturity means that a great harmony has developed within It, becoming manifest in the harmony (in a purely aesthetic sense) of the whole of Creation. The creature, on the other hand, must discover its place in this harmony through the greatest exertions, and it must act in accord with this knowledge in everything that follows. Let us note that human reflection is inclined toward such extremes. Either it says that consciousness is infinitesimal, a merely local anomaly in the apsychic and perfectly lifeless Cosmos; and hence this irregularity endowed with mind does not know how to find any existential or axiological reasons outside itself in surrounding matter. Or it preaches the panpsychic nature of cosmic phenomena—from which it follows that civilizations are only tiny parts of a single gigantic process of transformation that will ultimately transform the whole universe into a single Superconsciousness. Both positions are extreme, because both equally refuse to consider existence as the source of autonomous values. Neither gives an answer to the question of the meaning of existence. For we do not know why the universe “must be” a completely dead system in which thought seethes up at a single solitary point, nor why it “must become” a single Superconsciousness. What precisely would this Superconsciousness do, and why is Its coming into existence so perfect that we must strive for it with all our might?

The analysis of this whole ontological problematic reveals that its true character is semantic. Something can be a value only to the extent that it has a meaning; and meanings are always determined by a system. If the whole world has no immanent significance, if it exists only physically, then humans—or other intelligent beings—will make what had been purely phys-

ical existence meaningful through their own actions, directing it towards themselves and thus appropriating it culturally. Values exist by virtue of the meanings that culture gives them within the framework of the cultural system. Outside its borders there are no values, therefore no Good, no Beauty, no Evil. If there were no human beings, stars and atoms would certainly exist, but they would not mean or represent anything; they would be neither beautiful nor ugly, neither noble nor base.

If, on the other hand, the universe is the product of a creative—and hence, intentional—act, then its meaning is determined precisely by the content of the act. The Creator cannot simply grant it a meaning, accompanied by axiological gradients. No amount of explanation that our thought cannot be compared with the Creator's can change this. Even if the logic of the Creator's act absolutely cannot be derived from human logic, this state of things must also be the result of the creative act! It turns out then that the Creator manifests an immanent dishonesty *vis-à-vis* Its creatures, for God created us, but concealed the logic of the act from us. It made it inaccessible to us, in that we are unable—and never will be able—to reach, comprehend, and reconstruct it. The world thus carries meanings for the Creator, but we cannot understand them through our logic.

Let us note that logic is a time bomb hidden in the premises of every transcendental metaphysical system operating with the higher concept of the personal creator. In order to save the system from the bomb, one must argue logically for a while, and then put logic on the shelf. Otherwise the intolerable contradictions within the system will appear. Put another way, considering the semantic aspects of the matter, a metaphysical system operating with the concept of a personal god cannot be reconstructed in a consistent way. The lacunae and logical contradictions we encounter when we try to perform this reconstruction are traditionally filled by love. We will say: we must have faith in God; let our faith in Him be greater than the restlessness caused by the discovery of these doctrinal contradictions. This line of thought eventually leads to a point where *credo quia absurdum est*—"I believe because it is impossible"—becomes inexorable. We are expected to overcome every obstacle to the logical reconstruction of the incoherent system with trust in the Creator.

In contrast to the traditional image of the almost completely lifeless physical universe, in which the sparks of living consciousness vegetate in solitude on certain planets, Stapledon depicts a panpsychozoic universe, in which the primal nebulae, the stars, the galaxies, the planet-inhabiting nations are all endowed with soul. The telepathic community of all the civilizations, stars, and gas-clouds, fusing together in spiritual unity high above the level of mundane, existential matters, is strongly reminiscent of the community of saints. But Stapledon does not describe the actual contents of these panpsychic connections, where they lead and to what purpose. Instead, he announces that human language is incapable of articulating them. We are dealing therefore with the concept of the ortho-evolution of a panpsychism, according to which the positive, desirable gradient of the development of the universe is the "intermingling" of all the existing minds within it with all the others. This, then, is the highest value, the magnificent product that the uni-

verse bears forth with the greatest pain and effort, through the work of a myriad stars. It is the culmination the universe strives towards.

