ON *SOLARIS*: EXILE THE SF WAY

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Many SF writers dealing with exile tend to either show it as something that produces creative freedom or something that traps the protagonist in restrictive nostalgia; exile is a creative and liberating state, which enables the exiled to function freely of the limitations of the local, or it is profoundly nostalgic and yearns for the lost. Using Claudio Guillén's terminology about exile writing (McClennen 2), we can say that some exiles are Plutarchian, or solar, if they tend to look up towards the sun and the stars, or Ovidian, if they tend to look within and focus on loss. There are instances, however, in which SF writers present both sides of these dialectics in irresolvable tension that revolves around central components of the exile's cultural identity: humanity, language, time, and space. Humanity, because he is away from the Earth confronting Otherness; language, because in the new environment he needs a new means of communication; time, because he has been cast out of the present of his historical time; and space, because he is on another planet.

A case in point is Stanislaw Lem (1921-2006), probably the most popular non-Anglophone SF writer in the contemporary world (Maureen McHugh in Andrews, Rennison 86). He was a Polish author who combined a fierce intellect, compassion, and almost parodic affection for the clichés and strengths of SF, despite eloquent attacks on its failings, with a typically sophisticated European modernist approach. His scathing deconstruction of the genre more than often dominated his work: he wrote SF that deliberately pursued a different agenda from that of the Anglophone establishment and forswore the trappings of mere "entertainment" so that it may better provide a commentary on humanity free of sentimentality and the slick accoutrements of adventure.

His fame rests mainly on *Solaris* (1961), a wonderfully evocative novel that takes as its very subject matter the relationship between the familiar and the other, between identity and alterity against the background of self-exile on a distant planet, describing a form of first contact with an alien entity. A group of scientists – Gibarian, Snow, and Sartorius - have travelled to a distant planet, Solaris, to study the immense ocean that covers its surface, which is actually one huge, sentient entity, and make contact with it. Once there, they all begin to be plagued by disturbing humanoid "beings" that the ocean derives apparently from guilt images in the minds of the people who man or manned the terrestrial research station on Solaris. A "visitor" cannot be got rid of and is reliable only when in close proximity

with the scientist on whose mental image "he" or "she" is modelled. Kris Kelvin is sent to investigate what is going on at the station and arrives to find the remaining scientists (Gibarian, the station commander, has committed suicide) unable or unwilling to talk to him about what has occurred on board since. Soon he is visited by an exact replica of his wife, Rhea, who had committed suicide after being estranged from him. As he comes face to face with the eerie results – the Phi-creatures, as Snow calls them - of Solaris's efforts to acknowledge the cosmonauts, Kelvin delves deep into the immense archives of literature on the planet while attempting to come to terms with his feelings of guilt at Rhea's tragic end, over a decade earlier. Step by step, he deals with a tantalizing enigma: Does the "being" that is Solaris, this "extreme example of speculative Otherness" (Malmgren 42), have a mind to be reached or not? Would a human recognize it as such if that contact were established?

When Kelvin arrives on the planet, Solaris has been under study for more than one hundred years. During that time the scientists' attitude towards their object of study has gone through three phases (Malmgren 44): "romantic optimism" (Lem 174) – they were convinced they would establish contact with the ocean, gathering data about it and thus creating a new science, Solaristics; consolidation – they compiled the data, classified and put them into archives; and cynicism – "when they realized that the object of their most pressing attention was indifferent to the point of obstinately ignoring all their advances" (Lem 176), an alien intelligence that was utterly incomprehensible, *alien* in the deepest sense of the word.

In fact, the ocean is not exactly an ocean, it is a vast fluid body that covers its globe "with a colloidal envelope several miles thick in places" (Lem 24). For lack of a better word, the scientists call it "ocean," geomorphizing it. Geomorphism does influence their perception of the whole planet. Kelvin, for instance, sees "slate-covered ripples," "waves like crests of glittering quicksilver" (Lem 10), and "thick foam, the colour of blood" (Lem 14). More than that, the scientists' attempts to formulate a precise nomenclature for the polymorphic formations of Solaris – the "tree-mountains," extensors," "fungoids," "mimoids," "symmetriads," "asymmetriads," etc. – can be seen as inherently geomorphic in nature. Even the most neutral description starts from the assumption that there is some similarity, some basis for comparison, between terran and Solaris phenomena. Thus, defining the ocean is hopelessly geocentric and/or anthropomorphic. This tendency confirms Snow's claim that "we simply want to extend the boundaries of Earth to the frontiers of the cosmos. For us, such and such a planet is as arid as the Sahara, another as frozen as the North Pole, yet another as lush as the Amazon basin" (Lem 81). Wherever we go, we see only extensions of Earth.

