

1993

## Self and Other in SF: Alien Encounters

Carl D. Malmgren

*University of New Orleans*, [cmalmgre@uno.edu](mailto:cmalmgre@uno.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.uno.edu/engl\\_facpubs](https://scholarworks.uno.edu/engl_facpubs)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Malmgren, Carl D. "Self and Other in SF: Alien Encounters." *Science Fiction Studies* 20.1 [59] (1993): 15-33.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English and Foreign Languages at ScholarWorks@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uno.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uno.edu).

Carl D. Malmgren

## Self and Other in SF: Alien Encounters

### 1. Alien Encounter SF

When science fiction uses its limitless range of symbol and metaphor novelistically, with the subject at the center, it can show us who we are, and where we are, and what choices face us, with unsurpassed clarity, and with a great and troubling beauty. —Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Language of the Night*

Rendering the alien, making the reader experience it, is the crucial contribution of SF. —Gregory Benford, “Effing the Ineffable”

Some critics have argued that SF, given its discursive grounding in the epistemology of science and its *a priori* assumption of an impersonal, value-neutral universe, is generically inimical to the depiction and exploration of “character.” Scott Sanders, for example, suggests that “*in the twentieth century science fiction is centrally about the disappearance of character*, in the same sense in which the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel is about the emergence of character” (132; italics in original). In this line of argument, the very idea of character is predicated on a liberal humanism that the scientific worldview has obviated. This critical position ignores, overlooks, or is ignorant of alien-encounter SF, that which has as its narrative dominant the confrontation between terran representative and alien actant. This kind of encounter necessarily keeps “the subject at the center,” exploring not only who we are (in the classic, liberal sense) but also what we might become in a future certain to be different from the present.

Alien-encounter SF involves the introduction of sentient alien beings into the actantial system of the fictional universe; one or more of the actants are nonhuman or subhuman or superhuman. Like SF in general, this type of fiction may feature a number of different novums, but in it the actantial system predominates. LeGuin’s *Left Hand of Darkness*, for example, deals with ambisexual aliens, two contrastive nation-states, and an ice-age world. The novel’s dominant, however, is the encounter between terran self and alien other, and the novel is typologically alien-encounter SF. The encounter with the alien inevitably broaches the question of the Self and the Other. In general, the reader recuperates this type of fiction by comparing human and alien entities, trying to understand what it means to be human.

Since the alien actant can take a wide variety of forms, alien-encounter SF includes a wide spectrum of fictions. The alien other might take the form of a technologically transformed version of the self, as in Frederik Pohl’s *Man Plus* or Joseph McElroy’s *Plus*. It might appear in the form of a

mutant, as in A.E. van Vogt's *Slan*, or in the form of a monstrous alter ego, as in Wells's *The Invisible Man* or Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Humans can themselves create or invent an alien being, either benevolent, as in George Alec Effinger's *The Wolves of Memory*; malevolent, as in Harlan Ellison's "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream"; or ethically neutral, as in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The most common form of the alien is, of course, the extraterrestrial, but even that kind of encounter admits of variation. The alien might appear on Earth by accident, in need of assistance, as in the movie *E.T.* The alien might come here by design, either to save humanity from itself, as in Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*, or to subjugate or annihilate the human race, as in Wells's *The War of the Worlds*. The alien might appear here and attach itself to the human body, either as a parasite (Robert Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters*) or as a symbiont (Hal Clement's *Needle*), in so doing converting a human self into an alien other. Although some critics (e.g., Rose, Wolfe) would assign these fictions to separate categories, I would argue that they share a common dominant novum, an alien actant, which determines their typological identity and circumscribes their thematic field. These fictions explore the nature of selfhood from the vantage point of alterity.

In their critique of alien-encounter SF, critics have pursued two different lines of argument. One line claims that whatever form the alien might take, it is never really *alien*. The scientist Loren Eiseley complains: "In the modern literature on space travel I have read about cabbage men and bird men; I have investigated the loves of lizard men and the tree men, but in each case I have labored under no illusion. I have been reading about man, *Homo sapiens*, that common earthling" (cited in Pielke, 30). Related to this is the charge that SF tends to rely heavily on stereotypes in its portrayal of "character." Even a sympathetic and discerning critic such as Robert Scholes admits that "it is fair to say that the representation of unique individuality is not so much an end in itself in SF as it has been in some realistic novels" (48). Scholes fails to point out that the novels he has in mind are character-dominant; i.e., that bourgeois notions of the centrality of the individuated actant inform these novels' ontology. He also seems to have confused SF featuring other dominants (gadgets, alternate worlds, alternate societies) with the totality of the genre. When evaluating SF, one must pay attention to the nature of the dominant novum. While some SF (like other forms of fiction) resorts to stock characters and stereotypes in elaborating its roster of actants, good alien-encounter SF just cannot do that. The alien actant and its human counterpart occupy the story's center stage, and an exploration of their respective qualities is the *sine qua non* of the fiction.

Other readers of SF, more aware of the richness of the alien-encounter tradition, have proposed ways of discriminating between forms of alienity in SF. Author and critic Gregory Benford, for example, distinguishes between "anthropocentric" and "unknowable" aliens: the former consist of "exaggerations of human traits"; the latter, alien at the "most basic level," partake of an "essential strangeness" ("Aliens and Knowability" 53, 56). The basic

parameter here is the *degree* of alienity, the extent to which the alien adheres to or departs from anthropocentric norms. This degree, it should be clear, is a function of the mental operation used to generate the alien. Here we can make a basic distinction regarding the nature of that operation, one tying alien-encounter SF to other forms of the genre. The author may proceed either by extrapolation, creating a fictional novum by logical projection or extension from existing actualities, or by speculation, making a quantum leap of the imagination toward an *other* state of affairs.<sup>1</sup> Thus we can speak of extrapolative encounters involving anthropocentric aliens and speculative encounters involving unknowable aliens. As Benford notes, the anthropocentric alien serves primarily as a "mirror" for us, "a way to examine our problems in a different light" ("Aliens and Knowability" 54). The act of extrapolation insists that there is a line of connection between terran and alien actants, between Us and Them. The act of making that connection forces us to explore what it means to be human.

