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STANISLAW LEM: PHILOSOPHER OF THE FUTURE (2019) BY PETER SWIRSKI

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Swirski, Peter. *Stanislaw Lem: Philosopher of the Future*. Liverpool University Press, 2015. 203 pp.

Summarising the life and career of an author whose published work amounts to more than forty books, which range from novels to non-fiction monographs on cybernetics and have been translated into over forty languages, seems a daunting task. Furthermore, in attempting to approach this author's texts using their own esoteric interests in the philosophy of science as a framework, Peter Swirski's *Stanislaw Lem: Philosopher of the Future* (2015) is almost as ambitious as Kris Kelvin's attempt to communicate with an extra-terrestrial psychic ocean in *Solaris* (1961). It is to Swirski's credit, then, that *Philosopher of the Future* avoids being as inscrutable as Lem's theoretical aliens, resulting in an enjoyable and informative work which sheds new light on one of Science Fiction's most intriguing figures.

Swirski approaches Lem's oeuvre from three avenues. In part one, "Biography," Swirski provides the reader with a biographical overview of Lem's life and work, familiarising English-speaking audiences with his untranslated early novels, while simultaneously contextualising them within the rest of the author's canon. In part two, Swirski analyses such famous Lem works as *The Invincible* (1964), along with lesser-known works such as the surreal *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* (1961), in a series of essays which straddle, to use Lem's phrase, "the borderline of [the] philosophy of science and literature" (1). With these essays Swirski embarks on an interdisciplinary inquiry which moves away from traditional literary critique of theme, character, image, and form, in favour of approaching Lem's novels as scientific thought experiments. Swirski gives much the same treatment to Lem's final novel, *Fiasco* (1986), as well as the author's collection of essays, *The Blink of an Eye* (2000), in part three, "Coda"; by critiquing these final texts Swirski provides a retrospective on Lem's life and work, detailing the author's most significant and prescient themes.

The information contained within "Biography" is interesting in and of itself: as a young man Lem's Jewish background forced him into hiding during the Nazi occupation of Poland, but despite the considerable risk, he smuggled supplies (including explosives, radios, and bayonets) to the resistance under the cover of false identities. Furthermore, by detailing Lem's childhood and his later family life, Swirski provides a uniquely humanising look into his lived experiences which is often overlooked by other critics of the author's work. Though at times Swirski's listing of Lem's achievements can be dizzying, this emotive human thread contextualises and sets the tone for the analysis to come.

The bibliographical run-down of Lem's works found in "The Kaleidoscope of Books" is invaluable to any burgeoning Lem fan, as it gives a brief contextual overview of each novel and short story collection. But this section is equally beneficial to established readers of Lem, as Swirski sheds light on themes which pervade the author's entire body of work; these include the impossibility of human/non-human communication, ethical quandaries surrounding the evolution of technology, and looming Cold War-educed violence (brilliantly described by Swirski as "the transnational Thanatos syndrome" (49)). Swirski further establishes a key theme of *Philosopher of the Future* by reproducing Lem's thoughts on literary criticism itself, which the author bemoaned had placed "deconstruction and other anti-historical and anti-cognitive trends [as] the holy writ," a trend which Lem dubbed "the gospel according to Derrida" (43).

This deriding of Derrida sets the stage for the critical and interpretive challenge which Swirski sets himself: to read Lem's novels on the author's own terms. This task is more difficult than it may sound at first, as the pedestal Lem erects for his novels to perch upon (and subsequently, the quality of criticism he expects from literary theorists) is high. *Philosopher of the Future* acts as Swirski's response to Lem's preference for his books to be taken as "interdisciplinary inquiries from the borderline of philosophy of science and literature" rather than get "bogged down" in the fictionality of the works (1). Put simply, Lem "saw his novels as narrative models of our civilization" and deplored the ways in which literary theorists "dissect his style rather than his arguments" (1, 3). Lem viewed traditional literary criticism as "[l]imited by and large to thematic and structural schemata" (2). Picking up this "heuristic gauntlet thrown [...] by a writer who preferred to be called the philosopher of the future," Swirski's essays employ non-traditional modes of analysis to dissect the core ideas at the heart of the texts (2). For example, in "Game, Set, Lem" Swirski approaches Lem's work from the perspective of a non-literary field (in this case, game theory) whilst largely avoiding traditionally literary investigations into character, theme, and narrative structure. In this way, Swirski analyses Lem's text as though he were gauging the utility of a very real and very literal development in technology, rather than interpreting a work of fiction from an abstract or allegorical standpoint.

"Game, Set, Lem" manages to succinctly explain the complexities of game theory in such a way that a lay reader may gain a working understanding of its methods. Swirski then proceeds to use this model to analyse the events and irrational complexities of the world of the fifth pentagon featured in Lem's *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*. With this methodology, Swirski manages to explain how seemingly absurd decisions – like leaving your agents ignorant to the details of their own missions – can have a bizarre but comprehensible logic to them: "The power of game theory," he argues, "lies in its power to analyse the strategic basis of such paradoxes of rationality which, despite all appearances of logic or madness, can be tactically perfectly sound" (81). This essay stands out as being especially valuable to the study of absurdist narratives, Lem's fiction, and wider Science Fiction criticism, as it constitutes a compelling case for using unorthodox frameworks, like game theory, in the analysis of literature.

