

An Afterlife

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We are getting to the end of visioning¹

1.

The issue of *translation* permeates Stanislaw Lem's novels. In *His Master's Voice*, with its account of attempts to decipher an extraterrestrial transmission, the issue is explicit and integral; with *Solaris*, through its cinematic and artistic interpretations, as well as its actual conversions from Lem's Polish, the issue lives on and out of the text – it becomes an *afterlife*.

Solaris's translation problems, however, like *His Master's Voice*, have a narrative source: in the encounter of humans, used to interpreting themselves and their world, with a being that is radically not human and not of their world. The being – an apparently sentient ocean that covers the eponymous planet – despite having been the object of scientific research for several decades, has consistently defied the experts' comprehension and their attempts to communicate with it. Some have come to regard the *Solaris* 'affair' as a 'lost cause', for others its inscrutable surface – again like the signal of *His Master's Voice* – is 'essentially a test of ourselves, of the limitations of human knowledge.'²

What invites, almost obligates attempts at interpretation, its *mysterium fascinans*, is the behaviour of the ocean: it *creates*. The liquid surface solidifies into huge sculptural formations, at times uncannily reproducing nearby objects – the 'Solarists' name these 'mimoids' – at other times forming at random into enormous and bizarre structures which 'bear no resemblance whatsoever to anything on Earth'³. Where the mimoids are figurative these 'symetriads' are abstract,

and abstract 'raised to the power of N': totally unstable and capricious, unbound by the laws of physics, each with their own unique invented 'geometry'. Their countless transformations appear interlinked, like the mathematical counterpoint of a musical score; but if a symetriad is a 'symphony in geometry, ... we lack the ears to hear it'⁴.

Here is translation, then, both solicited and frustrated, but not only for the scientists attempting to 'read' *Solaris* - also for the reader attempting to read *Solaris*. That is, the descriptions of the Solarian ocean and its formations, although vivid in their details, do not amount to - do not translate into - any kind of comprehensive visualization. Particulars over-proliferate, obscure and contradict each other; more general nominations, like a 'symphony in geometry', are willfully anti-visual: the account of a 'symetriad', despite - or because of - its wealth, leaves the reader unable to 'picture' it. Consider the following:

The first rays of the red sun shone through the window, a blanket of red flame rippled over the surface of the ocean, and I realized that the vast expanse which had not been disturbed by the slightest movement in the past four days was beginning to stir. The dark ocean was abruptly covered by a thin veil of mist which seemed at the same time to have a very palpable consistency. Here and there the mist shook, and tremors spread out to the horizon in all directions. Now the ocean disappeared altogether beneath thick, corrugated membranes with pink swellings and pearly depressions, and these strange waves suspended above the ocean swirled suddenly and coalesced into great balls of blue-green foam. A tempest of wind hurled them upwards to the height of the Station, and wherever I looked, immense membranous wings were soaring in the red sky. Some of these wings of foam, which blotted out the sun, were pitch-black, and others shone with highlights of purple as they were exposed obliquely to the sunlight. Still the phenomenon continued, as if the ocean were mutating, or shedding an old scaly skin. Now and again the dark surface of the ocean could be glimpsed through a gap that

the foam filled in an instant. Wings of foam planed all around me, only a few yards from the window, and one swooped to rub against the window pane like a silken scarf. As the ocean went on giving birth to these fantastic birds, the first flights were already dissipating high above, decomposing at their zenith into transparent filaments.⁵

The effect is the readerly *experience* of - rather than knowledge of - the ocean's otherness. With 'no semantic system ... available to illustrate the behaviour'⁶ of the ocean, there are no laws by which to encode the behaviour as a message, let alone to transfer and decode the message into a receiving system - that is, most schematically, to translate it. For the reader the problem is not that the laws are unknown, but that the laws, which are the rhetorical codes of ekphrasis, are broken and the message 'scrambled'. And if a symetriad cannot be assimilated to subjectivity - neither comprehended nor comprehensively pictured - then surely an empirical, public picture of a symetriad is out of the question.



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2.

