



A Perfect Vacuum

Stanisław Lem, Michael Kandel (Translator)

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This is a collection of perfect yet imaginary reviews of nonexistent books. With insidious wit, the author beguiles us with a parade of delightful, disarmingly familiar inventions. "Lem is Harpo Marx and Franz Kafka and Isaac Asimov rolled up into one and down the white rabbit's hole" (Detroit News).

A Perfect Vacuum Details

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From Reader Review A Perfect Vacuum for online ebook

Lukasz Pruski says

"[...] And the only subterfuge the evasive Lem might still avail himself of would be a counterattack: in the assertion that it was not I, the critic, but he himself, the author, who wrote the present review and added it to - and made it part of - 'A Perfect Vacuum.'"

Whenever I begin a re-read of a Stanislaw Lem's book I am afraid of disappointment. Lem was by far the most favorite author of my youth, some 35 to 55 years ago, and I have been worrying that in re-reading his works my enthusiasm may diminish for the Polish philosopher and futurologist who is best known for his incomparable science fiction books, such as *Solaris*. I am happy to report there have been no disappointments so far and *A Perfect Vacuum* (originally published in 1971) is one of the best books I have recently read, maybe even better than Lem's *His Master's Voice* which I rated with almost five stars.

A full review would take too much space so let me just offer a few remarks about this impressive work. *A Perfect Vacuum* is set up as an exercise in metafiction where Lem offers a collection of reviews of non-existent books. In the author's stroke of genius, the collection even includes a review of the book that contains the review - how's that for advanced self-referentiality? On a similar note, in the review of (fictitious) *Gigamesh* Lem provides delicious satire on literary criticism that indulges in looking for non-existent references: after all, it is true that any reference to anything can be found anywhere if one looks hard enough.

Lem creates the author of *Gruppenführer Louis XVI* who writes about artificial reality of 17th century French royal court created in Argentina by SS officers who escaped Germany. Any older Polish reader will immediately recognize this as satire on the so-called communist government in Poland that created an artificial reality for the citizens. A contemporary reader, on the other hand, may easily make a connection to the current situation when it seems that about half of all people are unable to distinguish the artificial reality of TV shows from the actual reality. Another fictitious book under review, *Rien du tout, ou la conséquence*, pushes the meta-literature to the extreme positions: narration is eliminated to the extent that only pure language remains. The piece also contains a hilarious passage about an author who wrote *Don Quixote* from the scratch and obtained exactly the same text as the one produced by Cervantes.

Now about my three favorite pieces. The review of *De Impossibilitate Vitae*, a fictitious work halfway between mathematics and total lunacy, is a playful take on probability theory (the subject that I teach, by the way). Lem presents the author's clear and convincing explanation that his existence is a result of chains of events so improbable that it is not at all possible for him to exist. Neither is it for any other person (De Selby's observations presented in *The Third Policeman* come to mind).

Non Serviam, perhaps the deepest piece in the set, reviews a book about personetics - science and technology that enabled people to create personoids, sentient beings that exist as executing programs, computer models implemented in software. Nevertheless they are completely real to themselves; they build their culture, philosophy and even religion that seeks to embrace the Creator of their Universe. Lem, as the reviewer, emphasizes the monumental moral and ethical dilemmas of those sentient creatures' creators. Alas he takes an easy way out and only glides over the crucial issue of the origin of self-awareness.

Finally, in *New Cosmogony* Lem quotes the Nobel Prize acceptance speech of a physicist and philosopher who is one of the pioneers of a new model of cosmology - Universe as a Game - where the oldest civilizations are the players who apply minimax strategies to construct the "laws of nature." It is also here that Lem, through the fictitious physicist's words, states the audacious yet utterly brilliant thesis that the

expanding Universe serves the purpose of keeping the distance between new civilizations and the existing ones, which would cleanly account for the so-called Silentium Universi. Physics of the Universe as a by-product of sociology - it is not possible not to admire the author's (and the author's author's) cheek!

Despite Lem's usual hang-ups about sex, the piece *Sexpllosion* exudes sheer hilarity with its memorable mentions of unchastity belts, sodomobiles, cybordellics, gomorcadades (my own translations as I read the book in its original Polish version), and many, many other vehicles of pleasure. *Perycalipsis* is also a hoot with its spiritual masturbation, that is getting off on promises rather than releases. Phenomenal stuff!

Great book: funny yet deep and thought-provoking. In fact, now I love it more than 45 years ago. Despite my stinginess with top ratings here's the second one in just one week! Maybe I am getting soft in the head faster than I think.

