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**UNSPEAKABLE OTHERNESS—AN ESSAY  
ON THE FAILURE OF COGNITIVE AND EPISTEMIC  
COMMUNICATION TOOLS  
IN STANISLAW LEM'S *SOLARIS***

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***ABSTRACT***

Stanislaw Lem is one of the most famous figures of the Polish science fiction in post-world war two Europe. *Solaris*. His most famous novel, was published in 1961, and was adapted twice for the big screen, first in 1971 by Andrej Tarkovski, and in 2002 by Steven Soderbergh. The plot revolves around the psychologist Kris Kelvin, who is sent on the planet Solaris to try to find out if it is possible to communicate with the alien ocean that covers almost all of its surface. Confronted with a strange phenomenon and colleagues turned paranoid, Kelvin tries at first to understand what is going on at the space station. The unexplained arrival of the doppelganger of his ex-partner, Harey, will little by little make him accept the absurdity of his task and possibly of life itself. As Lem himself refused any final interpretation of his novel, there has of course been a flourish of them. One can however choose this exegetic impossibility as a major theme in the novel, and reflect on the implications of the situation Kelvin faces, caught between a desire to understand the nature of Solaris's ocean and the sheer failure of doing so. In this essay, we will try to suggest that, by showing the limits of language as the means to express a satisfying epistemic frame, Lem's parabol could be seen as an attempt to show the reader the existential limits of our anthropocentrism and scientific hubris.

**Keywords:** Lem; *Solaris*; Language; Communication; Existentialism.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

There was nothing the Polish author Stanislaw Lem hated more than the various interpretations of his works, whether academic or artistic. *Solaris*, published in 1961, is one of Lem's most mysterious and most discussed novel, but as Albert Camus with *The Stranger*, Lem always refused to explain it, and laughed at all the exegesis attempts of his time.

“I do not engage in interpretation of my books—I leave this task to the reader. And I never sat down at my writing desk with a complete plan of the entire book” (Lem, Finotti, interview).

Lem also rejected the two cinematographic adaptations of the novel. He found the 1971 version by the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky being too metaphysical and focused on a Christian approach of guilt: “[Tarkovsky] did not make *Solaris* at all, he made *Crime and Punishment*” (Lem, 1987).<sup>1</sup>

He was also very suspicious of the American director Steven Soderbergh’s 2002 adaptation because he thought it was too sentimental: “Had *Solaris* dealt with love of a man for a woman—no matter whether on Earth or in Space—it would not have been entitled *Solaris!*” (Lem, interview, 2002).<sup>2</sup>

Tons of articles, critics and essays nonetheless focused on a deeper meaning of Lem’s work, ignoring, perhaps fortunately, the writer’s scorn. The collection of papers, however, is strangely a reminiscent of the “*Solaris* library” of the novel, where hundreds of works dealing with theories on the planet *Solaris* written by scholars crowded on shelves, gathering dust.

It is true that the novel, like the planet of the title, is indeed mysterious. The planet *Solaris* only hosts an ocean which might or might not be a living and sentient alien entity. Kris Kelvin, a psychologist, is sent to the only base on the planet to study and possibly try to find a way to communicate with this entity. Kelvin is supposed to assist the head scientist, Gibarian, but he finds out upon his arrival that Gibarian has committed suicide. The other two surviving members of the crew, Snaut and Sartorius seem to be victims of paranoid delusions which are embodied in the form of “guests,” that is to say duplicates of persons linked to some unspecified deep emotional trauma for each crew member. As Sartorius never leaves his room, Snaut gives mysterious advice to Kelvin, unveiling the possible psychic menace of the planet’s ocean. Kelvin himself gets the unwanted companionship of his former partner Harey, a young woman who committed suicide because of him. Kelvin’s mission becomes thus a double quest involving both the mystery of the nature of the ocean and the nature of his own human self. After Harey is destroyed by Snaut on her own demand, Kelvin decides to wait for her less-than-likely return and accept the ocean as it is, an utterly incomprehensible entity.