But that is what Dominique Signoret claims to have made.

Signoret is a French artist, born in 1964. In 2006 he created a website dedicated to *Solaris*, in order to exhibit pictures ‘realized according to the descriptions ... made of the phenomena arising on the surface of the planet’⁸. As the website’s introductory text relates, Signoret was inspired to do so by an antecedent lack – the phenomena do not feature in either Andre Tarkovski’s or Steven Soderbergh’s films of *Solaris* – but he also, as an exegete, wanted to ‘follow the descriptions’ in order ‘to realize the definitely foreign nature’⁹ of the Solarian ocean. Signoret goes on to note how Lem presents the alien being as ‘a life form so different from ours that it escapes ... attempts [at] analysis’; and how the description of the ocean’s formations with ‘scientific precision’ – taxonomized as ‘Longus, Mimoides, Agilus, Vertebroides, Symetriades, Asymetriades...’ – only goes to prove its distance from ‘human understanding’. The reader is ‘at the same time filled with wonder and challenged by [the] descriptions of these phenomena’¹¹. But do Signoret’s illustrations meet that challenge?

It seems that as illustrations they cannot. Looking at his symetriad, we can see what ‘following the descriptions’ has entailed: the transmission of only the informational or essential content – the references to colour, to ‘wings’ and ‘membranes’ and so on – and, since the description is of something in flux, only a few particles of that information, extracted and stabilized into a static image. The translation excludes any attempt – how could it not? – to suggest such non-visual characterizations as ‘a symphony in geometry’; these ‘unfathomable ... mysterious ... “poetic,”’¹² qualities are, however, what constitutes the symetriad in its alterity.

Following the descriptions, then, could only ever annul, rather than realise, the symetriad's foreign nature; a picture of a symetriad remains an impossibility, both in *res cogitans* and in *res extensa*.

3.

As if it were not enough that Signoret's translative endeavour is terminally undermined by the textual form and semantic content of its object, we must now admit of a further complication: the descriptions he has followed are not Lem's but Jean-Michel Jasienko's, the author of the French translation made in 1965. This is the kind of description (he does not specify which of the several portrayals of symetriads he draws from) Signoret has followed:

Les premiers rayons du soleil rouge illuminaient la fenêtre ; un fleuve de flammes pourpres s'écoulait à la surface de l'océan et je constatai que cette immense étendue, que nul mouvement n'avait troublée les jours précédents, commençait à remuer. Et, tout à coup, un mince voile de brume recouvrit l'océan noir ; mais cette brume pâle semblait avoir une consistance très palpable. Ça et là, un tremblement agitait la brume ; puis, progressivement, la vibration se répandit en tous sens jusqu'à l'horizon. L'océan noir disraput alors complètement sous d'épaisses membranes vallonées, avec des renflements rosés et des dépressions d'ombre nacrée. Ces étranges vagues, suspendues au-dessus de l'océan, se confon dirent brusquement dans un tumulte et il n'y eut plus qu'une tempête soulevait furieusement jusqu'à la hauteur de la Station ; et partout alentour d'immenses ailes membraneuses, sans nulle ressemblance avec des nuages, s'élançaient dans le ciel roux. Certaines de ces ailes d'écume, qui voilaient complètement le soleil, paraissaient charbonneuses ; d'autres, exposées de biais à la lumière, avaient des nuances cerise ou amarante. Et le phénomène se poursuivait, comme si l'océan était en train de muer, de rejeter une vieille peau écaillée ; par instants, la surface noire de l'océan luisait dans une ouverture, aussitôt recouverte d'écume. Des ailes d'écume planaient tout près de moi, à quelques mètres de la fenêtre ; l'une d'elles, écharpe soyeuse, frotta la vitre. Et, pendant que l'océan continuait d'engendrer ces oiseaux bizarres, les premiers essaims se dissipaient haut dans le ciel et se décomposaient au zénith en filaments transparents.¹³

How does Signoret's symetriad appear now? Drawn from a translation, its intended fidelity to Lem's words is clearly ruled out. That Signoret was *mislead* in 'following the descriptions' takes on a second, more fundamental, meaning. But does that confirm the resulting images as the traduction, the misrepresentation, they heretofore seemed to be? On the contrary: as a translation of a translation it serves to *distance* Lem's symetriad; and that distance is the reinstatement of the remoteness from knowledge of what Lem describes. Conversely, Signoret's symetriad becomes significant not through its appearance but through its role in an afterlife, the role being to indicate a forgotten and irretrievable life, both former and future, where 'all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished'¹⁴: an *ursprache*, that is, or the Solarian ocean.