The case of the speculative encounter is more problematic. It should be clear that the otherness of the "unknowable alien" is itself a matter of degree; as Benford notes in another essay, "one cannot depict the totally alien" ("Effing" 14). Patrick Parrinder points out that "any meaningful act of defamiliarization can only be relative, since it is not possible for man to imagine what is *utterly* alien to him. To give meaning to something is also, inescapably, to 'humanize' it or to bring it within the bounds of our anthropomorphic world view" (150). Indeed, the relationship between figure and ground upon which perception is based abrogates the possibility of absolute otherness; one needs a background to distinguish the salient features of the foreground. Built into the concept of otherness is the idea of relationship, the question other than what? In terms of the alien encounter that *what* is necessarily defined in human terms.

And yet, as Benford points out, the speculative encounter insists that aliens are finally aliens, not just metaphors, and that "important issues turn upon admitting alien ways of knowing" ("Effing" 15). The speculative leap which generates the alien actant encodes a degree of excess that cannot finally be mastered or appropriated. The speculative writer inscribes an actant who transgresses basic characterological norms, whose relation to our world is less logical than analogical or even anagogical; Benford cites as a paradigm here the human encounter with God ("Aliens and Knowability" 56). These alien actants explore the limitations of being human and suggest the possibility of transcending those limits. They examine what we are *not*, in so doing intimating what we could become. Any attempt to naturalize them, to humanize them, fails, since they encode a degree of excess, an "essential strangeness," that cannot finally be mastered. The speculative encounter resists readerly recuperation; it presents itself as an experience to be undergone, not a lesson to be learned.

The second axis of critique of alien-encounter SF has to do with sets of relations between human self and alien other. American SF in particular, Stanislaw Lem charges, has been guilty of oversimplifying the human/alien

encounter, of reducing it to a single option: "Rule them or be ruled by them" (*Solaris* §11:167). This Us-or-Them mentality, Lem points out, represents a failure of the imagination. Authors who see the encounter in these terms are merely giving way to paranoia, projecting "their fears and self-generated delusions on the universe" (Lem, *Microworlds* 247), converting it into an arena for a Hobbesian war of all against all, in which the only possible relation between sentient beings is antagonism. "I'm an expert on alien psychology," a character in Robert Silverberg's *The Man in the Maze* claims. "I know more about it than any other human being, because I'm the only one who ever said hello to an alien race. Kill the stranger: it's the law of the universe. And if you don't kill him, at least screw him up a little" (§7:110). This "law," though it does hold true for some alien-encounter SF, simply cannot cover the spectrum of shapes that the self/other encounter can take and has taken. There are a number of permutations inherent in the alien-encounter formulation—e.g., other as enemy, other as self, other as other—and the most cognitively rewarding alien-encounter SF explores these various possibilities. In order to survey this spectrum of possible relations, we must turn our attention to specific representative texts.

## 2. Human and Inhuman Aliens: Other-as-Self, Other-as-Enemy

Thus, we see SF as a genre in an unstable equilibrium or compromise between two factors. The first is a cognitive—philosophical and incidentally political—potentiality as a genre that grows out of the subversive, lower-class form of "inverted world." The second is a powerful upper and middle-class ideology that has, in the great majority of texts, sterilized such potential horizons by contaminating them with mystifications about the eternally "human" and "individual" which preclude significant presentations of truly *other* relationships. —Angenot and Suvin, "Not Only but Also: Reflections on Cognition and Ideology in Science Fiction and SF Criticism"

Humanism, in its contemporary manifestation, is, in the last analysis, an ideological discourse the purpose of which is to reify petty-bourgeois values and attitudes in the guise of timeless truths. —Zavarzadeh and Morton, *Theory, (Post)Modernity, Opposition*

Orson Scott Card's Ender trilogy<sup>2</sup> can serve as a "tutor text" for alien-encounter SF not only because all three novels have as their narrative dominant the alien encounter, but also because it tries both to theorize and to survey possible sets of relations between terran and alien actants. The theory takes the form of the Hierarchy of Foreignness articulated by Ender's sister Valentine, a conceptual framework based on distinctions found in the Nordic languages:

The Nordic language recognizes four orders of foreignness. The first is the otherlander, or *utlänning*, the stranger that we recognize as being a human of our world, but of another city or country. The second is the... *främling*. This is the stranger that we recognize as human, but of another world. The third is the raman, the stranger that we recognize as human, but of another species. The fourth is the truly alien, the varelse, which includes all the animals, for with them no conversation is possible. (*SD* §2:38)

In terms of alien-encounter SF, the two pertinent categories here are those of *ramen* and *varelse*; aliens are either *ramen* or *varelse*, depending upon whether or not humans are able to communicate with them. With *ramen*, human beings can “work out differences and make decisions together.” *Varelse*, on the other hand, are “‘wise beasts,’ clearly intelligent and yet completely unable to reach a common ground with humankind” (*X* §9:151). Card’s trilogy, then, proposes two kinds of alien Otherness, roughly equivalent to Benford’s anthropocentric and unknowable aliens.

The first novel in the trilogy examines the inevitable shape that the initial encounter with Otherness takes. Since such an encounter generally precludes the possibility of communication, the Other necessarily becomes *varelse*, with whom there is only one possible relation: “With *ramen* you can live and let live. But with *varelse*, there can be no dialogue. Only war” (*X* §15:338). When the very first encounter with alien beings, the “buggers”—so named because of their insectlike appearance—results in the destruction of a human space ship and its crew, Earth decides that the buggers are mortal enemies, bent on extinction of the human race. Ender’s commander justifies Earth’s position in Darwinian terms:

“If one of us has to be destroyed, let’s make damn sure we’re the ones alive at the end. Our genes won’t let us decide any other way. Nature can’t evolve a species that hasn’t a will to survive. Individuals might be bred to sacrifice themselves, but a race as a whole can never decide to cease to exist. So if we can we’ll kill every last one of the buggers, and if they can they’ll kill every last one of us.” (*EG* §13:278)

In the first encounter between two species, evolutionary science takes precedence, and survival becomes the foremost consideration. Throughout the trilogy, the logic of evolution serves as the basic universal “law.” In effect, through the operation of this law, sentient beings are all reduced to “wise beasts,” animals who, having “passed through the crucible of natural selection,” have been imprinted with an overriding directive—the will to survive (*X* §11:206). In the initial encounter between such species, that directive inevitably results in war, and “when it comes to war, human is human and alien is alien. All that *ramen* business goes up in smoke when we’re talking about survival” (*SD* §17:340).

