

## *It Ain't Necessarily So: An Introduction*

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne

Chaucer, *The Parliament of Birds*

This Introduction is a very partial look backward at my “positions and presuppositions in SF and utopianism,” which means also at my life, up to 2001, and leaving out what is already sufficiently collected in my previous books on SF and utopianism. It cannot but be in large part autobiographical, melding memories and judgements. This may, I hope, be useful to the reader, for one’s biography is the place where the general, the particular, and the personal almost inextricably meld.

### 1. How a Young Boy, Age 11 on, Fell in Love with Freedom (Axiology), and How He Was Immediately Made to Understand What It Is Not or Against

This book, long enough to require two volumes, contains 32 articles plus a small secondary bibliography. Both title and body of the text should ideally be self-explanatory: to an open-minded reader, the enterprise should interpret itself (as Rabelais said of his *Gargantua and Pantagruel*). Yet given the historical distance and perhaps complexity of some of the textual positions, its presuppositions and contexts should be somewhat clarified.

A major part of the complexity, apart from personal idiosyncrasies, is due to the position of Marxist heretic that I had been elaborating for myself in the quarter century of 1945-69. Its profile in epistemology may be indicated by the names of an integral Marx (both his early and late works), a Lenin shorn of his early philosophical crudity and culminating in *State and Revolution* as well as

the October Revolution, and then overwhelmingly by the literary seers – Krleža<sup>1</sup>, Shakespeare, and Brecht. For my main reading interest in and out of school was literature: poetry, from the ancient Chinese and Greeks all the way to the generation of Mayakovsky and T.S. Eliot, prose as in the great European novel mainstream from Cervantes and Defoe to Joyce, Dos Passos, and Faulkner, and then increasingly drama (and theatre) as my professional orientation, where I also first learned about allegory from medieval Mysteries and Erich Auerbach. I also tried writing plays and prose but failed, I don't know how to create plots (two short stories were wrung from me by great need); while writing and translating verse has been my constant companion from age 21 on, functioning also as diary and self-psychoanalysis. The position and orientation that I shared with much of my generation, the one formed by the anti-fascist wave of World War 2, has two components, which I enthusiastically adopted from the reigning Titoist vulgate of my youth. It is a constant struggle on two fronts: against the bourgeoisie as a degenerated ruling class, and against the Stalinist involution of a plebeian revolution into a parallel cruel rule. It is a stance, first, against oppression and humiliation, experienced by me from age 11 on as officially “of Jewish race” — though I don't believe human races exist, and I cared little about Jewishness (but huge armed forces cared a lot) — and readily extrapolatable to all gender, economic, and other oppressions. Second, it is a stance intolerant of monolithism and a dogmatic One Truth, as applied equally by all Churches and, alas, often by militant revolutionary movements caught up in the need to decide *right now*. Therefore, by the age

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<sup>1</sup> The towering figure of Croatian and Yugoslav writer Miroslav Krleža was the first major literary, and today I'd say epistemological, influence on me from age 15 on. I read all of his available extant works, a dozen volumes or more (today over 40), for a class paper in my last year of high school, and have later written on his plays and translated some of his poems into English. I had the privilege of meeting him several times in the early 1960s in his office of director of the Encyclopedia Institute to discuss this or that in Yugoslav culture, in relation to which he was rather cynical, once in his villa apartment with our spouses, and once even ferried his considerable and protesting bulk on the back seat of my small Fiat 750 from a rare Union of Writers' meeting he attended. I have no spacetime here to explain him further – please read him.

of 21 I was in the black books both of the CIA and the KGB (as I learned later from those who put me there).

For a person whose life's work was thinking and writing about "culture" — literature, theatre, understanding — this was particularly urgent: such pursuits are the human species' Early Warning Systems. A Zeami, Rimbaud, Kafka or Brecht show us, clearly or as in a glass darkly, strange baby figures of the giant mass of human relationships to come.

Incidentally, this concern with the good and bad aspects of the great post-1917 experiment explains my writing about Russian and Soviet SF in this book or elsewhere (together with my being well taught Russian from 1945 to 1949, knowing poems in it by heart as in half a dozen other languages, and reading all I could lay hands on, from poetry to SF). A major such piece, revisiting Zamyatin's *We* in the midst of the genocidal stresses inflicted on the ex-USSR peoples by "democratisation," in its result quite similar to Stalin's ones in the 1930s except that no mass hullabaloo is raised about the 1990s, is my essay "Reflections on What Remains of Zamyatin's *We* after the Change of Leviathans" of 2003, which can be found in *Defined by a Hollow*.

