

Knowledge and Cosmos: Discovering Gnostic Tropes in Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker*

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Introduction

In his 1937 novel *Star Maker*,¹ Olaf Stapledon (1886-1950) draws on the gnostic concepts of dualism, gnosis and mythology to make sense of the spiritual and physical plight of humanity. *Star Maker* can be seen as reflective of Stapledon's own quest for knowledge in and about the cosmos, and this is a quest heavily signposted with the markers of Gnosticism. Instead of reflecting the typical Christian theology of his peers, Stapledon draws on gnostic theodicy to make sense of his very real apathy and fear regarding the modern world between two World Wars. Using Birger Pearson's typology of Gnosticism,² this article will explore the Gnostic world that is presented in *Star Maker*. Stapledon's work expresses a sense of conflict and spiritual exploration that breaks the confines of Gnosticism's historical context, revealing a shared proclivity still relevant in the twentieth century. The novel depicts an unnamed protagonist's astral travel, spatial and temporal, toward his ultimate meeting with the Star Maker. He joins his mind with the many alien minds he encounters, and together as a cosmic mind they explore the furthest reaches of space, meeting all manner of life forms, including sentient stars, planets, and nebulae. First, I present a brief overview of the historical and biographical context of Olaf Stapledon, and how this impacted on his writing. Second, I will briefly discuss the limitations associated with using Gnostic terminology, and explain its particular use within this article. Third,

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¹ Olaf Stapledon, *Star Maker* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972 [1937]).

² Birger A. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007 [1934]).

Pearson's three stage framework of gnosis, dualism, and mythos will be used to explore the markedly Gnostic character of the novel.

Olaf Stapledon's science fiction novel *Star Maker* is an intergalactic journey through time and space, which draws heavily on Gnostic theological motifs to explore the human condition. The novel can best be described as an imaginative cosmic exploration that begins and ends on a grassy knoll overlooking a sleepy English village. The protagonist, an unnamed man, uses his imagination and undergoes an out of body experience, astral projecting into the starry sky. Within the novel, he ranges far and wide to the nether regions of space, encountering new worlds and new species; including strange beings which emulate ships, beings with multiple legs and enhanced sensory organs, and even the stars themselves as a community of sentient beings. As he meets these new minds, they join him on his journey to the centre of the universe, becoming a collective consciousness that endeavours to discover the creator of this universe. The mood of the novel is sombre, as the protagonist discovers a prevailing condition within these planets, which reflects problems from his own earth. The condition is disabling intelligent beings from developing a sense of community. Instead, as they evolve, they end up destroying each other, through global warming, warfare, or as collateral damage by other warring planets. In the climax of the novel, the collective mind finally meets God, the Star Maker. The sense of fatalism the protagonist finds with his collective mind seems to imply that the key creator of the universe is not a benevolent being, but one which is base and loathsome. It is this initial understanding of the Star Maker that clearly aligns the novel with Gnostic anticosmism and the belief in a lowly demiurge that created the world, separate from the real God.

Stapledon's Context

Olaf Stapledon was an unlikely literary author, more inclined to analyses of humanity than to creating a fictional world of the future. Stapledon was born in 1886 in Seacombe, Cheshire, the very town that acts as the setting for the parenthetical story of *Star Maker*.³ Stapledon spent most of his career lecturing in Modern History, but remained keenly interested in philosophy and theology, publishing a set of philosophical poems titled *Latter-Day*

³ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, 'Preface'.

