Preface

When I was a child, my father told me we were Martians, exiled from our home planet, condemned to forget its red deserts and blue canals, and duped into thinking of ourselves as mere humans. I did not quite believe him, though I wanted to. Growing up on a steady diet of literary science fiction, from Jules Verne and H.G. Wells to Stanislaw Lem and the Strugatsky brothers, I had no problem accepting that aliens were real. But all the aliens I loved were non-humanoid: Wells' tentacled invaders, Lem's strange creatures and stranger robots, the Strugatskys' mysterious Wanderers. I could not quite see myself in this company; and much as I admired Wells' Martians, I did not want tentacles for myself.

Only later did I realize that my father was obliquely referring to the alienation that intellectuals and Jews experienced in the increasingly xenophobic atmosphere of the decrepit Soviet Union. Our family was both and though I was not much troubled by social issues at the age of seven, I felt the pressure – but also the privilege – of being different, being other.

Many years and many countries later, I see an increasing number of people like me: global nomads, living across cultures and languages; aliens to those who want to be surrounded by carbon copies of themselves. The process of cultural mixing and interpenetration that we call globalization cannot be stopped. It has brought a great deal of violence and enmity but also an astounding enrichment of human knowledge and experience.

The question of how to relate to the alien, the Other, is no longer a science-fictional one. From the pages of alien-encounter novels it has migrated to the news headlines. The Martians are here: people who have strange customs and beliefs, who speak incomprehensible languages, whose ways of thinking are different and opaque. And beyond the wave of cultural alienness looms the tsunami of animal rights movements, biotechnologies that are rewiring our brains, AIs that may one day be truly intelligent. What we loosely call posthumanism encompasses all these disparate trends, converging on the same question that science fiction has been asking for more than a hundred years: how do we confront the Other? And an even scarier question is implicit in my father's tale: what if the Other is myself?

And so in this book I am going to revisit the answers that SCIENCE FICTION has given to these question in the hope that they will have a wider implications for the post-Communist, postmodern, posthuman world. The impetus for its writing came from the strange disconnect in our political and ethical discourse between the reality of difference and the ideal of sameness. The current political orthodoxy of human rights is based on humanism: the notion that we all share the same nature and therefore have to treat each other fairly. This notion underpins the Golden Rule: do not do unto others what is hateful to you. But what if some others like what is hateful to you? What if they are so different that your own preferences cannot be a guide to theirs? What if the others, the ethical agents who require your response, are aliens?

Humanism has been philosophically demolished (see Introduction). But it remains a default ethical position, especially when issues of fair treatment and universal rights are raised. So instead of recapitulating the many philosophical and political arguments against humanism, which have been more than adequately marshalled by other scholars and philosophers, I have chosen a different tack. This book is about narratives: fictions that represent, in a concrete and palpable form, the many scenarios of encounter with the alien who is beyond the reach of the human-centered Golden Rule. These scenarios range from violent xenophobia to selfless acceptance. But the most challenging and hopeful of them invite us to envision a situation, in which we transcend the cognitive and cultural limitations of what we define as human in order to embrace an open-ended future. Such narratives are not policy prescriptions or moral sermons; most often than not, they end on a note of uncertainty and ambiguity. But they force us to examine our most cherished assumptions, confront and exorcise our deepest fears. Is it really so bad to clone and/or genetically engineer humans? Should we automatically condemn violence, even if we do not understand its causes? What is it that we really value about ourselves and is this quality shared by other animals?

In writing this book, I hoped to raise such questions rather than to provide specific answers. It is the greatness of good science fiction that it makes one think rather than emote and that it respects the reader's capacity to buckle the book's argument and to come up with alternatives of his/her own. I tried to imitate this in my study of the genre. But there is one question that will inevitably be asked and that I find hard to escape: do I think that extraterrestrial intelligent aliens actually exist?

I could evade it by pointing out that this book is about fictional aliens and that the fact that Mars is uninhabited has no bearing on the value

of H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*. But I will come clean and just state for the record that I do not believe that aliens have ever visited our planet. The UFO phenomenon has the same connection to extraterrestrial life as the Unification Church (aka the Moonies) has to the Moon. However, despite my criticism of the SETI project (alluded to in the Introduction) I believe that life on other planets exists and some forms of this life exhibit features we could recognize as intelligence. Whether any such life-forms generate technological civilizations is a different matter altogether and too complex to address here.

…After some days of consideration, I went back to my father and told him I would like to see the canals of Mars for myself. "Close your eyes," he said, "and imagine". This is the advice science fiction gives to its readers, and it is the best advice of all.