Therefore, to acknowledge from the start the impossibility of a fully satisfying interpretation might be a step in the right direction. What is more, not being a Polish speaker and thus not having access to many original sources and interviews, our reading can only be partial and mutilated. But, maybe precisely because of its inner limitations, it can also, hopefully, offer a rele-

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in: [http://www.nostalghia.com/TheTopics/On\\_Solaris.html](http://www.nostalghia.com/TheTopics/On_Solaris.html)

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in [mustseecinema.com](http://mustseecinema.com)

vant angle, as it will tackle a central aspect of the novel, which is the permanent and definitive failure of language as both an epistemic and cognitive tool that is to say the impossibility of formulating a valid scientific conclusion within the classical frames of reason, deduction and, lastly and most importantly, experience.

## 2. COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWNS

*Solaris*, indeed, opens with a communication breakdown, as the main character, psychologist Kris Kelvin, approaches the planet in his landing capsule, a dire manoeuvre that requires help from the surface base:

“I waited out a minute or so of silence then called again. I received no response this time either. Crackling volleys of static repeated in my headphones, against the background of a hum so deep and low it seemed to be the voice of the planet itself” (Lem, 2017 (1961), location 52–53).

Sounds are heard when a human voice is expected. The vulnerability of Kelvin’s position enhances the uncanny of the situation, mixing two anguishing realities: the first sound, static, is both partially human (as it is linked with technology) and partially natural (being electrical), yet none of its identities induce communication. On the contrary, static is the in-between, the undesirable sound that signals the absence of the human voice. It is doubled with a second sound, a “hum” of uncertain nature and origin, which Kelvin nonetheless immediately links with the possibility of coming from the *Solaris* ocean. This thought is crucial, as it associates communication (or its lack) with expectations: Kelvin is expecting a human voice to acknowledge his arrival on the planet, and supposes the humming sound to be linked with the mysterious ocean, which is the reason of his presence on the research base.

And Kelvin’s expectations are deceived a second time, as he finally hears a voice in his earphones:

“All at once, through the crackle and the hum, a distant voice began talking right in my ear: ‘Solaris Station to newcomer, Solaris Station to newcomer. A-OK. Newcomer is under control of the station. [...]’  
The individual words were separated by split-second mewing noises that showed that it wasn’t a human talking” (Lem, 2017 (1961), location 52).

Communication is both achieved and failing, at the same time—the failure being the concrete manifestation of the volatility and the ambivalence of language. What is believed to be crucial (communication) suddenly becomes automated and a-human. The system has a nearly human voice, but is still

(only) a machine, with which a real meaningful interaction is impossible. The robot speech is deceiving in that its humanity is a product of technology, a one-way simulacrum that enhances the uncanny absence of a real human being as an interlocutor. From the start, Kelvin's mission is marked by a distorted identity of language, first through a machine, then through fellow humans.

Indeed, when Kelvin finally meets and talks to the other two elusive remaining scientists on the base (Kevin will learn later that Gibarian is dead), Snaut and Sartorius, communication also proves highly problematic, as they are, at the beginning at least, obscured by secrecy and obliqueness from the scientists' side. The tone is more hostile than communicative, and muddled for (yet) unknown reasons.

“‘Snaut,’ I whispered. He winced as if he'd been struck. Staring at me with inexpressible aversion, he said hoarsely:  
‘I don't know you, I don't know you, what do you want ...?’” (Lem, 2017 (1961), p. 103).

When the reader later retrospectively understands that Snaut's aggressive reaction is motivated by his suspicion that Kelvin might be a “guest,” that is to say a creature sent by the Solaris ocean to escort him wherever its host goes, it becomes clear the first conversation begins with a tone of utmost suspicion. Language becomes once again an unreliable medium between the human characters. Voices and words, conversations conceal more than they reveal and Kelvin has to face alone a mysterious situation that is aggravated by language instead of being cleared by it.

