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Struggle Forever: Review of Kim Stanley Robinson's *2312*

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“SORRY, BUT IT'S TRUE. It has to be said: the stars exist beyond human time, beyond human reach. We live in this little pearl of warmth surrounding our star; outside it lies a vastness beyond comprehension. The solar system is our one and only home.” *2312*'s quiet insistence on the radical inaccessibility of the stars — their infinite retreat from the horizon of human agency — manifests as an iron law not only in this novel but across the fiction of Kim Stanley Robinson. We might hurl interstellar starships out into the void in search of other Earthlike planets, as characters in fact do in both *2312* and in Robinson's earlier “Mars Trilogy” — but the many-thousand-year timetable of these voyages means this can only be a branching of the human story and not its final, ecstatic culmination. The stars are out there, and we are here; they are not for us, they are not a part of our history, they won't be the thing that saves us.

If the stars are truly forever out of reach — as contemporary physics says they almost certainly are, to the heartbreak of space-opera fans everywhere — then humanity is permanently enclosed within a solar system that is, in the cosmic scheme of things, actually a pretty tight space. And the solar system, alas, is also fairly inhospitable; aside from Earth, there's no place we can live without performing a tremendous amount of very expensive work to make it habitable, and enduring an equally tremendous amount of constant risk to keep it that way. On Earth we have sun, air, copious water, nutrient-rich soil; extraplanetary colonies must replace each of these natural bounties with intricate human-designed reserve systems, whose temporary failure would mean universal death. In contrast to the expansionist fantasy that typically drives science fiction — humanity consuming more and more of the universe's resources, as it operates at grander and grander scales — Robinson's vision of the settlement of outer space is significantly more precarious and austere. “We're all vulnerable in space,” one of *2312*'s protagonists tells another. “There isn't a single off-Earth settlement that couldn't be destroyed, except for Mars.” Getting off Earth isn't any kind of permanent solution to resource scarcity or ecological crisis, no matter how our *Star Trek* fantasies would have it; if you think it's tough living within the natural constraints of a huge, rich, fertile planet like Earth, just think about the superhuman effort that would be required to try and live anywhere else. Outer space, the poet said, ain't the kind of place to raise your kids.

The general ban on interstellar travel in Robinson's fiction, the insistence on the solar system as an ultimate species limit, is more than just an arbitrary narrative choice among others; it is part and parcel of the intertwined strains of environmentalism and anti-capitalism that characterize nearly every one of Robinson's novels. Environmentalism: if the solar system is our only home, and most of it is totally barren, and life nearly everywhere would be agonizingly difficult, then the Earth's ecosystem becomes that much more precious, the vital core of everything we have. And anti-capitalism: if the limits of the solar system are our ultimate barrier — if Earth is the one and only really good place we'll ever know — then an economic system predicated on rapacious permanent growth and ever-increasing resource consumption is obviously catastrophically misguided.

2312 opens with a human race that has managed to spread itself across the solar system but still by and large hasn't learned this lesson. In *2312* humans are living in relatively small numbers on every possible bit of rock, from fiery Mercury to icy Pluto. But the bulk of humanity, its teeming, starving billions, still lives on an increasingly impoverished and ecologically devastated Earth. Echoing the bleak pronouncement of Robinson's former teacher, Fredric Jameson, that in the postmodern era it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, *2312*'s future history depicts space colonization as having occurred just when "late capitalism writhed in its internal decision concerning whether to destroy Earth's biosphere or change its rules," with many arguing for the destruction of the planet as "the lesser of two evils." Hundreds of years later, the colonies are thriving, in large part due to the "great Martian achievement" of confining capitalism to its margins, "like defeating the mob or any other protection racket." But the Earth has been wrecked by climate change, ocean acidification, overpopulation, and mass extinction, with most surviving animals having been pulled off the planet and kept in asteroid "terrariums" just to retain any species diversity at all. The terraforming techniques that have made the other planets habitable cannot be employed on Earth; you can only slam comets into planets that are empty, not ones where people are already living (at least, not if you want to keep them alive). And so, despite the prosperity of the space colonists, the Earth itself is a degenerating galactic slum, a hopeless "development sink," a "planet of sadness." As the novel opens, even this unhappy equilibrium is beginning to finally break down; snippets from future-history textbooks presented in the novel continually warn us that *2312* is a crisis year, an inflection point in history, and even the space colonies won't be safe from the crash the coming collapse of Earth will cause.

