

# Why Human?

**Maciej Kijko**

Institute of Cultural Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

In the eighth, oneiric star voyage, Ijon Tichy is placed in a very awkward position. As an earthly delegate on the forum of cosmic civilisations, not only must he swallow a very unfavourable version of human history, but he also hears that earthly life arose from slops and impurities accidentally and carelessly left on a dead planet at that time. In preparation for the meeting, he presents in detail the human achievements, convictions and beliefs to his guardian (and at the same time a representative of the Rhohch civilisation who recommended Earthlings) and states that it is common for Earthlings to recognise human beings as a measure of all things. He hears the surprised response: “Why human?”.

The poetics of sleep allows for a distortion, a grotesque shortcut and mind-bending hypotheses. At the same time, in a nightmare – it also allows one to avoid dangerous questions arising in dreams and breathe a sigh of relief: “It is just a dream”. However, many of Stanisław Lem’s texts lack this margin of safety and the questions asked by him, as well as the problems that surface, appear in front of the reader with all their strength. And here readers can find defence against taking them seriously – the fantastic costume

alone enables this: it is easy to think that fantasy is nothing more than just fun. Although it may echo anxiety and current hopes, it is not a breeding ground for more serious reflection. After all, Lem's work raises many questions that are difficult to ignore. The author himself in *Science Fiction and Futurology*, his critical view of fantasy literature, emphasised its usually untapped possibilities to expose problems which people might encounter in the future, and the possibilities of facing them in the medium of literature.

These questions can be approached in many ways and a lot has already been written about Lem's work. However, this does not mean that previous interpretations have exhausted the subject; new times, new phenomena, new intellectual perspectives allow for a rereading of old, and seemingly well-known, texts<sup>1</sup>. This is clearly visible in Lem's case. His novels and stories were often interpreted as a humanistic view of humans, their limitations and, as a consequence, their greatness after all. *Tales of Pirx the Pilot*, for example, can be approached this way. Thanks to his weaknesses and imperfections, our clumsy hero passes tests in which the perfection of machines fails. An anecdotal story of a dispute between the writer and director Andrei Tarkovsky, who adapted the novel *Solaris* for film, shows that reducing everything to one human perspective is limiting (and against the intentions of the writer himself – although this is not a decisive argument) and it is possible to see the matter differently [Lem and Bereś 114]. The filmmaker's

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1 It is worth mentioning Agnieszka Gajewska's book *Zagłada i gwiazdy* [trans. The Holocaust and the Stars], which explores the traces of the Holocaust and the historical experience of the Second World War in Lem's prose.

vision, which was extremely humanistic, placed a focus on the human characters of the book and celebrated their internal dilemmas related to the events they experienced, was met with violent opposition from the author of the literary original, who withdrew his cooperation as a result. This dispute is significant in that it expresses the extent of writing intentions. While I do not intend to discuss the interpretation of Pirx's short stories mentioned above, I am convinced that Lem's many other texts demand different approaches and interpretations referring to other assumptions. Many of his works were read as a critique of limited humanism and a satire on civilisation. Many can finally be read as an attempt to confirm that in the Rhohchs' surprise, there is nothing really strange. Such rich literary output induces various readings.

I would like to use posthumanism as an interpretative framework for the reading below. Like any general term, it is comprehensive, imprecise and controversial – not everyone whose work can be interpreted in these categories would agree with this reading. In order to move away from these initial problems, I will first try to clarify the category of posthumanism. Its most general definition would be to treat posthumanism as a criticism developed from the threshold of humanistic modernity and an anthropocentric vision of reality. This is translated into both the theory of cognition and ethical reflection [Hoły-Łuczaj 45]. As a result of a whole series of transformations, reformulations and revisions of detailed views in the face of emerging challenges and problems, generalisations were questioned – many scholars proclaim the need to rethink the project