Four and three quarter stars.

Cosimo says

“Niente, o la conseguenza non è soltanto l'opera prima della signora Solange Marriot, ma anche il primo romanzo a esaurire le possibilità della scrittura. E non perché sia un capolavoro artistico; piuttosto lo definirei un capolavoro di onestà. D'altronde è proprio l'esigenza di onestà il tarlo che al giorno d'oggi rode tutta la letteratura. Il letterato si affligge per il fatto di non poter essere contemporaneamente scrittore e uomo in senso completo, ossia serio e onesto.”

Questo libro molteplice, misterioso, infinitamente intelligente, scritto da un maestro di creatività e talento, racconta in modi differenti perché ci si trova ad amare la letteratura enigmaticamente e come la nostra esperienza di ultimi lettori si rinnovi ogni volta attraverso un unico, inestricabile e indefinibile senso. Dalla teoria dei giochi al grado zero della scrittura, dalla corte seicentesca di esuli nazisti in Sudamerica ai servizi essenziali a pagamento, metamorfosi, profezia e cosmogonia si intersecano e si riflettono l'una dentro l'altra in un continuum di episodi e racconti costruiti con disarmonico e spaventoso umanesimo. La letteratura è una maledizione, una forma di incesto, un connubio spurio e illegittimo tra essere e non essere e lo scrittore non fa altro che tradurre una babele interiore in silenzio e predestinazione, per lettori artificiali dalla memoria decapitata. Così tanti futuri possibili formano un presente inevitabile, il libro. Tra Herbert Quaine e Pierre Menard, dalla bibbia a Dostoevskij, Lem gioca con noi a viso aperto e con sapienza entropica per un antiromanzo dalla logica implacabile.

Sebastián Eugenio says

Escribí una reseña de este libro en mi blog.

Manny says

A delightful idea, that surely ought to appeal to habitués of this site - a collection of reviews for books that don't exist! My favorite was the one about the guy who thinks that there are three kinds of genius. Third-class geniuses do what everyone else does, but just get there quicker. They are very popular. Second class

geniuses do stuff other people don't do yet - they are ignored for a while, but when the world catches up they also get their share of glory. But what about the first class geniuses, who are so brilliant that the world *never* catches up with them? The hero of the (fictitious) book sets out to find evidence of first-class geniuses. It's such a pity that no one has yet managed to write this novel; Lem gives a precis of the plot, which has a wonderfully satisfying ending.

Some of the other books would be distinctly harder to write. There's the one constructed with computer assistance, which takes buried allusions to their logical extreme, so that, for example, the commas used in Chapter 4 form a floor plan of Notre Dame cathedral. Another one I liked was the novel in which everything is negated. It starts, innocently enough, by saying that she was not on the train, and then gradually proceeds to reveal that the train didn't exist, and neither did she. In fact, nothing happens at all, and we only learn what didn't happen. Lem's reviewer comments that people often describe the book as pornographic, but that this is unfair. It would be impossible for a book to contain less sex; it's just unusually explicit about specifying which acts did not occur.

Some of the ideas don't work quite as well, but each chapter is self-contained, so it's easy to skip the few duds. This is a fun read!

Dr Zorlak says

Borges lo hacía mejor, sin duda, pero a Lem no le quedan mal tampoco. Lo malo es que son más las piezas mediocres que las estupendas. Las mejores, por mucho, son *Non Serviam*, *La Nueva Cosmogonía*, *De Impossibilitate Vitae / De Impossibilitate Cognoscendi*, *Odis de Ítaca*, *Idiota*, y *Gruppenführer Louis XVI*; de estas las mejores son *La nueva Cosmogonía* y *De Impossibilitate Vitae / De Impossibilitate Cognoscendi*; y de estas dos la ganadora es *La nueva Cosmogonía*.

Esta última, cualquiera puede notar, sirve de inspiración al asunto de *Death's End*, de Cixin Liu.

una_sussa says

"Storia di quel che s'è desiderato e che non si avrà".

Sylwka (unserious.pl) says

Niestety moje postanowienie o „od?wie?aniu Stanis?awa Lema” nie idzie tak pi?knie, jak to sobie pocz?tkowo zaplanowa?am. W ci?gu trzech lat uda?o mi si? si?gn?? po zaledwie sze?? tytu?ów (Dzienniki gwiazdowe nie zosta?y zrecenzowane na blogu). Jak tak dalej pójdzie, to zako?cz? t? ca?? zabaw? na emeryturze. ;) Koniec jednak marudzenia, czas sprawdzi? co zaoferuje nam Doskona?a pró?nia, któr? mia?am okazj? przeczyta? w swoim ?yciu po raz pierwszy.
Zbiór recenzji...