Our protagonist — and entry-point for all this background — is Swan Er Hong, a 130-year-old former asteroid designer turned "sunwalker" enjoying multiple posthuman enhancements in Mercury's only city, Terminator, which is set on rails to remain perpetually ahead of the dawn. (Fans of Robinson's earlier "Mars Trilogy" will recognize Terminator from those books, as well as the Singularitarian explosion of human ingenuity and invention Robinson calls the Accelerando — but the two texts imagine significantly different future histories. In the earlier books, Mars was first settled by careful scientists who took steps to preserve the planet from human influence; here, Mars was immediately maximally terraformed, leading to an eighth of the planet being scorched and the rest made fully habitable to humans without protective devices.) Swan is the granddaughter of Alex, the "Lion of Mercury," the most-respected person on the planet and one of the principal founders of the Mondragon Accord, a multiple-planetary alliance of space colonies organized along cooperative, anti-capitalist lines. Alex's death reveals to Swan the focus of her life's work: first, her analysis of the socioeconomic trends of the solar system reveals that the entire system will crash unless Earth can get its act together; and second, the quantum computers (qubes) that humanity is increasingly reliant upon now represent a cognitive capacity that completely dwarfs the human — an artificially-intelligent force that may already be working towards its own ends. The task of Alex's heirs is to prevent either crisis from destroying what humanity has built.

These threads together suggest *2312* is Robinson's most openly Asimovian novel to date. Alex serves as the narrative's answer to Hari Seldon, the future-predicting psychohistorian of the "Foundation" series who famously inspired both Paul Krugman and Newt Gingrich; the qubes are Asimov's robots and Machines, humanity's faithful but deeply unreliable servants. Robinson

has credited the experimental style of the novel — its polyphonic use of fragmentary interstitial chapters providing both exposition and alternative voices— to John dos Passos’s U.S.A. Trilogy, but Asimov used the same trick with his excerpts from the Encyclopedia Galactica. Indeed, for most of the novel, the out-of-context snippets of academic historical commentary mirror the form of Asimov’s Encyclopedia exactly; each time they tell us that something very important is about to happen but cut off right before we find out what it is.

I was a rapacious reader of Asimov when I was young, and remain a genuinely devoted fan today for reasons that go deeper than mere nostalgia. But even a fan of Asimov’s should be able to admit that his novels characteristically depict a somewhat impoverished form of human life: Asimov’s worlds are full of cool, detached engineers, lacking literature and art, and very commonly both sex and love, and indeed any apparent emotional passion beyond the joy of problem-solving. If *2312*’s psychohistorian tendencies bear Asimov’s stamp, the book is, in this respect, a wild departure from the master. Robinson’s space colonies are vibrant, fun, alive — these are worlds where everyone is an artist, where total self-expression and self-creation are finally possible. Swan has a rhetoric-obsessed qube computer living in her brain, alongside bits of the personality of a former lover, and skylark DNA spliced into her genome to help her sing, and unknown alien bacteria living in her gut; retired from custom-designing hot-rod asteroids, her current sojourn on Mercury is devoted entirely to sublime, quasi-religious contemplation of the sun. Some characters switch sex freely, fathering some children and mothering the rest; others are trans and genderqueer, with over twenty separate categories of possible sex-gender self-image recorded in the novel. Swan herself is a gynandromorph, a woman with a penis, a fact so unremarkable in the world of *2312* that it is noted by her lover only in passing.

