

SUBJECTIVE COURSE OF POLISH LITERATURE

On Stanisław Lem

Essay by Wojciech Orliński

The oeuvre of Stanisław Lem is so extensive, you could divide it between several authors and each of them would still make history solely on the basis of their modest part. This very abundance led the American writer Philip Dick to write a denunciation to the FBI in 1974, in which he said that “Lem” is probably a typical communist abbreviation, behind which “a composite committee” is hidden, the purpose of which is to infiltrate Western popular culture.

For the purpose of this lecture, we can divide those Lems into several categories. The most famous became the author of seriously written science fiction novels, as he wrote the biggest bestseller – “Solaris”, a novel which was filmed by, among others, Andrei Tarkovsky and Steven Soderbergh. “Solaris” contains one of the most amazing twists in the history of science fiction. How jealous I am of those who don’t know it yet and will be surprised by it while reading the book or watching one of those movies! For those of you who don’t know “Solaris”, I suggest you throw aside whatever you do now. Don’t even finish reading this essay. Start reading “Solaris”; everything else can wait.

One warning: the same twist was also used in Paul Anderson’s horror film “Event Horizon”. It was on the verge of plagiarism. Seemingly, the action takes place on a different spaceship, there are different characters, but that Lem’s twist is so characteristic, no one else could think it up by chance. So if you know that film, you might think that Lem copied his idea from “Event Horizon”, but it was the other way round – the film was released in 1997, and “Solaris” comes from 1961.

Stanisław Lem himself was not a huge fan of his science fiction novels written for serious. As it turns out, he was writing them in torment, and in letters to friends he complained about lack of inspiration and willingness to work. In one of the letters, he called his greatest masterpiece “my solarian crud”. He was the most proud of other kinds of his work: satirical fantasy, which was more of a parody of the genre, and his non-fiction books. And so we move on to two other Lems: Lem-humourist and Lem-essayist.



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Lem himself considered “The Cyberiad” to be his most remarkable book, a collection of adventures of Trurl and Klapaucius, brilliant robot constructors who are robots themselves. The whole book is written in “Old Robotic”, i.e. a pastiche of literary “Old Polish” language, but one in which there are words for a robot, a spaceship and a laser thrower.

As you can imagine, this book is almost untranslatable. But there are eminent exceptions: fortunately we have the brilliant English translation by Michael Kandel. Lem himself considered it to be as good as the original. In the languages of the recipients of this essay it might look even more different, but I will illustrate the translators’ problems with an example in English. In one of the stories Trurl built an electronic poet – a machine writing poems. At one point Klapaucius, testing the robot, demands a poem on cyberotics, containing many specific words and all of them starting with C. In Polish, the poem sounded like that:

“Cyprian cyberotoman, cynik, ceniąc czule
Czarnej córy cesarskiej cud ciemnego ciała,
Ciągłe cytrą czarował. Czerwieniała cała,
Cicha, co dzień czekała, cierpiała, czuwała...
...Cyprian ciotkę całuje, cisnąwszy czarnulę!”

Michael Kandel got himself out of this conundrum in the following way. In English, the demand made by Klapaucius was: “a poem about a haircut! But lofty, noble, tragic, timeless, full of love, treachery, retribution, quiet heroism in the face of certain doom! Six lines, cleverly rhymed, and every word beginning with the letter S!”. And the poem was as follows:

“Seduced, shaggy Samson snored.
She scissored short. Sorely shorn,
Soon shackled slave, Samson sighed
Silently scheming,
Sightlessly seeking
Some savage, spectacular suicide!”



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Several dozen years ago, when Lem was still alive, an international convention of his translators was organized. One after another, they were all explaining how they dealt with this particular poem. Kandel stood up and said that he couldn't find enough interesting words starting with 'c' in English, so he had to escape this problem by slightly modifying Klapaucius' conditions, replacing 'c' with 's'. But then the Japanese translator stood up and said that in his language there are no "first letters" as we understand them at all!

To sum up, the humour of "The Cyberiad" cannot be recreated in every language in a precise way. I don't know how it works in your language, but the possibility to read Lem in original is an excellent reason to start learning Polish. Or at least read the English translation.

