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Interview with Kim Stanley Robinson

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**Interview with
Kim Stanley Robinson:
Poetry is for Thoughts,
Novels for Stories**

**Frank Ruda &
Agon Hamza**

You put a lot of faith in the novel as a form of art, or artistic expression. Can we start by asking you why the novel is the artistic form you prefer? How would you distinguish it from other forms of art, say with regard to the present issue of “Crisis and Critique”, from poetry? In what way do you see the novel continuing something, or intersecting with or doing something that a poem can(not) or does (not) do?

Maybe poetry is for thoughts, novels for stories. Narrative instead of lyric. Both are great forms. I read a lot of poetry, mostly looking back in time; I pick a “Collected” of some poet, then take six months or more to work my way through it. Most recently, George Mackay Brown.

But I spend most of my reading time on novels. That’s just an instinctive preference. I write novels because I love them as a reader. I like all aspects of writing them. And my sentence rhythms are prose rhythms.

The relationship between philosophy and poetry (maybe, in more modern terms: literature) has always been a fraught one, a relationship of rivalry, so to speak. One can account for the struggle between them in many different lexics, for example in political, epistemological and even ontological terms. Whatever register one emphasizes most will change the terms in which one will account for the conflict between philosophy and poetry. What is your take on and what do you make of this struggle?

There shouldn’t be a rivalry. Maybe philosophy tries to generalize, while literature tries to particularize. Each is committed to its approach, and has its usefulness. A rivalry would be a useless contest, although I can add this: I prefer literature. But they both have their place.

Considering the origins of philosophy, it can hardly be doubted that it was preceded and just emerged from poetry or from a form of thought that articulated itself in a rather poetic mode of expression (in this sense, one could say that the pre-Socratics are thinking poetically). Some have suggested that philosophy originated when the primary and intimate link between thought and poetry was ruptured and displaced, inter alia by the creation of mathematics. This did not simply debunk poetic thinking, but placed it next to this newly emerging scientific thought. What is your take on this relationship (between poetry, philosophy, science, to put it most broadly)?

Actually, I doubt this genealogy. These are three aspects of thinking, they evolved together. It’s not the case that any of them began when writing began; the long paleolithic period of orality has to be considered.

Also, you didn't mention the religious impulse, which is very ancient, deep-seated in the temporal lobes of the brain, which are older than the prefrontal cortex. So is religion older than poetry and philosophy, perhaps? And math too? So this is a confused and confusing question.

To play the game of this duality, I've heard both the pre-Socratics and Heidegger called "poetic philosophers," and Nietzsche is surely another; while poets like Gary Snyder, Robinson Jeffers, or Wallace Stevens, have been called "philosophical poets." Proust might be a good example of a philosophical novelist. But are these combinations or distinctions really illuminating? Labels: when you're a science fiction writer, you can get tired of labels.

Climate crisis is one of the issues that your work addresses. Your last novel *The Ministry of the Future* gives a powerful fictional account of how climate change will affect all of us. If we were to flirt with Althusserian terminology, can we read your work as a class struggle in the realm of literature? Of course, this is if we agree that ecology is one of the most important domains of class struggle today.

I would like to flip this, and say that the class struggle is a crucial battleground in the fight the people in the precariat are waging for the health of the biosphere. Capitalism is destructive of both people and planet, and needs to be replaced by an ecologically-minded post-capitalism. I write about this repeatedly in my novels, especially in *The Ministry for the Future*.

This does lead us again to the intersection of, at least, literature and politics. How would you -- and maybe in line with or different from other recent eco-poetics -- articulate the link between politics and literature (and/ or poetry)?

All literature is political. It's a form of praxis. Somewhere Jameson writes that works of literature are always both class excuse and utopian dream, at one and the same time. Keeping that notion in mind helps me when I'm writing my novels. To be clear, if I were asked what I most want to do, I would say I want to write a good novel; but to do that, I have to make it political, which is to say, to be aware of it as a work of praxis on my part. So luckily, I can try for both at once.

