

Review: The Curmudgeon of Krakow

Reviewed Work(s): A Stanislaw Lem Reader by Peter Swirski

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portrayal of whiteness could use more theoretical grounding. This sort of approach is especially relevant now that whiteness—as opposed to its various historical others—has begun to be seen as a social construction, a tissue of representations rather than an essential identity. While I would agree that the premise of the *Star Trek* world is about assimilation to a common goal and identity, the argument needs to be extended and strengthened.

Another limitation lies in the choices the author made about which *Star Trek* series to examine. Certainly, the “Original Series” and *The Next Generation* provide useful and relevant material, but for more complex perspectives dealing with the issue of whiteness, even brief attention to the *Deep Space Nine* or *Voyager* franchises would have added substantially to Bernardi’s critique. These series feature an African-American captain of a space station and a white woman starship captain, respectively; the crews on these shows are even more diverse, and the characters are more likely to examine their relationships with other humans and species. These more recent representations call into question the ideal of assimilation to a white standard, and explore in more detail issues of inter-racial or inter-species relationships. In addition, in *Deep Space Nine*, more explicit opposition to the Federation and its assimilationist goals is foregrounded. These are areas that would greatly add to our understandings of hegemonic whiteness, and how they are articulated—and potentially subverted—in the *Star Trek* universe. This is an area that remains to be addressed.

This book advances our knowledge not only of *Star Trek*, but also of racial representations in American popular culture. It gives a glimpse into the minds of the creators of *Star Trek* (something few researchers of the series have attempted to do) as well as of the fans. Bernardi’s book does an admirable job of analyzing race in *Star Trek*’s imagined twenty-third century: he illuminates what this means not only now, but at the historical moments when the series were created. This work also challenges other scholars to build on its solid foundation.—Mia Consalvo, University of Iowa

The Curmudgeon of Krakow. Peter Swirski. *A Stanislaw Lem Reader*. Northwestern UP (800-621-2736), 1997. 129 pp. \$14.95 paper.

The title of this excellent little book is a bit misleading. Unlike the usual sort of “Reader,” such as the *Olaf Stapledon Reader* published recently by Liverpool and Syracuse, Swirski’s does not contain representative selections from Lem’s fiction and discursive prose over the course of his career. In fact it consists of only two interviews, conducted by Swirski in 1992 (in person) and 1994 (in writing), and a 1991 essay by Lem reflecting on the fate of his major nonfiction work, the *Summa Technologiae* (1964), which is still untranslated into English. This is very much a reader directed toward people who already know and respect Lem’s work.

This is the first book in which interviews with Lem have appeared in English; indeed, it is the first book other than Lem’s own discursive essays (*Microworlds* [Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984]) that offers Lem’s readers an accessible commentary on his thinking. Lem has given many interviews; some of them have appeared in *SFS* (with Raymond Federman in #26, and with me

in #40), some in other journals. But unless one sets out to browse through the literary databases, these belong to the arcana of sf. It is much to Northwestern University Press's credit to have published Swirski's interviews (though one may also wonder whether this is all that they approved from a more ambitious project).

As a former interviewer and correspondent of Lem's, I cannot avoid both hearing Lem's voice and comparing Swirski's approach to my own. Swirski is uniquely placed among North American scholars of Lem: he is bilingual in Polish and English, and has a solid background both in literary studies and philosophy of science. He is able to converse with Lem without any appreciable loss of information, a privilege even Lem's German and Russian interlocutors may not have enjoyed, despite the writer's command of those two languages. Swirski is a fine interviewer. He treats Lem as an intellectual rather than a belletrist and is much more interested in his views on twentieth-century science than in his fiction per se. We get a picture of Lem's polymathic familiarity with the philosophy of science that few literary writers can approach. It may seem strange to say that Swirski's questions about game theory, Steven Hawking's contributions, or the possibility of mathematizing literary analysis are friendly questions for a fiction writer, but these are precisely the sort of matters that Lem likes to expound on. Lem does not have a high opinion of most other people's fiction, and even his own fiction he rates lower than his "philosophy of the future," the speculative-analytical writings collected in the *Summa, Science Fiction and Futurology* (1970), and the *Philosophy of Chance* (1974), none of which have been translated into English.

In the past, Lem has tended to treat aesthetics as inferior to science; in recent years, having given up writing fiction altogether, this disdain sometimes approaches contempt. Swirski seems to be on Lem's wavelength on these matters. He, too, appears not to consider the affective realm, or questions of what makes art valuable, to be very interesting. Sometimes Swirski seems *plus royaliste que le roi*, as when he asks Lem whether he believes there's any hope for a mathematical literary criticism. Lem sagely responds that scientization of criticism would probably be worse than the actually existing fuzz, and that art is not a form of cognition. Earlier in his career Lem would have gone on to speak about play as a virtue in its own right, but the days of the playful Lem seem to have passed. Perhaps a more playful interviewer might have teased more respect for fiction from the Curmudgeon of Krakow. But Swirski's emphasis on science and contemporary culture is completely appropriate. Most of my interview of 1986 was concerned with Lem's opinions about art and his writing; since Lem almost never changes his mind, Swirski's approach leads to new ground. He delves into matters that previous interviews touched on lightly or not at all.

