



An Interview with Bob Crossley

John Kendall Hawkins

Robert Crossley is Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. He has written books and articles on science fiction, Utopianism, Scientific Romance, and Futurism, in addition to other literary topics. His books include *Imagining Mars: A Literary History* (Wesleyan University Press, 2011); *Olaf Stapledon: Speaking for the Future* (Syracuse University Press and University of Liverpool Press, 1994); and *H. G. Wells* (Starmont Press, 1986; reprinted Borgo Press, 2007). In addition, he has appeared as an expert in an episode of *Ridley Scott's Prophets of Science Fiction*: "H.G. Wells".

I recently contacted Bob Crossley to exchange thoughts regarding the changing landscape of science fiction in the context of the Singularity. Our conversation addressed the irony of humankind's great leaps forward, technologically, while that sci-tech seems to be ineffective against our driven nature.

The following is the result of our exchange after we'd disposed of the niceties, rolled up the sleeves of our minds, and got to work.

JKH: When I took your Scientific Romance course at the University of Massachusetts many years ago, I was enthralled by your selection of books and absorbed by the themes you presented. What I am most grateful for, remembering 30 years later, is the deepening of my humanity as a result of novels and your thoughtful teaching. I recall *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, in which alien technology meant to facilitate intergalactic migration is co-opted by the Deep State, ironically, leading toward the destruction of Earth. The post-apocalyptic *Earth Abides*, depicting life going on without us. Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men* begins with war between the US and China, then moving millions of years through human evolution leading to man the flyer. *A Door Into Ocean* is a wonderful introduction to transhumanism, but also paints the same old differences between warlike,

terrestrial males and wise, social, sea-dwelling women who the men ignore and/or disdain.

These novels seem tied together by a profound sense of humanity’s consciousness and its fragility. Thirty years later, these works have never seemed more prescient, given climate change, pandemics, and new technology. Vis-à-vis these works, how would you describe the current state of humanity? Have we become too numb to respond?

BC: I don’t think numbness is the major problem. From my vantage point in the U.S., the overwhelming problem is hostility to facts and hostility to education – and the latter, for an educator, is extremely troubling. The novels you cite remain especially relevant to issues of climate and environment, pandemic, militarism, gender and racial equity. These authors still have much to teach to readers in the 21st century world. They can open minds, provoke thought, and combat numbness and indifference. But only if people remain open to education.

Here in the US, screaming parents want to dictate what can and can’t be read in schools; any books that challenge the status quo or suggest the need for rethinking history are deplored as “indoctrination”. These disturbing behaviours affect equally the sciences and the humanities. The distrust of the expertise of so-called “elites” leads to vilifying medical authorities and to irrational claims that freedoms are threatened by cloth masks and needles. The humanities, by definition, are devoted to cultivating and improving what makes us human, and the humanities – to which the life-affirming and critically inquiring novels you listed – are under threat by the contemporary equivalent of book burners.

JKH: You have just released a new book, *Epic Ambitions in Modern Times: From Paradise Lost to the New Millennium*. The scope of such a survey is extraordinary. What are your aims and methods? Can you say more about the book? Describe some of these ambitions?

BC: The scope of the book is brash, and I claim no special authority on the subjects of its various chapters – other than the authority of a lifetime of responding to works of literary, visual, cinematic, and musical works of art. I’m old enough not to care about seeming to be presumptuous, and I am very explicitly trying to write an old-fashioned kind of criticism, intended for the general reader rather than academic scholars and free from the jargon of literary theory.

The book is intended to question the notion that the epic ended with Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. My premise is that the long epic *poem* is largely extinct (with a few notable exceptions) but that the epic impulse has remained an aspiration for artists working in various forms and that the desire for epic experience has persisted for audiences. So, my book starts by considering the final two books of *Paradise Lost* as a farewell to the tradition of the epic poem inaugurated by Homer and the beginning of a new kind of epic. Succeeding chapters suggest that epic ambitions went underground after Milton and then emerged

in other places: in Gibbon's approach to history in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; in poetic autobiography in Wordsworth's *Prelude*; in opera in Wagner's *Ring*; in cinema in Abel Gance's silent *Napoleon*; in the 60 panels of Jacob Lawrence's Migration series that chronicle in paint the movement of African Americans from the south to the north and west; in Tolkien's imaginary worlds and beings in *Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*; in Frederick Turner's relocation of the epic to the future in his three multi-book epics *The New World*, *Genesis*, and *Apocalypse*; in theatre in Tony Kushner's rethinking of American cultural history in the AIDS era in *Angels in America*; and in radical 21st century translations of the ancient epics and in novelisations of those epics by Margaret Atwood, Ursula LeGuin, Madeline Miller, and Maria Dhavana Headley – each of them rewrites the originals in the voices of characters who were on the margins. It is, I admit, a lot to bite off, and readers may find some parts of the book less compelling than others.

