Utopian Wasteland: Abundance, Futurity, and the 'Golden Age' in Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*

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Introduction

While contemporary discourse on utopia complexifies, its etymology remains distinct. The double meaning laid out in Thomas More's eponymous *Utopia* (1551) is, by now, well established, inferring both *outopia* – 'fusing the Greek adverb *ou* – "not" – with the noun *topos* – "place"' (Logan 2011: 1) and *eutopia* – the 'happy' or 'fortunate' place. This neologism anticipated a genre that emerged from More's text, utopian fiction-as-travel writing focused on a 'voyage of discovery,' as described in *Utopia: The History of An Idea* (Claeys 2020: 63). Yet emerging utopian travel narratives were, in spirit, perhaps not so new, as Claeys further suggests: 'the mythical, fabulous, or extraordinary voyage is nearly as old as travel itself, and the lines between religious narrative, legend, fantasy, mariner's tale and downright lie are often impossible to draw' (63). Where more contemporary utopias have evolved seafaring discoveries into a more complex web of possible narrative pivots, entrenching the genre's now almost-inextricable overlap with science fiction – utopias as found in different times, on different planets, and featuring different species altogether – the notion of discovery remains present. Indeed, the sheer act of metatextual encounter with the text might itself be framed as an encounter with alternative political models themselves categorised as forms of utopia.

Yet this entrenchment of discovery begets the question, and as such contention: what, precisely, is being discovered? More simply put: what defines a "utopia" *as* utopia; more broadly, what defines the adjacent political configuration of utopian-ism? On this, more distinct bodies of discourse begin to emerge. In expanding on his broader account of utopian literary history, Claeys' own reading anticipates a broader tract of utopian theory that rejects the notion that utopia is, or should be read as, perfect:

> Nor does utopia mean the search for the 'perfect' life, though it is still frequently confused with this; perfection is an essentially theological concept which, while historically linked to utopianism, defines a state that is impossible for mortals to attain in this life. (16)

Echoing discourse by Frederic Jameson (2005: 23) – that not only should one not read utopia through the prism of perfection, but that utopia is 'irredeemably other [...], by definition impossible of realisation,' and thus that to strive for such perfection is itself actively counter-productive – Claeys expands yet again: 'if a project is thoroughly unrealistic we may subvert any possibility of encouraging real social change [...] demanding the impossible must always remain not only frustratingly tantalizing, but destructive of improvement' (Claeys 2020: 20). Others go even further: author John Crowley begins a 2017 article for the *Boston Review* website with the contention that 'inside every utopia is a dystopia striving to get out'.

Where Claeys, Jameson et al. tie utopia to a sense of pragmatism, or even realism, in the avoidance of what is deemed 'impossible' – or, as with Crowley, suggest one should reject utopia as being inherently dystopian – others push back against this same pragmatism. Caroline Edwards does so directly, suggesting that: 'the term [utopia] has come to focalise many arguments which pejoratively identify visions of the good life as escapist, unrealistic, and even authoritarian' (2019: 23). Edwards further centres utopia on temporality, arguing that it is not a matter of the not-possible but of the Blochian *not-yet*, reading through Bloch's utopianism an 'insist[ence] that the "Not Yet" reveals how emancipatory *futural possibilities are active within the present* through a utopian hermeneutics of longing, expectation and hope' (27). Thus, utopian 'fictions of the not-yet,' as Edwards terms them, harness the nature of 'narrative' as 'an inescapably speculative form, [that] offers philosophical and political discourses the imaginative capacity to sketch out what a reconfigured world might look like, how it might function' (197).

Much as Edwards centres the utopian imaginary around 'hope,' so too does Kim Stanley Robinson, suggesting that 'utopias express social hope,' and thus that to be utopian is to 'keep imagining that things could get better, and furthermore to imagine how' (Robinson 2020). Jose Esteban Munoz, himself reading Bloch's *noch-nicht*, similarly suggests that Bloch 'sharpens our critical imagination with an emphasis on hope' (Munoz 2009: 12), consequently arguing that 'utopia is an ideal, something that should mobilize us, push us forward' (97). Alex Srnicek and Nick Williams' post-work manifesto *Inventing the Future* (2015) echoes and transposes this from utopian narrative to utopian political modelling, declaring that 'this book is about how we got here, and where we go next' (3), and that 'a left modernity would be one that offered enticing and expansive visions of a better future' (83). Such models for utopia cast the utopian imaginary, and utopian writing borne out of such visions, as a bridge of temporality, codifying hope into manifestations both *of* this hope, and that seek to propel the voyage *to* the utopian not-yet.