It's worth your while also because, apart from many jokes being a kind of an intellectual slapstick, "The Cyberiad" contains a very deep social and philosophical message. And that's probably why Lem was particularly proud of this book.

Trurl and Klapaucius are friends, although sometimes in anger they say about each other "my friend, so-called". They both like to build machines, but they like even more to prove to their colleague that the machines of the other one are worse, worthless and that the other one knows nothing at all. The action of this story takes place in some robotic Middle Ages, where every planet is ruled by a king or an emperor, and democracy is non-existent. I would like to remind you that Lem wrote it sixty years ago, before Herbert's "Dune" and "Star Wars". Those monarchs are more than often tyrants, using political police, dungeons and tortures. Trurl and Klapaucius with all their genius, education and sense of humour are nothing to those tyrants. Very often they are threatened with arrest, very often they are being tapped, and so they need to conduct their brilliant dialogues using some kind of funny code.

For the reader of those times it was an obvious allusion to the situation of intellectuals under totalitarian regime. And Trurl and Klapaucius have to somehow function in that system. They build one new machine after another for this or that tyrant, and they usually end up in trouble, as the tyrant might prefer to kill the workers instead of paying them. Since he could do it with impunity – all in all he's a tyrant! – it's totally understandable. Trurl and Klapaucius have only their intelligence, ingenuity and friendship to use against the power of the royal secret police. And they always win anyway.



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I don't know the situation in your countries, but in Poland the question how to act when facing tyranny becomes more and more urgent. What can a journalist do, a doctor, a teacher, a writer, a judge, an academic, a policeman – when the authorities limit their rights, making it impossible for them to do their jobs honestly? Should they go to the forest with a machine gun, or should they remain on their positions, because otherwise the authorities would send somebody much worse to replace them?

What would Trurl and Klapaucius do in such a situation? I recommend you read the book by yourselves, but if I were to sum up their lesson in one sentence, it would be the following. Like I said, they differed in almost every matter, they argued endlessly, but when they faced a tyrant – they spoke with one voice. Many times they heard: 'I will let one of you go', but they always rejected such proposals. In all their unpleasant adventures they never strayed from the position that either both of them survive or both of them die, but none will betray the other friend. In other words, they expressed solidarity with each other. Sorry for the word, but we're in Poland, so I had to use it.

And so we move on to another Lem, Lem the essayist. He wanted the most to write an essay on tyranny, more or less similar to the one now written by Tim Snyder. Twentieth-century totalitarian systems were always in the centre of his philosophic interest. But because he lived in one of them, he couldn't openly speak about them.

But already in the 1950s, taking advantage of the thaw after Stalin's death, he found a way to overcome censorship. He wrote a serious science fiction novel, "Eden" – in which astronauts from Earth crash on a planet where an alien civilisation introduced something of a gulag mixed with holocaust. The programme of building a perfect society was a fiasco, so the totalitarian authorities cover it by putting citizens in camps and mass murdering them. Descriptions of crimes in "Eden" are very similar to the atrocities Lem saw in Lviv during the war, caused by Hitler and Stalin.

The allusions are obvious, but any censor finding similarities here would put himself in a difficult position. "Comrade censor, how is it possible, a cruel tyrant from a different planet made you think of our first secretary? And that failed experiment reminded you of our bright system? Well, comrade censor, are you tired of your position? I don't know, perhaps I should inform your superiors about it...".



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To put it short, Lem discovered that you can basically write everything as long as it takes place on a different planet, and the characters are robots or aliens. The same trick was used by writers from other countries of the camp, especially by the Strugatsky brothers, but Lem was the first one here.

Lem used a similar formula to write his first philosophical book, “Dialogues” – also already in the 1950s. Those “Dialogues,” like the ones written by Plato or Berkley, are conducted by some philosophers, but from another planet – one lectures the other that a communist system, like the one built in the Soviet camp, can never work. Obviously they do not use those words, they speak all the time about kings and tyrants, but the allusions are evident.

Writing “Dialogues”, Lem still strongly believed in cybernetics as a science which would replace all liberal arts – sociology, psychology, and history. Because seemingly they all deal with signals, processing them and their governing mechanisms. Then he changed his mind, because the more he read about it, the more obvious it was for him that a sentence like “psychology consists in processing signals” is at the same time brilliant and tautological. Not much of it can be used in practice, because we are still left with questions: what signals? In what way? Why and what for?

