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CATSCAN 2 "The Spearhead of Cognition"

You're a kid from some podunk burg in Alabama.

From childhood you've been gnawed by vague numinous sensations and a moody sense of your own potential, but you've never pinned it down.

Then one joyful day you discover the work of a couple of writers. They're pretty well-known (for foreigners), so their books are available even in your little town. Their names are "Tolstoy" and "Dostoevsky." Reading them, you realize: This is it! It's the sign you've been waiting for! This is your destiny-- to become a \*Russian Novelist\*!

Fired with inspiration, you study the pair of 'em up and down, till you figure you've got a solid grasp of what they're up to. You hear they're pretty well-known back in Russia, but to your confident eye they don't seem like so much. (Luckily, thanks to some stunt of genetics, you happen to be a genius.) For you, following their outline seems simple enough--in a more sophisticated vein, of course, and for a modern audience. So you write a few such books, you publish 'em, and people adore them. The folks in 'Bama are fit to bust with pride, and say you've got Tolstoy beat all hollow.

Then, after years of steadily growing success, strange mail arrives. It's from Russia! They've been reading your stuff in translation, and you've been chosen to join the Soviet Writers' Union! Swell! you think. Of course, living in backwoods Alabama, it's been a little tough finding editions of contemporary Russian novelists. But heck, Tolstoy did his writing years ago! By now those Russians must be writing like nobody's business!

Then a shipment of modern Russian novels arrives, a scattering of various stuff that has managed to elude the redtape. You open 'em up and--ohmiGod! It's . . . it's COMMUNISM! All this stupid stereotyped garbage! About Red heroes ten feet tall, and sturdy peasants cheering about their tractors, and

mothers giving sons to the Fatherland, and fathers  
giving sons to the Motherland

. . . Swallowing bile,  
you pore through a few more at random--oh God, it's  
awful.

Then the Literary Gazette calls from Moscow,  
and asks if you'd like to make a few comments about  
the work of your new comrades. "Why sure!" you drawl  
helpfully. "It's clear as beer-piss that y'all have  
gotten onto the wrong track entirely! This isn't  
literature--this is just a lot of repetitive agitprop  
crap, dictated by your stupid oppressive publishers!  
If Tolstoy was alive today, he'd kick your numb  
Marxist butts! All this lame bullshit about commie  
heroes storming Berlin and workers breaking production  
records--those are stupid power-fantasies that  
wouldn't fool a ten-year-old! You wanna know the true  
modern potential of Russian novels? Read some of my  
stuff, if you can do it without your lips moving! Then  
call me back."

And sure enough, they do call you back. But  
gosh--some of the hardliners in the Writers' Union  
have gone and drummed you out of the regiment. Called  
you all kinds of names . . . said you're stuck-up, a  
tool of capitalism, a no-talent running-dog egghead.  
After that, you go right on writing, even criticism,  
sometimes. Of course, after that you start to get  
MEAN.

This really happened.

Except that it wasn't Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. It  
was H.G. Wells and Olaf Stapledon. It wasn't Russian  
novels, it was science fiction, and the Writers' Union  
was really the SFWA. And Alabama was Poland.

And you were Stanislaw Lem.

Lem was surgically excised from the bosom of  
American SF back in 1976. Since then plenty of other  
writers have quit SFWA, but those flung out for the  
crime of being a commie rat-bastard have remained  
remarkably few. Lem, of course, has continued to  
garner widespread acclaim, much of it from hifalutin'  
mainstream critics who would not be caught dead in a  
bookstore's skiffy section. Recently a collection of

Lem's critical essays, *Macroworlds*, has appeared in paperback. For those of us not privy to the squabble these essays caused in the '70s, it makes some eye-op

ening reading.

Lem compares himself to Crusoe, stating (accurately) that he had to erect his entire structure of "science fiction" essentially from scratch. He did have the ancient shipwrecked hulls of Wells and Stapledon at hand, but he raided them for tools years ago. (We owe the collected essays to the beachcombing of his *Man Friday*, Austrian critic Franz Rottensteiner.)

These essays are the work of a lonely man. We can judge the fervor of Lem's attempt to reach out by a piece like "On the Structural Analysis of Science Fiction:" a Pole, writing in German, to an Austrian, about French semantic theory. The mind reels. After this superhuman effort to communicate, you'd think the folks would cut Lem some slack--from pure human pity, if nothing else.

But Lem's ideology--both political and literary--is simply too threatening. The stuff Lem calls science fiction looks a bit like American SF--about the way a dolphin looks like a mosasaur. A certain amount of competitive gnawing and thrashing was inevitable. The water roiled ten years ago, and the judgement of evolution is still out. The smart money might be on Lem. The smarter money yet, on some judicious hybridization. In any case we would do well to try to understand him.

Lem shows little interest in "fiction" per se. He's interested in science: the structure of the world. A brief autobiographical piece, "Reflections on My Life," makes it clear that Lem has been this way from the beginning. The sparkplug of his literary career was not fiction, but his father's medical texts: to little Stanislaw, a magic world of skeletons and severed brains and colorful pickled guts. Lem's earliest "writings," in high school, were not "stories," but an elaborate series of imaginary forged documents: "certificates, passports, diplomas . . .

coded proofs and cryptograms . . ."