In considering such discourses of utopia, this article will examine further a text where utopia is explicitly invoked: Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953 [2010]), in which the arrival of the alien Overlords – who quickly assume control of the planet through the proxy of the UN – is said to generate profound reconfigurations of human society and technology. This narrative invites readings that examine its colonialist analogue between the Overlords' subjugation of Earth, and imperialism such as that of the British Empire alongside consideration of Clarke's own encounters with this empire. While acknowledging such analogues, my reading here will instead primarily follow others that engage with the text's contradictorily utopian and apocalyptic narratives.

Where the central period of the text subtitled the 'Golden Age' might be characterised by a sense of progress or abundance, the conclusion is marked instead by existential apocalypse. The purpose of the Overlords' mission to Earth is revealed, and then fulfilled: to facilitate the assimilation of what are described as no longer being human children – the 'entit[ies] that had been' (Clarke 1953 [2010]: 192) children now an already-conglomerated '*they* [that] were emerging from their long trance' (229) – into the Overmind, a non-corporeal hive mind whom the Overlords themselves serve. This process, it is revealed, consumes the planet: 'There was nothing left of Earth: *They* had leeched away the last atoms of substance. It had nourished them through the fierce moments of their inconceivable metamorphosis' (235). This reinforces a narrative already underpinned by divergent futurity and temporality – the Overlords' arrival quashes an already near-future humanity preparing for an unprecedented space mission,[1] catapulting humanity towards a very different future. This shift is noted, with dark irony, by the narration of one astronaut's perspective on the arrival: 'He had labored to take man to the stars, and the stars – the aloof, indifferent stars – had come to him' (5). In ending on a cataclysmic scale, I argue that the spectre of apocalypse thus renders the Golden Age as something *other* to utopia, invoking instead – or conjunctively – a more familiarly apocalyptic form: the wasteland.

In encountering narratives of apocalypse, one typically finds wasteland following not long after, either conceptually – in defining a narrative space as an *apocalyptic wasteland*, as with this special issue's title – or temporally, in so much as wasteland is rendered as an outcome of apocalypse. Popular contemporary depictions – games such as the *Fallout* series (1997-2018) and *The Last of Us* (2013), or the original novel (2006) and film adaptation (2009) of *The Road* – construct 'fictional representations of post-apocalyptic ruin' (Yeates 2021: 4) that adhere to this temporality, in doing so invoking 'contemporary anxieties' (22) connected both to 'unsettling future visions' (55), and to actually-existing sites of past

disaster such as the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone that expose the conditions of such apocalyptic futurity come true. Chernobyl in particular, Mark O'Connell suggests, 'presents this prospect in a manner more clear and stark than any other place [...] to travel there would be to see the end of the world from the vantage point of its aftermath' (2020: 183). Eric Dieterle's engagement with the post-nuclear desert landscapes of American test sites centres wasteland further on a sense of absence: '[w]e still believe we can develop and control when the true lesson of the desert is its emptiness. It is a place, void of all else' (2002: 230). Much like utopia, then, wasteland carries the ontological friction of Derridean *haunting*, that which is 'neither living nor dead, present nor absent' (Derrida 1993 [2006]: 63) – the wasteland is at once a 'stark' 'place,' and yet 'empt[y],' 'void of all else'.

In engaging with *Childhood's End* through narratives of wasteland and utopia, this article will interrogate the utopian claim made concerning the text's Golden Age in connection to the fixed temporality by which the apocalypse is assigned to the Earth, examining how this intersection problematises the claim to utopia, and the extent to which the Golden Age can instead be read as an alternative form of wasteland that arrives *before*, rather than *after*, the apocalypse – one defined by what *will* happen, rather than what *has*. In doing so, the article will develop a case study of *Childhood's End* that allows further consideration of the temporality of the wasteland, and re-evaluation of the conditions and temporality that should, or do, connote utopia.

The Claim to Utopia

The temporality and atemporality of utopia is, as Bloch contends, a more contemporary development of the term: 'Thomas More designated utopia as a place [...] this designation underwent changes later so that it left space and entered time' (1989: 3). This construction of utopia as always-already *not-yet* – more simply, as possibility – constructs what Darko Suvin terms an 'estrangement arising out of alternative historical hypothesis' whereby 'sociopolitical institutions, norms, and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community' (2016: 63). Utopia is thus invoked as the known-unknown – estranged as the aspirational futurity of the *not-yet*, and, narratively, by the imposed atemporality generated by the primary structuralism *of* narrative itself. Edwards' dialogue with Bloch and the Maggie Gee short story 'The Blue' similarly reads an 'otherness' in Gee's use of colour – that 'the colour blue comes to signify the utopian overtones of this otherness' (Edwards 2019: 17) – and her further reading of Bloch on Gee emphasises the embedded temporal spirit:

> ‘This blue,’ he writes, ‘designates in a graphically symbolic way the future-laden aspect, the Not-Yet-Become in reality;’ an image of futurity that stretches towards us from ‘the other side’ to reveal ‘the contents of a future which had not yet appeared in its own time, if not towards the contends of an as yet unknown final state.’ (17)

This centrality of colour, and *use* of colour, as significant to ‘utopian overtones’ itself anticipates the critical role of control in utopian narrative. *Inventing the Future* – a title that already implies such centrality – is identified not only as a manifesto for the utopian imaginary, but as a text that ‘that seeks to take back control over our future’ (Srnicek and Williams 2015: 3). This extends to narratives of construction: ‘the hard task ahead [is] to build new worlds’ (177). This further anticipates the temporality of what Munoz terms a ‘“we” that is “not yet conscious,” the future society that is being invoked and addressed at the same moment’ (Munoz 2009: 20) – a ‘future society’ therefore constructed, its conditions thus controlled within in the utopian imaginary.

