In Stanisław Lem’s Orbit

JOANNA TRZECIAK HUSS
Kent State University

With the notable exception of his paleolithic feminism, Stanisław Lem (1921–2006) was a twenty-first-century writer writing in the twentieth century. As early as the 1960s, he anticipated much of the twenty-first century’s information technology and biotechnology—tablets, personal computers, smart phones, eBooks, virtual reality, artificial intelligence, robotics, holograms, advanced prosthetics, human-machine interfaces. Yet he also surmised that technology would have a profound effect on human life and culture—not all of it foreseeable, and not all of it good—that it could take on a logic of its own, one that portended catastrophic consequences for the future of civilization and humankind. As a survivor of the Holocaust against all odds, Lem was a writer searching for new forms, hybrid forms, impure forms adequate to a post-catastrophic world and its possible futures. The forms he ushered in are most conspicuous when one examines his works as a whole. His centennial has provided an impetus for a large body of his previously untranslated works to be published in translation, allowing for a fuller picture to emerge. Throughout, the long Lem centennial articles appeared in prominent journals notably from Jonathan Lethem (“My Year of reading Lemmishly” in the London Review of Books) and from Caleb Crain (“A Holocaust Survivor’s Hardboiled Science Fiction” in The New Yorker), bringing renewed attention to Lem and his works, while Roisin Kiberd chronicled the many events of the anniversary in The New York Times.

1. On one hand, Lem cultivated friendships with several accomplished women (Ursula Le Guin, Ariadna Gromova, and Helena Eilstein) whose intellect and opinion he valued as reflected in their correspondence. On the other hand, there is a dearth of female protagonists in his fiction. Lem himself, in a 1992 interview, stated that to include women in his fiction would increase narrative complexity at the expense of the cognitive issues he sought to highlight, whatever that might mean. See Peter Swirski, Stanisław Lem: Philosopher of the Future (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 133.

So indeed, there is more Lem. In the ether, in hard copy (approximately 40 million copies sold worldwide in over 53 languages), on social media (e.g., the Instagram project foodLEMology). MIT Press has published eight new editions, several of them appearing in English translation for the first time, including Dialogues (Dialogi 1957, 1971), translated by Peter Butko, 2022), The Truth and Other Stories (1956–1993, translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones, 2022), His Master’s Voice (Głos Pana, 1968, a 2020 reissue of Michael Kandel’s 1983 translation), Highcastle: A Remembrance (Wysoki zamek, 1968, a 2020 reissue of Michael Kandel’s 1995 translation), The Invincible (Niezwyścięzony, 1964, translated by Bill Johnston, 2020), Return from the Stars (Powrót z gwiazd, 1961, a 2020 reissue of the 1980 translation by Barbara Marszał and Frank Simpson) Hospital of the Transfiguration (Szpital Przemienienia, 1955, a 2020 reissue of William Brand’s 1988 translation), and Memoirs of a Space Traveler: Further Reminiscences of Ijon Tichy (a revised translation by Antonia Lloyd-Jones, published in 2020, based on the 1982 translation by Joel Stern and Maria Swiecicka-Ziemianek). We should also single out Joanna Zylinska’s inspired translation of Summa Technologiae, published by University of Minnesota Press (2013), which garnered some thoughtful reviews, but alas has never elicited a broader public debate. Meanwhile, The Invincible is just being released as a video game (with a female protagonist no less), and with an expansion of audience holds the potential for expert scholar and expert amateur alliances, dialogue, and collaboration. The official Lem site <lem.pl> and its English satellite <English.lem.pl> contains many scholarly resources such as Jerzy Jarzębski’s introductions to Lem’s major works. Lem’s time is upon us and he can certainly prompt us to examine ourselves and our civilization, to reflect on what lies ahead, and to look for solutions to the problems we have created.