Do you think that the Paris Agreement can be redeemed and at the same time serve as the framework and basis for fighting the climate crisis? We know *The Ministry of the Future* is about an international body trying to implement its accord. Although it might appear naïve, our question concerns the Paris agreement

itself: is it enough to try and prevent future environmental/ecological catastrophes? Many believe it is already too late. Is poetic thought able to transform the coordinates of our thinking, even our imagination and assessment of the catastrophe?

The Paris Agreement does not need redemption. But of course, it isn't enough to prevent catastrophe. It's merely a space in which we contemplate each other to see what we're doing. We make promises to each other there, as nation-states. The work itself remains to be done.

Also, it should be clarified and insisted on that it is not "too late." That formulation is apocalyptic hyperbole, and encourages inaction, in that if it isn't "too late," there's no reason to do anything; if it's "too late," there's no reason to do anything.

At this moment, we are still in a situation inside the boundaries of inevitable catastrophe and a mass extinction event. If we were to do the right things in the 2020s, our science tells us, we could get to a much better place, and dodge the mass extinction event. We're obliged to do that, and the Paris Agreement is a space to discuss how. So, it helps us to organize that work to make it happen faster, and an accelerating program is written into its format; along with its consensus format, which tends to make it too cautious and slow. It's not perfect by any means, but it's what we've got.

Many believe that socialism is the answer to the looming ecological catastrophes. Without taking a classically reactionary position, however, what to do with the fact that socialist regimes, historically speaking, have not been particularly careful about nature and the environment? For example, the era of mass and rapid industrialisation created major problems in this regard. What are your thoughts on this? Is a post-capitalist society in itself, broadly put, the answer to ecological catastrophes? Does one need literature, fiction or even poetic thought to conceive of it (and what can each contribute to thinking it)?

Historical examples have their own specifics of time and circumstance, so judging socialism's ecological record by what happened in the twentieth century is not very useful; to the extent we do it, we should remember Cuba, which has taken better care of its island's ecology than most capitalist countries, and has one of the world's highest combinations of low energy use and high quality of life.

That said, some kind of post-capitalism, which will inevitably have some classic features of socialism as part of its formulation, is indeed the central answer to our biosphere emergency. Justice among people lessens the biosphere burdens of extreme wealth and poverty, and increases people's ability to plan past their daily crises to join in the struggle to cope with the shared biosphere crisis.

I don't think it takes art to think of this, or to imagine it. We all have our internal utopias and dystopias, as a function of our hopes and fears for ourselves and our loved ones. People do this without art's help all the time. If art does sometimes help people to imagine various future states of society more clearly, great. That would be its greatest use value.

To follow up on this: you identify as a leftist, as a democratic socialist. You have maintained that we can choose between planetary death or the end of capitalism. We cannot but think of Jameson's phrase here "it is easier to imagine the end of the world, than the end of capitalism." Can we read your work, or at least parts of it, from this perspective?

Yes, certainly; my work says this explicitly. But "planetary death" is not the right phrase. The planet will survive, the biosphere will survive. But it could get very bad for human civilization, if we shove the biosphere into the "hothouse Earth" state that has obtained at many points in the geological past. Billions of humans could die, and the remainder struggle. So, the dire possibilities are very real and very dire, so much so that they don't need hyperbole; accuracy is bad enough!

Anyway, if we are to escape this bad fate, then there has to be an emphasis on the collective, in the usual leftist formulations: government over business, public over private, the commons over enclosure. An end to market dominance and to profit as such. As a sequence starting from now, I hope for immediate Keynesianism replacing the neoliberal order, followed by social democracy, then democratic socialism, then some further even-more ecologically based post-capitalism, in a great red-green fusion, as it has sometimes been called.

I feel the danger in this stepwise approach, which could stall at any point, especially the earliest stages; and Europe shows how all these programs can cross wires, compete with each other, fall apart, etc. It might be better to "leap to heaven," as the Chinese say, but their own history shows the dangers in that strategy.

I wonder if some kind of ecological compass, applied by everyone at every point of the way, could help keep global policy on point; that we could declare "what's good is what's good for the biosphere," since the biosphere is our extended body. Maybe this is the content of the Paris Agreement's form.