It in on such terms that one encounters both the connotations of, and explicit claim to utopia in *Childhood’s End*. Clarke invokes utopia both narratively and metatextually – the invocation connects to the conditions of the in-text setting and narrative space, but also to the wider utopian imaginary, connecting to the body of discourse that envisages an alternative future that is not-yet emergent, and the conditions such an alternative future might possess:

> By the standard of all earlier ages, it was Utopia. Ignorance, disease, poverty, and fear had virtually ceased to exist. The memory of war was fading into the past as a nightmare vanishes with the dawn; soon it would lie outside the experience of all living men. (Clarke 1953 [2010]: 70)

A second reference follows soon after: ‘Utopia was here at last: its novelty had not yet been assailed by the supreme enemy of all Utopias – boredom’ (75). These explicit invocations of the term ‘utopia’ follow earlier passages that develop the framework behind the claim. Exchanges between the UN Secretary-General, Rikki Stormgren – the closest human proxy to the Overlords – and the leader of the dissenting Freedom League, Alexander Wainwright, place the Overlords’ impact as generally beyond reproach, locating the only acceptable line of questioning around a sense of freedom: ‘Can you deny,’ Stormgren asks Wainwright, ‘that the Overlords have brought security, peace, and prosperity to the world?’; ‘That is true. But they have taken our liberty,’ Wainwright replies (9). Decades later, by the point at which the utopian claim itself arrives, it is suggested that sufficient time has passed for the Overlords to have successfully completed a paradigmatic shift in humanity:

> Fifty years is ample time in which to change a world and its people almost beyond recognition. All that is required for the task are a sound knowledge of social engineering, a clear sight of the intended goal – and power. (68)

Thus, in arriving at 'Utopia [...] at last,' *Childhood's End* concurrently implies the completion of a utopian teleology, whereby the hard task of building a 'new world' – a term that appears in both *Inventing the Future*, as above, and *Childhood's End* itself (Clarke 1953 [2010]: 71) – has been completed. The new world *has been built*. Throughout this section, the text expands upon the conditions that comprise this claimed utopia, primarily focusing on the ostensibly profound reconfiguration of the relationship between capital, labour, and welfare that is placed at the core of this new world. These conditions anticipate the impact of technological developments on labour, declaring that 'production had become largely automatic' (71). Yet where this conforms to contemporary developments on a base level of proliferation, it diverges significantly in terms of impact. Where contemporary automation and resultant mass production has, to date, largely functioned as an extended apparatus of the hypercapitalist drive for relentless expansion, in *Childhood's End* this is instead a key pillar of liberation in the Golden Age:

> The robot factories poured forth consumer goods in such unending streams that all the ordinary necessities of life were virtually free [...] men worked for the sake of the luxuries they desires: or they did not work at all. (71)

From this is said to come further developments. Socioculturally-utilitarian urban regeneration occurs on a broad scale: 'the cities that had been good enough for earlier generations had been rebuilt – or deserted and left as museum specimens when they had ceased to serve any useful purpose' (71). Pedagogical engagement is extended: 'education was now much more thorough and much more protracted' (72); 'at twenty-seven, Jan still had several years of college life ahead of him before he needed to think seriously about his career' (93). Approaches to sexuality are altered by the development of 'a completely reliable oral contraceptive' and 'an equally infallible method [...] of identifying the father of any child [...] they had swept away the last remnants of the Puritan aberration' (93). Contemporary discourse is again anticipated related to crime, which is portrayed as symptomatic of society, rather than the individual and, as such

> had practically vanished. It had become both unnecessary and impossible. When no one lacks anything, there is no point in stealing. [...] Crimes of passion [...] were almost unheard of. Now that so many of its psychological problems had been removed, humanity was far saner and less irrational. (71)

From religion – 'within a few days, all mankind's multitudinous messiahs had lost their divinity' (74) – to science – 'there were plenty of technologists, but few original workers extending the frontiers of human knowledge. [...] It seemed futile to spend a lifetime searching for secrets that the Overlords had probably uncovered ages before' (74) – to culture – 'the end of strife and conflict of all kinds had also meant the virtual end of creative art' (74-75) – little else, it is implied, has escaped Overlord-influenced reconfiguration, even if such developments begin to disrupt the uniform positivity of those initially stated. Later portions of the text suggest further shifts towards a post-racial society: 'A century before his colour would have been a tremendous, perhaps an overwhelming, handicap. Today it meant nothing' (92).