So Lem started writing a book which at the beginning was supposed to be a continuation of “Dialogues”, but in the end became his *opus magnum*, the essay “Summa Technologiae”. It is his most important science fiction book. Published for the first time in 1964, it was the first Polish futurological book. At that time, the word was not even used in Poland, so booksellers didn’t know on which shelf to put the book.

It is a work dealing with civilizational challenges which we will all face. Not Lem’s generation, but ours. For example, Lem described there that we would find ourselves in a situation where we would no longer manage data, but data would manage us. Where we would attempt to modify human organisms using cybernetic and genetic improvements. Where hybrid attacks of one country on another would be possible, one which seemingly wouldn’t even be war efforts, and so on. If that book was published in English in London, Lem would receive the Nobel Prize and everyone would consider him the leading thinker of the 20th century. But it was published in Polish in Cracow, so it never gained the renown it deserved.



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Later other authors started to write about similar things, so I doesn't make the same impression today as it did fifty years ago, which makes me sad not only as a lover of Lem, but also as a lover of good essays. Lem simply found cooler words to describe our civilizational challenges. Instead of "virtual reality", he wrote about "phantomology". Such a pity this word didn't stick!

And finally the last Lem is the non-fantasy Lem. He became a science fiction writer by chance, his first book was a moving war drama "Hospital of the Transfiguration". If he had taken it to the publishing house slightly earlier, maybe it would have been published in, let's say, 1948 – and then Lem's carrier would have looked entirely differently.

But he was a bit late and there begun the period of Stalinist purges in culture. For a long time the book couldn't be published, and when it finally came out, it was the third one in Lem's output – and he already was well established as the leading Polish fantasy writer.

So as a lover of his prose, I have mixed feelings here. I know for certain that if Lem could decide about it on his own, he would most readily write serious prose about what he saw with his own eyes – the Holocaust, Stalinism, pogroms and totalitarianism. He undertook fantasy a bit against his will – and on the one hand, I'm happy that as a result such masterpieces were created as "Solaris" or "The Cyberiad". But on the other hand, who knows what masterpieces would be created if Lem didn't feel the pressure of censorship?

Anyway, I don't think I need to convince you anymore that Lem's oeuvre could be spread between several authors. Each of them would be different and each would be renowned. So only one question remains: how did this genius appear in a country which is located, well, on the side-lines of world culture?

As a patriot, I would like to say that Lem is a child solely of Polish literature, but it would be a complete nonsense. Although it's true that he drew a lot from Polish classics, such as Kochanowski, Mickiewicz, Słowacki and Wyspiański. For example the "Old robotic" language I spoke about at the beginning is in itself a modified fictional Old Polish language, which was created for his historical novels by Henryk Sienkiewicz. A novel written in the actual Old Polish language, from the 15th or even 17th century, would be incomprehensible, so Sienkiewicz decided to use a clever hoax, creating a language which for a contemporary Pole sounded archaic, but at the same time comprehensible. The same language is used by



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Andrzej Sapkowski in “The Witcher”, we can find echoes of Sienkiewicz surprisingly often in the work of more contemporary writers.

But first and foremost Lem was a child of the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Lviv, a city where we can still see inscriptions on walls, a hundred or more years old, written in several languages, in three alphabets: Hebrew, Latin and Cyrillic. Lem could understand all those inscriptions since he was a child.

In his youth, he was fascinated by the poetry of Taras Shevchenko. Perhaps this was the inspiration for his interest in freedom. As is commonly known, Shevchenko lived for 47 years, and only 9 of those more or less free – if anyone living in the tsarist Russia could be called free. As he said himself, he wrote “slave poetry” and this phrase is a very good description of Lem’s stories about cosmic-cybernetic tyrannies.

He learned Ukrainian to understand Shevchenko better. But he also knew Russian well, he valued Pushkin and Dostoyevsky. In several of his works, among them “Solaris” and “Hospital of the Transfiguration”, you can find traces of Dostoyevsky in moral dilemmas of the characters. We can also find influences of Thomas Mann, also valued by Lem. Before he started writing, his favourite author was Rainer Maria Rilke and as he later said, he had to work on his workshop for a long time to get rid of Rilke-style tendencies for mysticism and terror.