In prosecuting its war against the buggers, the government of Earth has established a program to single out gifted children at a very early age. These children are subjected to a rigorous military training program intended to produce the kind of military genius necessary to destroy the buggers. In order to foster this genius, the Battle School creates and accentuates the circumstances in which a skewed Darwinian model of relations predominates—the war of all against all, where struggle is the *modus vivendi* and survival is the sole objective. Ender is thrown into a “military paradigm which assumes that humans are malleable, controllable objects” (Blackmore 125), and fashioned into what the people of the Battle School need, a “tool,” something they can *use* to serve their own ends. Graff, Ender’s mentor, believes that “individual human beings are all tools, that the others use to

help us all survive" (EG 37). After his training Ender has become the perfect fighting machine, able to see the Other in only one of two ways, either as another tool to be used or as an enemy to be destroyed. In either case the Other is dehumanized, treated as varelse or reduced to the status of object, object-ified.

Ender leaves the Battle School convinced that it is him against the world, locked into a two-value logic that sees the Other as a tool to be manipulated or something to be eliminated. Indeed, this logic dictates relations between sentient beings throughout much of the trilogy. In *Xenocide* we discover that the "godspoken" of the planet Path have been altered genetically by Starways Congress to become highly intelligent "slaves" (X §11:193). And the pequininos of Lusitania are the products of the descolada virus, introduced there by "a coldhearted monster of efficiency" (X §15:334) to reform the entire planet by "ungluing" species. Trying to explain the descolada, a xenologer on Lusitania speculates as follows: "What if there's a species somewhere that decided that in order to develop planets suitable for colonization, they should send out the descolada virus in advance—thousands of years in advance, maybe—to intelligently transform planets into exactly the conditions they need?" (X §14:271). A similar logic, it should be noted, drives the behaviors of all species that are locked into the view of the Other as varelse. For such species a planet is an object that needs to be "terraformed."

In *Ender's Game*, Ender himself is transformed into a kind of descolada virus, thereby living up to the pun in his name. He graduates from Battle School by taking a particularly grueling "final exam" culminating in a kamikaze assault upon the buggers' home planet and their Hive Queen. Ender learns afterwards that the games were not simulations at all but real battles, that he has wiped out a sentient species, that he is responsible for the death of ten billion buggers. Unknowingly, Ender has served as the ultimate tool, a doomsday weapon. Such subterfuge was absolutely necessary, Graff tells him:

"It had to be a trick or you couldn't have done it. It's the bind we were in. We had to have a commander with so much empathy that he would think like the buggers, understand them and anticipate them. So much compassion that he could win the love of his underlings and work with them like a perfect machine, as perfect as the buggers. But somebody with that much compassion could never be the killer we needed. Could never go into battle willing to win at all costs. If you knew, you couldn't do it." (EG §14:328)

At the age of eleven, then, Ender has been "retooled" as the "perfect machine" needed to eliminate the Other.

But he is not a mindless fighting machine, since the strategy of the Battle School calls on one of Ender's real strengths, his imagination. In order to defeat the Other, Ender must be able to put himself in the Other's place. In the process, however, Ender inevitably reconceives the Other as a Self, converting it from varelse to raman. Tapping into the "hive mind" of the Hive Queen, Ender sees the initial encounters between the species from her perspective. For the buggers, only the hive mind, centered in the queen, is

important; since eliminating the lives of workers does not affect the hive mind, it is not really murder; only queen-killing is real murder (*EG* §14:297). From this perspective, Ender realizes, the death of a few human beings is equally trivial. When the hive mind comes to understand that by destroying human beings it had committed murder, it experiences such a powerful grief that Ender, sharing it empathetically, is reduced to tears. The last Hive Queen begs Ender for a second chance, telling him "we are like you....We did not mean to murder, and when we understood, we never came again" (*EG* §15:353). Once Ender realizes that the war against the buggers represents unprovoked species genocide on the part of the humans ("we never came again"), once he has reconceived the Other as a Self ("we are like you"), he takes responsibility for his actions, despite the fact that he was being used by others.

It should be clear that the real reason behind the human-bugger wars was the inability of the two species to communicate: "If the other fellow can't tell you his story," Graff notes, "you can never be sure he isn't trying to kill you" (*EG* §13:278). Communication between species suspends the "law" of Darwinian struggle; it allows the humanization of the other, the conversion from varelse to raman. *Speaker for the Dead* follows this process of conversion in humanity's relation with a second sentient alien species, the "pequininos" on the planet Lusitania. If *Ender's Game* foregrounds the treatment of Other-as-Enemy, then *Speaker for the Dead* focuses on the idea of Other-as-Self.

Since humanity, prompted by Ender's telling of the Hive Queen's story, now feels guilty about its treatment of the buggers, the discovery of a second sentient life form is seen by most as a second chance, an opportunity for redemption for the sin of slaughtering the buggers. In order to avoid another such debacle, Starways Congress quarantines Lusitania, establishing there a small scientific outpost under rigid guidelines and one basic stricture: the pequininos are not to be disturbed. By minimizing contact in this way, Starways Congress intends to eliminate cultural contamination, to avoid "terraforming" Lusitania in any way: "The idea is to have as little impact on this world as possible" (*SD* §6:102).

The policy is not, however, as benign as it seems. For one thing, the relation between Earth and Lusitania is one-sided; the terran xenologist is put in a position of non-reciprocation, of trying to extract information without giving anything in return. Such an unfair relationship is built into the student/object of study definition, where the object is seen as just that, a thing with a certain number of verifiable properties or characteristics. The entire system guarantees, Ender notes, that the colonists can imagine only one cognitive relation with the pequininos, to learn "about them" not "from them" (*SD* §14:248). When Ender first arrives on the planet and sees the fence separating the scientific colony from the natives, he likens the colony there to a zoo or even a prison. He is reminded that in this situation the question of incarceration is a matter of perspective: "It's the human side of the fence that's connected to the rest of the universe, and the piggy side

that's trapped on its home world" (*SD* §6:107). Indeed, the natives are very much confined in a zoo, reduced to the status of animals to be studied by their human masters, a point brought home by the name the humans use to describe them, "piggies." They are varelse, animals with whom no conversation is possible. Indeed, the whole idea of seeing the pequininos as the agents of human redemption reduces them to their usefulness to human beings, in effect denying them their status as "true ramen" (*SD* §2:38).

