

Peter Swirski (Calgary)
e-mail: peter.swirski@ualberta.ca

Lem in a nutshell

How does a writer of science fiction become a literary movement and a cultural phenomenon in himself? How does an indefatigable innovator, who at times makes stern demands on his readers, sell close to forty million books in more than forty languages? How does a master of thrills and chills earn plaudits from litterateurs like Arthur Koestler and Anthony Burgess, critics like Leslie Fiedler and Susan Sontag, and literary taste-makers like the *New Yorker* and the *Times Literary Supplement*?

How does a storyteller get invited to Carl Sagan's brainchild, the first Soviet-American Conference on Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (CETI), held in September 1971 in the middle of Armenian nowhere called Byurakan? How does he get to be the *only* non-scientist so honoured? How is it that scientists and philosophers continue to root his literary make-believes for conceptual nuclei to advance their research programs? How is it that, among his numerous honorary doctorates in literature and philosophy, there is also one in computer science?

Although there are no straightforward answers to these puzzling, perhaps even paradoxical questions, any attempt to time-lapse the life and career of Stanislaw Lem into a single chapter must begin with the fact that he was one of the most creative, playful, cerebral, empirical, analytical, syncretic, and prolific writers ever to put pen to paper.

Lem has stamped his name on twentieth-century letters as a neologist extraordinaire, capable of oscillating like a sinusoid between crazany and ultranalytical in the space of a single paragraph. This is corroborated by more than fifteen hundred entries selected for the 2005 *Polish-Russian Dictionary of Lem's Neologisms*. Scores of other Lem's linguistic gems found their way into the 1998 *Polish-Russian-Russian-Polish Phrase Dictionary* and the 2004 *Polish-Russian Phrase Dictionary*.

At his best, his psychological nuance rivals that of Joseph Conrad, his philosophical depth that of Lucretius, and his conceptual sweep is quite simply out of this world. In the words of one of his American reviewers, he is quite simply "Harpo Marx and Franz Kafka and Isaac Asimov rolled up into one."

During the career that extended from the 1940s into the 2000s, Lem commanded front-page spreads in the *New York Times Book Review* and features in the *New Yorker*. The *New York Times* lionized him as a modern European version of Swift and Voltaire, and the London *Times* thought that his novels should carry a label: THE READING OF THIS BOOK IS GOOD FOR YOU. For American critics he was a Dickensian genius and one of the deep spirits of our age, and for Polish authorities a bipedal display cabinet for literary and cultural decorations of the highest order.

For decades now his books have been on supplementary reading lists for all highschoools in Poland, and in the former West Germany his books of robotic fables were included in the national elementary-school curriculum. In Russia at one point his reputation was so legendary that young couples were naming their sons Stanislaw in his

honour. By now Lemophilia is a global phenomenon and Lemography a global industry. Running into hundreds of pages, Lem's critical corpus boasts entries from the U.S. to the U.K., from Finland to Holland, from Australia to Argentina, and from India to Japan.

One of the few measures of international acclaim that has eluded Lem in his lifetime was the Nobel Prize, although more than once he was short-listed for this honour. All the same, the prevailing opinion that he ought to have got it has never been a secret. Already in the early 1980s, the *New York Times* pronounced him worthy of a Nobel Prize, whereas the *Philadelphia Inquirer*—seconded by *The New York Times Book Review*—joked in earnest that, "If he isn't considered for the Nobel Prize it will be because somebody told the judges that he writes science fiction."

Yet these extravagant tributes to Lem's literary genius only obscure his full intellectual calibre. A Renaissance polymath, he was a much sought-after philosopher, sociologist, as well as diagnostician *cum* prognostician of science. Futurologists such as Alvin Toffler (of *Future Shock* fame), scientists from Carl Sagan to Douglas Hofstadter, and philosophers from Daniel Dennett to Nicolas Rescher professed their deepest regard for his art. Alongside Gary Larson's cartoons, his short story "The Third Sally, or the Dragons of Probability" (from *The Cyberiad*) is a byword in departments of physics and mathematics around the world, while the book in which it was published boasts an entry in a dictionary of mathematical quotations.