As a start, the Keynesian approach is what we can enact with what we've got now. It would only be a start. Obviously, this is the big scary question of our time: how to get where we need to go fast enough? What should be our strategy and tactics as eco-leftists?

9) As a novelist, but also an American leftist, what is for you the potential of Marx's work for you?

What's useful for me is to regard him as a theorist of history and a science fiction writer, depending on whether he is writing about the past or the future; then to apply his clarifying interpretive lens to my own imagined future histories. I feel a certain added edge and heft to my stories when I do that; maybe they are better oriented, using Jameson's image of the cognitive map, and therefore more persuasive and effective. More coherent.

Something to add: for me, Marx has usually been mediated by way of Jameson, most of all, then also by Althusser, Gramsci, Bloch, Lukacs, Benjamin, Bakhtin, and Williams. These are the Marxist writers whose books I've found most helpful in my work as a novelist.

One aspect of your work deals with the relationship between science and technology. Unlike many, you do not identify science with technology. In fact, you put a lot of faith in science, but you do not opt for the rather liberal dogma or hope that "science will provide or is the answer." Can you tell us something about this important distinction (between science and technology) that you make in your work?

That's a hard one to answer in any brief or helpful way. Actually, I do think of science and technology as closely aligned, and I often use STEM as a formulation, with the M standing for both math and medicine.

I do think that science is a kind of unselfconscious and poorly theorized utopian politics. Science is a praxis, often expressed in technology; but this latter term *technology* needs to include law, language, medicine, justice—at which point the word has been blown up, and hopefully reconsidered. We were technological before we were *homo sapiens*, we co-evolved with science and technology shaping us over the last 200,000 years. So these activities can't be alienated or reified as "not us" without misunderstandings proliferating.

Thinking of your *Mars* trilogy, through *New York 2140*, up to *The Ministry for the Future*. Can we discuss what would be the unifying element in them if you therein identify any? Do you see a continuation there or is it a series of disruptions, as it were?

I find it hard to say. For me it's one book at a time, and while I'm writing, I'm focused on what that novel might be doing. I definitely didn't want to be creating a unified future history across my novels, as you sometimes saw in earlier science fiction.

The novels you mention, and more, are utopian novels, leftist in orientation, trying to imagine and portray leftist futures. That a unifying element for sure. Then also, beginning with the *Mars* trilogy, I've been focusing on climate change one way or another, for a reason that must

be obvious: it's the overdetermining story of our time. So it would be a dereliction to avoid it, an irreality. Say that literature can be an engagement with reality, and also, that it shouldn't be an escape from reality; so I've tried to come at each book with the idea that it will have its own approach to the situation of our time.

We have been discussing Adam McKay's *Don't Look Up*. We are quite divided about it amongst ourselves. What did you make of it? Do you think there is an emancipatory dimension to it, or is it simply the current poster-child for liberal 'virtue-signaling' so to speak? Or does its farcical form -- indicating how knowing that we are facing a looming catastrophe -- is never enough to produce practical effects, especially, because there is a very strong will-not-to-know, as it were?

I've only had the movie described to me, but in some detail. Satire is an ancient and powerful genre; one of my first professors, Robert Elliott, author of *The Power of Satire*, reminded us that Archilochos could kill people with curses, and also that satire was the precursor, or flip side, of utopia. So, I think deploying satire is always worth a try.

Also, no single work has to do everything art can do. So, it sounds to me like this movie is a big success, doing the Brechtian work of estrangement: we see it and say, but they're so stupid, it's amazing! and then catch sight of the movie's mirror and see ourselves in it, and hopefully get a little shock from that.

That means it also provides a little lesson in allegorical thinking, which is always useful. So, it sounds like it was definitely worth doing. But I guess I've been thinking, I already know how allegory works, and I know how much danger we're in now, and also how many people are avoiding that reality: so, don't I know this story too well already? And will this movie be too painful to laugh at?

One of the main questions or problems amongst the left today is the form of political organization. What do you think is the necessary form of political organization which could stand up to the challenges and overcome the contradictions of capitalism? Can we think of rehabilitating the party-form, and along with it, the state as a political objective of the emancipatory or, if we may, revolutionary politics? How can literature and / or poetry contribute to these political questions?

