

Introduction

Lemology Pure and Applied

György Lukács's book about young Hegel has 606 pages in a classic English edition, and 1,011 pages in the Polish edition.¹ A book about the life and work of Faulkner by Joseph L. Blotner consists of two volumes amounting to 1,846 pages of the main text, supplemented by 269 pages of references with separate page numbering.² A biography of Thomas Mann, written by Klaus Harpprecht in its one volume edition consists of 2,253 pages of very fine print,³ while Sartre's unfinished work on Flaubert takes up 2,801 pages (in three volumes).⁴ So how many pages would it take to write exhaustively about the life and works of Stanisław Lem? A comparable number perhaps. Such an exhaustive description is not what this work is after though.

The readers' response to Lem's works has gone through a number of phases. His novels and short stories started being talked about and appreciated in the 1950s in communist Poland, as well as in other countries of the Soviet Bloc, especially the USSR and East Germany. By the late 1960s they gained renown in West Germany and the United States as well. For a long time, however, he was perceived as a sci-fi author, and the genre was seen as inferior literary production by institutions in a position to determine literary value. The label did a lot of evil to Lem, because for years there would be no appreciation of intellectual values of his works. And once they eventually started being noticed, they left many critics puzzled, as the intellectual input made by Lem by far exceeded the competence of most literary scholars, while scientists representing particular disciplines explored by Lem did not deem his literary works and essays worthy of a thorough discussion.

This somewhat schizophrenic state seems to continue until today really. In the 21st century the intellectual circles appreciate Stanisław Lem, but the appreciation is often conventional. He is being praised for some vague achievements bordering on literature and science, for accurate predictions of technological

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- 1 György Lukács, *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations between Dialectics and Economics*, trans. by R. Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT, 1977). Idem, *Młody Hegel: o powiązaniach dialektyki z ekonomią*, trans. by M. J. Siemek (Warszawa: PWN, 1980).
 - 2 Joseph L. Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1974).
 - 3 Klaus Harpprecht, *Thomas Mann: eine Biographie* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1995).
 - 4 Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Idiot de la famille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971, 1975).

development – but it is not easy to tell what that in fact meant. Every once in a while his work is still seen as “not quite serious.” His situation as a writer is peculiar: his work as a whole is not “literary” enough for literary circles, and it is not “scientific” enough for scientists. Therefore, it is very difficult to classify him into any literary or philosophical current. On the other hand his work cannot be qualified as “science.” From the very beginning Lem would take up topics in-between two disciplines – which has become a scientific practice only several decades later (apart from the episode of cybernetics). So to any specialists he by necessity appeared to be an amateur. The unlucky proximity with trashy sci-fi and pseudoscientific charlatans, combined with the seeming abyss separating his work from the pantheon of literature and philosophy have contributed to the unfortunate image of Lem as a sort of technology prattler. Only as late as in the 1970s have there emerged a thorough criticism and interpretation, both in Poland and abroad, which would place him among the most eminent contemporary authors. Decades of being underestimated had grown in him into a lasting sense of frustration, which only became stronger in the last years of his life.

This book will be primarily devoted to Stanislaw Lem’s two discursive works: *Dialogues* and *Summa Technologiae*. I will try to prove that they are the author’s most significant input in the process of understanding civilizational changes in the West in the late 20th and early 21st century – even though they were in fact written several decades earlier. Lem’s fiction will be referenced here often, but marginally, as a detailed analysis would complicate the argument excessively. Lem’s two later theoretical treatises are wilfully omitted here: *The Philosophy of Chance* and *Science Fiction and Futurology*. They are devoted to completely different issues and employ different theoretical and interpretation methodology. They deserve a separate monograph.

Both *Dialogues* and *Summa Technologiae* are presented here against a broad theoretical background, as this approach helps unveil the intellectual sources that inspired them. Part One is devoted to *Dialogues*, which constitute Lem’s interpretation of cybernetics. After outlining the history of the discipline and its significance in world science in the 1950s and 1960s, I proceed with an analysis of *Dialogues*, where I show that by writing the book Lem attempted to apply the system of categories provided by cybernetics to build his own anthropological project. However, being aware of philosophical contradictions inherent to the attempt, he could not coherently complete the plan.

Within Lem’s oeuvre, *Dialogues* prepare the ground for a much bolder work: *Summa Technologiae*. The scope and the open structure of the text make it impossible to come up with unequivocal interpretation. In Part Two, I offer an interpretation according to which *Summa Technologiae* is an elaborate utopian

project of autoevolution of the human species, of transition from a phase of hap-hazard biological evolution toward a planned phase of controlled regulation of human biological and physiological features.

Part Three, which takes up most of this book, is devoted to contemporary intellectual currents, which take up on Lem's project of autoevolution. The most important among them is posthumanism, which was established in the United States in the 1980s.⁵ Similarities it shares with Lem's thought, while significant, are in fact accidental. Yet, it does not change the fact that *Summa Technologiae* and posthumanism belong to the same intellectual process.

My main task when analyzing both Lem's texts and the works of other authors referenced here is to reconstruct their covert assumptions. By revealing and analyzing them, I offer and further prove a thesis that both Lem's and posthumanists' anthropology have traits of utopian liberalism, based on an assumption of human rationality. In order to interpret Lem in a way that will not be limited to a narrow range of linguistic and genre-related issues, I need to refer to a wide range of disciplines. Therefore, this book will invoke tools of literary criticism, sociology, history of ideas, philosophy, science studies, bioethics and a few other disciplines, which means that as a whole this work cannot be classified as belonging to any single of the disciplines listed above. It can be its disadvantage, but it may also open a broader perspective on Lem's works.

5 In this book I use the notion of "posthumanism" in a different sense that is prevalent today – I do not mean an intellectual current, which developed from a rejection of anthropocentrism in the humanities, but a technocratic ideology of sorts that allows a possibility that the human species could transcend its biological limitations with advanced technology.