of humanism and move towards a new view of the world which does not situate humans in a dominant position. According to those involved in this debate, humanism is no longer valid. The expansiveness of human aspirations has led to a crisis that has to be faced in many areas. One of them is to re-evaluate the very basis of human existence on Earth and open ourselves to the prospect of participating in a world inhabited by other creatures, whose interests should also be taken into account. For now, it seems that we are dealing with the initial phase of the formation of this new perspective, which results in vague slogans and a lack of specific solutions<sup>2</sup>. Without dealing with the internal problems of posthumanism, I would like to use its most general understanding to express its usefulness in interpreting the work (at least in part) of Stanisław Lem. Posthumanism can be understood either as the inclusion of other entities inhabiting the Earth into a space of care and interest, or an attempt to go beyond human beings towards possible other non-biological, artificial beings (also being partially human), which is already defined as transhumanism. Lem's output would find its place in this second branch of posthumanism. It seems to me that in many of his works Lem tries to transcend, in a justified rather than simplistic manner, the human perspective of comprehension, beyond Reason (one that is associated with human beings in humanism). In other words, Lem tries to show a human being in the broader context of possible Reasons, while undermining the belief in a community of intelligent beings who

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2 There is a certain ambiguity here of whether posthumanism already extends its interest beyond humans, or just develops a different method of understanding reality and the problems posed by attempts to learn about it [Wolfe 146-147]. I skip these issues.

can communicate on the basis of universal reason. From the proposed definition, one can derive numerous proposals; ones that are more specific and refer to various cultural practices and which are actually being developed. They take on different, more specific issues and lead in different directions. In the context of Stanisław Lem's work I want to raise the issue of rationality and show that reflection on this concept is an important thread running through his fantasies: showing what human rationality is and attempting to show that it is one of the many possibilities of realising a thought; that each thought is limited by the material frames that define it. In this particular case, this is post-humanism clearly expanded, going far beyond the earthly globe and covering not only earthly, animal inhabitants of the universe, but also all possible and imaginable ones. This is how I would like to approach Lem's worlds – by moving away from human thought and from Earth itself<sup>3</sup>.

## I

*Golem XIV* develops the idea of computer intelligence and the way in which it is created in the writer's imagination, it is no more close to being realised today than at the time of its creation. In the poetics of reviews, introductions and fragments of non-existent books – liked and used not only by Lem, but also by Borges – there is a history of cre-

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3 An attempt to read at least some of Lem's works that situates his work in the context of epistemological problems might perhaps be supported by the author himself. In the aforementioned *Science Fiction and Futurology*, Lem refrains from, as he put it, the projection of fantasy (and probably more broadly, literature in general) and heads instead towards the questions that it may pose and the problems it must solve. In the last paragraph of the fragment, which deconstructs the structure of sci-fi work, he proposes paradigms for this kind of literature and unintentionally announces his *Observation on the Spot*, which he will write several years later.

ating non-biological intelligence and its lecture about itself and about human beings. A fantastic costume allows the writer's imagination to touch on problems of philosophical weight that go far beyond the general view of the intellectual capacity of the genre.

The Golem XIV from the title, which is a computer, is not only a machine with immeasurable computing power, but also has intelligence and is a thinking machine. Already at this point, at the beginning, a problem becomes clear and in the course of further considerations it will become even clearer – what does it mean to think? What does it mean to have reason? What does it mean to be a rational being? This problem is not straightforward, rather it results from the narrative's structure and becomes visible through it. Golem, as a product of the technological powers of humans, is not an extension of human thinking, but establishes its own. Thus, it forces us to revise the belief in the exclusivity of humans in the field of reason, and also makes us think again about the very nature of rationality.

Lem confronts the readers with this issue in two ways. On the one hand, he encourages the reader to recognise the possibility of a development of work on artificial intelligence, which leads to its creation, but in a shape that is far from expected. There are no specific clues here for most popular visions of this type: considering the threats arising from the liberation of machines from the rigor of subordination to the instrumental interests of their creators or anthropomorphisation of machines and its consequences. Here, any possible amazingness can only

result from the fact that the thinking machine presents a pattern of thinking markedly different from the one considered human (and often reduced to universal) and, in addition, it diminishes – in what it says and what it represents – the importance of human thinking. Human smallness can be the dominant reading experience. On the other hand, treating this text as another human-centred narrative would be insufficient and diminish its importance. Although it is impossible to move away from humans in literature (implicitly, even if they are not characters, they are always indelibly present), perspective can be adopted differently. In *Golem XIV* the issue is not about reprimanding mankind and taming conceit (so this would not be a version of a wisdom tale like Ecclesiastes), but to present a completely different position: it attempts to problematise the issues of reason, intelligence and rationality in a material context. It is not so much about developing the theory of material determinants of mental processes, but drawing consequences from the mere connection of reason with a material medium – to what extent this affects thinking, and more importantly, if different material media are carriers of different reasons.

