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## The Alien as the Other: Various Images of the Alien in Science Fiction Literature

The Other terrifies and fascinates, and crosses the boundaries the Self would not dare to cross or would not even recognise. Finally, the Other invariably also hides in Us. Although the Other has always been accompanying us, he/she has effectively been escaping any attempts at definition and understanding. Edmund Husserl described this special position of the Other when writing that the Other is available solely in his/her unavailability, thus situating him/her in atopy, i.e. in a non-place, to which the Self does not and cannot have any access (Waldenfels 2002). Science fiction literature draws inspiration from this unique dependency and equips the figure of an extra-terrestrial with the features of the Other. In science fiction, the Alien adopts many images.

When analysing the notion of a stranger or a newcomer, Bernhard Waldenfels introduces a categorization of alienness. The author identifies the daily alienness we experience for example in relation to our neighbours. There is a certain impassable barrier between us that determines the boundaries of our hearths, thus defending our privacy. However, neither my neighbour, a passer-by on the street, nor the shop assistant sheltered behind his counter destroy my familiar world – they do not threaten its structure, since they fit in with it themselves. Another category is the structural alienness we experience in contact with cultural differences. Finally, Waldenfels identifies radical alienness:

It applies to everything that remains outside all order and confronts us with events, which question not only a specific interpretation, but the very “possibility of interpretation”. [...] The radically alien can only be interpreted as a surplus, an extravagance crossing the existing horizon of sense (Waldenfels 2002: 34–35).

In this paper, I wish to follow the way in which science fiction uses the alien to talk about problems that are ontological – related to an attempt at defining humanity, ethical – accompanying a reaction to the Other, and epistemological – concerning the question of whether it is at all possible to understand the Other. Discussing the above issues, I shall use three examples of the creation of an alien: they come from Adam Wiśniewski-Snerg’s *Robot* (1973), Orson Scott Card’s *Speaker of the Dead* (1986) and Stanisław Lem’s *Solaris* (1961). I shall present the functions the figures of aliens play in the above-mentioned books.

Waldenfels points out that Familiarity cannot exist without Alienness, since to determine the boundaries of Familiarity, we also need the Alien and the Other that we might situate in the space “outside”. Therefore, we may say that Familiarity is created through contact with Alienness. Waldenfels refers to the Freudian notion of identification in a similar way:

[...] I become myself owing to the fact that I refer to others. I become what I am, since I identify myself with a part of my parents, my ancestors, with a group, with the *social self* in William James’s sense. [...] the other is perceived as that which is excluded from our collective sphere and separated from collective existence, and therefore that which is not shared with others. In this sense, alienness is tantamount to the lack of belonging to a certain “us” (Waldenfels 2002: 17–18).

Bearing the above relationships in mind, let us have a look at the protagonist and narrator of *Robot*, a robot called BER-66. Snerg’s character – a robot constructed by an alien race – wanders through the bomb shelter and the city of Kaula-Sud, kidnapped by mysterious Supercreatures, searching for a definition of humanity and a road to it. The story of this protagonist – a robot constructed by way of an antithesis and searching for humanity in himself – makes one reflect on the definition of the human being, the border between the familiar/human and the alien/non-human, and finally on what it is that makes us people. Both the robot character and the innards of the Mechanism in which he was constructed are built via imaging based on the play of opposites and on surprising similarities between the natural, authentic, and the mechanical and secondary. The accumulation of epithets related to the organic world in the description of the interior of the Mechanism makes one see that the assembly line carrying the subsequent copies of robots resembling BER-66, just like him bearing the appropriate serial numbers instead of names, does resemble – as rightfully pointed out by Rafał Nawrocki – the female reproductive system. The transportation of the protagonist from the insides of the Mechanism to a bomb shelter by Kaula-Sud is preceded by his several-month long stay in an isolated dark chamber – the period of BER-66’s adaptation and adjustment to life in human society. Moreover, the production line down which the transparent cylinder of BER-66 moves, is a tunnel finished with a tight duct leading upwards – from where the protagonist is literally pushed into the external world (Nawrocki 2011).