Psalms in 1914.⁴ After World War I, he completed his PhD at Liverpool University, and published several books, including *A Modern Theory of Ethics* (1929), but was unable to secure a teaching fellowship.⁵ Stapledon then turned his efforts to spreading his ideas through fiction, appealing to a wider and more receptive audience. After publishing his first work of fiction, *Last and First Man* (1930), a history of humankind extending into the distant future, Stapledon unwittingly secured his place in history amongst the elite of science fiction writers.⁶

Star Maker was published in 1937 against the backdrop of the rise of fascism in Europe, and written in the years leading up to World War II. The anxiety and tension of the time is palpable throughout this novel. Before his real success as a writer, Stapledon served in World War I in the ambulance corps, and he experienced the trauma and horror of war at firsthand. Stapledon's cathartic experience led to his recognition of the pointlessness of war, influencing his broader search for meaning in the world.⁷ *Star Maker* is clearly allegorical, purposed not to entertain but to teach. Stapledon explores a paradoxical lesson: on the one hand, he teaches readers about the insignificance of humanity in comparison to the sheer cosmic scale and reach of the universe depicted in the novel; whilst simultaneously placing humans at the core of the novel via the denouement, the return home to London. The continual repetition of the rise and fall of alien species throughout time and space contributes to feelings of futility and uncertainty on the part of the reader, who reads to gain the wisdom found at the end of the gnostic quest.⁸

⁴ John Kinnaird, *Olaf Stapledon: Starmont Reader's Guide 21* (California: The Borgo Press, 1986), p. 7.

⁵ Kinnaird, *Olaf Stapledon*, p. 8.

⁶ Kinnaird, *Olaf Stapledon*, p. 8.

⁷ Robert Shelton, 'Moral Philosophy', in Patrick A. McCarthy, Charles Elkins and Martin Harry Greenberg (eds), *The Legacy of Olaf Stapledon: Critical Essays and an Unpublished Manuscript* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), p. 11.

⁸ Gerry Canavan, 'A Dread Mystery, Compelling Adoration: Olaf Stapledon, *Star Maker*, and Totality', *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 43, no. 2 (2016), p. 310.

The Gnostic Lens

It is important to understand that information about ancient Gnosticism existed prior to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library in 1945, and it would be naïve to ignore the impact that Gnostic concepts had on some of Stapledon's contemporaries. Carl G. Jung (1875-1961) was an influential figure in psychology in the early 1900s who often explored gnostic themes associated with inner spirituality and individuality.⁹ The novelist Hermann Hesse (1877-1962) was inspired by Jungian psychology, and explored Gnostic concepts in *Demian* (1919) and *Steppenwolf* (1927).¹⁰ Similarly, the novelist Thomas Mann (1875-1955) presents a Gnostic quest in *The Magic Mountain* (1924).¹¹ Many other thinkers, scholars and writers were interested in Gnostic concepts before the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts, and it is appropriate to place Stapledon within this cultural milieu.

Wouter Hanegraaff argues that, whilst Gnosticism as a category or religious denomination is itself dubious, it does not mean the category of Gnosticism does not correspond with something that was both real and important.¹² As such, this article is neither a defence nor a condemnation of the term 'Gnosticism': rather, it will focus on the qualities of Gnosticism delineated in Birger Pearson's *Ancient Gnosticism* (originally published 1934) to investigate Gnostic religious elements found in Stapledon's novel.¹³ I have chosen Pearson's typology as a methodological framework due to its thoroughness and inclusivity of all Gnostic material, both within and without the Nag Hammadi texts. Whilst Stapledon clearly is not trying to recreate a Gnostic religion of antiquity, his novel explores many Gnostic themes, and I will herein demonstrate that *Star Maker* can be described as a 'Gnostic' fiction. Through an examination of the novel via the lens of

⁹ John Pennachio, 'Gnostic Inner Illumination and Carl Jung's Individuation', *Journal of Religion and Health*, vol. 31, no. 3 (1992), p. 237.

¹⁰ Gilles Quispel, 'Hermann Hesse and Gnosis', in J. Van Oort (ed.), *Gnostica, Judaica, Catholica: Collected Essays of Gilles Quispel* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 245.

¹¹ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 'Ironic Esotericism: Alchemy and Grail Mythology in Thomas Mann's *Zauberberg*', in Richard Caron, Joscelyn Godwin, Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Jean-Louis Viellard-Baron (eds), *Ésotérisme, Gnosés & Imaginaire Symbolique: Mélanges Offerts à Antoine Faivre* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), pp. 575-594.

