

## Kelvin 's Resolve and the Death of Rheya, or The Dialectics of Extraterrestrialism

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I think there is not much doubt that *Solaris* is the "wettest" of Lem's works. Ultimately, I would wager, it will be preferred over Lem's other important works because it is the only one to explore the role erotic and married love play in scientific exploration. In his other works, Lem is fascinated by the tests of heroic fidelity, friendship, and the cold bonds of isolatoes -- almost always among men without women. But in *Solaris* he presents a very rich and subtle parable, even if it is profoundly ironic and ambivalent, about the ideology of gender in the dialectic of scientific exploration and cognition, the dialectic that has been ingrained in the literature of exploration for centuries.

The character of Rheya, the neutrino-based simulacrum of a human woman who develops into an autonomous person, has received surprisingly little attention from *Solaris's* commentators. She is by far the most important female character in Lem 's work, which, in any case, does not abound with representations of women. Her mere existence is worth reflection, let alone her central role in one of Lem's most important novels. For it is Rheya's mediation that knots the historical-cosmic action of the novel, the exploration of the sentient planet Solaris by the human Solarists, with personal plot of the main protagonist, Kris Kelvin. It is in Rheya that the hard material science of *Solaris* intersects with

the spiritual problem of freedom.

Rheya appears at the outset as a creation on a cusp. It appears that she has been constructed through the co-operation of the Solaris-ocean and the human Kelvin. The most plausible hypothesis is that the planet has given her her substance, specifically neutrinos organized in a mysterious neutrino-field, while unconscious memory has given her her form. She is the simulacrum of Kelvin 's young wife, for whose suicide Kelvin has carried a burden of guilt for several years, and simultaneously a simulacrum of a transcendental mediator: a human image that has become Solaris, and Solarian substance that has become human. In the system of communication between human beings and Solaris, she is the black box; self-conscious enough to be aware that she does not know how she herself works.

Before the Visitor-Rheya appears on Solaris Station, Kelvin had failed, in his own eyes, the test of fidelity and love to the original Rheya on Earth. After expelling an earlier version in terror, Kelvin ultimately comes to accept the next -- identical -- one, believing that he has been granted a second chance, a *vita nuova*. Yet, since the simulacrum-Rheya is also a creation of his own mind, Kelvin is caught in a double-quandary. His loyalty to her seems to be both ethically misplaced and cognitively suspect. There is no way Kelvin himself can tell whether he is motivated by self-sacrificing love -- abandoning the search for Contact with the planet in order to nurture the Visitor -- or merely self-love. Loyalty and

solidarity, great virtues in the intercourse of human beings, appear to be obstacles both to new knowledge about new relations, i.e., how to make direct contact with the Alien and through it, spiritual growth. But without the bonds of human affection, why should a human being continue to live and seek knowledge?

Rheya, by contrast with Kelvin, matures progressively before our eyes, and comes to human consciousness, as all the Visitors apparently do (155). She ultimately fulfills certain essential cognitive, ethical and ontological requirements of being human: she is conscious of her ignorance of her own origins, she is willing to sacrifice her life for a loved human being, and she is, finally, able to die. The immortal "goddess" (Snow explicitly compares her to Aphrodite) freely chooses death to create the conditions of greater freedom for her lover.

We cannot be certain of the exact nature of the Visitors' connection with the planet, but there is a general feeling on Solaris Station that the ocean is present in them, as a tool-user is present in a working tool. Rheya herself feels that the Visitors are "instruments" (51), analogous perhaps to the measuring instruments sent down to the planet by the first Solarists, which came back "transformed" (27). In this light, we are invited to interpret Kelvin's dream in Chapter 12, as the unmediated interpenetration of Kelvin's mind and Solaris, bypassing the Visitors, who are apparently used for observation of the Solarists' consciousness.

The evidence mounts in the course of the action that Solaris and Kelvin have exchanged some fundamental information. As the EEG transcript of Kelvin's

waking thoughts is broadcast over the planet 's surface, he becomes increasingly sensitive to direct intuitions of "an invisible presence" (186); and after the broadcasts are completed, the annihilated Visitors no longer reappear, implying that the message probably went through. We can only speculate on what this exchange between Kelvin and Solaris might mean. Through the annihilation of the Visitors, Solaris possibly experiences the pain of final dissolution. Through Rheya, specifically, the planet may have learned of self-sacrifice, the ethical ideal of the human. Kelvin, in his turn, appears to loosen his grip on his narcissistic projections, and comes to identify himself with the planet, and to "forgive it," attaining a serenity that seems, to use his language, godlike.