As Swan leaves Mercury and begins to explore the solar system, she hitches rides on asteroids catering to every possible interest, obsession, peccadillo, and fetish, from “blackliners” filled with self-punishing penitents to “sexliners” whose extracurricular activities are exactly what you’d expect. In the utopian post-scarcity economy of *2312* — off-Earth, at least — humanity has time to devote itself principally to making and enjoying wonderful things, from installation art that chaotically melts and contorts in the heat of sunside Mercury, to impossible asteroid ecologies, to landscapes that dance and sing. For Robinson, a human being is a creative being, on an almost metaphysical level: the first things humans did when they arrived on Iapetus and discovered a region comprised of black dust over a white ice core was to doodle in the alien sand on an epically massive scale.

“Graffiti on Iapetus! Later it was declared a mistake and a scandal, a moral stupidity, even a crime, in any case disgusting; and there were calls for the entirety of Cassini Regio to be reblacked. Someday it may happen, but don’t hold your breath, for the truth is we are here to inscribe ourselves on the universe, and it is not inappropriate to remind ourselves of this when blank slates are given us. All landscape art reminds us: we live in a tabula rasa, and must write on it.”

The wonderfully inventive *2312* is, in this way, Robinson’s most aesthetically reverent work to date. Science, engineering, history, politics, philosophy, parenting, love — in this novel all are reimagined as essentially artistic practices, as the sorts of ecstatic creative pursuits people might devote themselves to once liberated from the drudgery capitalism inflicts on us. It might,

therefore, be Robinson's most nakedly utopian novel, his most ambitious attempt to show us just how good life after capitalism could be. Finally: a time for play.

But at the same time, *2312* could be Robinson's least utopian novel — beginning, as it does, from the rejection of the “Mars Trilogy”'s happier historical trajectory in favor of a world(s)-system in which the ongoing historical struggle between the residual (feudalism), the dominant (capitalism), and the emergent (none dare call it communism) never crests, but just goes horribly on and on and on. Indeed, there is a suggestion late in the novel as pessimistic and unhappy as any I can recall Robinson making: that perhaps some people are just bad, that (worse still) perhaps true evil will only exist after scarcity.

“Before [post-scarcity], it could always be put down to want or fear. It was possible to believe, as apparently you did, that when fear and want went away, bad deeds would too. Humanity would be revealed as some kind of bonobo, altruistic, cooperative, a lover of all. ... However you explain it, people do bad things. Believe me.”

A suggestion that the last thousand years of human history could be best described as “the late feudal period” is immediately countered by an even worse possibility: “What makes you think it's late?” Another of Robinson's interstitial chapters is simply a list of all the reasons that utopia can't happen, from original sin to greed to “because it probably wouldn't work” to “because we can get away with it.” Maybe things are bad, and people are bad, and maybe both will always stay that way.

In *2312* the characters themselves are aware, and deeply troubled, by this fundamental undecidability between hope and despair. They decide that heaven and hell — good and evil, art and war — must exist in permanent quantum superposition, each one always threatening to emerge out of the other. Humanity as a whole, one of Robinson's imagined future textbooks sadly notes, is “possibly smarter as a species than as individuals, but prone to insanity either way.” Politics therefore becomes reframed as a perpetual act of willpower, a continual ethical decision to demand things that are good over things that are not. And *2312* becomes in part a lengthy elaboration on the dictum presented in Robinson's 1990 novel *Pacific Edge* that the true definition of utopia is not a static happy end-state but “struggle forever.” Here then is Robinson's reply to a human history that, whatever happens, always seems to turn out wrong — a history that has rendered, and is rendering, and will continue to render our beautiful green Earth into a planet of sadness as long as we let it. In spite of everything, we have to keep trying. “There's no solution but justice for everyone,” declares Swan Er Hong. Okay, let's start there.