¹² Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 'Forbidden Knowledge: Anti-Esoteric Polemics and Academic Research', *Aries*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2005), p. 236.

¹³ Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007 [1934]).

Pearson's typology, the similarities between the two become evident, and deeper, prevalent questions of the nature of humanity, the cosmos, and God are revealed.

Gnosis

The central criterion of Pearson's typology is the idea of *gnosis* (knowledge).¹⁴ This knowledge includes: that which may come from a transcendent realm, shared by a messiah figure about the nature of God; as well as the gnosis that may be found in the individual.¹⁵ These elements of knowledge are intimately linked, as knowledge of the individual is also knowledge of the divine spark within. Pearson's gnostic criteria are met time and again throughout *Star Maker*. Gnosis is found within the novel in triplicate: gnosis of mankind and its human condition, gnosis of the Star Maker and the wider cosmos, and gnosis of the Self. Gnosis comes from the transcendent realm, a world Stapledon creates through the protagonist's out of body experiences.¹⁶ Yearning for knowledge of the true nature of the Star Maker, the protagonist is described as having "felt ... increasingly the hunger" to meet and face the creator of the universe, as he sensed an "outrageous and lethal secret" lying just beyond his reach.¹⁷ Stapledon also uses *Star Maker* to teach an allegorical lesson and spread his own gnosis. The novel presents an endemic sickness found across the universes and amongst all life; the races would all reach a stage in their evolution and become predisposed to complete social deconstruction.¹⁸ Stapledon explains this condition, positing that it arises from two causes: the individual's inability to merge into a true community; and the failure to develop an appropriate spiritual relationship with the cosmos. Stapledon uses the novel as a didactic exercise, his own gnosis, to promote a deep spirituality that could transcend organised religion and bridge global societies through community.

¹⁴ Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, p. 12.

¹⁵ Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, p. 12.

¹⁶ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 99.

¹⁷ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 99.

¹⁸ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 77.

Dualism

Dualism is a key criterion within Pearson's typology, being a consistent quality of Gnostic groups.¹⁹ The dualistic tradition of Gnosticism is represented in *Star Maker's* depiction of human nature and of God, and in the separation of spirit and body.²⁰ The novel presents a tipping point faced by all alien life: the choice of joining in a greater sense of community, or reverting to a base state, "the primeval sleep of the subman."²¹ The worlds visited on by the protagonist are described as having "reached that stage when the spirit, half awakened from brutishness and very far from maturity, can suffer most desperately and behave most cruelly," being "constantly tortured by their hunger for a degree of community which their condition demanded but their poor, cowardly, selfish spirits could by no means attain."²² In ancient Gnosticism, the dualism consists of the body and lower emotive soul, and the self, considered to be a part of the "transcendent God."²³ In *Star Maker*, humanity and the individual are categorised as two halves; the awakened spirit which exists within a community, and the lowly selfish spirit, incapable of any true awakening.

Just as the individual is divided into two dualistic entities, the protagonist understands the Star Maker as existing on an evolutionary path to enlightenment. The Star Maker is divided into the cruel creator of the cosmos and, simultaneously, as "the eternally achieved perfection of the absolute spirit ..."²⁴ Rather than the demiurge existing as a lower archon, a less evolved imitation of the Godhead as in most Gnostic texts, *Star Maker* explores the idea that the Star Maker is both the demiurge and the divine. When the protagonist confronts this being, he struggles to understand "his dual nature" which is paradoxically "humanly ideal" and "incomprehensibly in-human."²⁵ Finally, the very concept of having an out of body experience through astral travel is depicted in the very heart of the novel and is reminiscent of the gnostic dualism of body and spirit. The protagonist describes being "disembodied;" as he ascends into the cosmos

¹⁹ Hans Jonas, 'Gnosticism and Modern Nihilism', *Social Research*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1952), p. 435.

²⁰ Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, p. 12.

²¹ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 77.