The situation on Solaris has been complicated by the appearance of the Phi-creatures, created from the ocean's reading of the scientists' subconscious or unconscious minds. Even more mysterious than the question of what they are is why they were created. Kelvin suggests that they might be a form of torture devised by a "huge devil, who satisfies the demands of his satanic humours by sending succubi to haunt the members of a scientific expedition" (Lem 82). Sartorius proposes that they are the products of a "bungling" experimenter (Lem 112-113), while Snow thinks the creatures might best be seen as a sort of gift, "presents" sent by an ocean that is taking "account of desires locked into secret recesses of [the scientists'] brains" (Lem 200). Though at first horrified by the appearance of the new Rhea, Kelvin gradually comes to love her with an intensity that clearly surpasses that of his earthly marriage to her original; she, in her turn, seems to become capable of the ultimate expression of human love. Speaking with her, Kelvin summarizes the problem as follows:

> You may have been sent to torment me, or to make my life happier, or as an instrument ignorant of its function, used like a microscope with me on the slide. Possibly you are here as a token of friendship, or a subtle punishment, or even as a joke. It could be all those things at once, or – which is more probable – something else completely. (Lem 153)

The Phi-creatures, which are at once alien entities and extensions or projections of the scientists' most human aspects, bring into sharp relief the idea that an encounter with Otherness is at the same time an exploration of the Self; as one critic puts it, the scientists' "obsession with the mysteries of Solaris dissolves into a broader struggle to understand human reflection and identity" (Csicsery-Ronay 7). Again Snow links our interest in Otherness with a basic preoccupation with, and blindness about, our selves: "We think of ourselves as the Knights of Holy Contact. This is another lie. We are only seeking Man. We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors" (Lem 81). All knowledge is internal, we cannot know another until we are able to know ourselves. In this respect, the giant fluid brain that covers the planet is a grand metaphor for the human reflection and projection of our desires onto others. The human mind is "clouded and forced into ambiguity as a response to an impossible desire to know and apportion knowledge of all things according to conventional human values" (Kerslake 54-55). Therefore, exposure to another world, to an alien encounter, reveals to us hidden aspects of our secret selves and, in so doing, prepares us to meet that alien on its own terms. While the scientists in Lem's novel are there to study and quantify the ocean, it is the ocean that is, in fact, observing them, both sets of "observations" releasing repressed material in an autonomous form.

This is exactly what happens to Kelvin. Before entering into the passionate communion with "Rhea," Kelvin (though professionally trained as a psychologist), had generally appeared to be a cold, rather unempathic person. As he finds within himself unexpected capacities for love and commitment, he perhaps attains the so much wanted self-knowledge. On the other hand, his exposure to "Rhea" compels him to play out his guilt again, first in his attempts to rid himself of his Phi-creature, then in his determination to hold fast to her, and finally in his fear that, despite his conscious desire to save her, his unconscious might well want only her destruction. It is only after "Rhea" sacrifices herself, going willingly to her death and thus severing Kelvin's anthropomorphic link with the ocean, that Kelvin is able to encounter Otherness properly.

He explores a "mimoid" formation on the ocean's surface and, when he extends his hand to the ocean, a wave envelops it with a thin layer of gelatinous material. Kelvin repeats the movement several times, until the ocean "tires" of it and stops responding to his hand. The experience disturbs him; he has just had an insight about the ocean, about Otherness: "I felt somehow changed" sensing in the ocean "a curiosity avid for quick apprehension of a new, unexpected form, and regretful at having to retreat, unable to exceed the limits set by a mysterious law" (Lem 210). Now he is finally able to identify with "the dumb, fluid colossus" and decides to stay on the planet and persist in the "faith that the time of cruel miracles was not past" (Lem 211). The ocean is no longer a potential enemy; there is no longer the urge to transcend the power of the rival life form. Once Kelvin has yielded to its influence, he is able to understand the Otherness of the ocean, having a "moment of unprecedented empathy or psychological breakthrough with the ocean" (Freedman 100). For him the ocean is now a kind of "evolving, imperfect god, somehow reflective of both man and Solaris" (Ketterer 196), particularly as Snow develops the idea: "Solaris could be the first phase of the despairing God." Kelvin exclaims, "You've produced a completely new hypothesis about Solaris – congratulations! Everything suddenly falls into place…" (Lem 199).