Lem's writings were warmly endorsed by a procession of Soviet-era cosmonauts led by Herman Titov, second Earthman in space, who enthused:

Lem's books reveal to the reader what is as yet UNKNOWN—what can happen tomorrow or never at all. His books teach to think deeper, compelling the reader to reflect on the complexity of man's biology and history.

During his frequent literary tours of the USSR, Lem was more than once 'kidnapped' by Nobel laureates and other members of the Soviet Academy of Science for impromptu talks and seminars. In Germany, interdisciplinary interest in his literary thought experiments even led to a special symposium INSTRAT, held in 1981 under the auspices of the Free University of Berlin. Fortified with computer analyses of Lem's cyberevolutionary prognoses plotted in *Golem XIV*, the sessions with the writer included linguists, biologists, sociologists, and cognitive scientists.

With mathematicians and physicists adopting his books for course readings, with museums exhibiting art inspired by his work, with classical composers and rock bands honouring him with their music, the last word on this most original artist and thinker of the twentieth century should go to his literary peers. Between John Updike saluting Lem's Olympian playfulness and Anthony Burgess eulogizing him as of the "most intelligent, erudite, and comic writers working today", the transatlantic consensus is that Lem was a teller of tales the likes of whom are seen on Earth about as often as the returns of Halley's comet.

Peter Swirski is a Canadian writer, scholar, and critic, listed in the *Canadian Who's Who*. He's the author of nineteen award-winning nonfictions and forthcoming speculative novels *EUREKA* and *ICARUS*.

Peter Swirski is an autor of:

- Stanislaw Lem: Philosopher of the Future (2015)
- Lemography: Stanislaw Lem in the Eyes of the World (2014)
- Stanislaw Lem--Selected Letters to Michael Kandel (2014)
- From Literature to Biterature: Lem, Turing, Darwin, and Explorations in Computer Literature, Philosophy of Mind, and Cultural Evolution (2013)
- The Art and Science of Stanislaw Lem (2006)
- Between Literature and Science: Poe, Lem, and Explorations in Aesthetics, Cognitive Science, and Literary Knowledge (2000)
- A Stanislaw Lem Reader (Rethinking Theory) (1997)

See also:

Peter Swirski (Calgary)

When Swirski met Lem:

Scholar Peter Swirski talks to about one of the world's greatest sci-fi writers, the late Stanislaw Lem - (fragment):

“I discovered Lem for the second time, as it were, as an undergraduate student in Montreal. One day I sauntered into my favourite second-hand bookshop and noticed a familiar name. Turns out, someone had unloaded a whole bunch of used Lems onto the bookshop, which duly displayed them right at the entrance on the “cheap thrills” shelf. The price, I remember, was a buck a book. I didn’t think much of Lem then—he was my childhood companion whereas now I was a young intellectual. But on an impulse I reached for *His Master’s Voice*, which I’d never read before, despite running into it dozens of times. It was like a flash of lightning. An hour later I tore myself away from the book muttering “This is f...ing good”, and rushing to the cashier to buy every single Lem book I found on that shelf.

That was thirty years ago. Since then I’ve published seven books on Lem, dozens of articles in venues as diverse as the *Times Literary Supplement* to the *MIT Technology Review*, and given scores of talks and lectures on Lem on most continents of the world. In 1992 I met Lem in Cracow for two long days of nonstop talking, arguing, and crossing intellectual wits—to the extent anyone could cross wits with this born raconteur and polymath. In the aftermath, I’ve become friends with my childhood idol, keeping in touch over almost two decade first via letters, then email. We’ve even become collaborators, insofar as Lem submitted an essay on robots to one of my essay collections (*The Art and Science of Stanislaw Lem*, 2006).”

<https://www.thefirstnews.com/article/when-swirski-met-lem-scholar-peter-swirski-talks-to-tfn-about-one-of-the-worlds-greatest-sci-fi-writers-the-late-stanislaw-lem-221>

The project's consultant is Peter Swirski - a Canadian writer, scholar, and critic, listed in the Canadian Who's Who. He's the author of nineteen award-winning nonfictions and forthcoming speculative novels EUREKA and ICARUS. Peter Swirski is an expert in the work of Stanislaw Lem and author of many publications on the subject.