Inherent in the policy of minimal intervention is, of course, a covert political dimension; the supposedly neutral stance of the objective observer is itself politically "loaded," as feminist critics have made clear: "The observer's authority depends on his implicit or explicit superiority over the observed.... [His] effort to understand the object of his criticism and to articulate his understanding is, therefore, never quite clear of, never quite free from the issue of his power over the object" (Straub 856). Ender's other metaphor, the prison, suggests the real reason for the fence between the colonists and the natives and the true nature of their relationship: "Ender saw clearly that the rules governing human contact with the piggies did not really function to protect the piggies at all. They functioned to guarantee human superiority and power" (*SD* §14:252-53). The claim that minimal intervention on Lusitania serves the interests of science while protecting an inferior culture is thus pure ideological obfuscation, meant to naturalize and rationalize a relationship of power.

Humans thus control the pequininos by *object*-ifying them. Ender reverses this process by insisting upon the humanity of the pequininos, by treating them as ramen. His particular genius is the ability to occupy the perspective of the Other, to see the Other as an other Self. He explains the pequininos' view of the fence as follows:

"You see, the piggies don't think of the fence the way we do. We see it as a way of protecting their culture from human influence and corruption. They see it as a way of keeping them from learning all the wonderful secrets that we know. They imagine our ships going from star to star, colonizing them, filling them up. And five or ten thousand years from now, when they finally learn all that we refuse to teach them, they'll emerge into space to find all the worlds filled up. No place for them at all. They think of our fence as a form of species murder. We will keep them on Lusitania like animals in a zoo, while we go out and take all the rest of the universe." (*SD* §16:324)

Ender comes to Lusitania to see if he can figure out why the pequininos cold-bloodedly eviscerated the first two xenologers sent to study them. Because the ritualistic murders seem to him to be purposeful, carefully executed acts, he assumes that they can be understood if they are reconceived from the pequininos' perspective. The very deliberateness of the murders suggests to Ender that these apparently senseless acts might have meaning if inserted into another frame of intelligibility. In order to discover that meaning, Ender must deal with the pequininos as ramen. Ramen, Ender knows, take responsibility for what they do. Not to hold the pequininos accountable is to treat them like varelse, something Ender refuses to do.

Accordingly, he asks them direct questions and accepts their answers at face value. In so doing, he learns that the pequininos did not mean to murder their victims at all, that the dismemberment of the xenologers was actually an attempt to honor the humans by "planting" them and giving them the third life that the pequininos enjoy.

By assuming that the native Lusitanians are indeed ramen and that their actions are understandable, Ender is able in effect to discover their humanity. The pequininos are revealed to be all too human. Embracing ideas of responsibility and experiencing guilt, they are horrified that they have unknowingly committed murder. They share with humans the traits of curiosity and an interest in narratives. They have very human ambitions—the desire to travel from star to star, the desire to make their tribe as great as possible. These, Ender notes, are the substance of the "dream of every living creature," the "desire for greatness" (*SD* §17:364). Greatness here is defined in Darwinian terms, signifying primarily the proliferation and prosperity of the species.

In *Xenocide* Card takes the idea of the alien as human and universalizes it, in effect anthropomorphizing the universe. The novel represents an ambitious attempt to come to terms with "the nature of life and reality" (*X* §15:299). Starting with the assumption that evolutionary science informs interspecies encounters, the novel explores whether or not xenocide is a fundamental law, built into the universe, examining in particular to what extent intelligent species are exempt from that law (*X* §4:53). As in the other parts of the trilogy, interspecies war can only be avoided if interspecies communication is possible, if competing species come together as ramen and not varelse. Varelse are "implacably hostile and dangerous," Ender insists, "aliens with whom we are naturally and permanently engaged in a war to the death, and at that time our only moral choice is to do all that's necessary to win" (*X* §6:83).

Ender, it should be noted, is guilty here of oversimplification, of assuming that the human species is necessarily and naturally ramen (such a determination is, after all, a matter of position and not essence), and that as ramen, humans can decide if the Other is ramen or varelse. Such decisions may well be arbitrary; as one character observes, "Varelse is just the term [humans] invented to mean Intelligence-that-we've-decided-to-kill and ramen means Intelligence-that-we-haven't-decided-to-kill-yet" (*X* §15:304). This position is complicated even more by the recognition, elsewhere in the trilogy, that such determinations reveal more about the species that makes them than about the species being so classified: "The difference between ramen and varelse is not in the creature judged, but in the creature judging. When we declare an alien species to be ramen, it does not mean that *they* have passed a treshhold of moral maturity. It means that we have" (*SD* §1:1).

In general, *Xenocide* glosses over this particular moral problematic, insisting that the keystone for interspecies encounters is the possibility of communication. But the idea of communication elaborated throughout the trilogy also rests on some questionable assumptions. In the first place, it is

very anthropomorphic, involving matters of enlightened self-interest, rational give-and-take, and inevitable compromise. It assumes basic human parameters such as the idea of individual responsibility, a belief in equity, and the experience of guilt. Communication between species is thus logical in form and bourgeois in ideology; the pequininos may look like little pigs, but they talk like hard-headed midwesterners. Also, the idea of communication in the trilogy takes for granted a very unproblematic relation between signifier and signified and the ready translatability of one sign into another.

