In one of his more savage moods, Stanislaw Lem wrote a short essay called “Cosmology and Science Fiction”, which was first published in the *Science-Fiction Studies* in 1977. In the essay, he compares SF to pornography, accuses it of being anti-scientific, and advises its readers not to acquaint themselves with any actual science “unless they are willing to free their imagination from its imprisonment” by the genre (1984: 208). This was only one of the several attacks that led to a breach between him and the SFWA (Science Fiction Writers of America) where he held honorary membership.1

This broadside would be perfectly understandable from one of those academic holdouts where George Eliot is still seen as *ne plus ultra* of literary achievement. But coming from the man whom Theodore Sturgeon, himself no slouch in the field, called “the most widely read science-fiction writer in the world”, it seems either perplexing or masochistic.2

But Lem’s chastising is motivated by frustrated love, not ignorant hate. He takes SF to task because it fails to live up to its potential for opening its readers’ eyes to the sublimity of the scientific worldview. Because SF is unwilling to look too deeply into “those eternally silent abysses of which Pascal spoke with horror”, it has created “the totally false domesticated universe” (ibid. 205). In this domesticated universe, star wars, colonial allegories, space-opera adventures, and utopian dreams mask the abyss of the nonhuman, the Other, which is beyond recognition, understanding or appropriation. By transposing our petty notions of good and evil onto the cosmic vastness of time and space, we use morality as a defense against alterity, “for it makes no sense at all to look at the universe from the viewpoint of ethics” (ibid. 206).

In this chapter I will argue that Lem’s own oeuvre belies his diagnosis of SF. His works, from the early *Astronauts* (1951) to *Fiasco* (1986),

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explore the ramifications of encounter with the totally Other. In doing so, they not only plumb the “eternally silent abysses” of cosmology but develop a sophisticated and supple ethical discourse which points a way out of the narcissistic trap of the Golden Rule and toward a genuine acceptance of alterity. Lem the writer proves Lem the critic woefully wrong.

**Aliens among us**

Stanislaw Lem (1921–2006) was born and died in Poland but calling him exclusively a Polish writer is as reductive as calling Kafka a Czech writer or Borges an Argentinian one. All three belong to the rapidly growing field of global literature, in which the writer’s audience transcends the national and linguistic boundaries of his/her birthplace.

But while global literature is not place-specific, it is time-specific. It is indelibly stamped with the historical traumas of postmodernity. The trauma that shaped Lem’s oeuvre was the Holocaust.

Lem survived the Nazi occupation in Lvov, the city of his birth, by hiding the fact that his ancestors were Jewish. Many Jews tried to “pass” for Aryans, but for Lem, it was a double passing, since, as he writes in the autobiographical “Reflections of My Life”, “I knew nothing of the Mosaic faith, and, regretfully, nothing at all of Jewish culture” (1984: 4). The Nazi racial laws imposed an alien identity upon him, which he had to hide under the mask that used to be his face. The entanglement between self and Other, or, rather, the impossible and yet inescapable experience of self being Other, was no academic issue for him but literally a matter of life and death. And this experience prompted his choice of the genre of his writing. For Lem, realistic representation fails not just artistically but ethically as well in conveying the enormity of genocide. He describes his negative response to Saul Bellow’s realistic representation of the Holocaust in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*:

Those days [the Holocaust] have pulverized and exploded all narrative conventions that had previously been used in literature. The unfathomable futility of human life under the sway of mass murder cannot be conveyed by literary techniques in which individuals or small groups of persons form the core of the narrative [...]. I do not know, of course, whether this sort of narrative inadequacy was the reason I started writing science fiction, but I suppose – and this is a somewhat daring statement – that I began writing science fiction because it deals with human beings as a species (or rather, with all