Lem's Golem as a computer does not have a sensual access to the world, only, as one could say, an intellectual one. In its independent thinking about the world, it is therefore basically not involved in sensual metaphors and intellectual consequences of sensuality. This does not establish its superiority, but only its otherness and its irreducibility to the human mind. Intellectual potential measured by the amount of information that can be processed and the

speed at which it can be done, illustrates another difference. Intellectual power is not just a matter of speed and the amount of data taken into account at the same time, but something much more serious – the basic cognitive perspective that follows and the possibility of understanding reason having different potentials. Lem's vision allows for an infinite gradation of reason, and the price of this gradation is mutual closure – for subsequent levels, relative communication ability, although limited, remains possible (people and animals, Golem and people), and it disappears at greater distances.

## II

In *Observation on the Spot* the already mentioned Ijon Tichy – Lem's most experienced space explorer and discoverer of extraterrestrial civilisations – visits Entia and its two countries in order to atone for a distorted description (for which he was not solely culpable) in the fourteenth voyage in the *Star Diaries*, and report on the actual situation in Kurdlandia and Luzania. This happens as a result of a coincidence that is irrelevant at the moment. What is important is that by scrupulously examining the reasons for his mistake, while reading numerous studies of the Entians' history, philosophy and science, he encounters the hypothesis they have about Earth and the relationship between terrestrial ethics and the biology of the human species<sup>4</sup>. Entian scholars risked the statement that human anatomy, combining organs functionally delegat-

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4 It is not important at this point whether Lem's generalisation is justified on the basis of anthropological and historical knowledge, because what matters is the contrast in the face of which, presumably, possible exceptions would not matter much.



ed to reproductive and excretory functions, is responsible for the construction of ethics subject to ambivalence of purity and blemish, holiness and defilement, pleasure and sin, while the Entians themselves do not have this phenomenon due to the difference in anatomy and the lack of proximity of organs performing appropriate functions.

There is no direct continuation and development of this small paragraph in the further text, but it is interesting and significant, because it can affect the interpretation of further parts of the novel, and as a separate issue it raises important questions. They concern the same issues in a slightly different way than in the case of *Golem XIV*. If earlier the mind lost its biological medium and became senseless intelligence, it is now a mystery whether the difference in biological makeup translates into a difference in thinking. Rationality, shown in the previous text in the form of pure logical operations, is closely related to the biology of intelligent beings and limited by biological difference. We are used to thinking about our thinking solely in intellectual or emotional terms. In *Golem XIV* doubt is sown, however, whether in fact, what we have become accustomed to recognise as the property of humans, which is the possibility of their access to the world as it is, constitutes a certain reason that is species-specific and limited by the species' properties, and therefore – which is a further issue – to what extent it is mutually translatable and understandable.

Ijon Tichy's adventures on Entia confirm this clearly. After landing on the planet, the character systematical-

ly explores it and meets its inhabitants, who explain to him their special systems and ways of dealing with the world. The vision of a synthetic ethical sphere, which is perhaps most different from the one known to earthly civilisation, is particularly extensive. Although with every step the Earthling seems to be closer to understanding the Entians, he finally recognises his failure. Even technology that gives the impression of familiarity and comprehensibility, though different and more advanced, requires a different set of initial assumptions and a different thinking about physical reality in order to be understood. In the eloquent finale of the novel, the character tries to break out of sleep, which he would like this trip to be. Unable to understand, he tries to save himself with the conviction that he is dreaming and when he wakes up, the impression of embarrassing confusion will dissipate and put him back into an understandable framework of reality. To no avail. The inconvenience cannot be removed – we are doomed to our own interpretations and readings marked with human limitations, which will be imperfect attempts to break through to the other side.