Chyba tylko Stanis?aw Lem móg? wpa?? na tak genialny pomys?, by zmie?ci? swoje g??bokie przemy?lenia pod przykrywk? recenzji nieistniej?cych ksi??ek. W zbioru mo?emy przeczyta? nast?puj?ce eseje. :D

Stanisław Lem: Doskonała próżnia
Marcel Coscat: Les Robinsonades
Patrick Hannahan: Gigamesh
Simon Merril: Sexplosion
Alfred Zellermann: Gruppeafuhrer Louis XVI
Solange Marriot: Rien du tout, ou la consequence
Joachim Fersengeld: Perycalypsis
Gian Carlo Spallanzani: Idiota
Do yourself a book
Kuno Mlatje: Odys z Itaki
Raymond Seurat: Toi
Alistar Waynewright: Being Inc.
Wilhelm Klopper: Die Kultur als Fehler
Cezar Kouska: De Impossibilitate Vitae; De Impossibilitate Prognoscendi
Arthur Dobb: Non serviam
Alfred Testa: Nowa Kosmogoria

To by?o 200 stron czystej literackiej rozpusty si?gaj?cej swymi mackami w ka?dy zak?tek ludzkiego ?ycia oraz kultury. Pocz?wszy od Les Robinsonades, która jest doskona?? parodi? współ?czesnych dzie? literackich oraz Gigamesh'a, który obna?a absurdalne eksperymenty literackie po Sexplosion, które sk?ada uk?on sprawom p?ci, by z ca?? moc? wkroczy? na tereny filozoficzne (Rien du tout, ou la conséquence), a zako?czy? z przytupem rozwa?aniami na temat nauk ?cis?ych, kosmogonii czy praw rz?dz?cych ?wiatem i wszech?wiatem.

Podsumowuj?c. Doskonała próżnia Stanisława Lema to nie jest ?atwa pozycja. Wiele razy musia?am wróci? lub na chwil? od?o?y? ksi??k?, ?eby przemy?le?, a wr?cz nawet przetrawi? to, co autor chcia? przekaza?. Jednak dok?adnie tego si? spodziewa?am i jestem po raz kolejny zachwycona kunsztem, pomys?em i stylem autora. Polecam gor?co!

<http://unserious.pl/2018/03/doskonala...>

John Jr. says

Simply put, Stanislaw Lem is one of the masters of science fiction. Yet you can meet an endless number of SF fans who don't know his work and even find best-SF-books lists from seemingly respectable sources that don't include anything by him. Is it because the smarter you are, the more you'll appreciate in his work? (That risks being a nasty comment. But it must be admitted that much Western SF still possesses a pulp-fiction aspect, and at least some of its many readers may believe that's all there is or needs to be.) Is it that the further you go from Western societies, the less likely are the authors to be known? Milan Kundera hails from Czechoslovakia but has broken through, as has Czeslaw Milosz, a Pole. Then why not Lem, another Pole? Or, for that matter, the Strugatsky brothers, who are Russian? Lem himself could probably have constructed not one but half a dozen or more increasingly complex and satirical reasons to account for it; I can't.

I bought and read this collection more than five years before entering it here. The reason was that I wanted to refresh my memory of the story "Non Serviam," which I had first encountered in the 90s, as research for something I was considering writing. I won't try to explain that, but "Non Serviam" is a profound meditation on artificial consciousnesses, who in this case engage in their own meditations on whether they were created or not and, if so, whether they owe anything to their creator. I won't call it a masterpiece, but only because I

want to avoid the need to justify through argument and evidence my use of that much-overused word. The book is worth obtaining simply for "Non Serviam," but that isn't the only reward it contains.

anthony e. says

Astounding. I was introduced to Lem through the Special Collections librarian at UWM, as a means to formulate imaginary works (which is the cornerstone of my thesis). I am smitten. Lem writes with a Vonnegutian goofiness, a palpable delight in his ideas. Many of the works he describes sound SO interesting, but wholly impossible as realistic books. Furthermore, the theories of science and literature he puts forth are dizzying and mind-altering. For example, in *The New Cosmogeny*, Lem lays out a theory for the structuring of the universe via previous civilizations arising from a protouniverse, and that the laws of physics themselves are the creations of these societies! He goes on to suggest that the laws of physics are in fact alterable by these "beings", and that anomalies we see (I read this as, say, black holes) are the result of these beings changing the physics around us, or are the visual representations of another protocivilizations physics in action! AMAZING!