Referring to George Simmel’s and Max Weber’s observations, Richard Lehan in his book *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History*, points out that the fear of redundancy or the absence of meaning and anonymity of human life ceaselessly accompany modern people (Lehan 1998). The situation of BER-66 seems to be an illustration of the fear against becoming lost among the masses: the creatures created by the Mechanism are not born, but are produced; they do not have names – only serial numbers. However, the Mechanism’s products live like people, they experience human senses, and even (at least one special specimen) feel doubts as to the purpose of their existence and their identity. Scott Sanders notes that the above fear is expressed in post-war science fiction through the blur-

ring of the boundary between people and machines: people can be controlled, machines can think (Nawrocki 2011).

The fragment referred to above is just the beginning of BER-66's rambling through the complex of Kaula-Sud and the wide-ranging bomb shelter extending under it. The mysterious world into which BER-66 is thrust, leads to a complete alienation of the protagonist. He not only fails to understand the principles operating in the shelter or comprehend the fantastic phenomena he witnesses, but he also cannot confide his doubts and observations to anyone. He is an alien, and at least theoretically endangers the shelter community. All the more, the threat of denunciation enforces extraordinary alertness on the robot as well as quenches his natural curiosity. Wladenfels asks what alienness begins with. Does it take its beginning in my own perception of myself as alien to others, or of others as alien to me? "The answer depends on where we place our measure of normality: in our own world or in the world of others" (Waldenfels 2002: 41). The situation of BER-66 would suggest the first case; after all, he is a spy working for the Mechanism and the Supercreatures that kidnapped the Kaula-Sud city from the Earth. Nevertheless, the situation soon changes.

Herbert George Wells in *Mind at the End of Its Tether* expresses a pessimistic belief that the human species has reached its end (Lehan 1998). In the world of the *Robot*, his thesis not only has a symbolic dimension, but it also takes on a real shape when BER-66 discovers that the inhabitants of the shelter are gradually replaced with robots similar to himself. The mechanisation of people, and the consequent annihilation of the subjectivity of the individual are complete. The fear of losing one's humanity in the face of one's loss in the postmodern juggernaut or yielding under the oppressive system takes on a concrete form: here, people are replaced with machines resembling them to such a degree that it becomes impossible to tell them apart. The reality collapses, giving place to Baudrillardian simulacrum.

It is also a critical moment for our protagonist, who decides to rebel against the Mechanism, regardless of whether he is one of the faulty products or one of the last people living in the shelter. The act of the machine's rebellion against his creator is a very popular theme of science fiction works, but in *Robot*, the motif of rebellion is reversed, since here, it is the Mechanism which is the constructor. Opposing it, BER-66 stands on the side of the human race "together with its numerous strengths and weaknesses" (Wiśniewski-Snerg 1977: 7), thus making a choice. Patricia Kerslake in *Science Fiction and Empire* notes that the Other/Alien who cannot be differentiated from the Self, is most fearful (Kerslake 2007). In the current situation, however, one should ask a question who really is the Other endangering Our integrity and existence? The protagonist takes the people's side, while the society living in the shelter turn out to be an extension of the Mechanism. What initially seemed to be a part of the Self, now has the characteristics of the Other, while the Other/Alien, i.e. BER-66, achieves the status of the Self.

The picture of the relationship between the Self and the Other shown through the *Robot* is an opposition based on the dichotomy of the pair human–non-human, with human behaviours understood as ones marked by a humanistic attitude,

striving to maintain subjectivity and individuality, and non-humans questioning the subjectivity of individuals. We may draw such conclusions after having a look at the non-human robots, just pretending to be people, and non-human inhabitants of the surface of Kaula-Sud, reduced to the level of “animal animals” (Wolfe 2003: 110), and serving solely as a resource. Therefore, being a human being is not given to us a priori. On the contrary: the humanity in the *Robot* lies in the active process of the constant becoming of a human being through the cultivation of behaviours developing or sustaining humanistic subjectivity and a simultaneous limitation of behaviours against human individuality and uniqueness. It is not difficult to notice that this is a highly anthropocentric attitude – however, it determines an exceptionally important role to the Other, since we become Ourselves only in an identification of and confrontation with the Other.

