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Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*: A Prescription for Producing Humanity's Psychological Maturity

Bill Koch

Earlier this year, when I would tell people that my Intro to Lit class was reading Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*, they would react with smiles and nods of recognition.

Many said, "Yes, I read that long ago—it's about spaceships coming to earth, right?"

Indeed it is, and more.

It was the first Clarke book I had read (several years ago for some forgotten reason), but when I finished the book I felt that Clarke had conveyed something of importance, even if in the form of science fiction. There was a gravitas to it I hadn't expected. I read several of his other books to see if they had the same heft, but none of them did, even the Space Odyssey books.

Recently I mentioned to a friend who was an undergraduate with me at UNI that my class was reading *Childhood's End* and he said he had read it in his lit class—back in the early 1970s—with Tom Remington. He didn't remember anything from the book, though.

That's ok.

But since several people have mentioned reading the book a long time ago, I thought it might be fruitful to offer my reading of some of the book's key images. Because *Childhood's End* is very unconventional, mixing the science fiction elements of aliens from outer space with utopian and psychological elements, I will be using some of Carl Jung's archetypal symbolism concepts to shed light on the meaning of these objects and actions in the book.

Now *Childhood's End* is not a masterpiece of Western literature. Far from it. But, as Jung notes, "Literary products of highly dubious merit are often of the greatest interest to the psychologist" (154)—and to the literary critic, I would add. I will argue that the images and events in this story are "manifestations of the collective unconscious" and that this story is meant to be "compensatory to the conscious attitude [prevalent in Clarke's time]. That is to say, these images in literature bring a one-sided, abnormal, or dangerous state of consciousness into equilibrium in an apparently purposive way" (165).

Furthermore I will argue that this book might be more relevant (if not more important) than other literary works in suggesting what each individual can experience (if not do) in the midst of the historic changes occurring in the early twenty-first century. As Jung said of literature,

Whenever the collective unconscious becomes a living experience and is brought to bear upon the conscious outlook of an age, this event is a creative act which is of importance to everyone living in that age. A work of art is produced that contains what may truthfully be called a message to generations of men. (165)

Let us first look at the prologue to *Childhood's End*. Now it is interesting that the prologue from the original book, published in 1953, was changed when the book was reissued in 1989. In the original prologue, scientists in the West are making final preparations for a space launch using an "atomic drive." The scene switches to a Russian outpost where a similar ship is being tested and might be ready sooner than the American ship. But then, both scientists, though thousands of miles apart, see the same thing at the same time, as all the world did—alien spacecraft descending through the atmosphere.

Of course it is easy to see that the prologue represents the worrisome Cold War between the Russia and the US that was occurring in 1951 to 1952, when Clarke wrote the first draft. This very real struggle in the early years of the Cold War seems to have placed psychical pressure on Clarke's concerned mind and the result was this story of the arrival of something totally Other which the entire world had to recognize. In contrast, the new prologue describes a joint space venture by the US and Russia. There is none of the international nuclear tension of the original prologue and so right away the arrival of aliens loses much of its *raison d'être*. In either case, Clarke changed nothing of the original storyline, which is as follows, for those who aren't familiar with the story.

Just as a space race was heating up between Russia and the United States, aliens appear and hover over the major cities of the world. After remaining stationary and silent for 6 days, Karellen, known as the Supervisor, speaks to the world and announces that international disputes would now be handled through his "office." The effect is that peace comes to the world. The main story opens five years after this event and even though nations are now living without war, some people are still unhappy that peace has been forced upon them. And they are not happy that the Overlords (as Earth called the aliens) would not show themselves. Even the UN's General Secretary, the only human allowed to speak to Karellen, comes to be frustrated by this mystery.

Soon Karellen announces that the Overlords will show themselves in fifty years; when that day finally arrives, Karellen exits the spaceship (it turns out there was only one) with a child in each arm, a ploy to defuse any remaining terrors attached to his appearance—for he looks exactly like the classical Western image of Satan—red skin, horns, tail and all. But because the eyes of the Overlords are sensitive to sunlight, they have to wear sunglasses.

The years advance; a real peace dividend truly produces the kinds of changes in the social and economic structures of human society that humanity had always dreamed of making, and yet the Overlords remain, leaving humanity wondering if they have some kind of secret agenda. The answer comes when the children, seventy-five years after the arrival after the Overlords, begin to have dreams that mark their advance to another level of human consciousness, or of speciation. Total Breakthrough, the Overlords call it. This is a true generation gap, for the adults cannot join in this zoological and morphological advance.