For Lem, science fiction is a documented form of thought-experiment: a spearhead of cognition.

All else is secondary, and it is this singleness of aim that gives his wo

rk its driving power. This is truly "a literature of ideas," dismissing the heart as trivial, but piercing the skull like an ice-pick.

Given his predilections, Lem would probably never have written "people stories." But his rationale for avoiding this is astounding. The mass slaughters during the Nazi occupation of Poland, Lem says, drove him to the literary depiction of humanity as a species. "Those days have pulverized and exploded all narrative conventions that had previously been used in literature. The unfathomable futility of human life under the sway of mass murder cannot be conveyed by literary techniques in which individuals or small groups of persons form the core of the narrative."

A horrifying statement, and one that people in happier countries would do well to ponder. The implications of this literary conviction are, of course, extreme. Lem's work is marked by unflinching extremities. He fights through ideas with all the convulsive drive of a drowning man fighting for air. Story structure, plot, human values, characterization, dramatic tension, all are ruthlessly trudgeon-kicked aside.

In criticism, however, Lem has his breath, and can examine the trampled flotsam with a cynical eye. American SF, he says, is hopelessly compromised, because its narrative structure is trash: detective stories, pulp thrillers, fairy-tales, bastardized myths. Such outworn and kitschy devices are totally unsuited to the majestic scale of science fiction's natural thematics, and reduce it to the cheap tricks of a vaudeville conjurer.

Lem holds this in contempt, for he is not a man to find entertainment in sideshow magic. Stanislaw Lem is not a good-time guy. Oddly, for a science fiction writer, he seems to have very little interest in the intrinsically weird. He shows no natural appetite for

the arcane, the offbeat, the outre.. He is colorblind to fantasy. This leads him to dismiss much of the work of Borges, for example. Lem claims that "Borges' best stories are constructed as tight

ly as mathematical proofs." This is a tautology of taste, for, to Lem, mathematical proofs are the conditions to which the "best" stories must necessarily aspire.

In a footnote to the Borges essay Lem makes the odd claim that "As soon as nobody assents to it, a philosophy becomes automatically fantastic literature." Lem's literature *is* philosophy; to veer from the path of reason for the sake of mere sensation is fraudulent.

American SF, therefore, is a tissue of frauds, and its practitioners fools at best, but mostly snake-oil salesmen. Lem's stern puritanism, however, leaves him at sea when it comes to the work of Philip K. Dick: "A Visionary Among the Charlatans." Lem's mind was clearly blown by reading Dick, and he struggles to find some underlying weltanschauung that would reduce Dick's ontological raving to a coherent floor-plan. It's a doomed effort, full of condescension and confusion, like a ballet-master analyzing James Brown.

Fiction is written to charm, to entertain, to enlighten, to convey cultural values, to analyze life and manners and morals and the nature of the human heart. The stuff Stanislaw Lem writes, however, is created to burn mental holes with pitiless coherent light. How can one do this and still produce a product resembling "literature?" Lem tried novels. Novels, alas, look odd without genuine characters in them. Then he hit on it: a stroke of genius.

The collections *\_A Perfect Vacuum\_* and *\_Imaginary Magnitudes\_* are Lem's masterworks. The first contains book reviews, the second, introductions to various learned tomes. The "books" discussed or reviewed do not actually exist, and have archly humorous titles, like "Necrobes" by "Cezary Strzybisz." But here Lem has found literary structures--not "stories"--but assemblages of prose, familiar and comfortable to the reader.

Of course, it takes a certain aridity of taste to read a book composed of "introductions," traditionally a kind of flaky appetizer before the main course. But it's worth it for the

author's sense of freedom, his manifest delight in finally ridding himself of that thorny fictive thicket that stands between him and his Grail. These are charming pieces, witty, ingenious, highly thought-provoking, utterly devoid of human interest. People will be reading these for decades to come. Not because they work as fiction, but because their form follows function with the sinister elegance of an automatic rifle.

Here Lem has finessed an irrevocable choice. It is a choice every science fiction writer faces. Is the writer to write Real Novels which "only happen to be" science fiction--or create knobby and irreducible SF artifacts which are not true "stories," but visionary texts? The argument in favor of the first course is that Real Readers, i.e. mainstream ones, refuse to notice the nakedly science-fictional. How Lem must chuckle as he collects his lavish blurbs from Time and Newsweek (not to mention an income ranking as one of poor wretched Poland's best sources of foreign exchange). By disguising his work as the haute-lit exudations of a critic, he has out-conjured the Yankee conjurers, had his cake and eaten it publicly, in the hallowed pages of the NY Review of Books.

It's a good trick, hard to pull off, requiring ideas that burn so brilliantly that their glare is overwhelming. That ability alone is worthy of a certain writhing envy from the local Writers' Union. But it's still a trick, and the central question is still unresolved. What is "science fiction," anyway? And what's it there for?