To make matters worse, Sartorius, the other surviving scientist, can only be reached through a video communication device. Once again, communication is mediated through technology and is frustrating and limited. The scientist hides from exterior dangers (the “guests”) but also to protect his secret “guest,” who might be a child or a small person.

“There came a series of tiny footsteps, like the toddling of a small child—a rapid, hurried patter of small feet. Perhaps ... perhaps” (Lem, 2017 (1961), location 653).

Everyone can speak the same language, yet not much can be said. And Gibarian, who has invited Kelvin, is dead. Explanations are disrupted, and when they are finally painstakingly reconstructed by Kelvin, they only confirm a reality that moves beyond language: The Solaris ocean is something is called an “ocean,” but nobody is sure what it actually is; it might or might not be sentient, it builds structures called “mimoids” that might or might not have a meaning, it send “guests” who might have or might not have a purpose. Throughout all this, language is caught in a never-ending paradox through its simultaneous ability to define things and the inscribed limits of

this ability, as it is impossible to define what is not expressible in language, although it can very well exist, as *Solaris* constantly proves.

The creation of the *Solaris* library and of the scientific field of “Solaristics,” which is utterly useless in “understanding” the planet, are ironic hints placed by Lem to point at this internal breakdown.

“... I don’t remember if I mentioned R. Nudelman’s interesting observation about the structure of my novels which, he maintains, typically contain a ‘micro-model’ of their problematics (the solaristic library in *Solaris* ...), (Lem, Kandel, 2014, p. 77).

If science is usually seen (and accepted) as a “universal language,” then language fails here too. As Edward Balcerzan and Konrad Brodziński note in their article, *Seeking Only Man: Language and Ethics in “Solaris”*:

“The narrator of *Solaris*, on the other hand, has at his disposal a language which he cannot trust—just as 20th century avant-garde writers do not trust it. However, the sub-codes of scientific cognition turn out to be quite insecure, and their ostensible purity problematic: they are liable to decay just as much as the vernacular” (Balcerzan, Brodziński, 1975, p. 154).

Science cannot describe, explain or define the nature of *Solaris*, as the thousands of volumes of the library illustrate, because the planet escapes all known forms of analysis. The question of communication appears therefore central, and as Anthony Enns notes in his article *Mediality and Mourning in Stanislaw Lem’s “Solaris” and “His Master’s Voice”*:

“Recent criticism has followed this line of inquiry by interpreting *Solaris* as a novel not so much focused on the difficulties of conceiving an alien species as on the problems inherent in communication itself” (Enns, 2002, p. 35).

As a self-proclaimed rationalist, Stanislaw Lem pessimistically plays with the human paradox of rationality: everything can be explained rationally except what cannot. For him, even being an atheist is a paradox:

“Personally, although I am a non-believer, I would prefer it to be otherwise, even though I cannot justify this urge in rational terms” (Lem, Csicsery-Ronay, Jr, interview, 1986).

Contrary to Kenneth Krabben who considers Lem as a “moral theologian” (Krabben, 1994), *Solaris* can be seen as the epitome of an “atheist’s” nightmare: a reality that exists although it denies all the rational definitions of rationality. It demonstrates, by its sole existence, that the human reason is limited by its own frame, as well as by its embodiment: language.

Even natural science, which is based on numbers, is confronted the same limitations, as it is, as all the books on Solaristics indicate, also contained within a rational language. Theories, in *Solaris*, remain extrapolations, as

they are constantly challenged by the impossible reality of the mysterious ocean.

### 3. THE BODY AND THE FAILURE OF TOUCH

“*Noli me tangere!* Do not touch me!” Jesus Christ famously told Maria-Magdalena, when he appeared to her after his resurrection. When Kelvin’s ex-girlfriend Harey is resurrected as his own personal “guest”, the same sentence could be applied, but in reverse, as the living wants to break free from the dead.

“It was Harey, in a white summer dress. [...] My first thought was: ‘I’m glad this is one of those dreams where you know you’re dreaming.’ All the same, I’d have preferred her not to be there. I closed my eyes and began to wish this intensely, but when I opened them again she was still sitting there” (Lem, 2017 (1961), location 823).