The children's "evolution" involves the elimination of a need for their bodies. They can manipulate material things with their minds. They become catatonic and no longer recognize those around them. In the evolutionary "advance," all of reality is psychical. The material world becomes dispensable and the final images (150 years after the Overlord's had arrived) of the novel have the physical world converted into pure energy (and so destroyed) to help the new species merge with a greater Overmind.

I would suggest that this novel belongs in the category of fiction that Jung calls "visionary." Such a work, says Jung, is a strange something that "derives its existence from the hinterland of man's mind. *The story conveys a primordial experience which surpasses man's understanding* [. . .]. The value and the force of the experience are given by its enormity. *It arises from timeless depths; it is foreign and cold, many-sided, demonic and grotesque*" [all emphases, unless noted, are mine] (156-7).

For Jung, a work of art has a "*vision that is a genuine, primordial experience*. The vision is not something derived or secondary, and it is not a symptom of something else. It is true symbolic expression—that is, the expression of something existent in its own right, but imperfectly known." What this means is that "*the vision itself has psychical reality, and this is no less real than physical reality*. We need not determine whether the content of the vision is of a physical, psychical or metaphysical nature" (162).

I would like to reflect on some of the more prominent images and events in this book as if they convey "psychical reality," though these images might seem "foreign, cold [. . .] demonic." And I would like to keep in mind Jung's principle that, if "literature is the communal dream of society," (162) then every object and event in the dream refers to some psychical reality within the mind of the dreamer, whether it is the writer or the reader.

One event, or question is—why did the Overlords wait fifty years before showing themselves to look like the Devil. Certainly the book explains it in a couple ways, but those reasons are linked to exterior realities. I suggest that psychologically, those years represent the time it takes for a “peace economy” to reshape the psychology of the individual psyche. When humanity established peace on earth (even though it was in a sense forced on them), the individual psyche had less reason to act in selfish ways. Certainly there were still crimes, as Clarke noted in one of the passages describing the utopian-like society that emerged with the arrival of peace. And people could still annoy each other and act self-centered.

But this peace economy, at least in the early decades, provided people with opportunities to invent the social, economic and technological mechanisms to really distribute the material wealth that nations were creating. When someone is focusing their attention on the needs of others (even getting paid for it), then their self-centeredness becomes less important to them. And one could associate selfishness and self-centeredness with the image of the Devil. Now, with peace among nations a reality, that peace phenomena affected not just the external social world but also the individual psychical world. Peace still had problems, but these problems (distribution of goods so everyone has a minimal decent standard of living, for example) called on people to bring out their best. And so there was a slow conversion from selfish consciousness to selfless-consciousness. *After fifty years, there was so little of the devil (of shallow egocentrism) in people that they no longer had to fear an external projection of that which symbolized all that caused grief in the world.*

How does this lesson apply to those of us living in the early twenty-first century? For one, since 2001, the West has had a pronounced “war on terrorism,” and so the physical state of the species (at least those of us in the digital world) has been constantly agitated with a war mentality. This might be unavoidable, but at the same time we should recognize the ramifications of such a situation. But more important, as I have suggested to my Lit students, are the personal implications of the peace psychology. Maybe it isn’t this easy, but *if we say that we will be peace in the world, then we have placed our psyche in a peace environment*, such as what existed with the arrival of the Overlords. But the important point is this—just as the breakout of peace led to a ripple effect on the economy and other human structures, so if the student places his or her psyche into a “peace mode,” there will be changes in how he or she perceives other aspects of his or her life.

Students often are baffled as to why Clarke would make the aliens, the bringers of peace to earth, look like the devil. Is peace evil? Or does Clarke mean to say that it is demonic that peace was forced on the earth? Clarke doesn’t seem to suggest that. But the Overlords do have weaknesses, and they seem to be related to their strength, which is their scientific supremacy.

Clarke may be suggesting then that if humanity (well, should we limit it to Westerners? Modernists? Post-modernists?) maintains a one-sided reliance on science (or any other intellectual construct) to solve all its problems, then humanity might very well become demonic, and destroy that which it loves. Furthermore, that strength will not allow growth in other areas of one’s humanity. In addition, to rely too much on science and technology is to become blind to other important human sources of knowledge. What sources are these? The fact that Clarke has Jeff’s breakthrough begin with dreams suggests one source of human knowledge as important as that which we gain through empirical studies. And Jung would concur.

