

A Bus Trip to Heaven

There was a double valence in Arthur C. Clarke's earlier novels that made them congenial to two distinct audiences on either side of the two-cultures gap. Technocrats could respond to his blueprints of zero-souled engineers at war against nature, while his visions of a trans-human future, hinted at in the conclusions of his two best-known novels, *Childhood's End* and *2001*, have become icons of the counterculture. Only the cis-transcendental sector of his audience will be likely to endorse Clarke's assertion (in the jacket copy of the book) that *The Fountains of Paradise* is his best novel. Never before has Clarke concentrated the entire interest of a long narrative on the fabrication of a Wonderful Invention to the exclusion not only of ordinary human interest (never his strong suit) but as well of that earlier sustaining tension between a universe in which Meccano sets reign supreme and one in which God, in one of his latter-day disguises, can come down from outer space and help humanity slip loose from mortal coils. In *Fountains*, a philosophy of pure mechanism triumphs over an entire mountaintop of Buddhist monks and succeeds at raising a genuine Tower of Babel going all the way to heaven.

Clarke's vision of the monastic life is summed up by one of the novel's many apt epigraphs: "Religion is a byproduct of malnutrition." As antagonists to the builder of the tower (a twenty-second-century Isambard Brunel) the monks never get off the ground. Their single act of opposition is not of their own doing but the work of that old pulp standby, a Mad Scientist. Sane or mad, only Science gets results. To cinch the triumph of rationality an extra-terrestrial visitor appears in part II to announce, like some anti-Paraclete, that God is an unnecessary hypothesis that the more intelligent races of the universe do not entertain. Earth's religions dutifully expire at this news.

Though such a resolute stacking of the deck is not conducive to dramatic tension, *Fountains* maintains the narrative momentum of a well-developed and surprising axiom in geometry. No sf writer understands better than Clarke how to craft viable tales from no other material than the construction and operation of gigantic machineries. The big machine

Review of *The Fountains of Paradise*, by Arthur C. Clarke.

in this case is a satellite-supported lift from earth to outer space. By the time Clarke has got done documenting his hyper-elevator only those readers who never believed in the possibility of rocket ships will have been able to resist suspending disbelief. As to the significance of such a feat of engineering, Clarke is quite explicit: it portends the democratization and banalization of space flight. Mankind rides “in comfort and safety to the stars.” Some apotheosis. *Childhood’s End*, therefore, it’s not. Yet *Fountains* does represent Clarke’s own maturity as a consistent materialist content to live, and die, without illusions. It also represents his maturity as an artist. With a palette limited to shades of high-tech gray, Clarke achieves a consistent texture of elegy. One suspects that even he, the high priest of Technocracy, has doubts as to whether his tale is a working model of the future or instead a comforting fairy tale for the last days. In the limited category of novels about machinery *The Fountains of Paradise* must stand at the top of the list.