JKH: With the talk of the Sixth Extinction and species dying off all around us, how is it possible that the recently concluded COP26 in Glasgow could end non-committally in so many ways at this late stage of our collective crisis?

BC: “Too soon old, too late smart”, as my German grandmother used to say. Those in power are beholden to interests that do not recognise any crisis other than the threats to their profits. Hope rests with younger, less compromised people eventually moving into those places of power. But the clock is ticking.

JKH: Noam Chomsky has said that the three main issues humans face immediately are climate change, nuclear war, and the apparent end of democracy around the world. Do you see the same issues as our priorities? And would you agree with Chomsky's assessment that essentially our only hope to deal with these issues is education. If so, what area of education requires the most focus? Do we have time?

BC: As usual, Chomsky gets things pretty much right. But the hope that lies in education is imperiled by what I've already described as a know-nothing brigade seeking to clamp down on what can be taught to young people. But we cannot resign ourselves to this know-nothingism. I don't know what it will take to resist and reform this destructive attack on civic engagement and enlightened, critical thinking. Do we have time? Not a lot, I would guess, before the work of destruction becomes very difficult to undo.

JKH: Asimov's *Foundation* series features a kind of Alexandrian library, a collection of human knowledge that can be paid forward. One can imagine moving through the galaxies toward new potential homes knowing that “we bring good things” wherever we go. However, when you read about the internet these days – the security

state and corporate collection of people's private lives and placement of their data in fusion databases, the centralisation and dependency on access representing a kind of hivemindedness that reduces humans to data points – you have to wonder about our future journeys as humans. The Foundation, which takes place amidst the crumbling of an Empire, still contains hope for a future romantic humanity, as opposed to a dystopian hivemind, essentially one centralised human. Any thoughts on this difference between the Foundation and the Hivemind ahead?

BC: I'm going to pass on this one. It's been a very long time since I read the Foundation novels and you can write more acutely than I can on this topic. But I will just add a footnote: Anthony Doerr's new novel *Cloud Cuckoo Land* (to my mind a brilliant melding of historical fiction, science fiction, and psychological novel) does some wonderful and ultimately disillusioning things with the subject of libraries and electronic encyclopedias – perhaps something of a corrective to Asimov's "romantic" futurism.

JKH: Olaf Stapledon, on whom you've written so much, was keenly interested in experiments and adventures in transhumanism and also in anthropomorphic creatures. One thinks of *Sirius*, *Odd John*, and *Last Man*. What would he make of our contemporary rethinking of gender identity, the growing visibility of transgender people, and, dare I say, robotic dogs?

BC: Your question reminds me of a time in the 1980s when I was searching for and interviewing very elderly people who had known Stapledon in the 1930s and 1940s. One 90-year-old recalled hearing on the radio the terrifying news of the explosion of the Hiroshima bomb. She said to her friends, "Let's go find Olaf. He will know what to think about this". In his typical, philosophical, "on-the-one-hand-on-the-other-hand" fashion, he said – and I'm paraphrasing from memory here – "This may be the end of the world, or maybe it is the event that will finally bring the world together". Of course, neither was quite right: so much for the wisdom of sages.

To your specific question of how he might respond to transitioning from one gender to another or other forms of refashioning one's identity, I think he would be intrigued; critical speculation was his specialty. After the success of *Last and First Men* in 1930 he gave a national broadcast on BBC radio titled "The Remaking of Man". In that talk he challenged the idea that human nature was fixed and proposed that science could find ways to remake and improve humanity, despite the risk of "mere monkeying with man". This is slippery territory since it gets into the deep water of eugenics. Some radio listeners were outraged by Stapledon's speculations and called them "blasphemy" because he disputed the existence of a soul and of a god.

I think, on the evidence of a novel like *Sirius* (probably Stapledon's best novel, and certainly his most accessible one), Stapledon would have endorsed the idea that people have the right to transition gender and to inhabit the bodies that match their psyches and their "true" identities. But, as in the case of the

surgically and genetically modified dog in *Sirius*, Stapledon would be alert to the pain and suffering that would be a necessary part of the process of transitioning.

JKH: When I was your student there was no mainstream internet per se, and we were only one year removed from the fall of the wall in Berlin. Can you identify a leading theme of the last 30 years – in culture, technology, or politics – that draws your attention?

BC: I think it would be the prevalence of narcissism. And I'm not thinking merely of the embodiment of that perverse tendency in Donald Trump but a larger cultural narcissism of which he is a symptom. The erosion of civic responsibility, the indifference to the climate crisis, the persistence of segregation, the lack of empathy with refugees, the poor, indeed with anyone racially or culturally different from oneself, the not-in-my-backyard insularity – all these phenomena seem to me to stem from an egocentric self-absorption in which the only thing that matters is one's own comfort, convenience, and success. If this prevailed during my youth, I wasn't aware of it. But narcissism does seem to me to have metastasised in recent decades.