But I need to consider the interior meaning of these “external” events occurring in the novel. That the Overlords are pictured as the Devil symbolizes the demonic in us *if we are overly reliant on external (scientific/empirical) evidence for all the important things in life.* On a less sinister level, Clarke portrays the Overlords as having a face that cannot express emotions, or tears or even a smile. This image parallels the “objective”, emotionless methods of the scientist, or of the person who treats all of education with this detached scientific ethos. But to do so is to freeze one’s emotions and become demonic, Clarke might be suggesting.

And yet the Overlords represent the supreme achievement of the intellect, and the intellect is that which distinguishes humans from other animals. Yet the lesson seems to be that overreliance on science and its ethos leads to inhuman and inhumane living, and we will be closed off from the next level of evolutionary change. Perhaps it means that more than logic constitutes the Human Intellect.

Jung felt that the human mind had four functions—thinking, feeling, sensate and intuitive. Normal human growth and development requires that one concentrates on the development of one of these functions at the expense of the other three. But once one function has become fruitful, the other functions begin to demand attention (through dreams, a general sense of dread, etc.). In many ways, our education has been emphasizing thinking over feeling and creativity, emphasizing scientific thinking over artistic thinking. Clarke might be suggesting that our overreliance on science can be fruitful, but inevitably won't make us human.

Again, to apply these lessons to the individual, we might say *that for a person to become fully human, they must not just develop the logical side of their mind, but the artistic side as well.* (I highlight Art because the Total Breakthrough came to a child of artists on an art colony.) As a teacher in liberal education, dedicated to the development of a well-rounded student, I tell students to practice an art, not just take art appreciation classes (which is similar to the development of scientific logic). To practice an art is to develop the logic of art, and create a door into some extraordinarily important human experiences, profoundly needed for the early twenty-first century. To experience an art from the inside, as it were, is to insure that one's emotional function will not dry out. Indeed, a student in college taking up an art will likely find his emotions tempered, steeled, maturing as his intellect grows.

And so perhaps the way to end the species' childhood (well, the species that is Western, and Wired?) is to balance the scientific ethos with an emotional growth disciplined by art. At least it would be a start.

Speaking of imbalance, it is ironic that Clarke does not heed his own caution about overreliance on science (and hence on intellect and its logic), because the apotheosis of the human race he envisions at the end of the book is itself one-sided. The children become indifferent to their bodies and they convert the materiality of the world into an energy that catapults themselves into union with the Overmind (representing the next species of humanity).

The children's apotheosis is neither scientific nor religious nor artistic, but entirely mental, intellectual. They make no use of materials the way the Overlords did in converting science into technology. And my literature students were dismayed that the evolution of the species required the destruction of the world, even though Clarke meant this destruction to signal an evolutionary advance.

Perhaps the limitations of Clarke's vision suggest the way we are actually to advance into the next stage of consciousness, (which is what we are already doing in many ways) by using the materials of the earth. We do need to develop our intellect, our rationality—this is the purpose of education, though education is more than learning math and science and even spelling and writing. I suggest that our true advance would be a development of our intellectual skills, artistic skills and our appreciation of the materiality of the world (which would include the body).

I'm not referring to the present ecological movement in the West. I'm referring to a more metaphysical, perhaps one could say *sacramental* appreciation for the materiality of the world.

I struggle right now to explain this premise but it may help if I bring in my theological assumption. If we look at Christianity's "theory" of the Incarnation, we confront a claim that suggests an integration and transformation of both intellect (word) and materiality (flesh). One could even say it is a liberation (resurrection's meaning?) of physicality and psychology (the psyche). The doctrine of the Incarnation (which, fully appreciated, encompasses not just birth, but communal life, individual death and resurrection) claims that there is a definitive goodness to the material world which insures it is never destroyed. The mind must still be transformed and transcend its present

framework (this is represented in *Childhood's End* by the children's new psychological abilities), and eventually even the opaqueness of materiality does not confuse the psyche as to the nature and purpose of creation. One could say that the utopian society Clarke envisions materially also exists plainly on a psychological plane.