Harey the “guest” is indeed not the real Harey, Kelvin’s former partner who tragically committed suicide, but a creature sent by the possibly sentient Solaris, a *doppelgänger* whose purpose will remain mysterious throughout the whole novel. A “welcome present”? A spy? A form of torture? All scientists have “guests,” but only Kelvin’s and the deceased Gibarian’s are visible in the story. According to Snaut, these “guests” are all linked with the deepest guilt or emotion (obviously linked) buried within the scientists’ subconscious.

“ ‘It’s what we wanted: contact with another civilization. We have it, this contact! Our own monstrous ugliness, our own buffoonery and shame, magnified as if it was under a microscope!’ ” (Lem, 2017 (1961), location 1179).

Harey committed suicide because of Kelvin’s indifference. We will not know of the others’ fate or identity, as they remain carefully hidden secrets, locked in Snaut’s and Sartorius’s rooms.

Kelvin, however, will encounter Gibarian’s “guest” in a corridor: a huge black woman, who ends up lying in the morgue next to the body of her “host.”

“I stood rooted to the ground. From the far end of the side passage a huge black woman was coming towards me with an unhurried waddling gait. I saw the whites of her eyes glinting and at almost the same moment I heard the soft slap of her bare feet. She had nothing on but a skirt that glistened yellow, as if it were made of straw” (Lem, 2017 (1961), location 464).

Kelvin cannot speak and the alienation of speech is thus represented through an apparition that materially embodies all the symbolic elements of colonial “otherness:” gender, color, and silence which are the direct oppo-

sites of the Kelvin's identity, as he is male, probably white and gifted with speech.

This figure is essential in *Solaris*, as it contains many problematic but revealing aspects of the "communication theme" of the novel. The reminiscent of Sara Baartman, also known as the "Hottentot Venus," a South-African woman of khoikhoi descent who was exhibited as a circus attraction in the 1800s because of her large buttocks, this apparition is *physically* striking and frightening. Gibarian's "guest" is therefore the absolute white man's "other," an "exotic" and mesmerizing apparition linked with fascination, repulsion and death.

Gibarian's "guest" is last seen lying down next to the body of her "host" in the cold chamber, and is never mentioned between the protagonists. The utter mystery of the black woman is, once again, based on a paradox: she exists, impossibly, and her origins are unknown. Lem points at a rational glitch: if one can only see reality, then reality is undeniable, yet what of a "rationally impossible" reality? The encounter between Maria-Magdalena and Christ took place within a metaphysical, religious context. The unexplainable presence of the "guests" takes place within a place of science, where all beings are *a priori* functioning "rational" beings.

"As Lem explains in an interview, the notion of the "guests" in the novel was in part inspired by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant's notion of "the thing-in-itself," which lies beyond the boundaries of our understanding:"

"It is rather difficult to comment on this book. I think I managed to express what I intended. The wonder of Harey's returns was an example of a certain concept which probably could have been derived from Kant, since this is the Ding an sich—The Other Side we are unable to reach" (Lem, Esmaeili, interview).

The black woman's body hence acts as one of two absolutely opposite attitudes towards the immediately incomprehensible: rejection—whereas the apparition of Harey, at the other end of the spectrum will ultimately embody acceptance.

However, the sudden physical and uncanny presence of his ex-lover proves a test for Kelvin's rationality, who first dismisses it as a "dream." However, Harey's body is real, up to the detail of the spot on her arm where she injected herself the poison. Her presence is therefore as undeniable as it is logically impossible. Her ability to speak, however, should make communication easier, but it is not the case. Harey has a limited knowledge of her situation/condition and it is impossible for her to explain her presence.

" 'Where did you come from?' I asked. She took hold of my hand and started tossing it up and down the way she used to, knocking my fingertips up then catching hold of them. 'I don't know,' she said. 'Is that bad?'" (Lem, 2017 (1961); location 864).