Walter Benn Michaels points out that Orson Scott Card’s universe is also based on the dispute between Otherness and Familiarity, but the *Speaker of the Dead* discusses the motif of the Other in a different way. According to Michaels, the conflict between the two races portrayed in the novel results from irreconcilable cultural differences, which – as he stresses – seem to be the only insurmountable abyss. The ideological antagonism is not universal or eternal, as the worldview can be changed. If in turn we look at the problem of conflict between two different species from the perspective of ethics (and we shall thus attempt to interpret the text as one talking about interpersonal conflicts based on the opposition between the Self and the Other in a metaphorical way), the underlining of physiognomic differences between representatives of these species is basically a testimony to the insignificance of the role that these differences play within a single species. Nevertheless, we shall not escape the culture in which we were brought up and a part of which we are (Michaels 2000). As a result, the conflict between two cultures invariably involves a danger of valuation, and it is then that we feel most tempted to privilege our own culture and try to domesticate the alien culture.

*Speaker of the Dead* focuses on the relationship between the terrestrial colonists of the planet Lusitania and its native inhabitants that people call “the piggies”. The relationship is strongly marked by the belief of the supremacy of human civilisation, which rejects the culture of the piggies – built on their unique bonds with the native flora and fauna of the planet. Monika Bakke, when referring to Charles Taylor’s observations, identifies two types of the non-human: one originating from the divine, and one coming from nature, “from which people were separated or even isolated and considered to be the finest beings among all forms of life. This is also tantamount to the expulsion of the animal element from human life and a simultaneous lack of respect for the world of animals, plants, and other forms of life” (Bakke 2010: 23). The piggies are perceived as lower, more primitive creatures, dangerous to people. The reason for this is the lack of understanding of their civilisation and a belief that the Other – the Alien – is worse than the known and Familiar.

The author presents the silhouettes of xenologers who fulfil a function similar to the anthropologists or ethnologists on Lusitania; they are to collect comprehen-

sive information on the piggies and study their culture. The knowledge is indispensable to answering the question whether the piggies belong to the category of framling, i.e. people from another world, ramen – people of another species, or varlese – animals people cannot really communicate with. However, the xenologers' research leaves a lot to be desired. They focus on the introduction of human technical novelties that – as the protagonists believe – will make the life of the small inhabitants of the Lusitanian forest easier. As a result, their intervention almost ends with a catastrophe after they upset the balance of Lusitania's environment. The piggies are actually a secretive race, passionately defending access to their secrets, which does not make research any easier. Nevertheless, the Lusitanian xenologers focus on the domestication of the alienness of the piggies rather than on attempts to understand or respect it. This resembles a situation described by Cary Wolfe in his article "*Animal studies*", *Disciplinary and the (Post)Humanism*, in which he turns attention to the role of society in the neutralization of Otherness. Civic society absorbs its individual, different members, "holding together different classes and interests by providing their members with recognition [...] claiming the synchronicity of the unique and the universal, and the global reach of Western notions of 'heterogeneity'" (Wolfe 2013: 131). Similarly, the terrestrial protagonists of the novel in a gesture of a benevolent permissiveness that liberal humanism often adopts in relation to structural Otherness (Wolfe 2013) try to include the culturally different piggies that are also different as a species into the circle of rational beings, i.e. people. Meanwhile – as Waldenfels shows – the domestication of the Alien is essentially its annihilation, since it leads to the change of the Alien's status from the Other to the Exotic (Waldenfels 2002). This is not just about anatomical differences, but above all cultural differences between the terrestrial and the Lusitanian civilisation; the differences that xenologers consider irreconcilable with the terrestrial civilisation.

The piggies perform an extremely cruel – in the opinion of the terrestrial researchers – ritual murder of two persons. The scenes of the crime showing the massacred bodies of xenologers who must have been subjected to vivisection before giving up the ghost, shock – since they constitute a realisation of the anthropocentric fear of the non-human Other as: 1) the negative features of the human subject which were heretofore projected onto animals are shown by the piggies, and 2) the human subject is reduced to the level of "animal animal" as a result of a methodically (and not brutally) performed surgery.<sup>1</sup> This motif also deals with the idea of a friendly or hostile extra-terrestrial. As pointed out by Gregory Benford, in relation to the alien, the category of a friendly or hostile partner is basically contradictory (Benford 1987). Friendly or hostile attitudes are notions which apply only to people; therefore, an attempt to ascribe one of them to the piggies is yet another instance of the domestication of the other, and thus of depriving them of the status of the Other. The solving of the mystery of the xenologers' death confirms

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<sup>1</sup> Monika Bakke (2010) writes more extensively on the problems of anthropocentrism in relation to the non-human in the chapter *Kłopoty z antropocentryzmem* [Problems with Anthropocentrism].