Another element to reinforce this interpretation is that when the children ascend into the Overmind, all material objects literally become transparent. This could represent the mind finally understanding clearly the meaning of the mute material world.

It is interesting that the exodus of the children from earth to the Overmind is represented by a column of fire. That image harkens back to the Jewish Exodus from Egypt, an event that symbolizes the escape from human slavery. The image was later used by theologians as a symbol of freedom from spiritual slavery. Clarke uses the column in fire at the end of *Childhood's End* to represent an escape from materiality. But let us see these images as representing dynamics in the individual psyche.

In this case, I suggest that the apotheosis of the children represents the new consciousness that a real person would achieve after many years of discipline in the peace psychology that he or she had decided to submit him or herself to. The peace psychology begins with the reshaping of a student's childhood understanding of things into an adult framework of understanding, a framework that I call philosophic and ironic understanding (PIU). I propose that his or her liberal arts education helps the student reshape what I would call a "philosophical economy" of the mind, premised on a peace psychology.

It should be noted that the dreams the children had that signaled a Total Breakthrough only occurred after seventy-five years of an external peace. This suggests that the peace we can initiate in ourselves (and to some extent externally, at least at the international level) is just the beginning of an intellectual and evolutionary (religious? spiritual?) advance. After we have used our PIU to advance our understanding of all things, and we have developed what I call a selfless-consciousness, we will encounter new intellectual questions which will then motivate us to enter new psychological realities. We will understand more fully and more fruitfully than ever the psyche's part in creating the physical and how the physical supports the psychological. Perhaps Jeff's dreams, which took him on an astral projection journey through the cosmos, represent the arrival of new realities through our use of PIU. I would submit that as we develop our intellectual PIU, we step into what I call a Psychological Reality of Fulfillment and Transcendence—PROFaT.

Furthermore, these new realities will emerge in our consciousness because we will begin to understand that the early twenty-first century raises the curtain on Biology's Unified Psyche (BUP) and Psyche's Unified Biology (PUB). [or Psyche's Unified Physicality—Physicality's Unified Psyche—PUP?]

In the novel, when Jeff's dreams began, all kids under 10 were soon experiencing these dreams, and this new corporate experience of the Mind swept over the kids. Adults, because their mental frameworks were too set, could not evolve. I take this to mean that if we remain childlike, but not childish, then even adults can advance into these new psychological and human domains. But—I caution my students—if as adults we continue to apply the framework of understanding we learned growing up, what was okay for a child's level of understanding becomes demonic childishness in an adult.

So, let us say that when someone uses PIU (with the childlike wonder), he or she will enter into these as not yet explored realms of human thought and experience (PROFaT). How do we interpret the images of the children ignoring the needs of the body and that the material world is destroyed?

Again, I think that this denouement is a weakness in Clarke's vision. He has a gnostic revulsion of the material world (which is the main reason Gnosticism never went mainstream). Think of it this way: In all its levels, the material world is Biology. The self-consciousness of

humanity is the self-conscious element of Biology. Biology will not destroy itself, and self-consciousness has a chance to thoughtfully decide how to evolve (so says Kieran Egan, educational psychologist).

But a couple of minor images from the last moments of earth in *Childhood's End* suggest a way to balance Clarke's overreliance on the Mind. One I mentioned already: as the children enter the Overmind, the material things of the earth become transparent. This suggests that the new consciousness we can have right now, through PIU, will understand the purpose of the material things on earth. Perhaps it means that the physical world will reveal its metaphysical nature? (In practical terms, this means our human societies will have learned how to be "green." Incidentally, I see this "green" referring to money as well as to the environment.)

In the final scene, too, one man by the name of Jan, who had escaped the fate of the earlier last generation of adults, witnesses this final transformation of the kids. And he says that he feels "a great wave of emotion sweep over me. It isn't joy or sorrow. It's a sense of fulfillment, achievement." I would suggest that this kind of emotional catharsis is available to us today, if and when we begin—and we only have to begin—to reshape our level of understanding from that of a child to that of an adult.

Jung has written, "An epoch is like an individual; it has its own limitations of conscious outlook and so requires a compensatory adjustment" (166). Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* presents us with such a compensatory adjustment, one in reaction to the threat of a nuclear war, a reaction we can feel in our day. This adjustment, Jung felt, was effected by the collective unconscious, which he described as "a certain psychic disposition shaped by the forces of heredity; from it consciousness developed" (165).