FROM THE ASHES OF CIVILIZATION

What we knew of Lem’s life, other than the highly selective and sanitized, autobiographical reminiscences he provides in Highcastle: A Remembrance, and the somewhat more forthcoming, although highly deceptive remarks he shares in “Chance and Order,” his 1984 essay in The New Yorker, came to us through two book-length interviews, one by Stanisław Bereś, a Polish literary critic and academic, and the other by Tomasz Fiałkowski, a journalist and literary critic affiliated with the Kraków weekly Tygodnik Powszechny and the monthly Znak. Bereś held a series of conversations with Lem over the period from November 1981 to July 1982. These were initially published in German in an uncensored edition as Lem über Lem

3. At the time of writing of this introduction, Lem’s work has been estimated to have had a total print run of 40 million copies. https://stanislaw-lem.fandom.com/wiki/Print-run_data.


Stanisław Lem’s Orbit

[Stanisław Lem, 1986] before appearing in a Polish censored edition, *Rozmowy ze Stanisławem Lemem* [Conversations with Stanisław Lem] in 1987, before the fall of communism. The uncensored Polish edition was not published till 2002 under the title *Tako rzecze lem* [Thus spake Lem] and contained additional chapters, born of additional conversations following the events of 9/11. This edition also restores censored passages including Lem’s recollections of prewar Lwów and those related to the 1981 martial law in Poland. Fiałkowski had published his interviews with Lem, *Świat na krawędzi* [The world on edge] in 2000. This was followed in 2016 by Peter Swirski’s *Świat według Lema* [The world according to Lem].

It was not until after Lem’s death in 2006 that there emerged a climate more conducive to the open discussion of his life, and in particular his Jewishness and wartime experiences, and the role they played in his fiction, but even once this shift happened, there remained to be done the hard work of establishing basic facts. Lem’s extended family had largely been killed in the Holocaust, leaving practically no oral or written history. Much of the documentation pertaining to the life and function of social and educational institutions that were part of Lem’s life had also been destroyed, and what remained was not easy to find. Shifting boundaries created additional challenges, including fragile geopolitical alliances that needed to be judiciously navigated, while tracking down source material in archives. Much of this heavy lifting was taken on by Agnieszka Gajewska, a contributor to the present volume. In 2016, Gajewska published her pathbreaking monograph, *Zagłada i gwiazdy: przeszłość w prozie Stanisława Lema* [Holocaust and the stars: the past in Stanisław Lem’s fiction], in which she interpreted much of Lem’s corpus through the lens of his wartime trauma, at times relying on hints and the half-said in work by earlier scholars such as that of Jerzy Jarzębski, also a contributor to the present volume.


7. In the meantime, in 1997, Katarzyna Janowska and Piotr Mucharski published “Ze Stanisławem Lemem o wiedzy i ignorancji” in *Rozmowy na koniec wieku*, which focused on epistemological issues in his novels rather than on biography.


10. It is hardly surprising why Lem chose not to speak openly about his Jewishness or directly engage Jewish themes in his work. A month after a forced relocation to Kraków, its Jewish population was traumatized by a pogrom on August 11, 1945, that took the life of Auschwitz survivor Roza Berger. Less than a year later, on July 4, 1946, Sylwester Kahane, with whom Lem and his parents lived in the Lwów ghetto, was among the victims of the pogrom in Kielce, which took the lives of 42 Jews. At the time, Kahane was 35 years old and Chairman of the Jewish Committee in Kielce.
volume. This monograph appeared in Katarzyna Gucio’s English translation in 2021. In that same year, Gajewska published a comprehensive 700-page biography of Lem, *Stanisław Lem: Wypędzony z Wysokiego Zamku; Biografia* [Stanisław Lem: Exiled from Highcastle; A Biography], with a wealth of added material on his early life, his parents and with especial importance given to the period 1941–1945, chronicling the Lems’ move from their well-appointed apartment in the city center to the Lwów ghetto, his own employment at Rohstoffverfassung and his life in hiding on the “Aryan side.” Given the gaps in documentary or testimonial evidence of Lem’s life, Gajewska arrived at the method of making plausible inferences about aspects of Lem’s family life and childhood by researching cultural commonplaces and forms of life that were extant in the orbit of the Lem family. Wojciech Orliński’s 2017 biography, *Lem: życie nie z tej ziemi* [Lem: Life from another planet], is based largely on published sources, and complements Gajewska’s findings. Within Holocaust studies, Lem’s work is beginning to be discovered and probed as a rich source for the study of memory and postmemory.