this postulate. In reality, the mysterious murders performed on the researchers were not premeditated crimes, but a result of a radical difference between people and the piggies. For the piggies, a ritual murder is actually a ceremony of passage from the so-called second life to the third one. After a skilfully performed vivisection, a tree constituting another fully conscious form of life grows from the piggy's dead body. For a piggy, the third form of life is the highest honour and a sign of maturity, since they can procreate only in this form. The murder committed on the xenologers was therefore their honouring and an attempt at admitting them to the tribe. There would be no crime if the relationship between people and piggies was based on partnership. Having a basic knowledge of human anatomy and physiology, the piggies would not commit the murder. Their contacts, however, were different: they were a unilateral examination of an object by a subject, and the only attempts at the anchoring of the knowledge acquired by men – as aforementioned – gave no positive results due to the researchers' ignorance and their sense of superiority.

People's reaction to Alienness seems to be highly problematic. On the one hand, it is indispensable for Familiarity, since it shapes it. On the other hand, when faced with the Alien, people try at all costs to domesticate or reduce Otherness to mere Exoticism. Meanwhile, the unwavering faith in anthropocentrism prevents the acknowledgement of a pathway other than human; the apparent appreciation of the piggies, an attempt at their inclusion into the human family as representatives of the ramen class (people of another species), is nothing else but elimination of the difference. According to Michaels, the question which arises after we have read *Speaker of the Dead* is above all whether two strikingly different cultures are able to coexist without dooming one of them to annihilation (Michaels 2000).

Is therefore contact with those who are truly and radically Others and understanding them at all feasible, or are we doomed to eternally looking at the Alien through a distorting mirror of anthropomorphisation, thus annihilating their unique, impenetrable Alienness? Stanisław Lem's book *Solaris* wrestles with providing an answer to this question. The novel presents the figure of an alien who exceeds human possibilities of comprehension to such a degree that it becomes impossible even to communicate with it. The Solaris Ocean is an intelligent organism that Earthmen have been examining for years, but despite the development of a research field called "Solaristics", i.e. the knowledge of Solaris, it remains inscrutable, and all attempts at establishing any meaningful contact keep proving futile. The Solaris Ocean is an embodiment of radical alienness.

According to Waldenfels, one of the most difficult problems to be solved in contact with the truly Other is the asymmetry in the Self/Alien relationship:

This is because the alien is also specifically marked by being non-synchronized with the Self, and if it at all is, then to a very unsatisfying degree. [...] alienness does not exhaust in the fact that there exists something exceeding our power of disposal; rather, the experience of the alien starts with an alien claim that precedes our own initiative. What should be said and done is never the same as what can be said and done (Waldenfels 2002: 9).

“As Lévinas shows, [the absence of synchronisation – A.M.] does not consist [...] in that the roles in the dialogue are given in a unilateral way, but in that the claim and the answer do not coincide” (Waldenfels 2002: 131).

In *Solaris*, an example of the above are the guests whose presence makes the life of the explorers of the planet unbearable. They are projections of the protagonists’ innermost and most humiliating guilt or perhaps also desires. Two of them are so embarrassed by their guests that they do not allow them to appear to the rest of the research team, and the presence of one of the guests leads as far as to the suicide of one of the team members. The protagonists are afraid of confronting whatever makes them feel disgusted about themselves and ruins the order of their internal world. In other words, they are afraid of confrontation with the Other in themselves. However, how can we understand the fact that all attempts at contact with the undoubtedly intelligent being result solely in mental torture inflicted on the protagonists by the ocean? Here, we are returning to the lack of synchronisation: what people perceive as a torment inflicted by *Solaris*, is probably something totally different to the ocean itself. Researchers of Lem, headed by Professor Jerzy Jarzębski, interpret this phenomenon as a criticism of anthropocentrism and a sad conclusion on the possibilities of human beings (Jarzębski 2003). To understand the intention of the ocean, the researchers of *Solaris* would have to look at it through the eyes of the being they examined, putting away their human reasoning and human logic. Putting it in a nutshell, they would have to leave themselves aside, which – as demonstrated by Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. – is impossible, since “Consciousness can never make an object out of itself for objective observation” (Csicsery-Ronay Jr. 1985, p. 13). This observation is consistent with Wolfe’s postulate on an attempt to “reject any typical comprehension of the system [for the benefit of – A.M.] (...) a deconstruction of one’s own central comprehension” (Wolfe 2013: 136). As a result, the world shown by Lem seems to be – as David Ketterer put it – a hall of mirrors, in which one may only see his/her own distorted reflection (Csicsery-Ronay Jr. 1985). Thus, we are returning to the Husserlian conviction of the Other’s elusiveness. Patrick Parrinder points out that the very awareness of the Other’s existence gives us nothing without contact. Although we can talk about its certain form if we take into account Harey: *Solaris* and Kelvin’s joint product, we are still unable to see anything going beyond the framework of the projection of human consciousness (Csicsery-Ronay Jr. 1989). During attempts at objective examination or comprehension of not only the Other but also the Self, anthropocentrism emerges again as a highly faulty tool.

