

***MEDICAL ETHICS IN STANISLAW LEM'S HOSPITAL OF THE
TRANSFIGURATION***

**Roxana Doncu, Assist., PhD, "Carol Davila" University of Medicine and Pharmacy,
Bucharest**

*Abstract: A celebrated writer of science and speculative fiction, Stanislaw Lem was the son of a wealthy Jewish doctor and he himself studied medicine in Lvov and then in Krakow. His first novel *Hospital of the Transfiguration* can be read as a meditation on the status of medicine as a life science. Through the lenses of young doctor Stephan, assigned a position at a psychiatric hospital in Nazi-occupied Poland, the experience of being a doctor is related to the central issues of life and death, human experimentation and medical ethics more than to the purely scientific and technical side of medicine, thus anticipating the important debates which gave birth to the field of bioethics in the 1970s.*

Keywords: bioethics, medical ethics, human experimentation, euthanasia

A celebrated writer of science and speculative fiction, Stanislaw Lem was the son of a wealthy Jewish doctor (a laryngologist) and he himself studied medicine in Lvov and Krakow. His first novel *Hospital of the Transfiguration* can be read as a meditation on the status of medicine as an applied science functioning on the border between the purely scientific and the humanistic endeavour. Through the lenses of young doctor Stephan Trzyniecki, assigned a position at a psychiatric hospital in Nazi-occupied Poland, the experience of being a doctor is more related to medical ethics and to controversial issues like human experimentation and euthanasia than to the scientific and technical side of the profession. The ethical concerns of Lem's later fiction are anticipated here, although his style lacks the conciseness and humor of his subsequent novels. One reason for this may be the fact that the novel was not accepted for publication by the Soviet authorities and had to be rewritten several times in order to comply with censorship. Nevertheless, the bleakness of tone that lends the novel its eerie quality proves more suitable for the central concern of the novel, which lies in an extensive ontological and epistemological debate on the meaning and value of life as well as a reflection on the status of medicine as a life science. The framework for the staging of this philosophical debate is the troubled times of the German invasion of Poland. The topos (which gradually turns into a heterotopos) of the mental asylum, with its implications of alienation and irrationality originates within the discourse of modernization, with its emphasis on secularization, bureaucratization and the development of science. The scientific revolution in the 16-17th Europe initiated a discourse centered on the practices of exclusion, differentiation and specialization and medicine, traditionally defined as both an art and a science, tended to resist this definition. Although historically the practice of medicine gave birth to all the sciences, medicine itself, until the beginnings of European science, had been perceived more as a hybrid between specialized knowledge and an art of healing. The centrality of the patient and the emphasis on the sanctity of human life meant that the scientific side of medicine was traditionally subordinated to its practical and ethical concerns. The situation changed, however, with the rapid advancements in research and technology, and the 20th century saw the rise of previously unimagined pharmaceutical drugs and biotechnologies. Lem's novel stages the typical 20th century conflict between the traditionally hybrid medical practices (which involved both the expertise of the medical practitioner and an ethical concern for life

and the human being) and an attempt to cleanse medicine of all its other concerns and turn it into pure science. In other words, the philosophical focus of the novel is the question whether medicine can be classified among the pure or the exact sciences, which are predicated on a form of knowledge that excludes any kind of inchoateness and indeterminacy. This happens because the exact sciences rely on an abstract idea of order which makes theory and theoretical connections the focus of discovery. Conversely, life sciences are more dedicated to empirical research and to applied knowledge. *Hospital of the Transfiguration* illustrates the thesis that the consequences of a discourse that tries to assimilate medicine to pure science prove disastrous: deprived of its humanistic concerns, medicine turns from an art of healing into an art of killing.

The idea of pure science is materialized (and caricatured) in a familiar figure both in popular science books and science fiction: the absent-minded scientist, who devotes himself entirely to science. This unlimited devotion is a logical corollary of the discourse of exclusion, purification and specialization which constituted modern science. Stefan's family is full of examples of this kind, among which first and foremost is the paternal figure:

Stefan's father was an inventor who did all other things strictly out of compulsion; he waved the world away as though it were a fly; sometimes he lost days, living Tuesday twice and then realizing that Wednesday had been lost. This was not true absent-mindedness, just excessive concentration on whatever idea was driving him at the moment. If he was not sleeping or ill, you could bet that he would be sitting in his tiny attic-workshop, among Bunsen burners, alcohol lamps and glowing instruments, wreathed in the smell of acid and metal, measuring, polishing, welding. (21)