**The Dialectics of the Alien Encounter**

Lem has been successful in attracting both critical and popular attention in the anglophone world. Kurt Vonnegut and Ursula Le Guin were strong advocates for him and his work. His translator, Michael Kandel, served also as an interpreter and expositor of Lem’s ideas. Franz Rottensteiner, his translator and publicist, helped to build up Lem’s standing by asserting a strong presence for European science fiction. Lech Keller, a maverick champion of Lem has amassed an exhaustive bibliography of his works. A key anthology that introduced Polish scholars to critical perspectives on Lem from around the world was *Lem w oczach krytyki światowej* [Lem in...
the eyes of global critics, 1989] edited by Jerzy Jarzębski. Among North American scholars who have made substantial contributions to Lem studies are: N. Katherine Hayles, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, John Rothfork, Peter Swirski, Fredric Jameson, and Darko Suvin. Of these, only the latter two have enjoyed the honor of being cast in the role of Lem’s co-conspirators by American science fiction writer Philip K. Dick. Infamously, on September 2, 1974, Dick wrote a paranoid letter to the FBI implicating Suvin and Jameson as falling within a chain of command under Stanisław Lem, whom he deemed not to be a man, but rather a communist committee seeking to control American thought through science fiction criticism. Jameson, whose Archaeologies of the Future (2005) is a landmark work in SF studies, in his contribution to the present volume, develops a dual dialectic framework for understanding relations to “the alien other” in Lem’s fiction. This dual dialectic (aggressivity vs. non-aggressivity; comprehension vs. non-comprehension) constitutes a sort of architectonic within which Solaris, Fiasco, The Invincible, and Eden each instantiate one of the logical combinations. Jameson uses this occasion to reflect on his own engagement with Lem’s work, which, he argues, is part of a rising constellation of Polish literature and European literature more generally. Earlier, in Archaeologies of the Future, Jameson had developed and documented the literary and philosophical dynamics within Lem’s fiction, especially Solaris, that support the unknowability thesis, namely that whatever is truly alien, in the sense of being unimaginable yet nonetheless real and extant, will resist our attempts to know it, which, after all, are limited by the capacity of our imaginations.

An Unanswered Prayer

Jerzy Jarzębski, one of the architects of Lem studies, offers his meditations on Lem’s engagement with the contrast between the picture of the cosmos afforded us by developments in astrophysics and the manifest image of the cosmos each of us possesses by dint of our position in it. We are privy to the stars of the nighttime sky, which look fixed to us, but are confronted by the reality that what we receive as simultaneous signals is in fact a multitude of transmissions from stellar objects at vastly different distances from us, so far away that by the time their light finally reaches us, they no longer exist. Even if there is intelligent life out there, an exchange of communication appears to be physically impossible. Moreover, the kinds of beings Lem posits in the cosmos in at least some of his fiction (Solaris, His Master’s Voice, Fiasco) are fundamentally unlike us in that they are solitary, not engaged in social relations, and the universe in which they exist is beyond the ability of most humans to imagine. It becomes increasingly impossible for human imagination to extend to the strange physical picture of the cosmos, and hence most of us need literature or narratives to fill the gap. Jarzębski brings an aspect to the fore in which Lem is engaged in theological meditations that eschew a personal God, but invoke some sense that the cosmos bears responsibility for its “children.” His analysis draws on Lem’s engagement with the anthropic principle, the principle that the physical laws and constants of our universe seem to be fine-tuned for the possibility or inevitability of beings like us (the principle has variants that draw a range of conclusions from the apparent fine-tuning). Building on the considerations of physics, philosophy of physics, and secular theology that Jarzębski discusses, it might be added that much of Lem’s work is deeply engaged with biology. This is important since what we expect of a creator—that whatever gave birth to us children of the cosmos has a responsibility towards us—seems to be based on analogies with the post-procreative responsibilities of humans and other organisms who rear their young—a tiny fraction of the evolutionary tree. Many species broadcast their larvae, drop acorns, bury their eggs, etc. in such great numbers that no parent is needed. Maybe God is like that. Maybe universes are spun out in this way. It is hard to reconcile these possibilities with a personal God. Jarzębski meaningfully groups Lem with Kamil Baczyński and Tadeusz Różewicz as poets and writers facing up to a post-Holocaust world.