I think there is no one answer to this, but rather the multitude going out there and trying everything we can think of. On the one hand, we are in capitalism and the nation-state system, with each nation having a different form of government; that's the present reality, and needs to be manipulated

to the purpose at hand, which is to dodge the mass extinction event. This is such an emergency that the question becomes really immediate: how can we use the systems we're in to decarbonize as fast as possible, no matter how lame or awful they are; we have to start with them.

Thus, dragging the center-left parties leftward toward eco-socialism would be the ordinary party work. But the urgency of the situation suggests we should also be seizing these systems in an emergency way. I know historical analogies are always weak, but I'm remembering how governments seized businesses during World War Two, and directed them to their overriding project, which was survival in a war. This is a statist solution, of course, and even authoritarian, although one could postulate democratic support for such a planned society, because of the severity of the danger.

Though historical analogies are never really apt, sometimes they're suggestive in good ways. Maybe they're yet another kind of allegory. Perhaps the makers of *Don't Look Up* should make their next movie about the British Treasury seizing the Bank of England to help pay for winning WWII. Would people understand that as an allegory for climate change? Depends on how it was written, I suppose.

In an existential planetary emergency, that story and others would say that some kind of democratic socialism has to take over, to direct all society and coordinate it in the necessary work. The market is a fool, an over-simple algorithm; it can't deal with this crisis, because it generated the crisis itself by its greed and stupidity. Some simple allegory could be told, perhaps, about a small group or groups of people on an island, acting out various political economies; this might be a good thing to try in a movie, something like an adult *Lord of the Flies* with a Hayek, an Ayn Rand, a Keynes, a Fourier, a Marx, a Lenin, a Fidel, and so on. A wicked murderous black comedy.

In any case, we are about to hit some fundamental planetary boundaries, beyond which we will be headed into a Hothouse Earth situation, which we could not claw back from. In that emergency, it may become obvious, by way of a new structure of feeling imposed by the biosphere itself, that it's time to give up on capitalism, and do the work; listen to the scientists as to what's needed in energy and ecological terms, and act. Get a working political majority to back taking legislative control of our economies to decarbonize as fast as we can, as one start.

I feel the weakness of all these suggestions; it's terrifying. But I can't think of anything else that will work better. Maybe this is capitalist realism catching me up in its grip, despite myself; maybe I should advocate that everyone simply stops working now, walk away and gather around the nearby farmers and ask what to do, etc. But my mind balks when thinking this would work, given where we are now. So, I keep thinking "all hands-on deck," and looking for good actions at all levels.

In your account, do different modes of artistic expression have different potentials, especially when it comes also to their political articulation? Is there a conjunctural and historically specific aspect involved in what might prove most apt and powerful in a specific situation?

I speak first for science fiction, always, and in the context of this question, I'd say it is clearly the great art form of our time; it fits this time, it speaks this time.

As to how historical forces push various art forms to the fore, then make them less relevant and then completely of the past—of course this is one of Jameson's special topics. He is very good on this. So, I read him, and listen to his recent lectures at Duke, and feel pretty well oriented in this regard. For a proper answer to this question, I'd say, read Jameson. "Metacommentary" sets the method, and then right up to *The Antinomies of Realism* and *The Ancients and the Moderns*, it's a perpetual interest of his. To this immense inquiry I can only add, Go Fred.

Jameson once claimed that especially the American novel tried to solve a problem that other media of aesthetic representation struggled with before, namely how to adequately represent capital. But he added then also that a certain type of the American novel proved unable to do so, because through its inner complexity it ended up redoubling the disorientation and the lack of cognitive mapping that capitalism creates as an everyday form of experience. How do you think this problem can be dealt with or is it not a problem? We are asking, since the condensed form of poetic expression, we mean poems, operate very differently from what Jameson claimed that novel was doing: poetry might not be said to represent, but rather generate -- in its very complex forms -- names for things and thoughts that did previously go unnamed or even appeared unnamable (we could here think of Mandelstam's work, making the unthinkable of the Stalinist disaster thinkable). What are your thoughts on this?