'I do have to admit,' remarked Stanislaw Lem, 'that the outcome of most translations of my works is worse than the original. The most drastic is the English translation of *Solaris*, which has been translated from a very poor French translation!'¹⁵ The reader may indeed have noticed the similarity between the above English and French passages from *Solaris*. The first is Joanna Kilmartin and Steve Cox's 1970 rendering of the second. Their symetriad, then, as a translation of a translation, exists on the same genealogical stratum as Signoret's; the difference is that, at least for the hypothetically monolingual English reader, the two translations precede another, that from verbal to mental representation, which as we have seen, the text resists. If, with Lem, we envisage an authorial governance extending through the work's afterlife, the symetriad imagined from Cox and Kilmartin's text is the end point of a descending trajectory from rich to 'poor'. But its essential poverty¹⁶ as an insubstantial (in both form and content) mental representation is its *efficacy*, because unlike Signoret's representation it directly connotes the Solarian ocean's *cognitive* and *semantic* poverty, its definition as that without 'information', 'sense', or 'intention'.

Having seen how Signoret's symetriad *inadvertently indicates*, rather than deliberately realises, the 'definitely foreign nature' of the Solarian ocean, we should briefly consider the project's other stated impetus, which is the conspicuous absence of Solaris from *Solaris's* afterlife. Neither film, Signoret points out in censure, depicts the formations described by Lem. Tarkovski is partially exonerated for the unavailability of the technical means by which to do so, as well as for his attempt to intimate them, through a low 'muffled noise' heard in scenes set in the space station, 'a kind of rumble which recall[s] the presence of the gelatinous titan'.¹⁷ However, hopes that developments in technology would encourage a film-maker, 'by means of computer generated images' to 'transpose to the screen ... the extraordinary visions of the protoplasmic ocean'¹⁸ are quashed by Soderbergh's *Solaris*. There the possibility is entirely ignored in favour of 'a shoddy melodrama' which makes no 'allusion to the protoplasmic ocean'.

Signoret's complaint, which concludes with a plea for a fidelitous adaptation that 'will be finally worthy of [Lem's] formidable novel',¹⁹ tells us, despite itself, that an afterlife – 'which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living' – consists of *changes*: it is an historical process of 'the most powerful and fruitful'²⁰ kind. Tarkovski's allusive sound track marks that change, that refusal of the apparently similar, while retaining the invited and confounded visuality which is the bond of meaning with the original. To *show* the symetriad 'unchanged', as Signoret has attempted, is not only to invalidate it in its essence; the direct, digital transposition, that he sees as the cinema's possibility, entails a suppression of historical process.²¹

Coda

In the last chapter, at its very end, the protagonist Kelvin decides to remain on Solaris and commit himself to its study. He declares, in Cox and Kilmartin's rendering,

I did not know what achievements, what mockery, even what tortures still awaited me. I knew nothing, and I persisted in the faith that the time of cruel miracles was not past.²²

Kelvin's decision to labour at the face of the potentially inapprehensible is carried on an act of *trust*. It is an act that initiates all translations. It is, writes George Steiner, 'an investment of belief, underwritten by previous experience but epistemologically exposed and psychologically hazardous, in the meaningfulness of the ... adverse text. We venture a leap: we grant *ab initio* that there is something there to be understood, that the transfer will not be void.'²³ The translator's trust in the 'other' may be betrayed – as Solaris seems set to betray Kelvin – but translation, between languages, between media, between self and other, does not begin without it.