Such an exclusive devotion to science is described in the terms of a compulsive obsession, of mania, and the whole family resemble one another in being made of "fire and stone, passion and inflexibility." Devotion to science often springs from the incapacity to deal with the uncertainties and ambiguities of life, with what Keats used to call "negative capability"¹. Discussing uncle Leszek's death with Ksawery, Stefan uses the Latin term for cancer "carcinoma scirrhusum" "like an exorcism, a scientific spell that removed the uncertainty, the dread, the trembling, giving it the precision and the tranquility of the inevitable." (25) The precision of the scientific term (carcinoma scirrhusum is the name for a malignant tumor) does not admit any intrusions on its meaning, and so manages to exclude any other traces that in ordinary words lead to an openness towards other meanings, a consequence of what the French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida defined as the chain of endless *difference*. Yet Stefan is far from being the usual scientist, hard-bent on fact and precision, and his reaction to the complexities of life is not reduced to the exercise of scientific research and investigation. He is more drawn to the subtle power of language and his recourse to the specialized term is more akin to the poet's strategy of renaming the world than to the scientist's propensity towards accuracy and precision. He takes the job offered by his friend Staszek, with whom, as a young student, he had shared "a mutual lack of enthusiasm for working with cadavers" because first at the asylum there was an "absence of the smell of iodine or other hospital odours" (35) and secondly because there he meets the poet Seculowski, a genius who hides from the Nazis and with whom he can engage in debates on thorny ontological and metaphysical issues as well as on the relationship between science and art. A Polish Oscar Wilde with a penchant for paradoxical and challenging statements,

¹ John Keats defined Negative Capability in a letter to his brothers, George and Thomas Keats, on the 21st of December 1817: "I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." (www. Poetryfoundation.org)

Seculowski sometimes hits on a profound truth: he calls science “intellectual chewing gum”, dismisses the ethical and educational side of literature and notes that “each of us [...] is a kind of blueprint for the world”. Seculowski appears as an anti-rationalist for whom science can explain nothing, and his theory of life points the role that chaos and haphazard played in its emergence:

Every one of us is a lottery ticket that hit the jackpot: a few dozen years of life, what fun! In a world of super-heated gases, nebulae spiraling to whiteness, and the cosmic absolute zero, suddenly a protein pops up, some greasy jelly that immediately tends to decompose into a puff of bacteria and decay. A hundred thousand subterfuges sustain this weird field of energy, which divides matter into order and chaos.[...] Haven't you ever wondered why there are clouds and trees, golden-brown autumn and gray winter, why the scenery changes through the seasons, why the beauty of it all strikes us like a hammer-blow? Why does it happen that way? By rights we should all be black interstellar dust, shreds of the Magellanic cloud. The normal state of things is the roaring of the stars, showers of meteors, vacuum, darkness, and death.” (49)

For Seculowski the artist, life becomes precious through its uniqueness and unpredictability, the very qualities that deny the rationality of the scientific approach. “life is the opposite of mechanism, and mechanism the opposite of life.” (56) He regrets having to live in the “age of mechanical reproduction”²:

Now we are in the era of dwarves quartered in barracks, music in tin cans, and helmets under which you cannot see the stars. Then, they say, equality and brotherhood will come. Why equality, why freedom, when lack of equality gives birth to visionary scenes and fires of despair [...] I don't want to give up these colossal differences, these tensions. If it was up to me, I would keep the palaces and the slums, and the fortresses!” (58)

Seculowski's aestheticism prompts him to insist on difference as the sign of originality, and at the same time turns him into a reactionary, whose opposition to progress is explained by his attachments to the values generated by difference. Because his aestheticism translates into an extreme political conservatism, in the end it leads to the same de-humanization that is the outcome of scientific rationalization. The discourse of aesthetic difference that emphasizes abstract beauty at the expense of human welfare lies at the opposite extreme from that of rationalization and purification that constituted modern science, but their effects are similar: de-centralizing the human in favour of the abstract. In the manner of avant-garde artists, Seculowski tries to establish the autonomy of the artistic sphere by denying art any educational or entertaining purpose. Through his game theory of art and science he invests creation with a kind of auratic effect. Freed from all humanism and realism, Seculowski's creation appears as a kind of parasite that feeds on the scientific discourse. The ‘aestheticization’ of science: this is the true literary motto of Seculowski, discernible in his “chemical drama”:

Have you seen my play *The Flower Garden*? [...] The flowers are bacteria, and the garden is the human body in which they multiply. A fierce battle between tuberculosis bacilli and the leukocytes is going on. After seizing the armor of the lipoids, which is a sort of magic cap of invisibility, the bacteria unite under the leadership of the Supermicrobe, defeat the leukocytes, and then, just as a blissful and blessed future is

² This question is discussed by Walter Benjamin in his seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936).

unfolding before them, the garden sinks under them. In other words, the human being dies and the poor little plants have to die along with it.” (48-9)

Sekulowski's fictional counterpart, the neurosurgeon Orybald Kauters stands for the highly rationalized, highly specialized modern scientific discourse which goes back to Cartesianism, the scientific revolution and Darwinism. Entirely devoted to his research, he is likened to an Egyptian mummy: “He reminded Stefan of a reproduction he had seen of the mummy of Ramses II: “an asceticism independent of age, features sometimes timeless. His wrinkles did not indicate the years he had lived, but seemed to belong to the sculpture of his face.” (39) Although from a different perspective, Kauters' interest is awakened, just as Sekulowski's, by what is uncommon, the odd case, the exotic curiosity. His place is home to a vast and unusual collection of representations:

There was the iconography of the cretin: a flabby, snail-like body with no neck and a bug-eyed face, a worm-like tongue peeking out of the half-open mouth. Several of Leonardo's hideous faces were framed in glass. One of them, with a chin protruding like the toe of an old shoe and with nests of wrinkles for eye sockets, seemed to stare at Stefan. There were distorted skulls and Goya's monster with ears like folded bat wings and a clenched, twisted jaw. (60)

Besides this collection of monstrosities, Kauters shows Stefan, with the owner's pride, “an oversized album of Meunier prints illustrating early devices for treating the deranged”. On top of his cabinet of curiosities³ lies, however, a row of jars containing real specimens of anatomical abnormalities: “a cephalotoracopagus, and a craniopagus parietalis,[...] and a rare epigastrium. This last embryo is a perfect diprosopus; there's a kind of leg growing out of the palate, slightly damaged during delivery”⁴ (61).

The neurosurgeon's scientific interest in the anatomical and congenital anomaly echoes Sekulowski's praise of the differences that give birth to art. As Gould and Pyle noted in their introduction to the study *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine* “it was the anomalous that was largely instrumental in arousing in the savage the attention, thought and investigation that were finally to develop into the body of organized truth which we now call Science.” (1) Although the attention paid to the pathological anomaly and the anatomical exception triggered the birth of modern science, it should be noted that its development took a different course at the turn of the 20th century, that of the experimental method. By employing experiment and observation, scientists tried to establish with precision the cause and course of a disease, so that a common treatment for similar etiology could be developed. From this perspective, Kauters' collection of anomalies reveals a morbid and grotesque passion for the bizarre, for the odd case, which could make him another case for investigation in the mental asylum in which he serves as a neurosurgeon. He forsakes the medical deontological code and breaks the Hippocratic oath when instead of helping a patient to heal, he lets him die gradually so that he can better observe the pathological changes that the patient undergoes in the advanced stages of a tumor. The relationship doctor-patient has been and remains one of the keystones in medicine and healthcare, and it is no wonder that the medical encounter is

³During the Renaissance and early modern Europe, cabinets of curiosities were in the possession of kings and aristocrats who wanted to boast with their rare finds of objects that did not fit into any fixed category. The idea of the cabinet was to create a miniature cosmos that symbolically endowed its owner with control and mastery of the outside world. Cabinets of curiosities are considered as precursors of the museum.

⁴ Cephalotoracopagus is the name for conjoined twins with the bodies fused at the head, neck and thorax. Craniopagus parietalis is the name for conjoined twin at the head, more precisely in the parietal region of the head. Diprosopus (or craniofacial duplication) is a rare congenital disorder when a fetus has two faces.

strictly regulated⁵. Doctors are bound by their oath to act in the patient's best interests and human experimentation is ruled out. On the contrary, Kauters' conduct towards the engineer Rabiewski, who is hospitalized with the suspicion of a tumor in the frontal lobe, appears highly unprofessional: instead of operating on him as soon as possible, he delays surgery and treats Rabiewski as if he were less than human. The episode has a Kafkaesque touch and the description of the engineer fallen prey to the neurosurgeon's morbid curiosity reminds the reader of the atmosphere of *The Metamorphosis*:

The ordinary hospital bed had been replaced by a special one with nets at the sides and on top. The engineer lay as if caught in a web in the cage that they created, no more than a foot and a half high. His whole body seemed swollen. Kauters was leaning over looking at him attentively, moving his head out of the way when the prisoner tried to spit in his face. The thick lines around Rabiewski's mouth were white with foam. (70-1)

The relation between the engineer and Kauters is no longer the usual doctor-patient treaty of confidence and compliance. The patient becomes a "prisoner" caught in the surgeon's spider web, and the prey-predator binary is accomplished in the description of Kauters' eyes "dark like the eyes of an insect seen through a magnifying glass" (71). This is the dark side of science, in which the binomial *knowledge/power* becomes absolute and thus terrifying. The lab experiment that transforms Rabiewski into a powerless guinea pig strips him of all his humanity, and turns the scientist into a God presiding over life and death: "Rabiewski's body shuddered, his hands burrowing in the netting like unconscious animals. Then violent convulsions began. The cage screeched, its iron legs banging against the floor." (72) The purpose of all this is revealed in the discussion Kauters has with remorse-stricken Stefan. The surgeon interprets the evolution of the disease in the terms of reverse phyletic development:

The cortex has entered necrosis. An 'acortical man' is emerging. Freed from the cortex inhibiting influence, the older, earlier evolved parts of the brain, still unaffected, are speaking up. That attack was Bewegungsturm, the motor storm, which occurs in all animals from infusorians to birds. The animal is trying to escape, in the face of a threat to its life. The subsequent torpidity is the second stage of the same reactive apparatus. The so-called Totstellreflex, playing dead. [...] The mechanism that served the amphibians millions of years ago now emerges in Homo sapiens when the more recently evolved parts drop away. (72)

Appalled by the surgeon's attitude, yet afraid to lodge a complaint against his superior, Stefan confides in Sekulowski, waiting for the latter's moral support. To his surprise, the poet does not condemn Kauters, instead launches into a metaphorical exposition on the beauty and transience of the human being. His tirade is not even original, but a reworking of the Renaissance humanist credo so eloquently expressed in Hamlet's monologue⁶:

⁵ The original Hippocratic oath specifies that "With regard to healing the sick, I will devise and order for them the best diet, according to my judgement and means; and I will take care that they suffer no hurt or damage." The new version provides a different, yet related perspective: "Most especially must I tread with care in matters of life and death. If it is given me to save a life, all thanks. But it may also be within my power to take a life; this awesome responsibility must be faced with great humbles and awareness of my own frailty. Above all, I must not play at God. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippocratic_Oath)

⁶ "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals! And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" (Act II, scene II, www.opensourceshakespeare.org)

What genius, what precise craftsmanship! The beauty of the organs! The stubborn mind that harnesses the impassioned atoms, electron clouds and wild elements, imprisons them in the body, and compels them to deeds alien to their nature. The infinite patience of designing the joints, the complex architecture of the bones, the labyrinth of circulating blood, the miraculous optical system, the finery of the fabric of nerves, thousands upon thousands of mutually restraining mechanisms, rising above anything we can think of. And all of it completely unnecessary! (73)

Shakespeare's humanist tribute to the greatness of man resurfaces in the guise of a eulogy on the morphological description of the anatomical atlas. In the meantime, secularization (faintly resounding in the poet's own name) has replaced the religious impulse with the scientific precision of description. Sekulowski's imagination is captured by the intricacy and exquisiteness of man's biological being to such an extent that he excludes any other intrusion into this unsurpassed beauty of pure matter. Stefan's medical concern for the well-being of the patient is interpreted by Seculowski as lack of imagination and reactionary conservatism: "

your ideas are pickled in formalin. [...] Cancer? That is simply the side door, the Seitensprung, of the organism. My Blind Powers, securing the living tissue against accidents of a hundred thousand kinds, seem to have left one vent ajar. Everything was working perfectly, and suddenly, out of control! Have you ever seen a child playing with a watch, the way the child pulls off the hour hand, which makes the second hand spin and buzz like a horsefly? Instead of measuring the hours, the hands gobble up fictitious time! (73)

Comparing the workings of the human body with the workings of a watch reveals Sekulowski's philosophical to be no more than a vulgar version of the early mechanistic philosophies that determined the scientific revolution in Europe in the 16th and 17th century. In view of his earlier pronouncement that "life is the opposite of mechanism" his attitude looks suspiciously like empty verbalism or playing a double game. His behavior towards Stefan and later towards the patients reveals Sekulowski to be an opportunist, a man without character, who plays the genius as irresponsibly as he plays with language and the other people. At the end of the novel the hypocritical Sekulowski becomes a traitor: he reveals to the Nazi officers that had come to shoot all the patients that some of them had been hidden by the director of the hospital in the living quarters.

