Fiasco Short Guide

Fiasco by Stanisław Lem

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Contents

Characters

On one level Fiasco attests to Lem's fascination with problems common to the entire human race. Long sections of the novel are given over to descriptions of, or straight philosophical reflections on, the future history of our civilization.

In this sense it is again the accuracy of certain hypotheses and theories, and the broad techno-evolutionary perspective of the human nature and society, that occupy the book's narrative center.

The presence of a Dominican priest, Father Arago, among the crew of Euridice seems, for example, to have been dictated exclusively by Lem's need for a philosophical and reflective focus. One gets the impression that Arago, much like other characters, is little more than a spokesman in the debates that the author conducts on the pages of Fiasco. This impression is aided by the fact that, notwithstanding Lem's protests of psychosocial realism, he includes no women in the mission to Beta Harpyiae. Even if the Virtual Reality technology available to the astronauts could offset the biological consequences of such unisex flight, it seems less than plausible to have a Vatican representative instead of female crew members.

The crew of Euridice consists of ten astronauts: Steergard, the captain; Gerbert, a psychonicist (Lem's neologism for a novel medical profession); Nakamura, an astrophysicist; Polassar, a gravistician; Kirsting, Rotmont, and El Salam, scientists; Arago, the priest; the first pilot Harrach; and the second pilot Tempe.

The protagonist, a twenty-nine-year-old Mark Tempe, gives the story its much needed human dimension. All others —who, incredibly, address each other mostly by their last names during their drawn out voyage—are poorly developed as individuals. The mystery surrounding Tempe is that he is literally resurrected from the dead. Ironically, in the final scene, it is his fatal mistake in forgetting to communicate with the ship that brings the brutal reprisal and the death of the alien planet.

Following a host of administrative errors during the preparation for the expedition, the doctors on Euridice receive the frozen bodies of Commander Pirx, a hero of several other Lem's books, and Angus Parvis, the pilot of a supply ship that lands on Titan in the first chapter. Both perished while heroically attempting to rescue lost members of the mine on Titan. Unfortunately, the doctors can revive only one of them, by cannibalizing organs from both, and the secret of the hero's identity is preserved throughout the novel. Not only are there no material clues to determine which of the two pilots had been brought back to life, but the "living undead" himself, who eventually assumes the name of Mark Tempe, can offer no insights about his past due to a post-traumatic amnesia.

Lem's protagonist plays an important role in the structure of the novel. He is an outsider in the mission who must assimilate many new concepts and much scientific knowledge in order to become a legitimate member of the crew. Tempe becomes the recipient of

lectures on the history of humankind, its technological development, and the goals and background of Euridice's mission. The point of view of an apprentice who slowly learns about our futuristic civilization is the narrative vehicle through which the author both alienates and makes accessible a host of novel concepts. Regrettably, even Lem's undeniable mastery in synthesizing an array of new technologies and theories fails him occasionally, resulting in highly informative but somewhat colorless discursive passages. "Literature, much as philosophy, should never bore its readers to death," quipped Lem in our 1992 interview, leaving open the question whether Fiasco fully succeeds in this respect.

An interesting role in the story is given to DEUS, Euridice's on-board computer.

The machine is an eleventh member of the crew and, even though all strategic decisions are made by humans, it participates in all councils during the negotiations with Quinta. A word must also be said about the inhabitants of Quinta who, although they remain shrouded in mystery until the very end, are active participant in the events, becoming known to us through their actions. Differ as they may, the wartlike aliens clearly represent some of the tragic aspects of the human race. Their planet, disunited by two opposing ideological blocks, is a sad reflection of our recent history written largely by the political division of the Cold War.

Social Concerns

In Fiasco, Stanislaw Lem contemplates the chances for survival of humanity.

He uses the death of an alien civilization to symbolize the self-destructive potential latent in our own society. It is no accident that the planet Quinta, to which Earth's scientists travel, is in the end mercilessly blown out of the sky by their super-weapons. Noble proclamations of professional neutrality aside, the Earth's emissaries allow themselves to be drawn into the local war, and in the process become military dictators whose technological superiority makes them disregard the wishes of the Quintans. In this tragic novel Lem cautions that an accidental disturbance in the socio-military equilibrium can lead to destruction on a planetary scale, whether Quintan or our own.

In Fiasco, Lem gives voice to his anxiety not in terms of abstract moral or ethical axioms, but by relating them to the immediate reality of the social and political present. He persistently returns to the subjects of military technology, its destructive power and calculated strategy, so much that they threaten to overwhelm the latter half of the novel. The writer warns of the threat from the arms race which, despite the official end to the Cold War and a proliferation of peace treaties, shows no signs of dissipating.