Taken in conjunction with the explicit invocation of utopia that the text employs, many of these developments coalesce towards a broadly 'postwork imaginary,' following the contemporary term popularised by Kathi Weeks. For Weeks, 'the label [of] "postwork society" [is used] not to anticipate an alternative, so much as to point toward a horizon of utopian possibility' (2011: 30) – the very kind of utopianism that *Childhood's End*'s claim suggests has been made present, has been made *final*, in its setting. Weeks further reads Franco Berardi's assertion that 'the refusal of work does not mean the erasure of activity, but the valorization of human activities which have escaped from labor's domination' (cited by Weeks: 103) as articulating 'not only a postindividualist vision of the possibility of a postwork organization of production, [but] also a postscarcity vision' (103). This postscarcity is again represented in *Childhood's End*, by way of the automated and 'unending streams' of goods that are suggested to be so critical to the Golden Age. Much of what the text presents thus ostensibly connotes not only a postwork vision, but a form of utopian imaginary, of how 'things could get better.' Clarke's vision for automation, for example, realises a vision that 'with automation [...] machines can increasingly produce all necessary goods and services, while also releasing humanity from the effort of producing them' (Srnicek and Williams 2015: 109). The Golden Age of *Childhood's End*, as Merritt Abrash notes, represents 'a society which meets many criteria of an ideal society in the secular Western tradition' (1989: 372) – a society that declares itself to be post-war, post-poverty, post-crime, post-racism, and indeed post-fear. In claiming to fulfil such criteria – in claiming the mantle of 'utopia [...] at last' – we return again to the sense of completion, of not merely criteria, but temporality *fulfilled*. 'At last' constructs a relationship not only to the narrative past – to the 'fifty years' required to 'change [the] world' and attain the 'intended goal' – but to a narrative future

atemporally bound to such fulfilment – that in being 'utopia,' and in being 'at last,' the Golden Age is effectively *as good as it is going to get*.

Yet when placed in further context, the utopian claim underpinning this narration begins to unravel, whereby one can begin to problematise the text's twin invocation of utopia and temporality. *Inventing the Future*'s chapter on 'Post-Work Imaginaries' begins with a telling quote: '[t]he goal of the future is full unemployment' (Srnicek and Williams 2015: 107). One can read the quote as a microcosm of a broader utopian imaginary and teleology connoting work towards an absolute goal; the probability of accomplishment is less critical than the insistence that the goal itself be a 'full' measure. If 'utopia is an ideal,' then the goal must maintain it as such – there can be no settling for *half*-measures. Yet what is more noteworthy than the quote itself is its credited author: Clarke himself, an outward expression of absolute utopian imagination that thus complicates the 'utopia [...] at last' found in *Childhood's End*. The conditions of the Golden Age certainly represent a fundamental – and ostensibly generally positive – reconfiguration of work. Yet, in absolute terms – in *Clarke*'s terms – this is neither a post-work society, nor one that has achieved 'full unemployment.' 'Men worked for the sake of the luxuries they desired: *or* they did not work at all' [emphasis mine] (Clarke 1953 [2010]: 71): 'luxuries,' therefore, *remain* luxuries – remain, that is, a distinct class of item tied inextricably to the accumulation and expenditure of capital or status. 'Work' still exists as work; personal capital still exists *in relationship to* the performance of such work. Class and capital, then, remain implicitly and explicitly pervasive. The lingering superstructure of class is reinforced by a later scene narrating a high-society party that emphasises the social status of the host Rupert Boyce, who, as a result of the Overlords' interest in his extensive library is able to have the Overlord Rashaverack – whom Boyce addresses diminutively as 'Rashy' (84) – in attendance in return for access. Boyce is further granted use of a holographic device of Overlord design and ownership to greet arriving guests; this, too, is remarked upon as connotative of status: '"How did Rupert get hold of it? I thought only the Overlords had them." [...] "Have you ever known Rupert *not* to get anything he wanted?"' (78).