Another standout piece is Swirski's second essay, "Betrization Is the Worst Solution... Except for All Others." This essay analyses in depth the social and moral implications of the mandatory surgical procedure of Betrization, the key technological conceit within *Return from the Stars* (1961), which inhibits a person's capacity to enact or even conceive of violent acts. In Lem's novel this procedure enables the creation of a world without war, murder, or violence of any kind. The procedure is basically the Ludovico technique from Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) on a global scale and it is impressive how Swirski manages to follow and challenge the moral implications of such a procedure. Swirski's thought-experiment approach – treating Betrization as though it were a viable option for humanity, lurking just around the technological corner – delves into the topic with depth and nuance, resulting in a fascinating reading of the text while also engaging with Science Fiction's fertile capacity for social commentary to its fullest extent. The essay echoes Mark Bould's sentiment, in *Routledge Film Guidebooks: Science Fiction* (2012), that "the tendency to detach science from the social world" will always inevitably come up against "the impossibility of ever doing so" (20). The importance of contextual information comes to the fore here, emphasising the significance of Swirski's earlier biographical section. Prior knowledge of the fact that Lem saw first-hand "the 1956 massacre of the Hungarian insurgents by their Soviet 'allies' with the United States and its allies turning a blind eye" makes clear to the reader why Lem would be concerned with "not *whether* but *where* to construct the dam to protect humanity from a deluge of self-inflicted war, murder, and death" (31, 101, both original emphasis). With this in mind, as well as knowing that Lem suffered the pain of "having been duped [...] by the communist promise of a better future," it comes as little surprise that Lem would "never [...] allow himself to dream of altruism and pacifism without slapping on humanity some kind of technological muzzle" (31, 30-31).

Despite the success of these essays, the criteria set by Lem continues to raise a fundamental question: is Lem asking of literary criticism something it simply is not meant for? Is it justifiable to criticise the literary sphere for discussing "postmodern absurdity rather than game-theoretic rationality" when, arguably, its evolution has been geared towards analysis of the former, not the latter? (3). Bould makes the astute observation that "different people and communities have different investments in sf [...] For some, science is more or less irrelevant, but for others this relationship is profoundly debased, in need of discipline and repair" (6). Both Lem and Swirski seem to be firmly in the latter camp. However, Bould makes a compelling argument for the stance that both allegorical and grounded Science Fiction works have their own merits, as they fulfil slightly different (but equally valid) roles. In the same vein, Swirski's new science-centred approach has the potential to stand side by side with more literary focused modes of analysis in order to glean a more complete picture of the multi-faceted genre of Science Fiction.

The last section of *Philosopher of the Future*, the two-part "Coda," continues many of the themes brought up in the essay on Betrization, such as Lem's pessimism and his love of technological, futuristic concepts which act as thinly-veiled, critical mirrors aimed at both western capitalism and the Soviet Union. The only drawback to this section comes when Swirski readily acknowledges the conspicuous lack of women in Lem's novels but neglects to expand upon or critique this deficit. Swirski points out that the unisex crew featured in Lem's final novel, *Fiasco*,

damages the same “psychosocial realism” which Lem found so important; “it seems less than plausible to have a representative of the Vatican instead of a female scientist on board” (174). However, rather than interrogating what this omission means for Lem’s fiction and Science Fiction more broadly, Swirski reproduces Lem’s defence “that the introduction of female characters in his plots would necessitate a considerable increase in narrative complexity that could only be achieved at the expense of the cognitive issues always at the forefront of his fiction” (133). It seems a shame that, in a book which otherwise proves to be insightful in its in-depth analysis of the author’s work, a clear avenue for further discussion is foreclosed. This missed opportunity has been seized on by other Lem critics such as Jo Alyson Parker, to great success. Parker’s essay, “Gendering the Robot: Stanislaw Lem’s “The Mask”,” for example, acknowledges that “Lem’s fiction is saturated with the masculine, appearing almost as a parodic extension of the traditional SF realm as male” (179). However, Parker then proceeds to criticise Lem on this point, rather than merely state it as Swirski does, identifying that “[w]hen a female does appear, ‘she’ turns out to be that which is not. Rheya, the most fully realized feminine character, is not a woman but a simulacrum of one” (179). But by embracing this deficiency within of Lem’s writing Parker, in turn, is able to glean the argument that “the very artificiality of the woman [...] enables Lem to examine the issue of gender programming” (179). This essay demonstrates that by embracing detrimental and controversial aspects of an author one can update their work and preserve their continued relevance with contemporary issues. This is indicative of an inherent limitation in following Lem’s wishes regarding his own fiction to the letter, as the very exclusion of women in his novels suggests this issue is a blind spot for him. Therefore, it should be up to Swirski not only to follow Lem’s directive but to expand upon it, thereby fulfilling the author’s wishes in a more complete way than he could have foreseen.

Despite these shortcomings, Peter Swirski’s *Stanislaw Lem: Philosopher of the Future* is perhaps the greatest single resource available for newcomers to Lem’s fiction looking for an introduction to the author’s key texts and themes. Swirski approaches Lem’s fiction with accuracy, originality, and nuance, providing an inquisitive blueprint for further explorations into Lem’s work and into wider Science Fiction from a finely tuned, more practically minded, perspective.

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BIONOTE

Joe Howsin graduated from Manchester Metropolitan University with an MA in Gothic and trauma fiction. Their writing has been published in *The Dark Arts Journal*, *NotDeer Magazine*, *Horriified Magazine* and has been shortlisted in The London Independent Short Story Prize. They also have upcoming work in *Dreich*.