²² Stapledon, *Star Maker*, pp. 77-78.

²³ Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, p. 13.

²⁴ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 224.

²⁵ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 244.

his previous visceral headache is replaced by “a vague lightness and exhilaration”.²⁶ To separate the soul from the body in order to travel the cosmos, is reminiscent of a Gnostic transcendence as depicted in such gnostic texts as *The Apocalypse of Paul*.²⁷

Anticosmism

The third criterion pertains to anticosmism, the Gnostic notion of individual imprisonment: the individual’s spiritual *pneuma* trapped within the demiurge’s lowly cosmos.²⁸ Whilst the Star Maker is in its very nature dualistic, consisting of a less evolved and a highly evolved aspect, the protagonist struggles to accept the full nature of God and feels disconnected from the cosmos the godhead has created. Pearson frames anticosmism as an antagonistic dualism that generates a feeling of alienation: the “true human self” being “alien to the world”.²⁹ The cosmos in general is regarded as a prison that Gnostics are “shackled in.”³⁰ The dualism is not complimentary, but incompatible.³¹ Within Gnosticism, the cosmogony generally consists of a higher, unknowable Divine, generally separate from creation and humanity except for their inner “divine spark” or *pneuma*, and a lowly god, the demiurge, which in a passion and ignorance creates the cosmos, imprisoning humanity within.³² Both these aspects, of Gnostic anticosmism and the dualistic concept of God are extensively explored in *Star Maker*.

Michael Williams believes that anticosmism has largely been misunderstood, as it has connotations of anarchy and world rejection, which are not consistent with what we know about the ancient Gnostics.³³ It is important therefore that we differentiate between the feeling of spiritual and emotional disconnect with the surrounding world, and the modern

²⁶ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 17.

²⁷ Anonymous, ‘The Apocalypse of Paul (V,2)’, in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, George W. MacRae and William R. Murdock (trans.), Douglas M Parrott (ed.), 4th edition (London: Brill, 1996), V 17, pp. 19-24, 9.

²⁸ Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 96.

²⁹ Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, p. 13.

³⁰ Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, p. 13.

³¹ Jonas, ‘Gnosticism and Modern Nihilism’, p. 435.

³² Jonas, ‘Gnosticism and Modern Nihilism’, p. 436.

³³ Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*, p. 435.

connotations of an anarchist or self-imposed exile from the real world. In the outset, the protagonist assumes the Star Maker to be akin to the Gnostic demiurge; an evil, incompetent and cruel godhead. After their meeting, however, the protagonist realises that the Star Maker is unknowable and inhuman, reminiscent of the Divine understood in Gnosticism. Within the novel, the protagonist engages with both the Gnostic demiurge and the Divine god beyond god, with the intention to reconcile the dualistic notion of the Star Maker.

Alienation and apathy toward the physical world is a key feature of the protagonist's early experiences of the Star Maker. He states that "the maker of the universe must be indifferent to the fate of the worlds," finding in the suffering he finds on neighboring planets that the Star Maker must be Hate.³⁴ He suffers through the seeming "wastefulness" and "aimlessness" of the universe, questioning whether the true nature of God was in fact Lord or "outlaw" of the Universe; almighty or "crucified."³⁵ What the protagonist begins to discover is the notion that if there were a creator, it was not fatherly; rather "alien, inhuman, dark."³⁶ Not only is this description reminiscent of the demiurge and the Divine but also the eternal thirst for gnosis, reflecting the gnostic typology of knowledge. As the protagonist explores, he is overcome by the sense of "futility and planlessness of the cosmos."³⁷ When the protagonist finally meets the Star Maker, he notes that "he gazed down on me from the height of his divinity" with an "aloof though passionate attention" of an artist observing his work.³⁸ Similarly, in Gnosticism, the Divine is aloof to the world and the physical universe, often described as being totally "Other" and unknowable.³⁹ The protagonist has to accept both natures of the deity: its "perfect and absolute" aspect; but also its infantile state of restlessness, and lack of will.⁴⁰

³⁴ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 61.