Another fixed idea of mine, a deep hatred of war and militarism, can be followed from the chronologically earliest essay in this book, anent the Moon landing, to a special issue on *US Science Fiction and War/Militarism* of the annual *Fictions* I edited, and wrote a long overview for, in 2005. It is easily explained by my childhood, when not only could my entire family be shot at dawn tomorrow by the Fascists in reprisal for Partizan attacks, but a German bomb also fell 50 meters from me; so if it had been of the US airforce strength, whatever remained of me would have been tossed into a small grave before puberty. And it was in the 60s becoming clearer and clearer, after Korea, Vietnam, and a score of other armed interventions and induced civil wars, that permanent warfare and mass murders will be the trademark of the period so hopefully begun by the exhilaration

of 1945 (I taught the ending of Camus's *Plague* as the best testimony to it). This repulsion extends to all violence, the cruel mainstay of class society, and it made me leave for Canada in 1968. I admire much in the USA, at a proper critical distance: *in effigie*, as Freud remarked of dreams where nobody gets materially killed (though alas this is for the US radically changing).

All such obsessions can be summarised in the dominant value-horizon and polar star of this book: *freedom*, both collective and personal, freedom from and freedom for, in all workplaces rather than only polling booth. The common denominators of Jefferson's, Kropotkin's, and Lenin's best writings and furthest horizons for me can — and must — comfortably coexist. That is why I came to formulate (again by discussing and learning from Ursula Le Guin) such a utopian communist stance — also part of the original Titoist impulse — as the insistence on personally meaningful collective ethics, “on means commensurate to ends, [which] is much more than petty-bourgeois sentimentality.... [T]his is to my mind that demand of the old society, of radical and revolutionary middle-class (bourgeois and petty-bourgeois) traditions, for which the new society — or at least the movements toward socialism in the last 100 years — has to yearn.”

Freedom is what makes life worth living. Literature (art) is the most pleasurable way of living.

## 2. How a Young Man, Age 15 on, Fell in Love with the Narrative Logic and Transfer of Parable (Epistemology), and How It Took Him Long To Understand the Two Loves Were One

What is freedom? Well, to begin with it is a — supreme — value. How does that accord with art? First of all, both are in worthwhile or full cases suffused with subjective investment, a union of logic (category) and emotion (pleasure). There is no freedom or art without a discerning and convincing subject. That is why it is for me an axiom that literature abhors vacuum of belief, as I note in ch. 1.

People either live with values of freedom and friendliness (solidarity) or with pseudo-values of violent domination and exploitation. These may be more conscious in intellectuals, but operate and act just as strongly in everybody else. Value is co-extensive with productivity or creativity in the widest sense, encompassing almost all human action. A mother cares for the child because she values it, and herself for it. A worker cares for his/her work insofar as the work is not alienated. A learner (such as most of us are through most of our lives) cares for his learning because it multiplies his strengths and delights. A lover cares for her beloved because the love enriches her being.

Thus there is no human reality without values: I do not wish to discuss this, I take it for granted. But how do we know just what are the pertinent aspects and limits of reality or value? Thomas of Aquinas and the whole monotheistic tradition answer, because God's wondrous Creation tells us so through the mouth of His sacred interpreters. After the death of God with a capital g, killed by ruthless capitalist survival of the fittest, the universe's horrifying aspect of entropic decay and the human society's division into classes become nakedly apparent, so that we profoundly and rightly disbelieve authoritarian interpreters — though I'm quite happy to have a lot of specific godlets sprout up in history and die with it, as in Shintoism and Le Guin. We have to fashion for ourselves democratic and plebeian, from-ground-up epistemologies of the kind usually called "soft" skepticism (see the section "About Cognition in Science and Fiction" in ch. 10). I have been wrestling with such a libertarian epistemology in a number of essays, some of which are available on my site <https://independent.academia.edu/DarkoSuvin/Papers>, and hope to go on. A Left without active pursuit of epistemology, as a chance to understand and avoid huge strategic errors in its own past, is for me nonsense.

As to parable, that most popular allegorical form: I am attempting to read much Dick, the Strugatskys, the Brauns, Stapledon, and especially Le Guin, Lem, K.S. Robinson, and Weinbaum as