The Archival Turn

Agnieszka Gajewska is well-known for her landmark work, Holocaust and the Stars, extensively cited in the present volume, which diligently documents how

19. This assumes that the universe’s speed limit is the speed of light, yet research on quantum entanglement suggests that spin states may be “communicated” between particles at great distances, holding out hope for some other model of intergalactic communication. This research was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics in 2022.
Lem’s experience of the Nazi occupation, the Lwów pogrom, and the Holocaust is processed through his science fiction and futurological ruminations. Here, Gajewska takes the archival turn, and brings to our attention Lem’s unpublished manuscripts, written in the realistic vein, of the trilogy *Czas nieutracony* [Time not lost, 1955]. Gajewska also analyzes Lem’s earliest fiction—published, unpublished, and delayed in its publication—to show that many of the same issues that surfaced in his mature fiction he was already exploring in his immediate postwar works. These early stories bear witness to the proposition that, much like his poet counterpart Różewicz, Lem was confronting head-on the crisis of values that the Holocaust wrought, at times revealing such great darkness that these stories were deemed unsuitable for publication or sent back for revision. Gajewska has performed a valuable service in unearthing stories by Lem that appeared in now-obscure periodicals that are poorly indexed, correcting a misperception that Lem’s only engagement with the horrors of war through realistic prose was limited to the trilogy *Time Not Lost*.

**Chaosmos**

A fitting byproduct of Przemysław Czapliński’s effort to develop the notion of chaosmos is the order he ascribes to Lem’s literary career, subdividing it into three distinct periods, each characterized by the relationship between order and chance. On Czapliński’s reading, in his early works, Lem envisioned and depicted an orderly cosmos in which the possibility would exist of using science and technology to develop a utopian future world in which there would be no need for war. In the final period of Lem’s career, the ubiquity of contingency yields to some subordination to a greater whole. In his middle period order and chance co-exist side-by-side. This is Czapliński’s focus, with particular attention paid to *Solaris* as indicative of an acceptance of the fundamental unknowability of reality. Czapliński casts the scientists in *Solaris* as facing up to the inadequacy of the Cartesian paradigm. The world is not separable into cognizing subjects and extended objects. The Solarian ocean does not yield to the Cartesian framework, shattering its ontology and stymying its epistemology. Scientific attempts to know the Solarian ocean only yield an encounter with one’s own mental states. Its properties appear to defy physics and understanding. Lem’s representation of the blissful acceptance of incomprehensibility can be understood within the broader contours of a heretofore unspecified movement that Czapliński terms the Polish Post-Avant-Garde. Going counter to a tradition that sees Lem as a singularity, Czapliński situates him within a stable of authors including Tadeusz Różewicz, Edward Stachura, Witold Gombrowicz, and Miron Białoszewski, among others. These writers all deeply doubted the foundations of civilization, knowledge, morality—and exposed literature as unable to fulfill

20. It was not beyond Lem to periodize his own writing in a way that coincides with that of Czapliński, although under a slightly different characterization. See Lem, “Chance and Order,” 88–98.
its traditional role. What unites them, according to Czapliński, is their coming to terms with the realization that reality lacks any fixed point of reference, and their means for confronting this realization is to experiment with literary forms, whether the dismantling of existing forms or the construction of new ones. The forms these authors invented were highly distinct from one another, and in classing them together, Czapliński opens up the possibility for further exploration of the distinctively Lemian forms. He depicts Lem as increasingly coming to acknowledge, in the feuilletons that dominated his later career, that developments that could lead to progress—in science to meet real needs, in wealth to address lack, and in armaments to mount a defense—instead spiral according to their own illogic in a world of self-amplifying unpredictability. As chaos theory itself entails, even deterministic processes give rise to radically different trajectories due to acute sensitivity to the minute happenstances and contingencies of history. Whatever order emerges is often far from what could possibly have been intended.