Positive exchanges like these, if they happen, can only happen through Rheya's mediation. She is the point of contact of alien and human, the field on which the aliens gradually become familiars. If there is dialectical progress in Solaris, Rheya acts as the negation of the negation, the self-destroying incarnation of the new synthesis. She adopts the pain of mortality and repression, to open Kelvin up for a new cosmic relationship.

And yet, for all her cosmic nobility, Lem -- or rather Kelvin/Lem -- presents Rheya as a rather empty young woman, absolutely dependent on the presence of her lover. In this, the design of Kelvin 's memory and the design of Solaris 's surveillance agree exactly. Rheya's only free act is self-sacrifice, a conventional romantic liberation of the hero by a loyal wife/lover. Yet with her self-sacrifice, the

entire realm of human affections departs from the novel, as well. If the "religion of Contact" with the Alien was, as Snow implies, a male-myth analogous to the Grail Quest, the new state of affairs does not seem significantly different, merely a replotting of the Quest myth's dimensions. Rheya is identified completely with affectional bonds; she lives only to love Kelvin; and she must, it seems, be annihilated for any cognitive advance to occur.

*Solaris* is charged with suppressed sexuality. Perhaps precisely because of this, the story's resolution throws the baby of affectional ties to humanity out along with bathwater of attachments to neurotic ego-projections. It is as if Rheya and the affections must die, and Kelvin and the questing intellect *must not return* to Earth. Otherwise, the scientific-cognitive stalemate would be complete. If Kelvin were to return to Earth, the intuitions and "miracles" he experienced on Solaris Station might simply be inscribed in his own Little Apocrypha. If Rheya were not annihilated, she might continue to tie Kelvin up in his vicious cycle of love and guilt. Moreover, she must die willingly, so that Kelvin can recognize without guilt that the death of his simulacrum-lover has a human value, that it is an act of love.

A case can be made that a certain theory of dialectics underlies this scenario of the negation of affectional bonds in *Solaris*. It may be that the value-creating role of affection in the process of discovery is precisely self-sacrifice. Given the irreversibility of death for human beings, physical self-sacrifice stands at the top of the hierarchy of values. It is the act that lays claim to the greatest freedom. It can

only be justified as true self-sacrifice if the destruction of one's self frees the way for others to live freely. In essence, it opens up new and better relations that are blocked by the old relations (embodied in the sacrificial victim). Rheya's sacrifice – on her part can be read as just such noble act of love. Her death inevitable (since Sartorius and Snow were committed to annihilating all the Visitors), but by accepting it, she turns it into a liberating act.

And what does Kelvin make of this sacrifice? The identification of love and self-limitation might be construed differently -- not only as part of a cognitive dialectic, but as the repudiation of all but the most abstract faith (in human solidarity and species-consciousness). Lem, like Freud, invites us to associate affection and personal loyalty among real human beings overtly with trauma and neurosis; he portrays in extremely vivid concrete images the rationalist's tendency to equate the affections with mythmaking, atavism, lack of clarity. The Visitors are all "primitive" in one way or another: Gibarian's negress reminds Kelvin of an African fertility idol; Sartorius's Visitor may be a dwarf or a child; in the station library, which contains the ultimate speculations on the fate of human consciousness, Rheya is interested only in "The Interplanetary Cookery Book."

This association of affection with painful limitation is so constant in Lem's work that we might as well consider it integral to the way Lem constructs his SF worlds. We need only recall the cool, respectful distance-keeping that prevails in the novels, the absence of family or romantic bonds, and the sense of "the distance

between man and man" (*His Master's Voice* 193) manifest in the macrocosm by the unintelligible traces of alien evolutions. The fate of Rheya -- as "programmed" by both Kelvin/Solaris and the demiurge Lem -- place this dis-affection into the foreground.

Most of *Solaris*'s readers have felt that Rheya's death transforms Kelvin into an unromantic scientist without illusions, prepared to accept "reality." The text gives evidence for believing that Kelvin and Solaris already began an association through their mutual creation of Rheya, and with the removal of the indirect mediator between alien and human, they almost touch at the end of the novel. But we do not have to settle for Kelvin's final humility; on the same grounds we might read the ending as suggesting that Kelvin is on the way to becoming more than human, gradually freed of his all-too human illusions and atavisms. The religion of contact may thus be on its way to a surprising fruition.

