Stanislaw Lem (1921-2006)
Author(s): I. C. R.
Source: *Science Fiction Studies,* Vol. 33, No. 3 (Nov., 2006), pp. 564–566
Published by: SF-TH Inc
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4241486
Accessed: 13-06-2017 20:48 UTC

# NOTES AND CORRESPONDENCE

**Stanislaw Lem (1921-2006).** With the death of Stanislaw Lem, we have lost one of great fantasists of our age and a true friend of this journal. His fiction showed many of us that sf could be a philosophically sophisticated, critical, and artistically ambitious literature. His uncompromising critical writings about the genre—some of which appeared for the first time in English in *SFS*—showed us that it was possible to hold the genre to high aesthetic, as well as cognitive, standards. To the literati, Lem demonstrated that philosophical reflections on science truly could be resources for art. For the technorati, he expressed the absurdity, play, and perpetual dilemma that colors so much scientific work. For his casual readers, he tamed the abyss of technoscientific progress with the language of satire and fairy tales.

Lem belonged to a great generation of post-World War II writers who were inspired equally by literary experimentation, technoscience, and pulp fantasy—a generation that included Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Kobo Abe, and William S. Burroughs. All invented influential personal styles, and all were, in Isaiah Berlin's terms, hedgehogs who thought that they were foxes. Even with his polymathic knowledge and interests, Lem returned with near obsessiveness to a single theme: the inexorable collision between human consciousness' inherent inability to know itself and its ingrained need to do so. He found this theme crystallized in cybernetics (which he studied in secret when it was proscribed by Stalinist ideology), specifically in cybernetics' application to techno-evolutionary theory, ideas distilled in *Summa Technologiae* (1964). He found it also in Dostoevsky and Kafka, the writers who most influenced his literary vision. Lem's worlds are always *ad absurdum* arguments, demonstrating the irrational bases of the most rational systems. Until the end of his career, when he turned away from fiction and devoted himself to pessimistic essays, Lem used his dark theme as a pretext for dazzling linguistic and intellectual play.

Many of us in sf studies were introduced to Lem's work through *Solaris* (1961), which first appeared in English in 1970. It is no exaggeration to say that the book transformed the way that sf would be viewed in the West. No one had subjected the myth of space to such a rigorous and rich deconstruction. No sf had succeeded so well as literary art, conceding nothing to the sf ghetto or the marketplace. Lem's impact was the same in the USSR, where his work was read as a critique of Yefremov's space-utopianism and the Tsiolkovskian cult of cosmicism. For many years, and for many scholars (I certainly count myself), *Solaris* stood as the realized ideal of sf—showing that no matter how *pure et dure* science tries to be, it is driven by the same romantic fantasies, longings, and anxieties as tales of ghost-lovers, the Gothic, and the Kafkaesque.

Lem's trademark works as an sf writer, the Alien No-Contact novels—*Solaris*, *Eden* (1959; English translation 1989), *The Invincible* (1964; English translation 1973), *His Master's Voice* (1968; English translation 1983),

and *Fiasco* (1986; English translation, 1989)—were biting critiques of the pretensions of scientific explorations and sf romance. They were products of the moment when the Cold War superpowers were transforming the utopias of spaceflight into War Machines. In *His Master's Voice*, for me the greatest of Lem's books, he showed that sf is capable of confronting the worst obscenities wrought by our technoscience: the Holocaust and nuclear weapons.

Lem was diffident about his literary accomplishments. He aspired to be accepted as a philosopher of technoscience. He considered his greatest work to be the *Summa Technologiae*. Translated into Czech, Latvian, German, Russian, Serbian, and Hungarian, but not as yet into French, Japanese, or English, the *Summa* is a monumental meditation on technological evolution, produced at a writing desk in the medieval university town of Krakow, decades before extropian visions emerged from MIT. In it Lem worked out his pencil-and-paper posthumanism, imagining such inevitable developments as *fantomatics*, *imitology*, *intellectronics*, *teletaxia*, and *fantoplication*—concepts that we now recognize as virtual reality, simulation, artificial intelligence, scanning teleportation, and consciousness-uploads. Though some readers lament that it did not have the influence it might have had, that its fanciful terms never had a chance to take root, the *Summa* will, I think, remain a cherished work of inspired steampunk futurism. Lem once wrote that every scientific projection that is not realized becomes fantastic philosophy. His advantage was that he knew how to write fantastic philosophy without waiting for reality.