Read through Claeys 'realistic utopianism' – a rejection of the 'psychological interpretations of utopianism' that, he argues, 'focus on this tendency towards wish-fulfilment and stress the naïve and infantile qualities of the utopic impulse' (Claeys 2020: 182) – the fact that there has been progress outweighs the fact that such progress is not total. Yet this, I would argue, stretches utopianism towards a point of unrecognisability, a point emphasised by Kim Stanley Robinson:

> So, granting the complications and difficulties, the task at hand is to imagine ways forward to that better place. [...] Immediately many people will object that this is too hard, too implausible, contradictory to human nature, politically impossible, uneconomical, and so on. Yeah yeah. Here we see the shift from cruel optimism to stupid pessimism, or call it fashionable pessimism, or simply cynicism. (Robinson 2020)

Where Claeys' interpretation of utopia infers a necessary afuturity – that there is no way forward, because the present itself is and should be recognised as sufficient – Robinson more effectively returns to the necessary centring of hope as the very essence of the utopian imaginary. As such, it also better emphasises the shortcomings of the Golden Age in *Childhood's End*. Even where suggesting an abundance of resources, and a general investment in centralised, reconfigurative politics, the encountered setting is marked by precisely such pessimism, and precisely such an absence of *continued* utopian imagination. The resultant conditions partly anticipate the combination of hierarchy and abundance that Peter Frase terms in *Four Futures* (2016) as 'rentism' (32), one of 'four possible combinations' generated by imagining 'a world of either scarcity or abundance, alongside either hierarchy or equality' (29). *Childhood's End* may not resemble the bureaucratic minutiae of intellectual property law and other implicit control measures Frase characterises in a more grounded future of rentism (69-90), but it does echo the central premise: the maintenance of 'a system of capital accumulation and wage labor,' 'a system of power,' that is 'totally superfluous' (70). This superfluity is matched further: the Overlords may not be landlords in the strictest sense of expressly *private* ownership, yet their subjugation of the Earth effectively functions as such, preserving it as an asset in situ, with the Golden Age thus a structure of stasis, a holding pen ahead of assigned apocalypse. And even then, systems of control that are as far as this goal is concerned totally and utterly benign are perpetuated throughout the Golden Age and beyond. Even the impending end of the world is not entirely allowed to cause the end of capitalism.

A greater focus on this apocalypse and the subjugation that precedes it further problematises the text's narrative claim of utopia. In fixing the apocalypse in place as a deliberate act, *mere* apocalypse – that which might be narrated as happening 'naturally' – is replaced by *always-already* apocalypse, that which *will* happen. This is emphasised by a later return to the apparent mystery of the Overlords' appearance – first withheld while they managed affairs from the shadows, then revealed as uncannily demonic: 'The leathery wings, the little horns, the barbed tail – all were there. The most terrible of all legends had come to

life, out of the unknown past' (Clarke 1953 [2010]: 67). The instinctive assumption of linear temporality – a prior visit inspiring the conceptual appearance of 'the Devil,' generating a 'racial memory' (69) of terror – is upended. As Rashaverack reveals to the so-called 'last man' (225), Jan Rodericks – asked by the Overlords to catalogue the end of the Earth to allow them insight into the Overmind itself: 'only one event [...] could have made such an impact upon humanity. And that event was not at the dawn of history, *but at its very end*' (224). 'Call it not a memory,' Rashaverack explains, "'but a premonition." [...] There must be such a thing as racial memory, and that memory was somehow independent of time. To it, the future and the past were one' (224-5).

Thus, the end of the Earth, and the connected aesthetic imprint of the Overlords' appearance, is given an immutably haunted temporality – even as it has not yet happened, it always-already *will happen*, and thus, has always-already *happened*. This is anticipated by Edwards' encounter with Derrida and *Hamlet*'s 'peculiarly desynchronised time[,] not only a pulling apart of chronology, but, crucially, a deferral of justice announced by the arrival of the spectre' (Edwards 2019: 15). 'Derrida's reading of King Hamlet's ghost,' Edwards contends, 'suggests a particular mode of seeing that the future casts upon the present' (15) – a reading of chronology that echoes O'Connell's above reading of the present-wasteland of Chernobyl as 'the vantage point' for a futurity of 'the end of the world.' This jarring desynchronicity figures into *Childhood's End* again as much metatextually as it does narratively – once one becomes aware of the end, one is all too aware that the conditions that precede it exist to ensure *it* takes place. The temporality of apocalypse infects the Golden Age, in doing so exposing a spirit of wasteland. This spirit is developed further through readings of the perceived post-apocalyptic temporality of wasteland conceptually, as reinforced by Mathijs Pelkmans' outline of encountering post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan:

> Material and social remains and residue continue to assert themselves into the present. They do so as shadows, as ghostly presences and as concrete objects. Empty factories, apartment houses populated by cattle, warehouses overgrown by vegetation, and poisonous industrial waste dumps are part and parcel of this post-apocalyptic landscape. (2013: 17-18)

Such conditions, too, anticipate those of fictional wastelands, such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), 'where the wasteland subverts the trope of the New World as a bountiful territory' (de Cristofaro 2021: 2). These readings converge on a sense of wasteland that is driven by absence. The wasteland is defined by both that which is not there, and that which will always-already be present *as* absence: by 'material remains' and 'ghostly presences;' by

the absence of bounty, and the spirit of Prelapsarian capitalism according to which such bounty might carry weight; by the diminishment of material conditions, natural conditions, and the abstract conditions that might offer a comfortingly, atemporally nostalgic route back to a future marked by the familiar political order of before. This absence is itself thus a matter of time. Katherine Snyder's study of how wasteland figures in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) contends that 'the novel thus orders time, for both reader and protagonist, with respect to the breakpoint of apocalypse: pre- and post- are its main markers in temporality' (2011: 471). The protagonist Snowman, Snyder suggests, is 'haunted by memories of the past or, rather, he is himself a kind of ghost, a specter of the past who haunts an unimaginable present yet is denied the consolation of a future' (472).