A doubled image of the Solaris enigma, she exists only because she does, without a definite consciousness. All she knows is that she must follow Kelvin everywhere, like a shadow, or an uncanny blend of Eurydice and the mythical Erinyes, goddesses of vengeance who never ceased pursuing their victims, even if Harey is never hostile. On the contrary, it is Kelvin who will try to destroy her first incarnation, sending her on a one-way trip in a rocket, and she is the one, after a failed suicide attempt, who will ask Snaut to destroy her.

Violence, Lem seems to suggest, is the ultimate limit of reason, replacing language by negative action. Kelvin will learn through Snaut that Sartorius plans to attack the ocean with X-rays to destroy it.

“ ‘It’s very simple. It’ll be a neutrino antifield. Ordinary matter will remain untouched. The only thing to be destroyed will be... neutrino systems. You understand?’ He gave a satisfied smile. I sat there with my mouth agape” (Lem, 2017 (1961), location 2102).

Mankind’s logic seems keen on destroying what cannot be understood, as it is perceived as a physical threat, although the Solaris ocean has never directly killed anyone. In the same logic, even if the real purpose of the “guests” is unknown, they are interpreted as menacing.

Harey, for instance, cannot formulate why she is here and cannot remember her past life, yet feels compelled to follow Kelvin everywhere. Two contradictory possibilities emerge: either she has been sent to spy on Kelvin, or she might simply be expressing love, literally, which is, after all, to “always be close to the one you love.” However, this constant presence becomes a torture for the hosts, in a very similar way to the French existentialist author Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1944 play *No Exit*, where three opposing characters are condemned to remain together in a small room until the end of times. In *Solaris*, communication indeed seems based in a very similar way on a psychological suffering between “host” and “guest”, although there is no sadistic intention directly related to the “guests” behavior, at least in Kelvin’s situation. Violence, as we pointed out, comes solely through human intentions, with the exception of Harey’s failed suicide attempt. This, however, is motivated by Kelvin’s apparent lack of love for her, a repetition of what happened in the psychologist’s real life. But if the repetition appears to become a pattern, the result on Solaris are not the same than on Earth: If Kelvin managed to egoistically “forget” Harey on Earth, on Solaris he will finally assume his responsibility.

“ ‘And you’re sure it’s not her but me that you ... Me?’

‘Yes. You. I don’t know. I’m afraid that if you were really her, I’d not be able to love you.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I did something terrible.’

‘To her?’

‘Yes. When we were—’ (Lem, 2017 (1961), location 2420).

The pattern is momentarily broken, although communication remains both challenged and challenging, as Harey resents the permanent distance that Kelvin imposes between them. Sex itself cannot be a solution; even if some of Harey’s descriptions in the novel could be categorized as erotic, Lem does not give any indication on the subject, except that Kelvin wakes up next to her a number of times.

The fact that sexual intercourse is not described, or even alluded to, can, of course, be related to either the tight Communist censorship of the 1960s, or from a puritan side side of Lem, without one necessarily excluding each other. But the fact remains that nothing sexual is hinted in the novel, although Harey is often described as a beautiful person. The direct communication that sexuality can represent, as a physical interface between two people, is completely erased from the narrative. In Sartre’s play, *No Exit*, the characters are, on the contrary, engaged in an hopeless erotic chase: the male character is desired by the heterosexual Estelle, who is herself desired by the lesbian Inès. As it is impossible for all characters to satisfy the desire of the others, they must endure endless frustration. The possibility of a “sexual” situation is never evoked by Lem. Sexuality is purely absent, as outside the boundary of communication. The reader will not know if Kelvin and Harey have remained chaste or not, but whatever the case, it has no incidence in their thoughts or discussions.

#### 4. THE SYMBOLISM OF NOTHINGNESS

If the Solaris “ocean” cannot speak, it can however produce or create (the notion is at the center of heated “Solaristics” debates) physical shapes that have been called “Mimoids” by Earth scientists.