Mired in the endless preparations for war, our civilization might be paving the way to its eventual self-destruction. If we compare this view with the hopes Lem still expressed in The Invincible (1964; see separate entry)—that technological progress will be balanced by the recognition of its limitations—the result is a picture of a writer who has understood the limits of his humanism.

In one of the key moments in the book, Mark Tempe looks in the mirror and murmurs to himself, "You'll see the Quintans." It is clear that under the guise of an alien civilization Lem mirrors our own. His concern is similar to that which drove H. G. Wells to write one his most celebrated works, The War of the Worlds (1898; see separate entry). Popular imagination remembers Wells's Martians as bloodthirsty invaders, alien to us in all respects. But the author of The War of the Worlds is at pains to suggest that the Martians are an evolved form of life which, in the future, we ourselves could become. Repulsed by the invaders, we might in fact be repulsed by an indelible part of ourselves. In the same manner, for all their differences in history, technology, and even physical appearance, Lem's Quintans shockingly mirror some of the more disturbing attributes of humans. Although with reluctance, the Earth's crew end up dealing with Quintans in the same dictatorial and destructive fashion as the Martian invaders.

In Fiasco, the latest and most likely the last of Lem's fictional works, the author has come full circle from his very first Man From Mars (1946). The pattern of events in these two novels, separated by over four decades of philosophical reflection, is strikingly similar. Two civilizations come into direct contact; among military considerations attempts are made to establish meaningful communication; when these attempts falter the result is a ruthless extermination of the alien. Observing our civilization over forty years of wars and conflict, Lem records little progress in the sphere of moral and

humane conflict resolution. The only "progress," he points out, has been confined to the development of new technologies, especially instruments of war.

The growing chasm between the ever more potent means of mass destruction and the outdated colonial policies favored by Earth's nations is one of Lem's enduring social concerns. Military might and scientific expertise rarely go hand in hand with moral and political maturity. Sadly, the mere availability of powerful weapons frequently determines the shape of national policies, in times of crisis becoming their sole dictator. The arms race will never stop as long as everyone remains convinced that others may exploit peace initiatives to tip the balance of power in their favor. In Fiasco Lem considers the most frightening (because most likely) variant of global war in which no side wants to initiate or escalate hostilities, but in which all sides are relentlessly drawn into the conflict they had hoped to avoid at all costs.

Lem writes: "Many considered history an accumulation of cruelties, of senseless subjugations—senseless even without considering ethics, since neither the aggressors nor their victims derived anything." These words summarize his growing pessimism about our species' capacity for moral growth. Human messengers of peace and interstellar communication, wielding almost unlimited scientific and military power, and failing to establish contact with Quinta on their terms, exterminate the only other form of intelligence known to them in the universe. Today, at the turn of the new century and the new millennium, despite decades-long searches for extraterrestrial life, humanity remains the only known form of sentient life in space. Destroyers of another civilization in Fiasco, we may yet become destroyers of our own, given the shortsighted realpolitik which dominates political behavior on Earth.

It is significant that the crew of Euridice—the ship that bears them to the shores of Quinta—includes many sophisticated scientists. Armed with their expertise and a host of theories on the evolution of life in the universe, they seek contact to write a new chapter in the history of cosmic civilizations. So obsessed are they with contact at all costs that achieving their objective becomes more important than the right of Quintans to determine their own fate. "Is Fiasco a lament for human weakness or a vision of humanity in the grip of an unrelenting destiny?" asks one critic. Perhaps both. But it would be a mistake to see the novel as an elegy on humanity's unregenerate nature. Lem is a moral critic who tells his story in order to point out that moral imperfections cannot be used as an excuse for not trying to reform them.

Techniques

In Fiasco Lem uses a very original technique of double projection into the future. In the first and by far the longest fiasco chapter, we are introduced to Earth's civilization in the foreseeable but already distant future. The action takes place on Titan, one of the moons of Saturn, and follows Angus Parvis in his rescue attempt to find missing men from a nearby mine. The futuristic setting is reinforced by several details, carefully chosen for their vividness. Parvis's ship brings to Titan weather radiators powerful enough to disperse the moon's pernicious mists.

An array of gigantic mirrors (selectors) in stationary orbit collects and reflects sunlight onto Titan's night side. Furthermore, Parvis's life is preserved thanks to the vitrifax technology which deepfreezes his body after his gigantic strider is crushed during the rescue.