If *Childhood's End* can be said to invert such a configuration of memory – in introducing a notion of racial memories not of past, but of future – then such inversion can be encountered more broadly in the text's relationship to apocalypse overall. The familiar post-apocalyptic relationship insists by definition that apocalypse constitutes a moment following which there *is* an after of indefinite wasteland. Yet *Childhood's End* reverses this: the absolute nature and artificiality of the apocalypse transforms it from *not-yet* to *always-already* and immutable. This, in turn, transposes wasteland, which becomes not post-, but *pre*-apocalyptic. The Golden Age is haunted, both by memories of the future – 'ghostly presences' of the Overlords' appearances connoting the horror to come – and by the 'deni[al of] the consolation of a future;' it will never develop further, because it is bound in place *as* "utopian wasteland" – a space that at once invokes the atemporal end-point idyll of 'utopia [...] at last' (Clarke 1953 [2010]: 75) while connoting the atemporal apocalypticism of an end-point whereby 'there was nothing left of Earth' (235).

Parallel Encounters

In reading *Childhood's End*'s narrative through this fixed, cataclysmic 'breakpoint,' and the society that precedes such an event, one finds substantial critical comparison between Clarke's text, and Cixin Liu's more recent trilogy of *The Three-Body Problem* (2008 [2016]), *The Dark Forest* (2008 [2016]), and *Death's End* (2010 [2017]), popularly referred to through the title of the former as *The Three-Body Problem* trilogy (hereafter *TBP*).[2] *TBP* sees first contact between humanity and the alien Trisolarans occur through a Chinese scientist, Ye Wenjie, whose disillusionment with humanity having seen her father lynched during the Cultural Revolution causes her to ignore her Trisolaran counterpart's warnings – that further

communications might alert Trisolaran command – and encourage the Trisolarans, themselves seeking to escape from the chaotic, existentially challenged climate of their own planet and its three suns, to invade Earth. Such is the distance from the planet Trisolaris – placed by the text in the Alpha Centauri system – to Earth; however, upon the departure of their invasion fleet, its journey is estimated to take around 400 years. Thus, the collective future of humanity is abruptly reconfigured towards this eventual "Doomsday Battle," generating a centuries-long infrastructural mobilisation for war against a threat whose departure becomes certain, yet whose arrival remains a inconceivably distant. This is complicated further not only by human allies to the Trisolarans such as Ye and the 'Earth-Trisolaris Organisation' (ETO) (Liu 2008 [2016]: 342) but critically, by the presence of Trisolaran 'Sophons:' microscopic, hyperdimensional AI spheres sent long ahead to Earth, whose advanced presence irrevocably disrupts all scientific constants developed to date. As such, the capacity for scientific breakthroughs in the prelude to war is thoroughly extinguished; humanity's response is locked into only technological development attainable according to existing understandings, and nothing more.

The obvious antagonism inherent in this narrative premise – one that echoes, as American military academic Wendy Whitman Cobb notes, contemporary military anxieties such as those present in 'the 2001 Rumsfeld Report [and its] predicted scenarios of a "space Pearl Harbor"' (2021: 75), even if such a reading seems somewhat ironically ignorant of the geopolitical friction between such a description, and *TBP*'s explicitly Sinocentric, and thus anti-Orientalist narrative focus, perspective, and authorship – leads to ostensible juxtaposition against the Overlords of *Childhood's End*. Mengtian Sun argues that Clarke and Liu's 'imagination of the alien other has one major difference: While the aliens in Clarke's sf are mostly benevolent, those in Liu's are mostly malevolent' (2018: 610) This is inaccurate, yet perhaps subtly so. As noted through my above reading of *Childhood's End*, the distinction cannot be said to be one of benevolence against malevolence, simply because the Overlords' presence on Earth is at no point benevolent. Yet the subtlety of this inaccuracy is because the phrasing is not so far off accuracy: the distinction is that where the Trisolarans are *visibly* malevolent, the Overlords are *visibly* benevolent, even while both are in actuality 'mostly malevolent.' The distinction, then, is one of awareness, not malignance. Both the ascension to the Overmind, and the Trisolarans' planned invasion, represent deliberate actions that produce an immutably locked-in futurity, yet where humanity comes to discover the latter within decades, leading to the aforementioned mobilisation for war, the reality of the

Overlords' presence and their purpose is withheld until only a 'few years' before the end (Clarke 1953 [2010]: 199), and the Golden Age is established in its place.