That Card embraces an "essentialist" or logocentric position in regard to matters of language and selfhood is made clear in the way in which he "solves" the question of species difference, thereby resolving the multiple conflicts in *Xenocide*. He posits an irreducible basis to all existence, the "philote," the smallest conceivable physical particle, yet with no mass or inertia (*X* §4:43). Philotes are "the things out of which all other things are made" (*X* §15:313), but they are particularly instrumental to organic life:

"Life is when a single philote has the strength of will to bind together the molecules of a single cell, to entwine their rays into one. A stronger philote can bind together many cells into a single organism. The strongest of all are the intelligent beings. We can bestow our philotic connections where we will. The philotic basis of intelligent life is even clearer in the other known sentient species. When a pequinino dies and passes into the third life, it's his strong-willed philote that preserves his identity and passes it from the mammaloid corpse to the living tree." (*X* §4:43)

"The philote at the center of our twining," Ender says, is the seat of "our individual identity" (*X* §13:258) and the source of our individual wills. With philotes Card has effectively totalized life, supplied an essence, provided a repository or center which founds the Self. At the same time he has inevitably reduced all life to a monochromatic sameness.

Before incarnation, philotes exist in another kind of space: "All in the same non-place. No place-ness in that place. No where-being." Their condition in that non-place is perpetual dissatisfaction, a "life-yearning"; they are "all hungry for whereness. All thirsty for pattern. All lonely for selfness" (*X* §15:313). Their name is perfectly appropriate because they are essentially love-bodies, servants of Desire—for presence, for being, for meaning, for plenitude. Their essential nature is ironically underscored by the role they play in the novel's resolution. In order to avoid a showdown between Starways Congress and the various sentient beings on Lusitania, Ender and his friends must discover faster-than-light travel. Philotic twining, it turns out, makes such travel possible, enabling a "strong" philote, one which commands its own pattern, to pop through to Outside non-space and back into Inside real-space. Time-travel works, in other words, because Lusitanian physicists discover "the illuminating principle that wishing makes it so and all living creatures pop out of nowhere whenever they're needed" (*X* §15:326). The same principle, of course, applies to philotes themselves, which may thus be seen as a function of Card's wish-fulness, the product of a reaction formation which converts the cold and hostile universe into a "loving" place where prayers just might be answered (cf. *X* §15:347).

Like strong philotes, characters in novels somehow pop from the Outside into the Inside of the text. Card acknowledges the similarity quite overtly; Ender brings back with him from his trip Outside all-too-human copies of his sister Valentine and his brother Peter, created *ex nihilo* by his powerful imagination. In this way the trilogy closes on a metafictional note, one sounded originally in *Speaker for the Dead*. That volume recounts Ender's experiences as Speaker for the Dead, whose duty it is to tell "the story of the dead man as he saw himself, the life the dead woman meant to live, however badly it turned out" (SD §9:146). Identifying with the dead, a Speaker can tell "true stories" (SD §14:259), stories which reveal sympathetically but accurately the real experience of a single human individual. Speaking for the dead, it should be clear, is very much like being an author, a matter of telling true stories full of meaning and significance. In order to do it well, Card suggests, one must give one's Self over to the Other, must immerse one's identity in that of an Other. This, of course, is similar to what we do when we read a book; in effect, we listen to a speaking. To do it well, we too must give ourselves over to the Other, which is the speaking, which is the book. Every act of reading involves an encounter between Self and Other, an encounter fraught with immense potential. Such an encounter can make us into "someone else, someone less afraid, someone more compassionate" (SD §13:231).

The Ender trilogy thus surveys two possible treatments of alien alterity: the Other-as-Enemy and the Other-as-Self. The former treatment is shown to be predicated upon the belief that evolutionary law dictates the terms of all alien encounters, such law being that of "the jungle." This law justifies a strategy of systematic dehumanization of the Other, a perspective that ultimately infects both "friends" and "enemies," converting the Other into a tool to be used or an enemy to be destroyed. The trilogy unilaterally indicts those who so reduce the Other: "they would...have to be heartless, selfish, arrogant beings, to think that all life in the universe was theirs to manipulate as they saw fit" (X §14:288). Loopholes in evolutionary law can be discovered or devised through interspecies communication. Such communication, Card insists, necessarily consists of the telling of stories, the story of the Self and the story of the Other. Sharing such stories, partaking of them, can convert the Other into a Self and make possible both enlightenment and change: "I look through his eyes and see the world his new way and it changes everything" (X §15:292).

Occupying the position of the Other also serves to circumscribe the Self. When a pequinino named Human complains that humans are stupid because they refuse to believe what the pequininos tell them, Ender replies, "This is how humans are: We question all our beliefs, except the ones we *really* believe, and those we never think to question" (SD §14:257). But from the perspective of the Other we can distance ourselves from those beliefs, the ones we *really* believe; from an estranged position we can subject them to interrogation. One of the xenologer's reports notes that the pequininos have adopted the Hierarchy of Foreignness, but that they refer to themselves as

"ramen." The report nearsightedly concludes that the pequininos misunderstand the hierarchy or that they unconsciously view themselves from a terran perspective. But the pequininos do consider themselves to be ramen—at once human and yet alien to themselves—in that their true being consists in the third life, after they have metamorphosed into tree form, when they "reach and drink from the sun, in the full light at last, never moving except in the wind" (*SD* §17:369). This suggests, of course, that being merely human is a lower form of existence, lived out in the half-light of consciousness, full of haste and worry. Such a view emerges, however, only if one is able, at least momentarily, to adopt the perspective of the Other.

But this treatment of the Other exacts its own cost. The Other, so conceived, may finally be merely human. The trilogy suggests that the Other can almost always be "covered" by human paradigms (such as story-telling). There's never an excess, a surplus, of Other-ness. Accordingly, there's no need to transcend the human because the human is finally seen to be sufficient, adequate, neither too much nor too little. The last volume in the trilogy is, in this regard, aptly named; it effectively kills off the idea of strangeness. "Any animal is willing to kill the Other," says Ender, succinctly summarizing the Other-as-Enemy theme. "But the higher beings include more and more living things within their self-story, until at last there is no Other" (*X* §11:205). *Xenocide* is one such self-story.