Rather than being merely a narcissistic ideology, the religion of Contact pays off: after all, miracles ensue, even if they are cruel ones -- wives are resurrected, guilts are absolved, beautiful wonders take form. Thus *Solaris* might even be read as a tiny moment in a grand Stapledonian epic, the first tentative attraction of a future symbiotic species, like the ichthyoid-arachnoids of *Starmaker*. The concrete realization of such a dialectical leap in evolution would naturally entail the negation of affective ties to limited human conditions. Some such optimistic evolutionary vision follows if we accept Kelvin's final sentiments and

the "truth" of his humility -- and most readers of *Solaris* appear inclined to accept, albeit in soberly restrained form, the promises of possible cognitive evolutions.

Nothing compels us, however, to accept this, or any other view based on what Kelvin says, uncritically. In fact, after Rheya's death Kelvin's attraction to the intelligent planet becomes so great that he seems well on his way toward becoming another Gulliver among the Houyhnhnms, identifying himself more closely with the alien and its possibilities, than with the human qualities that link him with others of his species. If there is an evolution taking place, we, as readers, are as distant from Kelvin's evolutionary catalyst as we are from Gulliver's horses. But if Kelvin has "gone over" like Gulliver, then the story has merely added a chapter to the merry-go-round of Solaristical tautologies moving now from tragedy to farce.

The reader is left unable to determine whether Kelvin ends up a serene post-tragic and post-romantic consciousness who far surpasses the rest of his species in his humility and devotion to knowledge, or a cosmic buffoon, prepared to repeat the mistakes his species may be constitutionally doomed to repeat again and again, always with the belief of having transcended the limits of the past. Although Lem's tone and depth of characterization tend to give more weight to the romantic reading than the satirical, we do not, and can not, have sufficient evidence in the text to commit ourselves to either position. This lack always threatens to make us Gullivers. We may observe our own limitations, but how can we know that our perspective is not also one of those limitations?

Thus there is no way to say that there is anything like cognitive gain. But we may be sure that there is affective loss. Once we see that Rheya's mediation imports into the novel the structure of the affectional values and tragic action foreign to the myths of science that rule the Solarists, the inscrutable open-endedness of the novel's conclusion appears in a less heroic light. We might take a step further. The dialectics of cognition we described earlier, which requires the jettisoning of affective bonds in order to liberate the questing intellect to find new knowledge, ensures that the adventure of science is a male concern. Indeed, it runs throughout the culture of SF, to the degree that one theorist, Zoe Sofia, has defined SF culture in terms of its "extraterrestrialism," its idealization of the possibilities of human knowledge and power detached from the natural affectional bonds of life of earth, family and comity, social life embedded in a natural world. It is the alien that draws Extraterrestrialist adventure: an alien being-in-the-world that allows a purely abstract functional set of relations, or purgative violence, to replace the enslaving Earth and its exponent loyalties. It is not hard to see that this entails a drearily recurring dialectic: the sacrifice of women for the sake of male adventure, a dialectic that appears in one form or another in the literature of exploration from *Robinson Crusoe* to Gleick's *Chaos*. The dialectic that sees the scientific handy man exiling, and ultimately subsuming, his "wife at home," in the process of transforming or seducing an alien, wild zone that is fertile and willess enough to be female, but inert enough to yield willingly to techno-scientific force. (Recall that the first

breakthrough to the ocean comes after Sartorius -- illegally -- showers its surface with x-rays.)

Rheya might then be read not as a romantic heroine, but a dupe -- of both Kelvin and Solaris -- who comes to autonomous consciousness only to make her sacrifice; and perhaps that is all she ever could have done: the freedom of the instrument of mediation can only extend far enough to bring the agents together. She must never be permitted to come to consciousness of her own subjectivity. Thus, perhaps we should modify what we said earlier about Rheya becoming essentially human -- she is spared the ultimate anxiety of the freedom-in-guilt of male cognitive adventure, and so, she becomes essentially not human -- but a woman. That is, a female simulacrum being created from an abstract model, for the specific purpose of creating bonds of affection that must be broken; after the goal is achieved, the simulacrum returns, according to the program that she is programmed to inscribe in herself, to the oblivion of the cosmic ocean. So much for the role of female simulacra in the progress of knowledge.