Stanislaw Lem is known in the English-speaking countries virtually only as a Science Fiction (SF) writer. This is despite the fact that two of his best non-fantastic novels were translated into English,¹ and his numerous critical papers and reviews were published in such periodicals as Science-Fiction Studies.² This is in significant contrast to Lem’s reception in countries such as Germany (with no significant difference between the eastern and western lands), the former Soviet Union and, of course, his native Poland. The reasons for such a phenomenon are manifold. The most important seems to be the high level of commercialization of SF in the English-speaking countries, especially in the US. Another is the popular misconception (quite common even in the literary circles of America) that since SF is only a popular genre, with very lowly origins in so-called pulp magazines and comics, no SF writer can be seriously regarded as a true artist. Obviously, there are many exceptions to this rule. First, some SF writers are indeed regarded seriously by the critics (for example Kurt Vonnegut). Second, some prominent authors are not regarded as writing SF, in spite of the fact that they really write in this genre. Aldous Huxley and George Orwell are the most striking examples of this popular misconception. The reasons for such an artificial and obviously incorrect classification are manifold, and beyond the scope of this article. Therefore I shall only mention that after H. G. Wells and Karel Čapek, virtually none of the SF writers (including such outstanding authors as Olaf Stapledon) was regarded as “high-brow” artists.

It is important to analyze Lem’s non-science fiction novels in order to prove that the classification of Lem as a SF writer is artificial and reductionist. Lem’s non-fantastical prose can be divided roughly into autobiographical (or semi-autobiographical) novels and unorthodox detective stories. Both of these genres have important links to Lem’s science fiction as well as to


². Some of the most interesting of these are in the collection Microworlds: Writings on Science Fiction and Fantasy, ed. and with intro. by Franz Rottensteiner (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).
his philosophical writings. In his SF, Lem's privileged the role of chance and the impossibility of meaningful contact between truly alien cultures. Lem's biographical novels and thrillers can also be read as political works. The reason is that Lem's life was very much influenced by political events, such as the Second World War and two of Poland's major economic and political transitions:

I, who experienced the alternative character and fragility of subsequent social systems (from poor pre-war Poland, through phases of Soviet, German and again Soviet occupation, and then the People's Republic of Poland and the end of the Soviet protectorate), disregarded fretting about individual psychology and tried to concentrate on this, which as technologicus genius temporis shapes or rather becomes the possessor of human destiny.³

The war and the subsequent transition from market capitalism to a centrally controlled economy and so-called “real socialism” is thus the main subject of Czas nieutracony [Time not Lost]. This trilogy, and especially the last two parts, Wśród umarłych [Among the Dead] and Powrót [Return], which were withdrawn by the author himself after a few editions in the 1950s and early 1960s,⁴ are without any doubt political novels. Their artistic value may not be the highest (mostly due to censorship), but they remain an important record of the times that many would like to expel from Polish history. The first part of this trilogy, Szpital Przemienienia [Hospital of the Transfiguration] is different from the last two parts. First, it is not written in the Socialist Realist style of the other parts and, second, it is the only portion that is still in print in its original (pre-Socialist Realist) form.⁵ Although Szpital Przemienienia is not a political novel to the same extent as the other novels of the trilogy, politics plays a very important part in this first part.

Politics plays an important role in Lem's thrillers, especially in Katar, translated as The Chain of Chance. This is in contrast to the majority of orthodox English language detective stories.⁶ Because of the political background of both Śledztwo [The Investigation] and The Chain of Chance, these novels have only superficial similarities to the classic “whodunit” stories. As there is no individual murderer, a triumph of justice as well as punishment

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4. This is because of very strong intervention by censors who changed the novels to such an extent that Lem could no longer accept them as his own work.
5. The first part was not as heavily influenced by the editors, who in turn acted as preventative censors, so it was possible for Lem to re-create the original form of the novel.
6. A good example of an exception to this rule is SS-GB (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978) by Len Deighton.