Mitsuyoshi Numano: Lem Unchained

Japanese public intellectual and literary translator Mitsuyoshi Numano, (interviewed in the present volume by Elżbieta Skibińska), did not introduce Lem to Japan, but rather encountered him as a teenager in a translation of Solaris into Japanese from a censored Russian edition: a chain translation. This hobbled Solaris nonetheless opened up a world of Polish literature and language that Numano walked through, studying at Harvard with Stanisław Barańczak and eventually becoming a leading Japanese translator of Lem’s works including The Astronauts, Chain of Chance, Perfect Vacuum, The Invincible, and Solaris. Numano is a leading public voice for Japanese and other literatures, and has contributed to popularizing Lem not only through his translation, but also through television programming and publishing extensively in the academic and popular press.

Odyssey Without a Homecoming

While others have situated Lem’s writing with respect to the western canon (Lucretius, Descartes, among others), Alfred Gall relates Lem’s 1961 novel, Return from the Stars to a classical intertext, the Odyssey of Homer. He argues that in Lem’s novel, while the astronaut Hal Bregg returns from a lengthy cosmic voyage to a changed world, unlike Odysseus, he can hardly be said to have returned home. Drawing on Adorno’s analysis of the Holocaust, Gall seizes on the disanalogies between the return of Odysseus and the return of Hal Bregg to make a broader point about the relationship between Lem’s writing and the Holocaust. Just as Adorno had pointed to the Holocaust as a break in civilization, making it impossible to attribute positive meaning to the world in the wake of a civilizational catastrophe, Bregg, returning from space, a site of great trauma and loss tantamount to war, cannot experience a homecoming due to the break in the system of values on earth. Only
the disruption has taken the form of a utopian society in which Bregg’s values are without meaning or effect.

LITERARY FORELIFE AND AFTERLIFE OF LEM

His claims to originality notwithstanding, Lem like every writer, borrowed heavily from others, and not only canonical authors such as Homer (witness Alfred Gall’s piece in the present volume). As someone who sought to frame science fiction comprehensively and theoretically, Lem was uniquely well-versed in Western SF authors, not only classics of the genre such as Wells and Stapledon, but his contemporaries—Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke; Brian Aldiss, Alfred Bester, J.G. Ballard, Philip K. Dick, Robert Sheckley, James Blish, Ray Bradbury, Damon Knight, Walter Miller, and of course Ursula Le Guin and Kurt Vonnegut—to name the authors extensively discussed or mentioned in passing in his Fantastyka i Futurologia, volume One and Two [Science fiction and futurology, 1970; second expanded edition, 1972].  His familiarity with these authors did have an effect on his fiction, resulting in influences that often went unacknowledged, but fuel scholarly research on the intertextuality of Lem’s work.

Lem’s influence on others is so vast it would be hard to measure, given the 53 languages into which he has been translated, and the broad interest in his fiction. Sometimes it manifests itself in unexpected places. A recent example of Lem’s afterlife in literature is the admission of the winner of 2022 Goncourt prize, the Senegalese writer Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, who in his La plus secrète mémoire des hommes [The most secret memory of men, 2021] names his protagonist Stanislas for Stanisław Lem (casting him in the role of translating Gombrowicz’s Ferdydurke).

In the present volume, Anna Zielinska- Elliott makes a strong case that elements of Haruki Murakami’s A Wild Sheep Chase correspond closely to those present in Lem’s Solaris. The intertextual connections between the two works are striking and are clearly important in understanding the likely genesis of Murakami’s work. What is equally important to investigate is the literary significance of this intertextuality. For example, it may be worth inquiring into the role translation has played in cross-currents between science fiction and magical realism in Japanese literature.

21. Stanisław Lem, Fantastyka i futurologia (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1970); expanded edition, 1972. I would like to thank Szymon Kukulak for generously providing me with an inventory of authors mentioned by Lem in this work.

22. One good example provided by Szymon Kukulak in personal correspondence is Lem’s discreet “borrowing” of the Martians from Stapledon’s Last and First Men, which found their way into Lem’s The Invincible.