But the single greatest symbol of the power and technology at the miners' disposal is the Digla, a strider-type machine the size of some of today's sea vessels. The list of its parameters includes: "Maximum operating power 14,000 kilowatts; overload limit 19,000 kw; rest mass 1680 tons; reactor multishielded Tokamak with Foucault converter; hydraulic drive; main transmission, and gears by Rolls Royce; chassis made in Sweden." In a triumph of transformed function, the steering system of this colossus consists only of several colored cubes and a rumpled piece of clothing. This body suit collects impulses from the rider's body and translates them into a chain of commands for the giant machine.

And yet, as soon as the reader begins to feel confident in this novel environment, he is in for an unsettling experience. Without a change of pace, Lem picks up the action in the second chapter several centuries later. The familiar present from the beginning of the book is now solidly in the past and the reader must assimilate a whole new range of astounding powers available to the Earth that dispatches a spaceship to Quinta.

The era of interstellar travel requires great amounts of energy and its initial source is the entire mass of Titan. In preparation excavations are conducted by striders next to which the Digla, so proudly described by Parvis, is only a dwarf. Perhaps most awe-inspiring, our future civilization is capable of sidereal engineering, i.e. of manipulation of energies which rival those of stars. Lem inspires wonder by contrasting the era of the Quintan mission with the era of the Digla, inviting an inevitable three-stage comparison with the Earth of today.

The style of Fiasco, although not devoid of moments of high-speed action and mounting suspense, is not as smooth and accomplished as in Lem's earlier works.

But it is clearly the philosophical demands of the novel's theme rather than lack of skill that make for a slightly halting narration. In fact, in the two short adventure stories woven into the novel Lem proves once again that he is a raconteur without equal. Both of these old fashioned Indiana Jones-type tales are suspenseful and imaginative page-

turners which, in the opinion of every reviewer, will have the reader wish they had become full-blown stories.

The novel abounds with symbolism, perhaps most prominent in the names of various celestial bodies, mining settlements, geological formations and spaceships. Curiously, the author does not reach for any single body of myths or legends to give Fiasco a unifying and accessible frame of reference. It has been an old astronomical tradition to delve into ancient mythology for names of planets and moons in our solar system, and the towering presence of Saturn and Titan, mythical children of Earth and Heaven, is keenly felt in the opening chapter. The mines, called Grail and Marlin, refer to the Arthurian legends of chivalry (Merlin was king Arthur's powerful court magician), also detectable in the protagonist, Parvis, whose name is a corrupted version of one of Arthur's knights, Parcifal/Percival. The names of some geological formations like Gorgon and Typhon are lifted from old Hellenic myths, as are Hermes, the giant rocket which carries humans to Beta Harpyiae, its main computer DEUS (Zeus), and Euridice, the ship which makes the last leg to Quinta. Once Euridice is in proximity to Quinta, a scouting mission is carried out by an unmanned ship called Gabriel which bears the name of God's messenger in the Christian tradition.

Back during the Grail episode Parvis takes his Digla into an ice formation where the missing miners had perished, which the settlers on Titan call the Birnam Wood. This reference to a moving forest in Shakespeare's Macbeth is most appropriate as the glaciers of frozen gas which adorn the surface of Titan shift constantly, becoming a moving jungle of gargantuan icy thickets. It is in his description of these outlandish formations that Lem's style becomes the most lyrical.

The narrator, moving through these monstrous structures, animates them into a cemetery of some prehistoric dinosaur giants. He sees enormous ribs, colossal spider skeletons, blood-speckled bulbous eggs, crystal fangs, and massive vertebrae of icy spinal columns in the tangle of glasslike frozen gas. Lem captures the awe and immortal beauty in the works of Nature that were not designed by anyone and not meant to be seen by anyone.

Themes

Considering that Fiasco is Lem's farewell work, it is not surprising to find in it many themes from the various stages of his career. In fact this last novel is a kind of encyclopedic summary of the problems and debates which the writer has conducted over the years on the pages of his fiction and nonfiction. The most prominent among them is the theme of SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence), brought into focus by the astronauts' long journey to the distant star system Beta Harpyiae. Much as in his other writings, Lem avoids the facile extremes of describing contact as a meeting of two aggressors bent on wresting scientific secrets from the other, or a handshake across space between cosmic comrades who inhabit different but amicably disposed Utopias. The overriding theme of Fiasco is one of incomprehension and deep incompatibility of concepts, theories and, ultimately, civilizations.