In other novels, even the earlier *Eden*, and the final, *Fiasco*, it is shown even more clearly – lack of understanding, lack of the possibility of breaking free from one's own framework and changing the way of communication, condemns humans to a communication failure and opens them to the awareness that although there is other thinking, it is concealed. There is nothing left of pride, and consciousness is filled with a sense of failure and anxiety.

### III

The situation shown in *Solaris*, which is one of Lem's most outstanding achievements, takes the problem of reason and rationality to another level. On a planet called Solaris, people come into contact with an organism (organic structure?) of planetary dimensions, and which exhibits activity not only at the reflex level, but seems to be a form of intelligence. The very action of the novel proves this equally emphatically: members of the earthly mission are confronted with incomprehensible and terrifying testimonies of the abilities of the Solaris ocean. It makes material the memories of deep layers of consciousness that are particularly painful and intense, in the form of people who are the protagonists of events. Despite attempts to eradicate these phantasms (who retain all the characteristics of hard materiality and show uncanny resemblance to their prototypes), they encounter the persistence of bringing them back to "life". The puzzle is multidimensional. What is the meaning of making that which is absent present? Why do those that are (re)moved in all possible ways relentlessly reappear? Why do they seem to remember nothing? Is this supposed to be a form of communication or is it just an instinctive realisation of a certain disposition?

There is no method of solving any of the questions or any of the puzzles. One cannot expect to be able to achieve it. The impossibility lies in the scale. The Solaris ocean is unimaginably larger than an individual, so its experience is difficult to even relate to the human experience. Similarly with thought processes, a planetary intelligence which

embraces processes of this size cannot be compared to human intelligence. Returning to the situation in *Golem XIV*, a computer capable of processing an infinite amount of data in an extremely short period of time becomes incomprehensible to human comprehension. Here, on the other hand, the situation of planetary consciousness (even only assumed) is incomparable when it comes to the scale of information, which is subject to verification, reflection, and transformation into decisions and actions, and a human subject wanting to understand something of this. Bizarre phenomena from this perspective must remain underdeveloped, because it is impossible to cross the limit of agency, which is a consequence of knowledge and the ability to control it. Even computer-aided means can make something possible with their efficiency – due to the fact that they are constructed as an extension and enhancement of the abilities of the human mind, they are unable to discover anything. No “human” theory of action matches what members of the mission witness and what phenomena they observe. The frustration, confusion and fear accompanying the astronauts are the result of their inability to intellectually control the situation. What seems to them to be emotional torture (being reminded of people, and as a result, things that they would like to forget) has no rational explanation. There is no clarification at all. At the moment when the possibility of grasping the sense of the presumed and assumed purposefulness of the actions of the Solaris ocean appears, it simultaneously disappears. What remains is the belief that there is a boundary separating human from the planetary being and this does not provide any answers.

The dilemma, whether it is intelligence, purposefulness, agency, reflexes, unconsciousness or instinct, has no chance of being solved.

Even if it is reason, it is closed to us. So different that it escapes understanding.

You can avoid the problems that fill Lem's worlds or not notice them at all. You can only admire the writing's inventiveness, not go beyond the attractions offered, and find it sufficient. Or you can read Lem's prose as an adventure of humans relentlessly and courageously heading into the unknown, which is another confirmation of their uniqueness.

You can also go beyond the human perspective, confront the questions posed and treat them as a challenge, even if they are unanswerable, and try to understand something more from the mystery of the world or understand it differently. By agreeing to the unsolvable nature of this secret, one can still inquire into it. Except that at this point it should also be acknowledged that our path is one of many possible ones. It does not lead anywhere beyond ourselves, and additionally that trying and caring belong to all the inhabitants of the world and the universe. Reason obliges us not to sink into exclusivity. Therefore, reason also means recognising its borders. They will never be discovered and they will remain merely conceived of and assumed, thus obliging them to be considered impassable.

This is a necessary and, at the same time, an extremely difficult challenge, and it is probably represented in Ijon Tichy's last words in the finale of *Observation on the Spot*: "So I gathered strength for a spiritual fight with the cord that my dream is holding so tightly to, in order to tear it apart and throw it off like a dark cocoon, but although I did my best, nothing came of it. I didn't wake up. There was no other reality" [311].

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