

*I'm tired of the Earth. These people.
I'm tired of being caught in the tangle of their lives.*¹

We live in interesting times. According to the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* organization, which assesses the negative impacts of technological development, the risk of a man-made catastrophe of global magnitude has never been higher. The overlapping of various events, such as the pandemic, the delay in action against climate change, and the outbreak of war in Ukraine, meant that in 2023 the hands of the symbolic Apocalypse Clock would be moved further forward than they have ever been - 90 seconds from midnight. It may therefore seem minor that the war in Ukraine has put one of the most ambitious Mars exploration projects of this century, that of the Rosalind Franklin rover, on indefinite hold.

The rover is part of the Exomars mission, a project of the European Space Agency in collaboration with the Russian space agency, Roscosmos, to examine the environmental and atmospheric conditions on Mars and look for signs of present and past life in deeper layers than those so far analyzed by other rovers and landers. The mission was planned in two phases. On March 14, 2016, the Trace Gas Orbiter probe was launched from the Bajkonur Cosmodrome, equipped with sensors for imaging and high-sensitivity chemical analysis of trace amounts of methane and other hydrocarbons, as well as other potentially biochemically interesting gases. The probe also carried the Schiaparelli lander, which was supposed to collect meteorological information and measure electric fields during dust storms, but more importantly to serve as a test for a soft landing, since up to that point only NASA had been able to get something workable to rest on the surface of Mars. Unfortunately, there was too much compartmentalization of work, with poor communications between various contractors that ultimately resulted in an unrobust altitude calculation software. When Schiaparelli was dropped into the Martian atmosphere on Oct. 16 of that year, all was well until the parachute opened, at which point the lander began to pirouette faster than expected, saturating the rotation sensors and generating a huge error in position calculation. The disoriented on-board computer became convinced that the rover's altitude was *negative* when it was still more than three and a half kilometers away from landing. The result was the premature deactivation of all braking systems and a crash at three hundred kilometers per hour, which created a small crater about

¹ Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* Chapter IV, p. 25 (Titan Books, 2007)

half a meter deep. The remains of the poor lander were spotted by the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter's HiRISE camera just over a week later; fortunately, unlike what happened with Beagle 2, the main telemetry data were transmitted before the crash, and should have provided important information for Rosalind Franklin's landing. The rover is equipped with a telescopic drill designed by the Italian Leonardo, which was supposed to self-assemble on site and take rock samples from a depth of two meters, and then analyze them in the portable chemistry lab with the hope of finding some extremophilic archaeobacteria, sheltered enough from cold and radiation to live semi-quiescent, and perhaps take advantage of some small concentration of water below the regolith.

It is normal administration that when you have only one attempt and plenty of time, you want to get it right without taking any risks. Thus, the second part of the mission, i.e., the launch of Rosalind Franklin, initially scheduled for 2018, was moved to the next launch window, in 2020, due to delays in the delivery of the science payload by European and Russian manufacturers. In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in Europe, and this exacerbated delays already accumulated in vehicle readiness, forcing another postponement. Two years later, Russia invaded Ukraine, and European Union sanctions resulted in the suspension of the partnership between ESA and Roscosmos. Not all joint science projects were abandoned; for example, the advancement of the program on controlled nuclear fusion, which includes Russia, was not challenged by the war, and some institutions continued collaborations considering it a priority to ensure the continuity of everyone's contribution. But that was not the case with Exomars: hopes of a launch in 2022 faded, and everything has been on standby ever since, personnel have been reassigned to other projects, and it is not known if and when it will be able to restart. In short, it seems that ESA will not be able to get rid of the Mars curse anytime soon.

The events we are witnessing represent for me a very strong temptation to attempt parallels between the Russian invasion and those alien invasions, with their more or less obvious metaphorical meanings. The rhetoric of statements, propaganda, and policy decisions made within Russia in the context of the war testify to a profound divide in mentality that has survived the supposed Westernization of the former Soviet Union. At times, one wonders if we all lived on the same world. However, not being an expert on the roots of this terrestrial conflict, I prefer to take refuge in something simpler, namely the (literary) conflicts with Mars described in invasion fiction. Almost all of them spring from a situation of resource scarcity, but they are corroborated by the existence of irreducible differences between aliens (yes, because we too are someone else's aliens). Differences in culture and values, which may be represented by symbolic physical characters and which are almost always a metaphor

for our tendency to see in the "different from us" something inherently hostile and threatening, to be fought or, if it is weaker than us, to be exploited by justifying our actions on the basis of an alleged evil, inferiority or impending threat to our existence, or to be modified to make it more consistent with us, with our needs. A view reminiscent of that of cosmists such as Nikolai Fyodorov, for whom worlds other than our own must be subjugated, and imperfect life replaced by our domination².