“More often than not the mimoid produces magnified copies; at times it distorts them, creating caricatures or grotesque simplifications, especially of machines. It goes without saying that the material is always the same, a rapidly decoloring mass that, when flung into the air, instead of falling hangs there, joined by easily broken umbilical cords to the base, across which it crawls, at the same time contracting, narrowing or expanding as it fluidly assumes the most complex patterns” (Lem, 2017 (1961), location 1856).

These structures which have apparently no purpose seem to have fascinated scientists since the discovery of the planet. Are they natural, and only defined by the primordial instinct of the “ocean,” like cobwebs or honeycombs, or are they intentional, but impossible to decipher, like some form of

abstract or Surrealist art? The reference to Surrealism is hardly random, as one of the scientists who became fascinated by them and died studying them is named André Berton, which is a transparent anagram of the famous founder of Surrealism, André Breton. What is more, the shapes themselves seem to evoke landscapes by Salvador Dali, Yves Tanguy and Giorgio de Chirico. This clue is stressed by the fact that Kelvin is a psychologist, who was supposed to help Gibarian in his studies. The oneiric descriptions of the structures, the reference to Breton and Kelvin's occupation point to the possibility of a "dreaming planet," only aware of reality through the filter of its dreams. The result, though, is that interpretation proves impossible and that description remains the only tool left to the protagonists. Like spectators confronted with a Surrealist painting, the scientists on the planet can only project their own visions onto the Mimoids. They exist no matter what, beyond any explanation, as the sterile science of Solaristics seem to self-prove.

This opens for a whole new aspect of language and communication, which is the very ancient art of dream interpretation. However, if Jacob of the Ancient Testament could explain the Pharaoh's dreams, no one can decipher those of the Solaris ocean. These structures reveal nothing, from afar or from closer inspection. They appear as constantly morphing and ephemeral labyrinths, that imply some kind of awareness, as the ocean imitates human shapes and architectures, but are nonetheless undecipherable. This situation ultimately opens up for a radical questioning of all forms of "communication" as all attempts to understand the Solaris ocean's seem doomed to failure, even when it is sending "guests" to the crew. On Solaris, all rational explanations reach a dead-end, and only an fruitless exegesis of reality remains possible.

The failure of the Mimoids to share any kind of meaning is reminiscent, on our planet, to the famous Linear A riddle. The script called Linear A was found on a tablet in Crete by Sir Arthur Evans in the 1950s, along with other tablets bearing the Linear B script. It is an circular inscription with ideograms that until now have proven impossible to decipher, although some are common with Linear B (which can be read). Even Artificial Intelligence programs have failed to break the code. It therefore exists as an undeniable object which can be seen in a museum, but also as undefined artefact bearing signs that could be a meaningful or at least informative message—or not. Its reality is therefore a paradox as, until it is deciphered, we can only attest of its materiality, but not of its purposed intention. Like the ocean on Solaris, its symbols dance under our eyes without making any sense.

Once again, the connection between rationality and our desire for explanation seem to collide, as with Harey's mind-boggling presence. In Solaris, Lem seems to voluntarily link rationality with the ability to put anything that exists into words, whether in language, symbols or simply written

down. And language, conversely, is what allows us to comfort this epistemic rationality and give it a shared meaning. The loss of reason is the ultimate human fear, which is expressed in the novel when Kelvin realizes, through a scientific experiment, that Harey's body is actually made of nothing.

“What had actually happened? What did it mean? This body, seemingly so slender and frail—at its deepest level had turned out to be made of nothingness?” (Lem, 2017 (1961), location 1602).

The discovery of such an impossibility can here be easily connected to the Linear A example presented above: Harey is a total enigma, like the Mimoids, because she has no structure and therefore no reference to help define her. In clear, having no atoms, Harey cannot be explained, in the same way a language without equivalent is impossible to translate. Hieroglyphs and cuneiform, for instance, were only deciphered when an object bearing various languages it could be compared too (the Rosetta stone for hieroglyphs, the Beshitun inscription for cuneiform) was discovered. Solaris, however, is unique and there are no equivalent planets in the known cosmos, making any comparison, and thus communication, impossible, at least through our own perspective and systems. The Solaris ocean is the untranslatable personified, the wall against which all our rational human tools fail and break, and its otherness is both undeniable and unconquerable.