Another forceful theme, previously elaborated in "Upside Down Evolution" (in One Human Minute, 1984-1986) and Peace on Earth (1987), is the evolution of military technology. The author speculates that, with progressive miniaturization and rise in computing power, the future will belong to micro-systems not unlike viruses or bacteria whose hostile behavior will be characterized by an increasing autonomy of action. In the worst case scenario these intellectronic (intelfigent and electronic) micro-arsenals may precipitate an era of crypto-hostilities.

The scientists of Euridice face a problem of this type when they must decide whether the destructive action initiated by a kind of space pollen dispersed by the Quintans is its natural (i.e., nonaggressive) behavior or a deliberate attack. Once weapons reach the stage when they can imitate natural disasters—earthquakes, typhoons, ozone depletion—the victims of these calamities will face a terrible dilemma, being unable to determine whether to attribute their losses to Nature or to an act of war. Lem cautions that the uncertainty and confusion provoked by such crypto-hostilities may trigger wars of unheard-of proportions among nations ravaged by cataclysms with no apparent enemy to blame, yet armed with an ineradicable suspicion of being under attack.

Throughout the novel Lem often suspends the action to provide the scientific background behind the theme of space exploration and the chances of encountering intelligent life. In these "lectures" we are given the concise history of search for life in outer space and a synopsis of contemporary theories on the evolution of cosmic civilizations. The greatest puzzle of cosmology and xeno-biology is the discrepancy between predictions that life ought to be teeming in the universe and the verdict of radio-listening stations which record no signals that could be attributed to technological means. One way to explain this Universal Silence is a hypothesis which reflects another of Lem's frequent themes. It is hard to believe that the development of technology powerful enough to beam messages into the sky could occur in a scientific vacuum. More likely a civilization sophisticated enough to possess means of interstellar communication will also have developed technologies of other kinds, including powerful weapons. It might be a tragic regularity of technological progress that the invention of means of mass destruction will exceed the abilities of their inventors not to use them. As

such it can lead to the extinction of whole civilizations before they can unite and direct their attention to other planets.

Another theme which is developed at length is the evolution of machine intelligence. On Euridice the everyday running of the ship and the responsibility for the well-being of the crew is assigned to DEUS, a super-computer of the last generation. This ultimate thinking machine represents the terminal stage in computer evolution; as Lem puts it, "no other [computer] could have greater calculating power." Eventually, miniaturization must reach the limits imposed by quantum properties of matter. Describing DEUS's capabilities the author debunks old myths of machine revolt and suggests ways in which human thought will remain forever irreplaceable by even the most sophisticated machine intelligence. There is little doubt that society will increasingly rely on computers, especially in situations which demand even faster-than-human or more reliable powers of analysis and response. But it is a mistake to think that humanity may ever completely surrender its goal-setting and value-setting decisions to machines for the simple reason that only we have a vested interest in the fate of our society.

The list of leitmotifs which at one point or another appear in Fiasco is, of course, much longer and includes topics in information theory, probability, game theory, evolution, cosmology and philosophy of science. A problem of another dimension is the ethical dilemmas which beset the scientists of Euridice during their long and fruitless negotiations with the warring factions on Quinta. Lem has always been an ardent critic of the role of science in perpetuating the arms race. So much contemporary research is underwritten by the Pentagon that in some areas—e.g. space research—almost half of all projects are given over to secret military experiments. Indirect control of research by the military complex makes it easier for individual scientists to feel less morally responsible for their work. Moreover, lucrative spinoffs of scientific inquiry erode moral scruples even further as researchers (bankrolled by big business or the military) vie to develop and patent the next technological bonanza.

Scientific ends seem more and more to justify the means, and Fiasco depicts the tragic results of such crass pragmatism.

Lem gives this theme even more resonance by developing it in two short stories interpolated in the novel. The first involves two Spanish adventurers who greedily attempt to plunder the gold deposits of a powerful Indian tribe.

"There is no force that can open the Mouth of Mazumac if He does not wish it," the narrator sums up the fiasco of their quest, in a clear allusion to the attempts made by Earthmen to force dialogue with the Quintans. There seems no force that can open the Mouth of Quinta, either, and the reluctance to relinquish the goals of the mission becomes a justification for turning the planet into ashes.

The other story bears even more directly on the fiasco on Quinta and the death of its inhabitants who, in the eyes of Mark Tempe, resemble naked and defenseless termite mounds. In this second narrative an African explorer torches and dynamites his way

through a city of mounds built by strange termite species to get to the heart of the colony and plunder its treasure.