Also Baudelaire, catching the new affect state of modernity: poetry can be the canary in the coal mine. But I don't know enough about contemporary poetry to say much more about this.

My teacher Gary Snyder was crucial to me, as the "poet laureate of deep ecology." He showed me that poetry has a shamanic power that fiction can't have. Same with W. S. Merwin; he and Snyder both show how poetry in our time can stay grounded in the biosphere, calling out the dangers of our civilization's drift away from the natural world, which is to say the animals and plants, our cousins; thus, poetry has been sharply political until very recently; and maybe it still is.

What I see in my casual reading is that poetry seems to exhibit influences from the twentieth century more in terms of form than content; and here the great influencer looks to be John Ashbery. His slippery fractured syntax, supple and surprising, is something younger poets have learned from, it seems to me—as with Josie Graham and others. These startling poets are like Emily Dickinson without the dashes, and I like them very much; or to be more precise, I like that formal move very much.

Back to the novel: maybe Jameson is saying the novel should be diagnostic, or a cognitive map, as in his famous formulation; and so, if the novel dives too deeply into the internal labyrinths of its characters, it's just more bourgeois self-absorption, and the novel's ability to synthesize, clarify, historicize, diagnose, and teach gets lost in that morass of MFA-program standards, which are so tedious at this point. What's needed is something more like Dos Passos's method in the *USA* trilogy, perhaps: or, to say it again, the need now is for science fiction.

In the work of Samuel Beckett, as some scholars have argued, one can detect a movement from forms of experimenting with the novel-form that then moves to a more dramatic form and ultimately ends or culminates in poetry. One might see this movement itself as a movement of condensation. We do not want to ask you about Beckett (even though, we are happy for you to comment on his work), but rather if you think that now is the time to reverse this movement of condensation or if there is a way in which the novel might even operate side by side with poetry?

I've read Beckett with pleasure. His novels are a mess, they're too much work, and strangely sentimental: oh these poor people who can't ride a bike competently, can't even get out bed, or think a thought, dear me, the pathos of it all: no. I think that the experience of looking at Proust and Joyce from up close, as he did, blew his fuses as a novelist. But then came "Waiting for Godot". He turned out to be a man of the theater, and discovering that changed his life, he'll be in the canon forever—because he found the right form for his content. Later still, his project dove hard toward silence. This is a personal trajectory, not a program.

Compression can be very powerful, not that I've managed it very well myself, but I would like to, and I've felt the power of it, from time to time—mainly, in my own work, in the eyewitness accounts scattered through *The Ministry for the Future*. I'm thinking about what more I could do with that kind of squeezing.

In the other direction (though it won't be mine, as I've already tried it), the Very Long Novel has possibilities that normal-length novels can't manage: sheer vastness (big data?), and the possibilities of long arcs and weavings that can be put to use to do things the normal-length novel can't. Proust showed how this can work, and I'd mention also the twenty-

volume Aubrey/Maturin novel by Patrick O'Brian, one of the great novels of the twentieth century, some 6,000 pages long. So expansion can be good too. It depends where you are in your life, as well as in history. Late style is usually about compression, and in Thomas Hardy you can see a novelist shifting to poetry: he was good at both. For myself, I don't know where I am right now in that regard. I'll find out later by trying things.

Back to poetry, your topic here: in twentieth century American poetry there were many who tried to write a modern epic poem, combining the compression and fracture of modernism with older narratives, into some kind of grand enjambment: you see attempts by Crane, Pound, Williams, Eliot, Berryman, and so on. The real success in that kind of project, for me, is *The Folding Cliffs*, by W.S. Merwin, who finessed the problem by going back to the oral tradition and writing in that mode. Each individual page is a lyric poem in his own late style, a beauty by itself, while it also advances a taut, tragic tale of Indigenous people crushed by the coming of the modern state. I wonder if contemporary poetry could learn something from Merwin's great achievement. But maybe it's singular; and in any case, his was a historical fiction, and a novel in verse, as well, which has always been a weird hybrid.

For now, I think heteroglossia is the proper approach for literature in our time; and maybe there is no escaping science fiction. No matter what, I keep coming back to the novel. What a surprise!