### 3. Alien Aliens: The Other as Other

Science fiction nowhere more firmly rejects—indeed, explodes—humanism than in treating the alien. —Gregory Benford, "Effing the Ineffable"

The alien is the creation of a need—man's need to designate something that is genuinely outside himself, something that is truly nonman, that has no initial relation to man except for the fact that it has no relation. —Slusser and Rabkin, "Introduction: The Anthropology of the Alien"

"Biggest fact about aliens is, they're alien." —Gregory Benford, *Big Sky River*

Gregory Benford notes in "Effing the Ineffable" that a friendly alien is an oxymoron, that "friendliness is a human category" (14); he thus indicates how easy and "natural" it is to see the alien in human terms and, correspondingly, how difficult it is to imagine the truly alien. How does one represent the unknowable, speak the unspeakable? In the same essay, Benford cites as an example the aliens in Terry Carr's "The Dance of the Changer and Three" who insist that "two and two are orange" (20). Such an overt violation of the dictates of mathematics and the frames of common sense does suggest an essential strangeness. While conceding that all renderings of the alien are relative, speculative SF attempts in various ways to suggest the possibility of, and even to approach the condition of, "real" ontological Otherness.

An obvious way to suggest a "real" alien-encounter is by indirection, focusing not on the alien itself but on the human response to the alien. An author can, for example, render the human response in terms that draw on the reader's "sense of wonder," that "indefinable rush when beholding

something odd and new and perhaps awesome" (Benford, "Effing" 16). Arthur C. Clarke depicts the human encounter with the Overmind in *Childhood's End* as follows:

"Now it looks like the curtains of the aurora, dancing and flickering across the stars. Why, that's what it really is, I'm sure—a great auroral storm. The whole landscape is lit up—it's brighter than day—reds and greens and golds are chasing each other across the sky—oh, it's beyond words, it doesn't seem fair that I'm the only one to see it—I never thought such colors...." (§24:215)

Benford may be right that "'dat ole sensawonda' is the essential SF experience" and that "no alien should leave home without it" ("Effing" 16), but Clarke's passage falls short of triggering it. The passage so emphasizes the human response (as opposed to the alien stimulus) that it risks devolving into exclamations and exclamation points. His approach confesses that the experience of Otherness is finally "beyond words." More important, it is also cognitively suspect; it makes no intellectual demands. It is like SF in general, according to a caustic Lem character, in that it supplies "the public with what it wants: truisms, clichés, stereotypes, all sufficiently costumed and made 'wonderful' so that the reader may sink into a safe state of surprise and at the same time not be jostled out of his philosophy of life" (*His Master's Voice* §9:106-07).

This is not to say that focusing on the human response necessarily means failure, nor that Clarke's novel fails as a whole. Indeed, Clarke's novel succeeds powerfully when it dwells on the Overmind's behaviors, on what it *does* to Earth and Earth's children. In order to render the human experience of speculative Otherness, the author must depict the "dissociation of sensibility" such an experience would entail. The author fractures language and syntax, trying to suggest "a sense of dislocation, of reality distortion, of fevered intermittent content" (Benford, "Effing" 22). In his aptly named short story, "In Alien Flesh," Benford renders the climactic moment of contact as follows:

- Bursting light that lanced through him, drummed a staccato rhythm of speckled green—
- Twisting lines that meshed and wove into perspectives, triangles warped into strange saddle-pointed envelopes, coiling into new soundless shapes—
- A latticework of shrill sound, ringing at edges of geometrical flatness—
- Thick, rich foam that lapped against weathered stone towers, precisely turning under an ellipsoid orange sun—
- Miniatured light that groaned and spun softly, curving into moisture that beaded on a coppery matrix of wire—
- A webbing of sticky strands, lifting him—
- A welling current—
- Upward, toward the watery light— (19-20)

Juxtaposing images, conflating the languages of science and nature, metamorphosing one sense into another—these literary devices can suggest the sensory experience of a genuinely different mode of perception. This technique has the advantage of allowing readers to share the experience themselves, to undergo alien-ation. The reader is not being "told" about the

experience, or even being "shown" it; he or she is given the opportunity to become the alien.

Lem, in general, avoids rendering the alien in the ways elaborated above, in large part, I suspect, because he has reservations about their cognitive force, about their critical edge. He emphasizes another aspect of the human response to the alien—its limitations. In novels such as *Solaris*, *The Invincible*, and *His Master's Voice*, he depicts speculative encounters in which the aliens truly live up to Benford's epithet; they are in some sense "unknowable." Lem systematically interrogates the frames of intelligibility that human beings, scientists in particular, bring to the encounter; invariably he demonstrates how such frames are limited, or subjective, or emotionally colored, or simply inappropriate, hopelessly anthropomorphic.

One of his favorite strategies for depicting the inadequacy of the human response, for representing the gap between Us and Them, is the telling metaphor. In *His Master's Voice*, for example, the efforts of the scientists to decode the "neutrino letter from the stars" (§3:43) are parodied by a series of belittling comparisons. The scientists are compared to ants feeding on the body of a dead philosopher, convinced that they are making good use of their find (§1:22). "Receiving the message from the stars," the scientist-narrator claims, "we did with it no more than a savage who, warming himself by a fire of burning books, the writings of the wisest men, believes that he has drawn tremendous benefit from his find!" (§1:27). Elsewhere he remarks that humans may have analyzed the "ink" with which the message has been "penned," but that discovery reveals absolutely nothing about "the intellectual attributes of the writer" (§8:104). These scientists are jamming a tape from a digital machine into a player piano and claiming to hear music (§13:145). These metaphors parody and ridicule the pretensions of the scientists while at the same time indicating the extent of their ignorance, the measure of their incomprehension.

Lem's objective here and elsewhere is to indicate the limitations of humanity in its encounter with Otherness. He seems more concerned with the investigators than with the object of their investigations. He draws maps, very good maps, of human ignorance, of humanity's blind spots. In *His Master's Voice*, for example, he shows how the scientific view of the universe is totally unable to deal with the idea of intentionality:

Because scientists learn to conduct so-called games with nature, with a nature that is not—from any permissible point of view—a personal antagonist, they are unable to countenance the possibility that behind the object of investigation there indeed stands a Someone, and that to become familiar with that object will be possible only insofar as one draws near, through reasoning, to its completely anonymous creator. Therefore, though they supposedly knew and freely admitted that the Sender was a reality, their whole life's training, the whole acquired expertise of their respective fields, worked against that knowledge. (§2:33)

Clearly, Lem's targets here include both scientists and science-fiction authors; both communities are locked into a limited set of conceptualizations. Elsewhere Lem's narrator indicts humanity for its tendency to see the

Other either in terms of use-value (§4:61) or, through "paralysis of imagination," as an enemy committed to the annihilation of Earth (§8:101), tendencies which, as we have seen, Card also deals with in the Ender trilogy. The interrogation of human epistemological assumptions, it should be noted, is not solely the province of the speculative alien-encounter SF. One of the classic stories of the "Golden Age," Zelazny's "A Rose for Ecclesiastes," features an encounter between terran poet and all-too-human Martian "houri" that subverts one of the most common human frames of intelligibility—the idea of romantic love.