parables. The parable is, I concluded in the early 80s and argued at length in ch. 22, a key term in understanding SF: the clearest and most efficient way of both inducing and understanding the estrangement proper to it. Thus I'm pleased with the stress Eric Smith puts in his Preface on my early little article approaching allegory. True, I never dared to write about it since (as we can see from the recent welcome book by Jameson) this minefield requires a book-size work. However I did translate the central concern about the relationship of art and doctrine — there is much more on it in my latest book *Communism, Poetry* — into a practical stress on the parable, on which I at the time supervised several MAs on dramas as parables in the McGill Department of English. This concern reposed upon a deeply felt need to render justice both to the what and the how: to the undoubtedly necessary sociopolitical stress on liberation, equity, and solidarity as presupposition always inly interfused with the equally necessary position and quality of grace or beauty inherent in all art. How to render the gracious equity or the emancipatory grace in the art of narrative? How to translate into a critical net what the best narratives actually do? True, this depends as much on “artistic” tact and width of waveband as on any “scientific” conceptual logic, so it can only be pinpointed maybe halfway. My analysis of Le Guin's brilliant story “New Atlantis” in the first part of Chapter 10 is where I might best approach this impossibly possible emancipatory grace, because it caught fire from what is to me her best short story (while the famous “Those Who Walk Away from Omelas” is to my mind cognitively untenable). The story, and in its wake my exegesis, strikes me as today being the most important one. The reader who won't like that, I despair of persuading that parable is the key to a richly just reading.

### 3. On Some Positions and a New Presupposition of This Text

**3.1.** The book has 32 chapters, but since several of them are thematic groupings, these comprise at least 44 original bibliographic units. It follows a chronological order flexibly, for both the gestation and the publication of variants is in a number of cases complex and the stance is rather spiral and insertional than a linear progression. Also, the texts were written for various venues that imposed their own strict styles of reference in notes and/or works cited; all texts have been slightly edited for style. Finally, editing this book, we found ourselves catapulted into the explosive Covid-sparked world state of siege, caused by capitalism's organic intolerance of long-range planning for human well-being (see Suvin, "How To Go On," a long essay on "coronisation" forthcoming in *Socialism and Democracy* next issue). Yet whether strictly imposed or badly disregarded -- as in USA, UK, Sweden, and most poor countries -- its 100s of thousands of unnecessary deaths caused us to concentrate on precise and buttressed discussion of values rather than on reference conventions.

The chronology of my work is articulated by my sabbaticals in 1973/74 and 1980/81 in UK, 1986/87 and 1993/94 in various venues, and in the 90s by a four-year grant that allowed me to take one semester off teaching for those years. In the two British years, the Cambridge one was devoted mainly to writing MOSF and the London one to *Victorian SF*. Also of major importance were my immersions into Japanese life and culture, beginning in the mid-80s and continuing every year up to 1996 for one to three months. Its fallout begins to be glimpsed in the interview with Hager (ch. 27): though it did not directly deal with matters pertinent to SF, one could argue all nipponising is a form of more or less strange or estranging utopianism, where Lyman Sargent would have trouble to classify it as bodily or collective.<sup>2</sup> It may reach the best utopian formulation I was capable of in the

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<sup>2</sup> Still, for the record: what it meant professionally may be seen in my *Lessons of Japan*, [Montréal] CIADEST, 1996, and in more depth in the poetry and the second short story written in those years. I collaborated with a group of Joyce fans that published a periodical called first *The Abiko Rag* (from the suburb of Tokyo where some lived) and later *The Abiko Quarterly*, and published there a lot of verse; a particularly ambitious poem was printed under the pseudonym of Roland Wyser in the Fall-Winter 1996 issue of the latter title.

verse of chapters 25 and 26. This holds especially for the poem *Visions Off Yamada*, written in the key of “soft” primitivism, in a strange relationship of alterity plus wishdream permeation to the cities of Tokyo and Montreal that I was bodily living in. I see now that its unplanned culmination in the *hieros gamos* (blessed union) of the rustic king and queen, stag and doe, may not be unworthy of the allusions to Percy Shelley and Hokusai Katsushika.

When I started revisioning these old texts for the new book, I debated whether to retroactively improve the naiveties and in places crudities of my younger days, but on the whole decided against it. The pressure to finish this job while still in my present incarnation was a subordinate factor in the decision. The main factor was the feeling that there was an autonomous historicity, or even historical dignity, to the texts as written that should be respected. Yes in a way I am the author and have the legal right to change them, but the author was really my younger (or is it older?) brother. So I used that right very gingerly, for outright infelicities of language or errors of fact, and then for some by now unbearable confusions of categorisation – such as that between dystopia and anti-utopia, or American for US, which I did correct. As to repetitions of some smaller passages, originally brought about by addressing differing audiences in different argumentative contexts, I cut a number of them; however, some resisted elimination because I much like them (say the quote from Joyce on consumers-producers), and repetition as well as novelty are the mothers of learning, and some because it would destroy the rhythm of the argument.