At times his writing slips into a thick, almost imperceptible jargon. Nevertheless, its ideas resonate through even that prosaic haze, and startle the intellect. Marvelous stuff, and definitely worth the effort.

Alex says

I mean, yeah, I do want to read reviews of books that don't exist. Why wouldn't I?

Gwern says

As Lem explains in the introduction, the fake book review (and fake acceptance lecture), as particularly exemplified by Borges's book reviews, is a micro-genre suited for intellectual jokes - for ideas which need more than a tweet, but can't be written out unironically or in full as articles/books. (If dry academic humor is not your thing, you probably already know from reading descriptions that you should not read this book, so I can address fellow aficionados.)

One way to fail in this rather abstract micro-genre is to tell too much - since this is a genre where more detail can make it worse the same way that a horror movie can be worse when it shows too much and the horror collapses into irony & camp when you see the rubber monster. Lem's own fakes succeed when they maintain this distance from the subject matter; this is why "Robinsonade", "Gruppenführer Louis XVI", "A Perfect Vacuum", "You", "De Impossibilitate Vitae and, De Impossibilitate Prognoscendi", and "Non Serviam" fail, as they try to be the works they purport to describe (particularly "A Perfect Vacuum" and "Non Serviam"), but of course neither Lem nor anyone else could write them for lack of the required exceptional talent & knowledge.

Still, that leaves half the volume as successes, interesting and amusing.

"Gigamesh" takes *Finnegan's Wake* into the Wikipedia age, describing a mobster story with improbable allusive density where a single item requires several pages of lists of things it is an allusion to; while it's easy enough for Lem to merely tell us that such a chapter in *Gigamesh* is an encoded work of classical music

which comments on the events of the chapter, Lem goes one better by *showing* us at least 26 interpretations or allusions he is able to contrive for the word 'Gigamesh'.

"Sexplosion" is a satire of technologizing sex which takes a left turn, leaving us in not so much a dystopia but a weirdtopia where food assumes the role played by sex, down to the pornography and moral hysteria (a satire particularly pointed these days by the extent to which all sorts of sexual deviancies have been normalized but the moralizing of food seems to have hardly ever been stronger).

"Pericalypse" is a modest proposal to treat the inexhaustible emission of human culture as not an asset but info-pollution, to be discouraged because every book written obscures further the best books, a viewpoint with which I have some sympathy myself.

"Idiot" proposes a psychological horror novel (somewhat similar to "Robinsonade") in which the parents of a retarded child convince themselves he is intelligent, and perhaps he is and has been murdering and rearranging his life as convenient; like most horror, in the end humans are the real monsters, as Lem has described little but 'facilitated communication' after all.

"U-Write-It" is another parody like "Sexplosion", but where "Sexplosion" criticized human tendencies towards over-moralizing everything, "U-Write-It" criticizes apathy & disinterest toward fine literature by the general population in describing the commercial failure of an attempt of an Oulipo-like company to sell its kits for splicing together classic novels into new fanfictions - the moral being, of course, that most humans are not interested in or even capable of such disrespect. (One has to wonder what Lem would have made of FanFiction.net; is the glass half full or half empty?)

"Odysseus of Ithaca" offers an inversion and image that seems like it should have been in Calvino's *Invisible Cities*: searchers convinced that the greatest wisdom by the greatest geniuses, truly original thoughts, would be ignored and not understood as comprehensible by the general population ('if a lion could speak, we would not understand him') and so to find treasures, they must search through sewers and insane asylums and trash cans. ("Odysseus" could have been combined nicely with "Pericalypse", I think.)

"Being Inc" is an update on Borges's "The Lottery in Babylon", with more computers; what I loved most about this one was two throwaway lines: "Antitrust legislation in the U.S.A. forbids monopolies; consequently Being Inc. is not the only life arranger. There are its great competitors, Hedonica and the Truelife Corporation."

The story "Culture as Mistake" has as its core an interesting argument: that 'culture' can only refer to everything which is not useful or backed up by reality, and so, in the strictest and most concrete sense, all of culture is lies and mistakes.