23. Game designer Will Wright named The Cyberiad as a major inspiration for his series The Sims. David X. Cohen, Executive Producer of the animated series Futurama was inspired by Lem’s short stories to create the robot character, Bender, in the series.

Hard Science Fiction: Facing the Facts

In “The Two Faces of Mars,” Szymon Kukulak leverages a strong understanding of science to present a distinctive literary analysis of the depiction of Mars and Martians in The Man from Mars (1946) and “Ananke” (1971). Painstakingly assessing the shifting role that “Martian fiction” and the evolving state of Martian science played for Lem as he composed these two works some twenty-five years apart, Kukulak reconstructs as closely as possible on the basis of textual evidence which works of science fiction Lem could plausibly have read at the time he composed these works. Yet at the same time he presents a formidable history of scientific understanding of Mars, and from the vantage points of literary and scientific history, he reasons his way to a nuanced, logical analysis of Lem’s evolving view of Mars as reflected in his fiction. The picture of Lem that emerges from this analysis is that of someone for whom serious literature must be answerable, at least in some measure, to what science tells us about the world.

The Identity Problem, Literary Experiments On

Benjamin Paloff explores the issue of personal identity through an examination of Lem’s literary thought experiments. Paloff’s analysis reveals that far beyond simply replicating such well-known thought experiments as the Ship of Theseus and John Searle’s Chinese room, Lem developed literary experiments in personal identity to challenge the assumptions of these thought experiments, which frequently assume understanding of the very phenomenon being investigated. In an analysis that ranges over instances found in Lem’s fiction (paradigmatic cases being Harey in Solaris and the titular character in “Does Mr. Johns Exist?”), philosophy (Summa technologiae) and interviews, Paloff builds a case that Lem’s conception of personal identity rests on notions of self-inscrutability. Through this inquiry we come to see better Lem’s processual understanding of entities, particularly biological beings, who retain their personal identity and integrity despite the fact that they are temporary repositories for the molecules and energy constantly passing through them and changing their composition. The implication is that Lem’s work might be due a revisitation by the current generation of philosophers who, in an era of molecular biology, the human microbiome project, and increasing human and machine integration, seek to understand the ontology of identity, consciousness, and life.25

The Macabre in Lem

Paweł Majewski, in his contribution, lays bare the macabre elements in Lem’s fiction. Majewski conjectures that one of the formative influences on Lem’s depictions of the human body and the sense of the macabre that permeates his fiction

was his early encounters with anatomical textbooks in his father’s study. Majewski’s insight makes for a significant complement to the scholarship of Agnieszka Gajewska, whose interpretation of Lem focuses on his wartime experiences and firsthand encounters with the horrors of the Holocaust. Majewski brings to light the role that Lem’s stealthy childhood visits to his physician father’s library played in providing an anatomical framework for his observations. Along the way, in his analysis of Lem’s tract *Summa Technologiae*, Majewski makes the case that Lem’s ruminations on the relationship between humans and technology, in particular the prospect of liberating consciousness from the restrictions of the human body, were a pioneering foray into what is today known as posthumanism. The argument here, building on Gajewska, is that Lem indulged in technological fantasies that would place consciousness—even that immanent in a “good machine”—at a remove from the human cruelties of the world Lem witnessed firsthand. A more daring, deeper conjecture ventured by Majewski, is that a form of escapism was also to be found in the obsession with Nazi soldiers as having godlike power over life and death, and in their own way transcending the human in their embodiment of a Nordic ideal. What emerges is an analysis of Lem’s work in posthumanist, or even transhumanist terms.

**The World Lem Left Us**

While it is, as a matter of probability, reasonable to expect intelligent life exists in the cosmos, we so far see no evidence of it, leading to the conclusion that we will not recognize intelligence “out there” until we move beyond the anthropomorphic and anthropocentric image of intelligence by which we are possessed. Here on earth, we are surrounded by living beings that themselves may constitute a computationally complex brain, with the ability to affect and be affected by a multitude of variables. They, rather than machines, may turn out to be just the kind of “intelligence amplifier” that we need, vaulting us past our anthropocentric concerns.