We should not blame ourselves if we tend to give in to these calls: we are calibrated that way. The human brain evolved carrying tribalism as a guiding spirit that tells us that we have to classify and separate things: us and them, man and woman, good and bad, healthy and sick, humanity and environment, nature and culture, humanistic culture and scientific culture, rational and irrational, species, races, social classes, nationalities and so on. These are all concepts that, if we analyze them more deeply, we find that they respond to a primal need of ours to create taxonomies rather than sharp scientifically determined divisions. Therefore, the fact that conflict with the other is inherent in our tribalism and that we are still someone else's different can challenge the very idea that the invader is evil and not, for example, speciesist in the same way that the human is. A position explicitly stated in *The Massacre of Mankind*, the authorized sequel to *The War of the Worlds*, through Walter Jenkins, the narrator of the first invasion: "Do the Martians see us as civilized? Oh, they recognize our mechanical prowess, and the danger it poses to them [...] but they might see our machines, our cities as the product of a kind of blind reflex; we ourselves might decide to eradicate an anthill no matter how sophisticated it appears to us. And they may not consider this a war at all. In fact, they may not even know the meaning of the word."³. Baxter elaborates these thoughts more than a century after the original, but the seed of the idea that conflict and oppression could emerge from a failure to recognize the sentient nature and dignity of the different was already present from the beginning; we saw it in *Last and First Men*, but also in the socialist utopia of *Red Star*.⁴ Sterni's position, which considers the annihilation of the violent and corrupt human species the only option to allow the growth of Martian society outside planetary limits, is contrasted with that of Netti and Menni, implicitly supported by the author, which identifies the difference between Earthlings and Martians not only as the result of unique environmental, historical and social processes, but also as a value and enriching factor, and the resulting conflicts are to be addressed by alternative methods to the creation of a hierarchy establishing the superiority or

² For an in-depth discussion of Russian cosmist thought and its influences, see also Fred Scharmen, *Distant Worlds* (2021, Codex) p. 20ff.

³ Stephen Baxter, *The Massacre of Mankind* p. 136 (Gollancz, 2017). Translation is mine.

⁴ For the characters and plot of *Red Star*, see Chapter 3.

otherwise of one species over the other. A position that in the end, despite the sacrifice involved, will prevail. It is no accident, perhaps, that Bogdanov's Martians exhibit much less pronounced sexual dimorphism than Earthlings.

To make a long story short, some form of conflict between humans and Martians is inevitable just as it is inevitable between any living being that presents differences and with whom we have to contend for material resources (space, nourishment, light) or immaterial resources (representation, power, recognition, social role). Conflict with the other from oneself has the potential to turn into enrichment and growth the moment the other is recognized as having the right to exist with equal dignity and, on the basis of this, conflict is managed by seeking ground for synthesis, compromise or coexistence. However, it has always been much more automatic to establish a priori an implicit hierarchy that sees in front those who are more technologically, culturally or intellectually advanced, those who hold power and economic wealth, or simply "who came first." Those who consider themselves higher in this hierarchy will assume that their own interests take priority and that everyone else must willingly accept the interference of the dominant tribe. Except that each tribe tends to see itself as having superior values and culture. Who is right?

The Apocalypse Clock is there to sow doubt that perhaps our traditional way of handling conflict will not guarantee our survival or greater well-being. The symbolic bearing of Mars as Earth's different twin, in addition to hosting numerous alternative sociopolitical and ecological models, has given room for many identity reflections about what makes us who we are and what distinguishes us from each other, and speculations about how our civilization might look from an outsider who is immersed in it. Becoming alien for a while, looking at ourselves from a distance, may be the first step in that act so laborious and foreign to our nature of metabolizing deviations as that which allows us to break the stalemate, to reshape our relationship with what we consider different and distinct from us, and which perhaps so different and distinct in the end is not.

The stranger

martian

adj. and s. m. [from fr. *martien*, der. of *Mars* "Mars"]. - 1. adj. Relating to the planet Mars: *Martian satellites*. 2. s. m. (f. -a) a. Hypothetical inhabitant of the planet Mars, especially as a character in science fiction novels or films, to whom vital organs different from those of humans and far superior technical training are attributed: *encounters between humans and Martians*; *the film recounts a hypothetical invasion of Martians*. b. Figuratively speaking, in fam.

language, one who stands out for his strangeness, for his diversity; also, one who in an environment or group feels uncomfortable, bewildered, not fitting in: he *is always the usual m. who wanders around in a world that is not his own and that he does not know* (Lalla Romano).

(From the online Treccani)

It is not necessary to be from Mars to be a Martian: a genius in scientific-technical disciplines can be one, or one who feels like a foreign body among other humans, or both. Hungarian physicist György Marx tells⁵ how the nickname "the Martians" was jokingly bestowed on a group of Hungarian scientists from Jewish families, mainly mathematicians and physicists, who emigrated to the United States in the first half of the twentieth century to escape Nazi or Communist persecution. The idea was that Hungary was actually an Earth outpost for aliens, and that they had already spread to Earth; a hypothesis that would provide an answer to Fermi's famous paradox (if it is really so likely that intelligent life exists elsewhere in the universe, why have we never found it?). To the group of Martians belonged figures out of the ordinary even in the scientific arena, who contributed crucially to the emergence and development of various areas of theoretical and technical knowledge: Paul Erdős, Theodore von Kármán, George Pólya, as well as the four Budapest physicists (Leó Szilárd, Edward Teller, John Von Neumann and Eugene Wigner) who, among others, participated in the Manhattan Project.