Kelvin's idealism only points to the "uncertain quality of what humans call knowledge […], the mutability of reality itself and the indefinite nature of human experience" (Charles Gannon in Kelleghan 483). The challenge of comprehending and understanding what Solaris is doing to him eludes Kelvin until he realizes that the ocean is somehow an emotional reflection of that which is hidden inside himself. First Snow insists that Kelvin's passion for "Rhea" is rather idiotic: "She is willing to give her life. So are you. It's touching, it's magnificent, anything you like, but it's out of place here – it's the wrong setting. […] You are going around in circles to satisfy the curiosity of a power we don't understand and can't control, and she is an aspect, a periodic manifestation of that power" (Lem 162). Then the

scientists discover that the Phi-creatures are radically inhuman on the submolecular level. They are not composed of normal cellular matter but instead are accretions of neutrinos that mimic human physiological structures and metabolic processes. They also regenerate very quickly and, if destroyed, are reproduced shortly afterwards. When Kelvin learns that, he realizes his "love story" with the "Rhea" is nothing more than a particularly intimate and unusual encounter with the ocean, with no real contact achieved.

The other – the ocean – can never be fully or confidently known, Kelvin can only glimpse it through its various and always ambiguous signs, from the "mimoids" to the Phi-creatures themselves. What Lem suggests is that "the quest for contact is not wholly vain, but also that contact can be attained only in […] tentative, fragmentary, ambiguous, oblique, and unexpected ways" (Freedman 109).

The author himself said it plainly, forty-one years after his book first appeared:

> I wanted to cut all threads leading to the personification of the Creature, i.e. the Solarian Ocean, so that the contact could not follow the human, interpersonal pattern - although it did take place in some strange manner. The method I used in the novel to demonstrate this was the particular outcome of the interest of people, who for over one hundred years have been studying the planet "Solaris" and the ocean covering its surface. One should not speak of a "thinking" or a "non-thinking" Ocean, however the Ocean certainly was active, undertook some voluntary actions and was capable of doing things which were entirely alien to the human domain. Eventually, when it got the attention of little ants that struggled above its surface, it did so in a radical way. It penetrated the superficial established manners, conventions, and methods of linguistic communication, and entered, in its own way, into the minds of the people of the "Solaris" Station and revealed what was deeply hidden in each of them: a reprehensible guilt, a tragic event from the past suppressed by the memory, a secret and shameful desire. In some cases the reader remains unaware of what has been revealed; what we know is that in each case it was capable of incarnation and physical creation of a being the hidden secret was connected to. Kelvin's recklessness and imprudent behaviour in the past had not prevented the suicide of his beloved woman […]. He buried her on Earth and in a sense he buried her in his mind as well - until the Ocean made her come back at the "Solaris" Station. […] The vision of the Planet "Solaris" was very important for me. Why was it important? The Solarian globe was not just any sphere surrounded by some jelly - it was an active

> being (although a non-human one). It neither built nor created anything translatable into our language that could have been "explained in translation." Hence, a description had to be replaced by analysis - (obviously an impossible task) - of the internal workings of the Ocean's ego. This gave rise to symmetriads, asymmetriads and mimoids - strange semi-constructions scientists were unable to understand; they could only describe them in a mathematically meticulous manner, and this was the sole purpose of the growing Solarian library - the result of over a hundred years' efforts to enclose in folios what was not human and beyond human comprehension; what could not have been translated into human language - or into anything else. […] I only wanted to create a vision of a human encounter with something that certainly exists, in a mighty manner perhaps, but cannot be reduced to human concepts, ideas or images. (Lem, 2002)

Lem makes no assumptions that life elsewhere in the universe will be wholly understood by humans: there is no reason why it should be. And with this realization we see the central concept that informs his novel: the universe is simply too big for human intelligence to grasp, too unimaginably ancient and beyond our reach, for us to even begin to believe that we may one day conquer it. Lem is not a pessimist, simply a realist struggling to come to terms with the vast maze of life and to provide an alternative to the blatant, uncritical optimism about humanity's destiny that pervades much of Western culture. Looking at the world, "he sees a floating island of tiny minds adrift in one very small corner of the universe, its population ignorant of its own place in the grand scale of time and space" (Mann 192). The universe forces us to use only the unsentimental categories of necessity and chance, and our only hope lies in the "freedom to continue the painful path of cognition" (Rafail Nudelman in Parrinder 191). In other words, the amorality and indifferent reason why Lem's novel remains fundamentally open.

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