Card, Zelazny, and Lem, then, use the alien-encounter to probe the limits of human knowledge and understanding. Unlike Card and Zelazny, however, Lem also takes on anthropomorphic notions of communication. Card's humans and aliens converse easily; they swap stories and cut deals. Zelazny's poet translates Ecclesiastes into "high" Martian, in so doing saving the Martian race. Communication with Lem's alien aliens is much more problematic, conducted as it is through a "veil of incomprehensible signs" (*His Master's Voice* §2:32). Lem's title itself refers to a kind of miscommunication between two different orders of being. Lem understands that the alien alien is necessarily characterized by an excess, a surplus of signification, an inadequation between signifier and signified. Such excess is, by definition, "beyond words"; all attempts at description, at direct rendering, inevitably violate the alien's irreducible strangeness. Even to refer to the enigmatic sentient being in Lem's *Solaris* as an "ocean" is to geomorphize it. Linguistic formulation, it seems, involves some sort of xenocide.

The question remains: If one is committed to rendering an alien alien (and not merely the human response to such a being), how then does one go about it? The author must somehow encode an irreducible degree of mystery, something that radically defies comprehension or intelligibility. This is most effectively done through "alien effects"; the author focuses not on what the alien *is* but on what it *does*. The ocean being in *Solaris* fashions massive colloidal compositions that resist both description and explanation. The ocean's activities can be recuperated or naturalized, Lem shows, in very different, even contradictory, ways: a mimoid formation is thought to be a "stillbirth" by one observer, a "necrosis" by another (§8:122-23). Even more uncanny are acts that obviously reflect intentionality but deflect intelligibility. The ocean-being manufactures Phi-creatures that it "reads out" from the investigating humans' subconscious or unconscious minds; the appearance of these creatures seems to represent an attempt to make contact and an intentional act. But given the nature of the Phi-creatures, that intention remains entirely obscure, so much so as to problematize the idea of intention itself—is the idea of intentionality simply a human construct, a function of human desire?

In a similarly enigmatic way, the Overmind in Clarke's *Childhood's End* works a terrible metamorphosis upon the children of humanity, converting them into something extrahuman and incomprehensible, a strange transindividual being that reshapes continents and makes rivers flow uphill. Clarke's

novel foregrounds an essential aspect of the encounter with speculative Otherness, the possibility of transcendence, of passing beyond the merely human. Benford and Gordon Eklund depict a series of such encounters in *If the Stars Are Gods*. Their protagonist, Bradley Reynolds, makes personal contact with a spectrum of aliens, including extraterrestrial giraffe-beings, the sphere "whales" of Jupiter, the lattice creatures of Titan; all of his encounters are informed by a common concern—the need to discover something beyond the Self. The giraffe-beings, who ironically assume the names Jonathon and Richard, have entered the solar system in order to converse with the sun. "We would like to visit and converse with your star," they matter-of-factly tell Reynolds, because it is both "powerful" and "benevolent" (§2:32). Over a period of time they teach Bradley how to speak to the Sun through song, and he undergoes a truly alien-encounter (§2:62-64), "experiencing something personal that no other man would ever know" (§2:66). This touchstone experience dictates Reynolds' subsequent career, driving him outward through the solar system in search of what the first encounter had given him, "the edge of true meaning" (§2:74). For him the alien-encounter entails the possibility of "revelations" (§5:192), a word that calls to mind Benford's remark that the most "unknowable" alien of all is, of course, God.

Before leaving the solar system in search of other star-gods, Jonathon tells Reynolds that stars are indeed alive and that he should "think of them as doorways" through which humans are not ready to pass (§2:76). The metaphor here figures the alien encounter as a rite of passage from one universe to another, from one reality to another. This is perhaps the most troubling and wonderful aspect of such an encounter; "the truly alien doesn't just disturb and educate," Benford notes, "it breaks down reality, often fatally, for us" ("Effing" 23). Bradley Reynolds's encounter with the lattice creatures on Titan culminates in a final estrangement involving both revelation and death: "The sky shattered. Something broke inside him" (§5:210).

The reaction to the alien can be so violent as to cause the human actant to become alien to himself, to experience a real alien-ation (Slusser and Rabkin xii). Wesson, the protagonist in Damon Knight's "Stranger Station," after four months exposure to a crab-like alien creature, finds his perceptual field altered or contaminated:

He held the back of one hand close to his eyes. He saw the dozens of tiny cuneiform wrinkles stamped into the skin over the knuckles, the pale hairs sprouting, the pink shiny flesh of recent scars. *I'm human*, he thought. But when he let his hand fall on the console, the bony fingers seemed to crouch like crustaceans' legs, ready to scuttle. (131)

When he thinks he has figured out the alien's intentions, Wesson tries to communicate them to the shipboard computer only to find out that he can no longer understand English, can no longer read or write: "The black letters were alien squiggles on the page, little humped shapes, without meaning" (132). Learning to converse with the alien has rendered him

unable to converse with his fellow human beings. In one stroke Knight sabotages Card's distinction between raman and varelse. The story ends in chaos and ambiguity as Wesson's hold on reality dissolves. The encounter with speculative Otherness entails the possibility of "falling through" from one reality to another, of really radical change, of a fate that itself is ineffable. The human race in *Childhood's End* comes to "an end that no prophet had ever foreseen—an end that repudiated optimism and pessimism alike" (§23:205), a fate which obviates human categories of hope and fear.