The afuturity of the construction of 'utopia at [...] last' and the manner in which this focus on 'the pleasures of the present' (75) functions as a façade for existential, apocalyptic futurity – thus producing connotations of wasteland – contrasts against the existential crisis of *TBP*, one that is no less severe, yet one whereby the capacity to prepare thus preserves the capacity to hope. That is not to say one can link *TBP*'s pre-battle society to claims to utopia, but rather that, in contrast to the faintly neoliberal replicative tendencies of *more of the same* that anticipate in contemporary political terms the temporality of the Golden Age – a political temporality and afuturity that might best be defied through meme-form, via a viral parody tweet depicting 'Thousands of people holding hands and chanting "Better things aren't possible"' (@InternetHippo 2017) – the mere possibility *of* a subsequently fulfilled possibility in *TBP* produces a far less apocalyptic *futurity*. *TBP*'s pre-apocalyptic world, even while gripped by explicit if unavoidable militarism, is nonetheless able to build, and does; in contrast, the colonised utopian wasteland of *Childhood's End* is engulfed by the spectre of its imposed afuturity. Even the aforementioned revelation delivered by the Overlord supervisor Karellen refuses to offer temporal clarity, perpetuating a void in which 'it was as though the planet was in mourning, lamenting all that now could never be' (194). Where much of the world is 'numbed' (194), elsewhere, it is more expressive. The artistic community of New Athens, for example, decides that '[their] island had been born in fire; in fire it chose to die' (203), choosing instead collective suicide by explosion.

This contrast to *TBP* in pivoting once again on wasteland preceding the end, critically undermines readings of *Childhood's End* that, as with Mark Hillegas' in *The Future as Nightmare* (1967), insist that it is inescapably utopian:

> Arriving just in time to stop men from turning their planet into a radioactive wasteland, the Overlords unite Earth into one world, in which justice, order, and benevolence prevail and ignorance, poverty and fear, have ceased to exist. […] Mankind, as a result, attains previously undreamed of levels of civilization and culture. (153-4)

Hillegas focuses on wasteland as the apocalypse that humanity is saved *from* by the Overlords – and more significantly as 'radioactive,' the wasteland not merely as a space of waste, of absent futurity, but one that is *visibly* so. Much like right-wing political propaganda threatens the risk of left-wing government even while inflicting actually-existing harm, Hillegas' reading claims the possibility that such a wasteland *might* have arisen without the

Overlords is, in fact, of greater concern than the actually-existing subjugation and stagnation followed by apocalypse that the Overlords' arrival brings with it. Hillegas' description further connotes a reading of the wasteland space as that which can, perhaps, *only be seen as* wasteland and nothing more. Yet this is set against Sophie Gee's reading of wasteland relative to the Great Fire of London and colonialism, that 'wasteland in colonial space represents an outside that [...] "can be rubbished"' (2005: 102), and that 'in other words [...] desert and city, dismal wasteland and splendid excess, are related not by opposition but by uncanny similitude' (105). Much as Heather Wintle's discourse on the 'journey into wasteland' invokes the otherness of the wasteland space by figuring 'a simultaneous flight from, and confrontation of, the demons of their past or a search for stability, belonging, purpose and security' (2013: 11, 6), Gee's reading emphasises the temporality of wasteland that is so present in the invoked utopia of *Childhood's End*. Where Hillegas reads *Childhood's End* in anticipation of Claeys' characterisation of 'naïve and infantile' utopian thinking (1967: 152-4), the contrast with *TBP* and connection to readings of wasteland reinforce the hollowness of such claims to utopia in *Childhood's End* as Hillegas' and that of the text's own invocations of the term.

This structure returns consideration to the influence of colonialism – and more specifically of Clarke's perspective on colonialism – on the text and its narrative. Matthew Candelaria's discourse on this relationship in the aptly titled article 'the Overlord's Burden' suggests *Childhood's End* represents 'Clarke's most complete statement on British colonialism [...] a melancholy attempt to answer the lingering questions that plagued the conscience of Englishmen' (2002: 38), identifying the manner in which the text's analogy in the process sympathises with British colonialism – 'Through their words and actions, the Overlords are quite clearly characterized as European, and, ultimately, British colonial administrators' (39). Yet the problematic sympathy of Candelaria's own tone in reading Clarke – whereby the traumas inflicted by British colonialism are trivialised in being reduced to the 'melancholy' and 'lingering questions' of the subjugators, not the subjects – emphasises further a reading of the utopian invocation as linked to colonialism and wasteland. The hollow claim to utopia under subjugation and in the face of always-already apocalypse – a project, as above, not of mostly benevolence, but of underlying malevolence irrespective of appearances – conforms to echoes of Kipling's 'The White Man's Burden' (1899), and the broader soft-supremacism of colonialism as a project of "civilising betterment." *Childhood's End*'s inflection of the Golden Age is not of subjugation, half-measures, or impending apocalypse, but of colour – just as Caroline Edwards reads Maggie

Gee's 'image of the colour blue, with its promise of something "[m]ysterious, liquid, endless whole"' connotes 'the utopian not yet' (2019: 17) – the gold of the Golden Age and *Childhood's End* carries a distinctive sheen of capital luxury that, perhaps, can be said to obscure the absence of that very same blue.