³⁵ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, pp. 97-99.

³⁶ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 99.

³⁷ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 76.

³⁸ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 228.

³⁹ Jonas, 'Gnosticism and Modern Nihilism', p. 435.

⁴⁰ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 223.

Mythopoeia

The final typological Gnostic quality is Pearson's concept of mythopoeia, or myth-making. Stapledon creates his own mythology to teach a valuable lesson of both the true, unknowable nature of god and the cosmos as well as the importance of community. Defining myth, like defining religion itself, is a near impossible task. The term has negative connotations, often used to invalidate non-dominant historical narratives. For clarity, it is best to turn to Olaf Stapledon himself who attempts within his science fiction to "achieve neither mere history, nor mere fiction, but myth," expressing the "highest admiration possible."⁴¹ Thus Stapledon views myth as being greater than history or fiction, as it teaches a valuable moralistic lesson on the improvement of humanity. Charles Elkins states the success of Stapledon's science fiction is in this quality of myth making coupled with his "cosmic vision."⁴² Similarly, K. V. Bailey sees much of Stapledon's appeal in his ability to create a cosmic drama that explores human ethics, using imagery and form to create such an engaging mythos.⁴³

Pearson's concept of mythopoeia consists of four key themes: cosmogony (the origin of the world); theosophy (God and the divine cosmos); anthropogony (origin of human beings); and soteriology (salvation) are all present within *Star Maker*.⁴⁴ The novel focuses on the origin and destruction of the cosmos and its cyclical nature. Stapledon describes sentient nebulae, which the protagonist follows from their first awakening as "discrete clouds of gas" in an explosion of creation, through to their eventual senility and death.⁴⁵ The exploration of space is the main purpose of Stapledon's myth-making exercise, evoking the sheer scale of the universe, and bring a cosmic perspective to his readers. The protagonist's goal of meeting the Star Maker is an overtly theosophical concept, reinforcing his thirst to meet the creator as a driving force behind the exploration.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Olaf Stapledon, *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker* (New York: Dover Publications, 1968), p. 9.

⁴² Charles Elkins, 'The Worlds of Olaf Stapledon: Myth or Fiction?', *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 13, no. 3-4 (1939), p. 145.

⁴³ K.V. Bailey, 'A Prized Harmony: Myth, Symbol and Dialectic in the Novels of Olaf Stapledon', *Foundation*, vol. 15 (1979), p. 54.

⁴⁴ Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, p. 14.

⁴⁵ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 213.

⁴⁶ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 99.

Pearson's mythopoeia is bounded conceptually by salvation, which Stapledon clearly strives towards. Stapledon uses literary devices like allegorical parallels, metaphors, and microcosm/macrocosm relations, to educate readers regarding the power of community in the role of salvation. The contrast of microcosm and macrocosm is masterfully employed in the novel: from the cosmic ascent⁴⁷ and spectacularly imaginative extra-terrestrial imagery; to the return home and the protagonist's description of his village.⁴⁸ If his imagery is insufficient for a reader to fully appreciate the didacticism, Stapledon concludes with a solution to how one should "face such an age."⁴⁹ Through community and spirituality, humanity might be able to overcome the crisis Stapledon's protagonist identified in so many planets, and so win "lucidity before the ultimate darkness."⁵⁰ The use of allegory, microcosm and macrocosm, leaves little doubt that the goal of *Star Maker* is not to entertain but to explore the gnostic mythic quality of theosophy and soteriology.⁵¹

Stapledon's use of allegory, particularly by comparing the differences in planetary life forms and practices, drives the reader to critique their own society. The first planet the protagonist finds life upon, called the Other World, is dominated by a bipedal species similar to Earth's humans, but with poor eyesight and increased olfactory/gustatory senses due to their enlarged spout-like mouth.⁵² Thus, the sense of smell becomes vital to the Other World, and Stapledon's narrative focuses upon a peculiar instance of conflict - the conflict of the Other Men's religion. In this description, he parodies his own perception of the futility of religious conflict. The taste of god is the focus of the Other Men's wars: whether the taste of god was mostly salty or sweet, whether he could be tasted with one's hands or mouths, or whether God was really a person or an actual flavour itself.⁵³ In this section of the novel, he reduces human religious wars to bizarre misunderstandings regarding the exact qualities of God, whether it be a simple change of the name of God (something akin to the difference between Jehovah or Allah), how humans get to know God

⁴⁷ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 15.