As Manfred Geier expresses it in his article, *Stanislaw Lem's Fantastic Ocean: Toward a Semantic Interpretation of "Solaris"*:

“In view of the ontological alienness of the ocean in relation to human beings, its ‘meaning’ can only be expressed negatively: it consists of holding up before human beings a mirror of both their anthropomorphic and geocentric limit-edness. If there is any purpose/meaning at all, it lies in the attempt to conquer Solaris, not in Solaris itself” (Geier, 1992, 195).

## 5. CONCLUSION

The main question that subsides once one had finished reading Solaris is how can mankind tackle an otherness so extreme that it cannot fit within the spectrum of any human language, whether based on letters, numbers, signs or symbols. Stanislaw Lem saw himself as an atheist, based on a moral position:

“To start from my personal view, I am an atheist—for moral reasons. I am of the opinion that you would recognize a creator by his creation, and the world appears to me to be put together in such a painful way that I prefer to believe that it was not created by anyone than to think that somebody created this in-

tionally. In the first place, for moral reasons” (Lem, Engel, interview, 1984).

This, of course, explains why he resented Tarkovski’s religious interpretation of the novel so much. It also clarifies what he thought of Soderbergh’s missing the point by focusing on Kelvin’s love for Harey. There is no “sublime” in *Solaris*, as nothing is revealed. The reality of *Solaris*’s ocean lies in its pure existence, and nothing else. It is neither inspiring, nor pushing mankind forward—on the contrary, it lies like a huge obstacle that ultimately must be destroyed, once all the exegesis have failed. The *Solaris* library and its endless rows of useless texts (as well as this essay) are a collection of rational processes projected on the impossible. The *Solaris* ocean is the embodiment of all the possibilities of human understanding, as well as its ultimate failure.

Otherness only opens up to the limitations of human understanding, and there is no epiphany for Kelvin in the end. As a mirror of Albert Camus’s protagonist Meursegault in *The Stranger* who “hopes” to be met with cries of hatred the day of his execution, Kelvin decides to stay on the planet and hopelessly wait for Harey’s return.

“Yet to leave meant to strike out that perhaps slim, perhaps only imagined chance concealed in the future. [...] In the name of what? The hope of her return? I had no hope. Yet expectation lived on in me—the last thing she had left behind. What further consummations, mockeries, torments did I still anticipate? I had no idea, as I abided in the unshaken belief that the time of cruel wonders was not yet over” (Lem, 2017 (1961), location 3386).

The important words here are “expectation” and “anticipate,” as they are linked with a conscious state of mind. It is definitely an existential position, close this time to Camus’s Sisyphus feeling happy as he eternally pushes the rock up the hill. Kelvin’s position is a rational choice in front of a manifested “absurd,” and if assuming his choice does not bring him any possibility of freedom or happiness, it gives him nonetheless a meaning. With no hope to cling on to, Kelvin sides with the rational side of the tragic instead of the sublime heroic version. Kelvin’s decision could thus be a key that Lem discreetly hands to his reader: absolute otherness can only be accepted as such through an existential decision, even if the reasoning seems to only lead to an unresolved absurdity. Kelvin, as an existential protagonist who has probably read Sartre, knows the difference between belief and decision: in belief, there is a suspension of reason, whereas a decision is a consequence of reason. By deciding to wait for the radically incomprehensible other, Kelvin becomes an absolute, tragic and heroic assumed human anti-hero. Faced with the impossibility of understanding and the gift of prediction, Kelvin places his existence within the possibility of reward, as tiny as it might ap-

pear. In *No Exit*, there is a brief moment when the door of Hell opens, but none of the characters take the chance to leave the room where they are imprisoned. Kelvin, on the contrary, is waiting for that moment, even if it may never occur. When all communications fail, one can only rely on expectation, the sole notion to conjugate the rational with the irrational in an eternal human loop.

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