The spacecraft that descending through the atmosphere, psychologically speaking, represents an objective reality that we experience subjectively only; but it is still "a genuine, primordial experience. [. . .] the vision itself has psychical reality, and this is no less real than physical reality" (162). Perhaps as people read this essay, their interior reaction to it will include the experience of a psychical reality that is as real (i.e. objective) as their body and which is to be a primordial, that is a primary, experience in their lives, one to be reflected on for years to come.

But even though this experience is from the collective unconscious, the content is not alien to us because, says Jung, human consciousness developed from the collective unconscious. Jung also said that the artist

has drawn upon the healing and redeeming forces of the collective psyche that underlies consciousness with its isolation and its painful errors. We see that he has penetrated to that matrix of life in which all men are embedded, which imparts a common rhythm to all human existence, and allows the individual to communicate his feeling and his striving to mankind as a whole" (172).

I would suggest that *Childhood's End* suggests a three-part rhythm to the existence of human life, three breakthroughs. The first breakthrough is the arrival of the Overlords. This represents, as I said above, the subjective experience of an objective *psychical* reality. The test that this psychical reality is objective is that it brings you a cathartic sense of peace, even though a lot of intellectual work still must be done. The second breakthrough in the book—when dreams signaled that the kids were entering a new level of consciousness—represents a further subjective experience that will occur only after one has spent some time understanding the implications of their objective psychical experience of Peace. I would suggest that the transformation of the economies of nations in *Childhood's End*, along with the other changes, are symbolic of how one's ego formation changes from childish mythical and romantic notions to adult philosophical and ironic notions. One would still value myth and romance, one would still have a sense of childlikeness, but the ego would be

practicing agape type love rather than infantile type of love.

The realistic objective psychical experience represented by the third breakthrough in the book—the *apotheosis* of the kids—can be explained by understanding the weaknesses in Clarke’s vision. The person’s psychical experience will be of union with others, but concurrent with that is a *transformative understanding of the material world. This is an ecological view and a sacred view, sacramental view.* One’s cognitive view will have a concurrent emotional component of fulfillment and achievement. One will have a sense of liberation, as represented by the fire, but not from the material world. It will be liberation from an incomplete understanding of Nature and a liberation from a disordered relationship with Nature and the material world. One will completely understand the nature and purpose of life, I suppose. One will have a right relationship with one’s self and others.

Such a state of affairs is not to be expected in our lifetime. This final transformation occurred 150 years after the arrival of the Overlords, in Clarke’s work. Psychically, we who live in the early twenty-first century may be called to submit to an objective psychical reality that brings peace among nations but still doesn’t mean we rest. Indeed, we would have lots of problems to solve as we struggle to find ways to convert our peace psychology into a material peace. But isn’t this what we have been trying to do all along. As Chris Rock says in the movie *Down To Earth*, why should we be surprised if our most desperate prayers get answered?

In regards to religions as we presently understand them, it is quite ironic that the Bringers of Peace look like the classical Western image of the Devil (though it might be helpful to know that this image arose late in Western history). But Jung would not find this irony incongruous. He writes that because the poet or writer has submitted his consciousness to this collective unconscious, he is working with primordial experiences, and so he finds that mythological figures provide most fitting expression of his experience (164). And even though some of these images are bizarre, they “bring a one-sided, abnormal, or dangerous state of consciousness into equilibrium in an apparently purposive way” (165).

To understand such a work of art, even though they contain these disconcerting images, we readers “must allow the work to shape us as it once shaped the artist. We must let the work of art work upon us as it acted upon the artist. Then we understand the nature of his experience” (172).

This is what I have tried to do over the years with *Childhood’s End*. And I have found Jung’s archetypal symbolism especially fruitful in seeing how these bizarre images have personal implications. *Childhood’s End* might not be a literary masterpiece, but it seems to be filled with psychic buoys released by the collective unconscious matrix submerged deep in our psyche. Our wired western world does seem to be floundering and gasping to stay afloat, and some people expect an apocalyptic ending to the world. But we might find that if we grasp the life lines cast out by *Childhood’s End*, the only thing that ends is our childish understanding of what apocalypse represents, in ourselves and in the world, in our objective psychical world, and in our objective physical world.

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