The Stanislaw Lem Reader opens with a brief introduction to Lem's career. It is perhaps a bit too brief, and slanted toward viewing Lem as a *lumen* rather than as a great writer of fiction. This is understandable, considering the heavily cognitive slant of the *Reader* as a whole and the fact that Swirski is familiar with the Polish originals of all the major works of speculation that Lem has

produced and which Lem seems now to view as his *chefs-d'oeuvre*. It may be trivial to complain that Swirski's introduction neglects Lem's rhetorical and storytelling genius. For Swirski, Lem's fiction and discursive work are "a single *magnum opus*" with a "single historiosophic scenario":

His novels, stories, and essays model plausible socio-cultural reactions to powerful new stimuli, often of global proportions. Inventing fictional crises to portray the flexibility of our culture's potential response, Lem suggests—correctly in my opinion—that the stable dynamic equilibrium of a sufficiently large system will tend to dominate its overall pattern. (18)

Lem would certainly agree with this. It is what makes him a serious intellectual. However, Swirski's short account might also work, in terms of the fiction at least, for John Christopher or George R. Stewart. Lem's distinctiveness as a writer, his use of language, his profound irony and wit (which Swirski should have better purchase on than any of his non-Polish colleagues), his use of concrete symbols, his rich sense of the literary tradition, are arguably at least as important as his culturological speculations. But for Swirski Lem is an oracle, whose management of the two-culture split does not include raising literary art to greater importance but, as it were, to the projection of a future in which he cannot even imagine more than one culture, the culture of science. If Swirski does have a weakness, it is his stubbornness regarding the possibility of applying game theory to literary studies. This, too, is forgivable, since that appears to be one of the main attractions of Swirski for Lem; Lem's *Philosophy of Chance* and his essay on Sade (untranslated, of course) are two of the most serious discussions of the use of decision theory in literary studies. But to Swirski the matter appears more serious than it does to Lem, for whom, one suspects, his own discursive works are more ironic in spirit than they appear to earnest students of science and literature like Swirski.

The centerpiece of the book is Lem's own essay "Thirty Years Later," originally written to commemorate the writing of *Summa Technologiae*. In it, Lem describes the Polish intelligentsia's long-standing dismissal of the work as a compendium of positivistic fantasies. Lem vents, at greater length than usual, his resentment against Leszek Kolakowski, one of the most prominent Polish philosophers and the leader of a circle to which Lem peripherally belonged in the 1950s. Clearly, at the time of the essay's publication in 1991, the book was still considered a weird, indigestible meal in Poland, and Lem writes as if he were introducing a foreign book to his Polish readers. He gains his revenge by pointing out how well his book foretold the coming of virtual reality—which Lem called, with characteristic wit, "fantomatics"—long before computer engineers took it seriously. Lem quotes abundantly from the text, showing not only how precisely he conceived fantomatic technology, but how deeply he pondered its cultural implications. The *Summa* is unquestionably a wonderful book; most of Lem's themes appear in it in neutral form (i.e., with relatively little irony), and Lem consistently displays his erudition with a *sprezzatura* not unlike that of *The Star Diaries* (1976). The *Summa* is one of the great works of cultural futurology, and the lack of an English version is scandalous. One can hope that the excerpts included in Swirski's book,

excellently translated by Swirski himself, will whet the appetite of readers sufficiently to inspire the publication of the whole book. I cannot imagine a better translator and editor for the job than Swirski himself.—ICR

Managing the Unconscious. Matthew C. Brennan. *The Gothic Psyche: Disintegration and Growth in Nineteenth-Century English Literature*. Camden House (803-788-5633), 1997. 179 pp. \$55.00 cloth.

I want to begin this review by publicly acknowledging my bias—one I am certain many readers will share: I generally do not find Jungian criticism persuasive, since it relies upon generalizations of mythic proportion and encodes a way of thinking that is essentially allegorical in nature, without openly acknowledging its status as such. Indeed, Jungian thought has been out of favor among literary theorists for some time for precisely this reason, despite minor flashes of renewed interest in Carl Jung throughout the twentieth century, and irrespective of the continuities it shares with Joseph Campbell's large influence on the scholarship of fantasy and myth. The cover copy for *The Gothic Psyche* claims that today there is a "growing popularity...of Jungian ideas," and while this may be true of the self-help genre (see, for example, Robert Hopcke's recent spiritual guidebook, *There Are No Accidents: Synchronicity and the Stories of Our Lives* [Riverhead, 1997]), I do not believe that Jung scholarship jibes with the cultural studies-informed inquiries of most literary theory today.

Jungian literary criticism has fallen from favor because it inevitably functions to reduce the literary text to little more than supporting evidence of Jung's totalizing (and rather mystifying) theory of the "collective unconscious." This theory alleges that when we read literature, we dip into a universal repository of the entire psychic experience of the human race, which is evoked through archetypes (or what Jung calls "racial memories") we all supposedly carry within us, and whose traces can be found in the patterns and symbols of literature. This sort of approach inevitably explains away individual narratives by showing how they fit into Jung's larger meta-narrative, which often disempowers works of literature in the process. In other words, Jungian criticism risks telling the same story over and over again, naively setting aside textual and cultural differences.

Yet in *The Gothic Psyche*, Matthew Brennan succeeds in overcoming these pitfalls of vulgar Jungianism, by emphasizing Jung's theory of individuation (rather than just the archetypes) in order to theorize the Gothic consciousness evident in such nineteenth century classics as *Frankenstein* (1816), *Dracula* (1897), and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886)—with additional chapters dedicated to Romantic poetry, Emily Brontë, and Poe. Brennan uses Jung's work on the psyche and on dream interpretation in order to "amplify" these Gothic texts, and to "uncover how these works symbolize the threat of psychic collapse, which the novels and poems warn can occur if the nightmares are repressed" (147-8). For Brennan, literary texts are a source of power and healing, a way of integrating our unconscious impulses into our psyches, in a quest to adapt to our own shortcomings. Thus, the crux of Brennan's work is