Lem condemns such scientific irresponsibility by making it clear that, loath as they are to abandon their battle plan, the astronauts' mission has, in fact, been a success. It has established that the human race is not alone in the universe; moreover, the exchange of messages with Quinta reveals that its evolution parallels that of Earth, confirming the correctness of the Ortega-Nilssen theory about the rise of extra-terrestrial life and intelligence. The latter finding is perhaps more important for it leaves the door open to future contacts with other civilizations.

And yet human obsession with enforcing contact brings life on Quinta to an end, proving that contact and cooperation on human terms means litde more than surrender. Let us compromise, insist the scientists from Earth—let us do it our way!

Key Questions

In so many respects Fiasco is a novel of the future. It vibrates with the forceful impact of new science; it offers an exciting new perspective on the human race and its history; it speculates on the possible paths to which our future may lead us. Yet underneath this cloak of futuristic speculation lies the sad and twisted Earth of today.

1. In what respects could the mission to Quinta be considered a success, and in what respects is it a failure?

2. At which point do you think the scientists could/should have desisted from enforcing contact, leaving Quinta to its fate?

3. In the style of narration and apparent subject matter the two interpolated adventure stories are in contrast to the rest of the story. What role do they play in its overall structure?

4. Did you find the author's technique of double projection into the future—the era of the Grail crisis and the era of the voyage to Quinta—effective? What is the reason for a two-stage narrative strategy?

5. Can you explain the significance of at least some of the numerous symbolic names which appear in the story?

6. Although impossible in strictly physical terms, Lem's description of the use of a black hole to effect a jump in time appears quite convincing. What makes it so?

7. Which of the stunning range of future technologies which Lem forecasts on the pages of Fiasco do you find most original?

8. Did you come to identify with the protagonist, Mark Tempe, in the course of the novel? Why?

9. How does Lem's depiction of Euridice's central computer, DEUS, compare to machines of this kind from other works of science fiction?

10. Do you agree that Lem sets his book in outer space and in a distant future in order to tell us something significant about Earth and the present?

Literary Precedents/Related Titles

The discussion of precedents for Fiasco could easily turn into a full-scale analysis of Lem's entire literary career. The novel is full of elements, allusions and even direct references to the themes from a great number of his major fictions. In this sense Fiasco is the final chapter in the author's lifelong work, openly bringing its multiple themes and techniques to a conclusion. Lem's frequent return to his major themes invites an approach which can be called "anthologizing." By rearranging his works according to different criteria one can gain valuable insights into his development as a writer and the evolution of his thought.

The most obvious precedent is the cycle of stories about pilot (later Commander) Pirx who returns in Fiasco in the person of Mark Tempe, a protagonist who, in the body resurrected from the dead Pirx or Parvis, may be either of them. The rising up from the dead alludes to The Investigation (1959) and Solaris (1961) in which, respectively, the eerie effects of statistical fluctuations and the actions of the solaristic ocean bring people back to life with haunting results.

Space travel and the subject of life on other planets echoes Eden (1959), whose military struggles and political oppression seem to be a direct precedent for the ideological and military discord on Quinta. The subject of communication with the alien and the resulting feeling of misunderstanding and incomprehension have been explored by Lem with unforgettable effects in his spiritual diary, His Master's Voice (1968). The evolution of military technology and weapon systems designed on the principle of bacterial or viral organisms go back to their discursive and narrative treatment in, respectively, "The Upside Down Evolution" and Peace on Earth (1987). Finally, the overall structure of Fiasco, with its futile attempts at contact and an unnecessary extermination of alien beings, reminds of Lem's very first science fiction novel (which he now forbids to reprint), Man From Mars (1946).

Even some of the specific imagery or techniques in Fiasco can be traced back to his earlier works. The "skeletal, weblike structures: cocoons, nests, club moss, euglenas, gills pulled from the bodies of fish but still pulsing, because everything, in a constant drizzle, crept and coiled"— these images of Titan's icy jungle cannot but evoke the unearthly formations of Solaris's ocean, equally difficult to describe in any terrestrial language. The mirror scene in which Tempe sees his own reflection while pondering the mystery of the alien is only one in a series of such encounters with the self experienced by many of Lem's protagonists. As if to drive the point home, Lem includes an even more elaborate version of such selfreflection when Parvis chases his own image (or rather that of the Digla in which he rides) in the Titan's clouds. This is an almost literal transposition of a key scene from The Invincible (1964; see separate entry) in which Rohan, also in the throes of a search for missing men, is startled by a massive human silhouette reflected in the Black Cloud above him—his own.

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