Among his great visionary contemporaries, only Lem was truly an sf writer. Despite his excoriations of pulp vulgarities, his essays display his grudging, and perhaps even unconscious, love of popular sf. His respect for Philip K. Dick, whom he dubbed "a visionary among the charlatans" in a famous essay, is well-known from his wonderful *hommage*, *The Futurological Congress* (1971; English translation 1976). But a close look at his stories and *Science Fiction and Futurology* (still not fully translated into English, though parts were published in *SFS* between 1973-75) reveal a sort of gratitude for Hal Clement, Isaac Asimov, and especially Fredric Brown—writers who irritated yet inspired him.

In the end, Lem's most lasting legacy will probably not be the science-fictional conundrums of his novels but the linguistic genius of his stories. Many postmodern readers and Western sf fans may not understand what made Lem such a beloved writer in Central and Eastern Europe, in Israel and Japan. Lem wrote sf for an audience that knew science, but not power. He had the imagination of an outsider excluded equally from Communist utopia and capitalist enborgization. Like Polish astronauts, Lem's protagonists are in the middle of a science-fictional universe, but they are not of it. Their instincts are closer to those of the village and the *shtetl*. His most popular characters are the space-cadet (and later pilot) Pirx, the Münchhausen-Gulliver figure of Ijon Tichy, and the dueling robot-constructors Trurl and Klapaucius of *The Cyberiad* (1967; English translation 1974). Not a few Polish parents have read the robot fables and *The Star Diaries* (1957; English translation 1976) to their children as modern fairy tales. Lem in the end supplied virtuoso *play*—the play of a

storyteller bringing technoscience under control by converting it into exuberant, antic, always surprising story-language.

In his (again, untranslated) *The Philosophy of Chance* (1968), Lem argued that literary worth is ultimately a matter of luck. He was indeed very fortunate to have found brilliant translators in several languages to convey his fantastically inventive Polish. He was particularly impressed with his German, Russian, and English translators. (His Hungarian translator was also spectacularly good.) It is perhaps the luckiest chance of all that his US translator was Michael Kandel, for English may be one of the languages least responsive to Lem's linguistic genius, for concrete social-historical reasons. Lem's shorter fictions especially are packed with neologisms and wordplay, spoken in a narrative tone that reflects a world where language is still linked to oral tradition, literature, and storytelling. However far they may have traveled in outer space, Lem's protagonists are down to earth, rooted fast in their language's kinship terms, diminutives, folk sayings and motifs, and the formulas of fairy tales. Like his characters Prix and Tichy, Lem was completely in sf, but *of* the alternative universe of literature.—**ICR**

**More on *Anatomy of Wonder*.** My thanks for Graham Sleight's detailed review of the fifth edition of my *Anatomy of Wonder* (*SFS* 33.2). Some comments of likely interest to readers of *SFS*:

There are multiple target audiences for the guide, as Sleight summarized, but libraries are perhaps the most important single market, given that it's not a trade book carried by book retailers and is apparently regarded as "expensive" (about equal to four hardcover novels, which for the most part will be read once and shelved, rarely to be consulted again). The $80 cost is about what you'd expect over 30 years of inflation, but does not allow for the fact that the fifth edition is more than 1,000 pages (versus about 480 for the 1976 first edition) and is completely updated. If the guide has a useful life span of about ten years and is used, say, once weekly, that's a cost of about 16 cents per use, or 8 cents if used twice weekly. By my standards that's dirt cheap.

Whether reference works like this will become online products is a good question. I've yet to receive any updates about the third edition of the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, and I haven't seen any subscription prices quoted for this work, which will be updated monthly and apparently be much lengthier than the second edition, now dated but still useful. I will not edit future editions (as the detailed quote Sleight includes suggests). If the publisher decides a sixth edition is warranted, it will probably be edited by Michael Levy, a capable and knowledgeable contributor to earlier editions.

Sleight talks of the oddness of *Anatomy of Wonder 5*, but fails to mention the most significant single change. In the first through fourth editions, the historical/chronological chapters are immediately followed by a bibliography of fiction in that period. That requires a generic cross-reference, "For other books by this author, see chapter(s)," for authors whose works were published in several periods. In the new edition, all fiction, from Abbott to Zoline, is annotated in a single alphabet, so the reader will see early, middle, and late