On the other hand I have persuaded myself there is a bundle of red threads running through the texts. I have no systematic overview for them but I’ll indicate a few. First, already in the earliest article, my take on the first Moon landing, the somewhat naive style is rebellious, ironic, and anti-militaristic. Let me note here that the Croatoserbian originals of chapters 1 and 2 were published in Yugoslav periodicals, for which I assiduously wrote in the preceding 15 years. They were as a rule

all remunerated in socialism, following the excellent logic that writing is work and should be properly paid. The payouts were decent; prolific writers, critics, and translators — not simply bestsellers — could live from their writing.

Another thread may be indicated by another offence, alas, against the prevailing common sense, as the title of ch. 5 rehearses. To take the almighty dollar — that is, sales of the writings — as the tacit final yardstick for evaluation, while still perhaps despising the “idiot multitude” (Poul Anderson, if I remember well), means subscribing to the horizon that “on the whole whatever is, is right — diametrically opposed to the basic assumption of all tenable criticism and scholarship, which is that whatever is, is questionable. Instead of personal common sense, we need a communal uncommon sense...” The SF estrangement means that in our technologically accelerated collective lives “the present has become history too, not to be accepted as given but explored as unique.”

Critical reading is always a reality-check the creative text imposes upon the critic’s presuppositional system (discussed in ch.s 21 and 22). Whoever cannot learn from worthwhile novums is fit only – maybe – for an antiquarian history of the past, as Nietzsche told us. Therefore, “[t]he first task of the critic, cutting across any theories he might cherish, is still to respond to a powerful imagination” (ch. 4). Judging is quite indispensable but it judges, with poetic justice, both judge and judged.

**3.2.** Finally, probably more important than the errors I may have committed is at least one major error of omission. I am struck how huge it is now, in May 2020, waiting for further flare-ups of needless tortured dying in the impoverished masses of the USA, Latin America or India: how even the darkest forecasts of those of us who knew this system must for immanent reasons fail have been exceeded. The amount of folly, bad faith, and readiness to sacrifice millions of people that we are

undergoing is anti-utopianism taken to its as yet untranscended limits. It makes us retroactively wince not only at the planet-busting adolescent naiveties of pulp SF but also at the Social-Darwinist racism of all the Bug-Eyed Monsters, infecting the most popular SF (and of course in spades Fantasy) from E.E. Burroughs to Heinlein, Tolkien, and the well-financed militarist — even mercenary — SF (my overview of which, “US Science Fiction...,” was also left for a following book).

I did have a proper horizon how to begin thinking about it, having analysed at some length the Yugoslav and Russian revolutions and the “really obtaining socialism” that followed. In 2014, I was asked to allow a reprint of my earliest theoretical essay, “Estrangement and Cognition”: in the electronic publication *Strange Horizons*. I agreed on condition that they add a brief but fundamental Postscript from 2008 to it, which conjoins the melding of estrangement and cognition to the point of view and horizon of the plebeian ruled classes. At that time, I wrote for that site a longer self-critical comment about my early Formalist poetics, that concludes:

*what is* cognition (and in particular the defining factor of SF, the Novum) cannot be answered in a vacuum but only within an explicated value system wedded to the labouring, exploited and dominated, classes — that is: from their standpoint (as guessed at by the critic).

In a nutshell, we’ve got to get the good old class struggle back as a key factor of our considerations: especially today, when it is conducted from above, by the rich rulers, against the impoverished people, who seem to go on struggling — where are you, Lenin? — each all alone or in powerless little groups.

To go a step further, my rhetorical sigh about Lenin has to be transcended by a realisation that if we want him, we must collectively recreate and organise an equivalent of him ourselves.

About this, I'm afraid there is little or nothing in the most radical SF or utopological critics and writers. It is the limit of this book too. It is the price for living in relatively safe enclaves of this dying societal formation.

Following the stimulus of the Birkbeck College "The Idea of Communism" conference in 2009 and some ensuing ones, some of us attempted to consider this matter of plebeian political self-defence by a permanent, strict but democratic, organisation as an adjunct to our main writings; I argued for it in "What is to be Done?: A First Step ." Though it happens, not by chance, that parables of class are prominent in ch. 29, chronologically the latest one of this book, this is still subordinated to a focus on SF and utopianism. Yet clearly, just as capitalist logic transferred anti-utopia from a wizened sub-genre to the dominant of our lives, so should anti-capitalist logic transfer the question of to be or not to be — how to organise class self-defense — from being one aspect of our works and days to its center. Perhaps it has always been latently central to them but is now patently, starkly, and undeniably visible as such.

#### 4. Namings as Acknowledgements and Thanks

**This section is left out here, but it can be found in my book *Parables of Freedom and Narrative Logics: Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction and Utopianism*, ed. Eric D. Smith, forthcoming from P. Lang, Oxford, any week now (they keep telling me for the last 6 months).**

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