In general, then, we can contrast extrapolative and speculative encounters in terms of how we recuperate or naturalize them. Extrapolative encounters can be recuperated within existing human or scientific paradigms. The anthropocentric alien may be more or less than human, but it is human nonetheless, and its humanity reflects back upon our own. In the extrapolative encounter we appropriate the alien, turning it into our property by giving it our properties. The speculative encounter finally resists appropriation, refuses to be "named." Insisting upon the possibility of something extrahuman, nonhuman, or metahuman, this encounter necessarily plays upon and with religious ideas of faith, transcendence, and apotheosis. The alien alien is meant to be "ingested" (Benford, "Aliens and Knowability" 63); in the ideal case, the reader experiences a transfiguration that interrogates and problematizes all human assumptions and beliefs.

In its most extreme form, the speculative encounter suggests in fact that "the universe may be unknowable, and its 'moral' structure might forever lie beyond humanity's ken" (Benford, "Effing" 23). And yet even while it calls in question "cognitive universality" (Lem, *His Master's Voice* §1:26-27), speculative SF does not completely endorse cognitive pessimism. As Benford notes, the "science" in SF "represents *knowledge*" ("Effing" 13), the possibility of gaining some kind of purchase, however tenuous, upon the unknown. The scientists in *His Master's Voice* may finally fail to translate the "letter from the stars," but Hogarth the scientist-narrator insists that it is indeed a letter, only one so cleverly crafted that it prohibits misreading and misuse (§2:192-94). Elsewhere he speaks of the "march" of science/knowledge:

Science meanwhile advances at its gradual pace, often slowing to a crawl, and for periods it even walks in place, but eventually it reaches the various ultimate trenches dug by philosophical thought, and, quite heedless of the fact that it is not supposed to be able to cross those final barriers to the intellect, goes right on. (§2:29)

The speculative alien encounter represents one such barrier.

## NOTES

1. For an elaboration of this distinction, see Malmgren, *Worlds Apart*, pp. 11-15.
2. The trilogy consists of *Ender's Game* (1985), *Speaker for the Dead* (1986), and *Xenocide* (1991). I will use the abbreviations *EG*, *SD*, and *X* in the discussion that follows.

## WORKS CITED

- Angenot, Marc and Darko Suvin. "Not Only But Also: Reflections on Cognition and Ideology in Science Fiction and SF Criticism." *SFS* 6:168-79, #18, July 1979.
- Benford, Gregory. "Aliens and Knowability: A Scientist's Perspective." *Bridges to Science Fiction*. Ed. George E. Slusser et al. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1980. 53-63.
- . "Effing the Ineffable." *Aliens: The Anthropology of Science Fiction*. Ed. George E. Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987. 13-25.
- . "In Alien Flesh." *In Alien Flesh*. New York: Tom Doherty Assoc., 1986. 3-29.
- , and Gordon Eklund. *If the Stars Are Gods*. 1977; rpt. New York: Ace, 1981.
- Blackmore, Tim. "Ender's Beginning: Battling the Military in Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*." *Extrapolation* 32:124-42, Summer 1991.
- Card, Orson Scott. *Ender's Game*. 1985; rpt. New York: Tom Doherty Assoc., 1986.
- . *Speaker for the Dead*. 1986; rpt. New York: Tom Doherty Assoc., 1987.
- . *Xenocide*. New York: Tom Doherty Assoc., 1991.
- Clarke, Arthur C. *Childhood's End*. 1953; rpt. New York: Ballantine, 1976.
- Knight, Damon. "Stranger Station." *Earthmen and Strangers: Nine Stories of Science Fiction*. Ed. Robert Silverberg. New York: Dell, 1968. 113-36.
- LeGuin, Ursula K. *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Ed. Susan Wood. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1979.
- Lem, Stanislaw. *His Master's Voice*. Trans. Michael Kandel. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
- . *Microworlds: Writings on Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Ed. Franz Rottensteiner. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984.
- . *Solaris*. Trans. from the French by Joanna Kilmartin and Steve Cox. 1961; rpt. New York: Berkley, 1970.
- Malmgren, Carl D. *Worlds Apart: Narratology of Science Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991.
- Parrinder, Patrick. "The Alien Encounter: Or, Ms Brown and Mrs LeGuin." *Science Fiction: A Critical Guide*. Ed. Patrick Parrinder. London: Longman, 1979. 46-58.
- Pielke, Robert G. "Humans and Aliens: A Unique Relationship." *Mosaic* 13:29-40, Spring/Summer 1980.
- Rose, Mark. *Alien Encounters: Anatomy of Science Fiction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1981.
- Sanders, Scott. "The Disappearance of Character." *Science Fiction: A Critical Guide*. Ed. Patrick Parrinder. London: Longman, 1979. 131-47.
- Scholes, Robert. *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on the Fiction of the Future*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975.
- Silverberg, Robert. *The Man in the Maze*. New York: Avon, 1969.
- Slusser, George E. and Eric S. Rabkin. "Introduction: The Anthropology of the Alien." *Aliens: The Anthropology of Science Fiction*. Ed. Slusser and Rabkin. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987. vii-xxi.
- Straub, Kristina. "Women, Gender, and Criticism." *Literary Criticism and Theory: From the Greeks to the Present*. Ed. Robert Con Davis and Laurie Fink. New York: Longman, 1989. 855-76.
- Wolfe, Gary K. *The Known and the Unknown: The Iconography of Science Fiction*. Kent, OH: Kent State UP, 1979.

Zavarzadeh, Mas'ud and Donald Morton. *Theory, (Post)Modernity, Opposition: An "Other" Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Washington, DC: Maisonneuve Press, 1991.

**Abstract.**—*Alien-encounter SF involves the introduction of sentient alien beings into the actantial system of the fictional universe; one or more of the actants are nonhuman or superhuman or subhuman. By staging a confrontation between an alien actant and a terran representative, alien-encounter SF broaches the question of Self and the Other. The reader recuperates this fiction by comparing human and alien entities, measuring the Self by examining the Other.*

*Alien encounters can be discriminated according to the extent to which the alien actant adheres to or departs from anthropocentric norms; in simple terms, we can distinguish between "human aliens" and "alien aliens." This article examines the nature of human aliens by analyzing Orson Scott Card's Ender trilogy, a work which theorizes and surveys possible sets of relations between terran and alien actants. It explores the problematics of alien aliens by looking at appropriate texts by Lem, Benford, and Clarke. (CDM)*