Both Sekulowski and Kauters are prisoners of an abstract idea of art and science, respectively, fascinated by it and turned by its medusa-like stare into pillars of salt. What is surprising is that Kauters' anti-humanism does not spring from any pure positivism, no more than Sekulowski's anti-humanism can be attributed to any futuristic or avant-garde influences specific for modernism. Their dangerous extremism is a result of fanaticism, of a perspective that excludes any holistic approach to the phenomenon of life and to the human being itself.

To return to the topos of the mental asylum, it gradually turns out that there is no difference (or a very blurred one) between the doctors and the patients. Kauters is an extreme case, but the others are just as insane as he is. The only one for whom the asylum becomes a "hospital of the transfiguration" is Stefan himself. For him the experience turns into a rite of passage that marks his becoming a doctor. As Dan Mircea Enescu, the eminent pediatric surgeon repeatedly says: "You become a doctor not after graduating from a school of medicine and passing your exams, but only after one of your patients dies". To become a doctor means to experience life and death so closely together, that the value of life will shine forth through the darkness of death and despair. Stefan will learn this lesson the tough way, after the Germans shoot Sekulowski and the other patients. He will have a revelation as well

in the person of old Pajpak, the director of the hospital, whom he initially disliked for being, like all old men, boring and a little too pompous. He is the only one who has the courage to attempt to save the patients. Threatened with being killed themselves if they dare to hide just one patient, the doctors discuss various ways of facing the situation. Pajpak decides that all patients that are conscious should be hidden and saved, and when Staszek suggests a form of euthanasia as a means to escape from a violent death, Pajpak, a devout Catholic, replies: "That's not only nonsense, it's criminal. [...] God might change everything at the last minute, and what then?" (147) Thus he turns out to embody the ideal figure on whom Stefan could model himself, a practitioner of medicine for whom his calling is more important than prestige or even life itself.

Old Pajpak instantiates the traditional connections between medicine and ethics, which are weakened, on the one hand, by a modern discourse of medicine as a science and on the other, by the deterioration of ethical principles due to the tumultuous climate of the war and the Nazi occupation. Following Hitler's secret order to apply euthanasia first to deformed and retarded children in 1939 and later expanded to include adults with mental illnesses, a Nazi troop is sent to murder all the inmates at the *Cristo Transfigurato* mental asylum. While Pajpak's ethics derives from his strong religious faith, Stefan will find his own way to endorse life, as an atheist and a materialist. Scolding the priest for his illusory faith which prompted him to pray while the patients were killed, Stefan will regain the will to live in the arms of Nosilewska, the woman doctor at the asylum, in whom the tragedy awakens a passion unsuspected before.

The Hospital of the Transfiguration becomes thus a liminal space, a heterotopos where the lives of both patients and doctors are changed forever, despite Staszek's initial perfunctory observation, meant to convince Stefan to work there that "It's like being outside the Occupation, in fact it's like being outside the world!" (31). Turning the asylum into a "kind of extraterrestrial observatory, a delicious solitude in which a man naturally endowed with a fine intellect could develop in peace" Staszek is ironically unaware of his creator's belief that we carry the world with us wherever we go, even to the furthest corners of space, and that not even by travelling to distant planets can man find an escape from what Hannah Arendt called "the banality of evil".

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Gould, George M. and Walter L. Pyle. *Anomalies and Curiosities of Medicine*. Philadelphia, London: W.B.Saunders, 1901

Keats, John. "On Negative Capability: Letter to George and Tom Keats", 21-7 December, 1817, www.poetryfoundation.org, 5 May 2015, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237836?page=2>

Lem, Stanislaw. *Hospital of the Transfiguration*. San Diego, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1991

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, prince of Denmark*.

www.opensourceshakespeare.org, 5 May 2015, <http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/playmenu.php?WorkID=hamlet>

---. Hippocratic Oath. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippocratic_Oath, 7 May 2015