Let us note that in all the above-discussed works the basic reaction to Otherness is curiosity motivating the protagonists to examine the secret hiding in the space unavailable to the Self and the subsequent horror with the Otherness. Next comes hostility or an attempt at the domestication of the Otherness – it is worth pointing out that both reactions try to disarm the Other through elimination (understood literally or through the inclusion of the Otherness into the domain of Familiarity). The blame for the above must be placed on the anthropocentrism inscribed into the humanistic thought. It is also worth recalling that in the case of BER-66, rebellion against the oppressive Mechanism determines the robot’s humanity and can

therefore be interpreted almost as a manifesto of a humanist faced with a threat of losing their humanity in the postmodern reality. Like Bernard Rieux in *The Plague*, BER-66 tries to find a chance for the saving of humanity in the face of inevitable disaster – the annihilation of the people in Kaula-Sud. Significantly, *Robot's* protagonist does not originate from the human species – despite being an ideal copy of the human physiognomy and psyche, he is only a robot. As aforementioned, the above is an expression of the belief that you are not a human being, you become one. The reaction to the Otherness as presented both in *Speaker of the Dead*, and in *Solaris* is not that clear-cut. Both works criticise anthropocentrism for the awkwardness in its attempts at comprehending not only Otherness, but also Familiarity, recognizing the reason behind the failure to become familiar with the Other and the Self in the absence of the possibility and (above all) an absence of the will to reject the human perspective. This problem, particularly visible in *Solaris*, also concerns the world presented in *Speaker of the Dead*. After all, the xenologers dealing with the piggies try to study this alien race, referring only to themselves, and in isolation from the natural Lusitanian environment, incorrectly interpreted as identical with that of the Earth solely on the basis of a superficial similarity between the two biospheres. In the case of *Solaris*, the very fact of being a human being, having a human psyche, and therefore also subconsciousness, is an impenetrable barrier. This leads to a sad conclusion that the dialogue between the Self and the Other is impossible until people are guided by their anthropomorphic belief in the superiority of the human being above all other beings. We need decentralisation or rather an extension of the humanistic subject to also cover non-human Otherness. It seems that the development of the posthumanistic thought provides a chance for a subject-based interpretation of the Other, since it is posthumanism which postulates moving away from “a lonely and thus impoverished – since reduced to himself/herself only – human being” (Bakke 2010: 87). The human being constitutes neither the ultimate goal nor the final result of evolution, but is just one of its Stages. Therefore, being a human being may have nothing to do with belonging to the human species (Hollinger 2009). The conclusion of *Speaker of the Dead* also suggests this solution: a happy end is possible only when the terrestrial colonists on Lusitania, having appreciated the Otherness of the colonised planet, begin to see themselves as an element of the Lusitanian landscape, rather than its architects, and as a result they break all their relationships with the Earth.

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## Summary

### *The Alien as the Other: Various Images of the Alien in Science Fiction Literature*

The Other simultaneously terrifies and fascinates; the Other crosses boundaries which the Self would never dare to cross or, in some cases, would not even be able to recognize. Finally, the Other resides also within the Self. Drawing inspiration from this unique relationship between the Other and the Self, science fiction literature ascribes the qualities of the Other to alien characters. In this article, I will attempt to demonstrate how alien characters are employed in science fiction in order to discuss ontological questions of defining what humanity is, ethical questions regarding the reception of the Other, and epistemological ones regarding the human capability of comprehending the Other. I will support my line of argument with examples of the depiction of alien characters from *Robot* (1973) by Adam Wiśniewski-Snerg, *Speaker for the Dead* (1986) by Orson Scott Card, and *Solaris* (1961) by Stanisław Lem as well as their functions.

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