⁴⁸ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 259.

⁴⁹ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 262.

⁵⁰ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 262.

⁵¹ Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, p. 14.

⁵² Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 33.

⁵³ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 51.

(prayer, contemplation, study), or if God is in such just an essence (spirituality). Stapledon uses allegory and metaphor in *Star Maker* to critique both religious conflict and difference. Stapledon critiques both religious conflict and difference through allegory and metaphor.

Stapledon and Gnosticism both draw on Christian tropes to critique and construct an alternative to established religious traditions. According to Pearson, mythopoeia is the way in which gnosis is transmitted, with gnostic teachers spreading their messages in revelatory literature.⁵⁴ Pearson points out that gnostic myths are built upon reinterpretations of both biblical and Jewish traditions.⁵⁵ Similarly, in Stapledon's novel, one planet that the protagonist visits is "reminiscent of Christian orthodoxy."⁵⁶ This creation is considered to be one of the demiurgical phases of the Star Maker, who creates two lesser beings: a positive being and a rebellious, cynical spirit.⁵⁷ In a very gnostic trope, these emanations of the Star Maker act as two disassociated independent spirits, representing the two moods of himself.⁵⁸ This world is described as having three universes: one in which the people exist, one punitive afterlife below, and one heavenly blissful afterlife above.⁵⁹ The two spirits battle for the souls of individuals in the middle plane to either condemn them to suffering or bring them into a heavenly bliss.⁶⁰ The protagonist finds this world barbaric, shocked that the Star Maker could have such a hand in sending spirits to suffer for eternity.⁶¹ By utilising this Christian metaphor, Stapledon critiques Christianity and the demiurgical aspect of the Star Maker for creating such a barbaric universe. Like the ancient Gnostics, by re-framing Christian and Judaic canons, Stapledon discovers hidden truths in old literature. The esoteric nature of Gnosticism and the inability to explain one's spiritual experiences is a repeated theme within *Star Maker*. Stapledon reflects on the difficulty of explaining spiritual experience: "human language and even human thought" are "incapable of metaphysical truth."⁶²

⁵⁴ Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, p. 14.

⁵⁵ Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, p. 14.

⁵⁶ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 243.

⁵⁷ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 243.

⁵⁸ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 243.

⁵⁹ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 243.

⁶⁰ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 243.

⁶¹ Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 243.

⁶² Stapledon, *Star Maker*, p. 232.

Conclusion

Science fiction is not always associated with religion; after all, the very term itself contains the word science. Science as a word (sometimes inaccurately) exudes connotations of secularisation, progress and rationalisation, often seeming to attempt to distance itself from religion. However, the two fields of thought are never too far apart, both sharing the common tendency of the existential questions of life.⁶³ Why are we here? What is our purpose? Where did we come from and where do we go? Both science and religion explore the future and reflect upon the past, with the overarching aim of helping humanity learn from the error of its ways. Gnosticism is a religious tradition which is ultimately concerned with gnosis; knowledge of oneself, of god and, ultimately, of the world. These same questions are asked in Stapledon's *SM*. Stapledon creates a gnostic world to teach his own knowledge through myth, and to explore and map out his own spiritual concepts. Like the ancient gnostics, he found himself at the end of the terror of WWI at complete odds with the world around him. In *SM*, ideas of god and the world appear as a tangle of threads in which we, as the reader, attempt to disentangle the truth of his creative work. We are made to feel like we are part of a larger thought process, witnessing an artist and a survivor map his own journey and discoveries.

⁶³ Steven Hrotic, *Religion in Science Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 1.