JKH: My life's journey is almost near an end, and I marvel daily, as I'm sure you do, at the 65 years I've had that have encompassed the black and white, ideological, Hank Williams days to our current cusp of quantum computers and multiverses. It's like one never came back from El Cid's dream world. How can so much happen in one lifetime? Do you feel similarly? Can we even process such momentousness?

BC: I wonder whether the experience of momentous, sometimes unprocessable change hasn't now been a phenomenon of human experience ever since the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century. I think often of the life span of H. G. Wells, who recalled watching his father in the 1860s reading a newspaper by candlelight – the single spot of light in a darkened house at night. He died at age 80 in 1946 having witnessed the first atom bombs being used. That arc – from candlelight to the atomic flash – seems to me at least as amazing and as unnerving as the cultural and technological changes we have witnessed in our lifetimes.

JKH: I'm working on a long piece, tentatively titled "The End of Science Fiction". The basic premise is: It is clear that we have no real solution for deflecting cosmic rays in space and that exposure to them can be fatal and debilitating over time. In conjunction with Earth's diminishing resources, then, we are not going anywhere (not even Mars). I've been researching and writing about synthetic biology and chemistry recently. Humans seem to be at the cusp of

breakthroughs in re-making the world as a synthetic product. A Chinese doctor has cloned humans and “accidentally” enhanced the intelligence of his babies. Just yesterday I was reading about DARPA’s call for the creation of new synthetic molecules. We seem to have become gods – but at a time of great crisis, a crisis at least partially rendered by the people who think they’re gods. What, if anything, do you make of all of this?

BC: I think your topic of “the end of science fiction” is certainly worth exploring. It is almost a truism that we find ourselves thinking, “I’m living in science fiction”, as the gap between what was once imagined and the kind of world we now inhabit narrows. There is certainly a moral issue that has to be wrestled with: how much of what we *can* do *should* we do? Do all the guardrails come off as we exercise this “godlike” power? The question, of course, is as old as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, but it is increasingly urgent and unavoidable.

I’d like to take your question in perhaps a different direction than you intended. Given the world we now have, the power we now have over our environment, the knowledge and the capability to do things that were once only dreamed about, it may be that we have not reached the end of science fiction but that we have a greater need of science fiction than ever before. That means not thinking of science fiction as prophecy – which is what it is often taken to be. Think of Wells’s 1912 novel *The World Set Free* in which he imagined chain reactions and the use of atom bombs (he invented that term) in war three decades before the Manhattan Project. But I think the case of a science-fictional forecast coming true is relatively rare.

I prefer to think of science fiction not as prophecy but as myth. Myths are very important to our well-being because they cause us to think about who we are, how we got this way, what we value, what we want to become. With the increasing irrelevance of religion as a guide to behaviour and aspiration, we need a modern mythology – and that’s what science fiction can be good at. I think of the living writer who I believe produces the best science fiction in English: Kim Stanley Robinson. His novels are meticulously researched, scientifically grounded, but they function as myths, secular moral parables. His three famous novels about the terraforming of Mars – *Red Mars*, *Green Mars*, *Blue Mars* – are wonderful exercises in mythmaking, not prophetic accounts of settlements humans will make on Mars. Because he can *imagine* human beings going to Mars and permanently settling there doesn’t mean that Robinson thinks we can or should go to Mars. These are novels fundamentally about Earth – about our politics, our environmental stewardship, our tensions between development and conservation, the need to terraform our own fragile planet, and so forth. Mars is a convenient location from which to look back at Earth and see it in a new light, to defamiliarise the overly familiar, to think freshly about the problems we face and how we might solve them. So, perhaps we have not come to the end of science fiction but to a new sense of why we need science fiction to get our bearings again.

JKH: What, if any, lessons can we be certain we’ve learned from a relativised history, as the smoke clears and new fires begin?

BC: Gee, you've saved the easiest question for last! I don't have any sense of certainties, any grasp of what lessons have been learned that won't have to be relearned. I'm no dystopian, but to the degree that I am a utopian I think of utopia as a process and a struggle in which no achievement is definitive, in which there will continue to be trial and very often error. Stasis is the enemy of progress, and progress has been – and will probably continue to be – by fits and starts. And of course there are no guarantees that things won't simply collapse, but I think we have to try to live *as if* things can get better, always remembering that the future is not something that happens to us, but something we make.

Biography: John Kendall Hawkins is a poet and freelance journalist who writes regularly about culture, primarily for CounterPunch magazine. He is also a doctoral candidate in philosophy at the University of New England, Australia, where he is researching the future of human consciousness in the age of machine-thinking.