But why should this Pancosmic Yoga be the final stage of cosmogonic evolution? Why does this development begin with the lower stages? Why does the Star Maker begin Its work with such terrible, Sisyphusian, indirect means to create the panpsychic harmony, instead of creating it all at once? None of this can be known. Did It intend things to be this way, or was It compelled? The answer: silence. Stapledon thus raises the typical dilemmas and antinomies of every religion to a cosmic scale, elevating them from an earthly plane and earthly scale of magnitude to the dimensions of the fictive universe. He directs the traditional drama by manipulating not-entirely-traditional figures and symbols.

Thus, although *Star Maker* is an artistic and intellectual failure, at least the author was defeated in a titanic battle. The road Stapledon travelled from his novel about "Superior Man"—via the history of humanity—to the book that tells the "universal history of the cosmos" is clearly visible. Stapledon's book is a completely solitary creation. No other work in fantastic literature has begun from similar premises. For this reason, it defines the boundaries of the SF imagination.

## RÉSUMÉ

*Stanislaw Lem. Le Créateur d'étoiles de Stapledon.*—Le Créateur d'étoiles de Stapledon est une oeuvre prodigieuse de science-fiction cosmogonique qui définit les frontières de la science-fiction et entreprend de construire une théodicée moderne. Le roman tente de peindre «l'histoire universelle du cosmos» à travers le voyage mental du narrateur en partant de la découverte de formes de vie qui se trouvent dans un univers «panpsychozoïque» jusqu'à la vision fugitive du créateur de l'univers, le Créateur d'étoiles. Malgré l'entendue sans précédent de la vision de Stapledon, le roman est un échec car l'auteur présente un univers reposant sur une ontologie ambiguë. Le Créateur d'étoiles a-t-il créé l'univers librement ou bien est-il un intermédiaire, obéissant à des lois venant de plus haut. En considérant la première hypothèse, le comportement du Créateur d'étoiles face à ses créatures indique qu'il est mené par des critères esthétiques et ludiques et non par un intérêt éthique axé sur leur bien-être. Quant à la deuxième hypothèse, on ne comprend pas pourquoi le cosmos a évolué de la manière décrite. La métaphysique de Stapledon se heurte à une profonde contradiction: la gloire issue de l'acte de création du Créateur d'étoiles liée d'une certaine façon à la volonté que manifestent ses créatures à se résigner à leur mort, à leur destruction inévitable. Bien que Stapledon eut souhaité créer une exégèse mythique fabuleuse, on se demande pourquoi l'univers du Créateur d'étoiles a dû évoluer selon des voies indirectes et en suivant les traces de Sisyphé. (IC-R)

**Abstract.**—*Stapledon's Star Maker is a monumental work of cosmogonic SF, at once defining the boundaries of SF and attempting a modern theodicy. It attempts to depict the "universal history of the cosmos" through the mental journey of the narrator, from the discovery of other life-forms in a panpsychozoic universe, all the way to a glimpse of the universe's creator, the Star Maker. Despite the unprecedented expansiveness of Stapledon's vision, the book is a great failure—for the author depicts a universe founded on an ambiguous ontology. Either the Star Maker created the universe freely, or it acted as a medium according to rules higher than Star*

*Maker itself. In the former case, Star Maker's behavior toward its creatures reveals that it is governed by aesthetic-ludic criteria and not by an ethical interest in their happiness. In the latter case, it remains a mystery why the cosmos developed the way it did. Stapledon's theodicy breaks apart on a profound contradiction: that the glory of Star Maker's act of creation is somehow related to the willingness of its creatures to resign themselves to their own deaths, their inevitable destruction. Despite Stapledon's wish to create a fantastic explanatory myth, why the universe had to evolve in the Sisyphean, indirect ways in Star Maker remains unexplained. (IC-R)*