Conclusions

If *Childhood's End* is not, therefore, truly utopian, or is fundamentally flawed in its invocation of utopia, then in returning to the world of *TBP*, one must again note that it is at no point utopia either; certainly not in the intervening period preceding the Doomsday Battle covered in the eponymous first text in the trilogy, and still not in the subsequent eras that follow in *The Dark Forest* and *Death's End*, where humanity forces the Trisolarans into an uneasy truce under the threat of mutually assured destruction at the hands of other, yet more powerful alien species lurking in the universe, before subsequently fleeing Earth to space-cities and beyond as further apocalypses arrive, ending with the ultimate death of the primary universe itself. Yet even while none such worlds can be said to connote *utopia*, it is worth considering the extent to which they nonetheless connote *utopianism* and the utopic impulse. If, as Kim Stanley Robinson suggests, to be utopian is to 'keep imagining that things could get better, and furthermore to imagine how' (Robinson 2020), then one can observe such a spirit in *TBP* that is absent in *Childhood's End*, not least in the conclusion to the first book in the series: 'Trisolaris communicated with humanity outside the ETO for the first time. After this, they terminated all communications [...] It was only a single sentence: *You're bugs!*' (Liu 2008 [2016]: 418). In response, one character attempts to demonstrate to others the indefatigability of locusts, asking: '[i]s the technological gap between humans and Trisolarans greater than the one between locusts and humans?' (422) The narration itself emphasises this parallel: 'The Trisolarans [...] seemed to have forgotten one fact: The bugs have never been truly defeated' (422). In spite of the material conditions present throughout, this notion draws the connotations of the utopian imaginary and its own connection to a sense of hope, linking further to the utopian discourse of Munoz:

> Utopian thinking gets maligned for being naively romantic. Of course, much of it has been naïve. We know that any history of actualized utopian communities would be replete with failures. No one, other than perhaps Marx himself, has been more cognizant about this fact than Bloch. But it is through this Marxian tradition, not beside or against it, that the problem of the present is addressed. (Munoz 2009: 27)

Thus, one observes what is absent in the utopian claim of *Childhood's End*; where the text remains an engaging and fascinating narrative, it also remains one that is thoroughly lacking in a spirit of *utopianism* to connect to its invocation of *utopia*. Its invocation of utopia is, instead, one that echoes Claeys' sense that utopia should connote realism – that, as Munoz decries, anything further is 'naively romantic' (Munoz 2009: 27). Through this, and through the pre-apocalyptic wasteland that is produced as a result – a barren space tied to the breaking point of apocalypse, *Childhood's End* thus diminishes futurity in spite of abundance. The Golden Age invokes utopia *in place of*, rather than as accurately representative of, the necessary *conditions* for such a claim, or conditions such as those in *TBP* that might be simply termed utopian: a world that succeeds on its own terms, or that at least retains an inherent sense of the utopian imaginary. *Childhood's End* produces a world that, much like that which Srnicek and Williams describe as present in the contemporary world that surrounds us – one that is itself beginning to be locked into its own immutable always-already apocalyptic environmental temporality – has 'lost the capacity to build a better future' (Srnicek and Williams 2015: 3). In the face of *Childhood's End* fixed-point apocalypse, 'the future has been cancelled' (3), and a wasteland masquerading as utopia is produced in its wake.

Notes

[1] Two editions of the text exist – the original 1953 text locates the opening chapter depicting the Overlords' arrival around 1975, pre-empting the subsequent Cold War space race by focusing on two competing ex-Nazi scientists, Reinhold Hoffman and Konrad Schneider, who now head the rival American and Soviet space programs. Clarke updated the first chapter in 1990 to renew the initial futurity, subsequently focusing on a joint twenty-first-century mission of 'more than half a dozen countries' (Clarke 1990 [2010]: 4) to establish a permanent base on Mars, as well as transposing Hoffman's closing remarks of the chapter to now be given by new character, Mohan Kaleer. While this new edition carries an altered narrative tempo and style – resulting in what Adam Roberts describes not unreasonably as 'a slightly awkward fit' (Roberts 2010: vi) – the concluding paragraphs are essentially unchanged outside of character names.

[2] First published in Chinese between 2008 and 2010. English translations by Ken Liu (books one and three) and Joel Martinsen (book two) followed beginning in 2014, prior to the publication of the UK editions of the three texts cited here between 2016 and 2017.

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