I would like to point out that soldiers speaking the language of Rilke and the language of Dostoyevsky inflicted a lot of suffering upon Lem and his family. But Lem was never offended at German or Russian culture, on the contrary. When he gained international renown, Lem rejected invitations to France and the US, but never to Russia and Germany. He treated his fans in those countries as his compatriots. He never justified that, but he simply didn’t answer invitations from the US at all, and invitations from Moscow or Berlin – with enthusiasm.

I believe it’s an important lesson for us today. After September 11 2001, it was fashionable in the West to assume the attitude of Oriana Fallaci – taking offence at the whole Islamic culture. As if the Persian poet Omar Khayyam hijacked those planes in person! Lem’s approach was the exact opposite – he believed it is better if the conflicted nations talk about their poets and writers. The more conflicted, the more they need it, because it’s better than if they shot at each other. You must agree he was at least partially right here!



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Last but not least, Lem inherited the culture of Polish Jews. He was almost entirely assimilated, he didn't use Hebrew or Yiddish, but he could probably understand both, which can be proved by various small allusions in his prose. Researchers of Judaism, however, point out some more serious inspirations. The Old Testament and other books important for the Ashkenazi culture are full of stories about supernatural beings, statues coming to life and numerical ciphers. Perhaps it's not a coincidence that so many science fiction masters were raised in Jewish families?

When he was alive, Lem never wanted to speak about it, his origins were a taboo for him. But he had to hide during the occupation, he witnessed tragic goodbyes with friends and family who couldn't be saved – his fate and the traumas which shaped it were inadvertently linked to the fate and trauma of Middle European Jews.

In the end, I would like to mention America. He never went there, but he read a lot of American books, newspapers and scientific publications. One of his routine everyday pleasures was reading "International Herald Tribune", as the international edition of "New York Times" was once called. It's enough to say that Lem was self-taught, he learned English from a dictionary, so he pronounced this title just like other English words, as they were spelled. But it didn't stop him from understanding American culture better than many Americans, which can be seen for example in his correspondence with his American translator, Michael Kandel. They started by talking about Lem's books, but soon they moved on to letters, in which Lem explained America to an American.

And what is more – he was right! Just like Lem usually was. If I hadn't met him in person, I could have believed myself that Lem is a code name for some composite committee...



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Appendix

Some important (and funny) terms related to Lem's fiction

BENIGNIMIZERS – „Love Thy Neighbour” bombs, a chemical weapon which makes people helplessly benevolent. It was used by the police on demonstrators during the coup d'état in Costa Rica in “The Futurological Congress”;

BRIPPETS AND GNOOLS – body parts designed entirely to provide sexual pleasure, attached to their bodies by the residents of Dichotica, encountered by Ijon Tichy in “The Twenty-First Voyage” of “The Star Diaries”. Brippling and gnooling supposedly far exceed regular sex, providing endless possibilities for ecstasy in various arrangements;

DOLANIEC – name of a villain from the trilogy “Time Not Lost”, speculating in Jewish estates during the occupation. Undoubtedly based on real people, which can be proved by many situations taking place in our times;

GENEGENEERING – Lem's term for genetic engineering, which he used 30 years before that domain of science was actually invented;

GOLEM – a military supercomputer so powerful and intelligent it no longer feels the need to talk to humans. This name could be mockingly decoded as Government Lamentable Expense of Money. Some futurologists speculate Google might soon build such a machine, and we will be able to keep Lem's name for it, decoding it as Google's Lamentable Expense of Money;

INTELLECTRONICS – a term invented by Lem in „Summa Technologiae” to describe what nowadays is called “artificial intelligence”;

LINGUISTIC FUTUROLOGY – if you can name something then at some point it will probably be invented. A domain of science dealing with coming up with words from the future and reflecting on their possible meanings;

NONLINEARS – androids perfectly imitating the appearance and behaviour of humans (and their partial unpredictability);

PHANTOMOLOGY – a term invented by Lem in „Summa Technologiae” to describe what nowadays is called “virtual reality”;

TRIONS – data storage devices described in “The Magellanic Cloud”;



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