And finally, the piece Lem calls the best, and I would have to agree, the "A New Cosmology". Here Lem offers up an explanation for the Great Silence: all our knowledge predicts countless alien civilizations but we observe not the slightest trace (here nothing has changed, as modern astronomy vindicates Lem's assumptions of the commonness of planets and entire absence of signals or anomalies), and this is because the aliens have become so advanced that they have become indistinguishable from nature; but here, where most speculation idiotically stops, showing that the author has not thought in the slightest bit about resource limits or competition or exponential growth or the likelihood of all aliens being consistently the same way over billions of years without the slightest deviation, Lem keeps going, suggesting that the laws of physics themselves have already been molded by the most advanced aliens in a previous multiverse as a solution to an intractable conflict in which different bubbles of physics in the multiverse try to expand (erasing and eating other bubbles), where the solution hit upon by all parties independently is to fix a single common set of physics, and that we do not see the original universe but a successor, a stabler successor with physics strategically chosen to limit the ability of any alien civilization to expand or tinker with the laws (especially

the lightspeed limit), where the existing alien civilizations continue to remain silent & hidden as they strategically continue to tweak physics like the value of certain constants while wishing to avoid tipping off competitors. This is a theory of the Great Silence which is far from idiotic and quite interesting as a hard SF premise. (It still doesn't work, though. While the multiverse part is unfalsifiable, the explanation for our current universe still makes no sense as lightspeed is not *that* much of a barrier and we can easily imagine expansionist strategies which make more sense; eg when it only takes a few million years to colonize a galaxy, if you're worried about competition, why not put Von Neumann probes around every planet to kill competitors in the womb, so to speak?)

Eric Uribares says

chulada de libro. reseñas de libros que no existen. imaginación pura y una prosa envidiable.

Libros Prohibidos says

Divertido, original. Reseña completa:

<http://www.libros-prohibidos.com/stan...>

Marina (Sonnenbarke) says

L'idea dietro questo libro è ovviamente geniale: un libro completamente fatto di recensioni a libri che non esistono. Così come è geniale l'autore, non solo ad aver escogitato questa idea, ma anche e forse soprattutto ad averla messa in pratica con tanta perizia. I finti libri di cui Lem parla sono descritti e recensiti in modo talmente dettagliato da far dubitare della loro non-esistenza. Alcuni verrebbe anche voglia di leggerli, se soltanto esistessero. Ma non molti, perché quasi tutti sono di una cervelloticità tale che passa la voglia di leggere le recensioni, figuriamoci i libri.

Proprio per questo motivo sono stata indecisa fra le 2 e le 3 stelle. Il libro è geniale (da cui le 3 stelle) ma noiosissimo, perché gira e rigira abbiamo capito l'idea, ma ora basta con questi libri così complicati (intendo quelli descritti da Lem). Insomma, 3 stelle al merito, ma non posso dire che mi sia davvero piaciuto.

Guille says

Un conjunto de reseñas o críticas de libros inexistentes, lo que en algunos casos es una verdadera pena, de lectura inquietante y, al mismo tiempo, o quizás gracias a ello, gozosa, que atesora ideas estimulantes que son presentadas con una gran originalidad.

Curioso e intelligente que la primera de esas reseñas sea sobre su propio libro, y que en ella se critique hasta su propia forma de criticar. Ya desde el principio se establece una disyuntiva inquietante: estamos ante un libro de parodias, de tratados filosófico-festivos o son simples bromas intelectuales. Seguramente un poco de todo ello.

Así, encontrareis a un Robinson, que enfrentado a la terrible soledad total, crea un mundo imaginario cada vez más extravagante (genial la mujer trípoda que da a luz dos taburetes); se comenta un libro de 395 páginas que viene precedido por una introducción del mismo autor de 847 páginas, donde se recogen las claves para entender la novela y cuya historia transcurre en 36 minutos (“la sistemática de las comas en el capítulo VI, por ejemplo, corresponde al trazado de Roma”) (¿Joyce?); un mundo en el que desaparecen las sensaciones que acompañan al acto sexual, acto que es sustituido por la gastronomía (cuidado: comer un plátano ya nunca será lo mismo); distopías aterradoras e hilarantes; críticas a la cultura de masas, a la estupidez que a veces rodea la educación de los hijos, al vanguardismo sin fundamento, al mercantilismo y al progreso tecnológico sin cortapisa alguna, a poner cortapisas al progreso tecnológico, a los límites cada vez más incomprensibles a los que está abriendo paso la ciencia. Hay hasta capítulos incomprensibles. Una fiesta de la inteligencia.