The first known case in literature of a Martian expatriate, actually an earthling who ends up being an alien in his home world, can be traced in the novel *Mr. Stranger's Sealed Packet* (1889), written by Scottish mathematician Hugh MacColl, who was also the author of theological and philosophical treatises. While drawing on the utopian strand of the late 19th century on the one hand and Catholic didacticism on the other, this work is distinguished by the sensitivity with which the story is told of the protagonist Joseph Stranger, a charismatic man with an unknown past, prematurely aged, who takes up service as a science teacher. During a lesson on Mars, Stranger appears troubled, arousing suspicion in the pupils that he is an alien; shortly thereafter, he disappears and leaves his friend, the narrator, a package to be opened only five years after his disappearance, where it turns out that Stranger, pursuing his father's research on interplanetary travel as a solution to Earth's overpopulation, had built a spaceship and after a long journey punctuated with reflections on silence and loneliness, had arrived on Mars (Glinton to its inhabitants), finding there a society of humans, descendants of Earthlings, scientifically advanced that had found ways to optimize resource management so as to make planetary emigration unnecessary.

⁵ György Marx, *The Voice of the Martians* (2001).

Stranger's is a dramatic and ill-fated affair, making his identity gradually more complicated, alienating him from himself until we no longer know whether he is a Martian or a Scot. The technological utopia is not matched by the typical emphatic and positive expressiveness: the story maintains sad and nostalgic tones, expressing the disappointment and isolation of a man of two worlds that we will find, at even more irrevocable levels, in the TJ Newton of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*.

Exceptional characters may end up on Mars, either by their nature or by deliberate or accidental intervention. In the best tradition of travel stories as a journey of formation, numerous short stories and novels set on Mars host protagonists with unique but somehow incomplete or problematic qualities who grow up, become more self-aware, change their perspective, and in the process also change the planet. In the novel *Red Genesis* (1991) by Sondra C. Sykes, Graham Kuan Sinclair is a Chinese-American business executive framed as a scapegoat for an environmental disaster caused by his company and sentenced to permanent exile on Mars. As we learn, Sinclair was already in exile on Earth: his hybrid ethnicity, his different character and intellect had made him a recluse, virtually devoid of emotional ties. The structure of split Martian colonies based on manual labor seemed the least suitable place for a sophisticated and extremely rich *executive*; but of course, this exceptional individual can only find a way to put his intelligence and necessary long-term vision to good use to turn adversity to his own and others' advantage, improving the organization of work to achieve economic independence and encouraging cooperation among different groups of colonists initially hostile to each other, until a system of planetary government is created that impresses even Earth; and all the while, he learns to open up and create meaningful relationships, even at the cost of being hurt. In short, the figure of the different and the exceptional, with its maturation, often serves, in this story as in others we have already seen, as a nucleus for condensing those forces that lead to the realization of a stronger and more independent Mars.

In a coming-of-age story that deviates significantly from this plot, Mars is the refuge of former physicist Jon Osterman, who after a laboratory accident acquired the power to manipulate matter on an elemental level and a different perception of time and events, transforming himself precisely into Dr. Manhattan in *Watchmen*. The graphic novel's publication, at the turn of 1986 and 1987, parallels a historical phase of great tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, amid the aftermath of the Russo-Afghan war, the resumption of the atomic arms race (the stockpiles of

which peaked precisely in 1986⁶) and the echoes of the Chernobyl' disaster. The Apocalypse Clock struck three minutes to midnight, which was considered very worrying at the time. Manhattan is the progress of science and technology exploited by power to impose American hegemony in the world, in an alternative timeline characterized by authoritarian stagnation and aggressive U.S. expansionism. Far from creating prosperity and peace, Dr. Manhattan's presence makes international relations even more tense and problematic; at the same time, the emotional bond with humanity is becoming increasingly tenuous. Overwhelmed and bewildered by accusations that he unknowingly caused the illness of some of his former colleagues and his ex-girlfriend Janey, Manhattan teleports himself to Mars to reflect on the meaning of life, his own as well as that of those he has known and the rest of humanity on Earth, and the complexity of human relationships. Manhattan's disappearance from Earth upsets the already precarious geopolitical balance between superpowers. But he no longer seems to care. "My opinion is that the existence of life is an extremely overrated phenomenon," he tells Laurie/Silk Spectre, who tries to convince him to return to prevent the apocalypse on Earth. "Look around you: Mars is doing perfectly well without a single microorganism." Despite this, it is on Mars that Manhattan eventually realizes that, however messed up, life on Earth is a "thermodynamic miracle" and worth preserving, despite everything.

However, it is more often the visiting extraterrestrial on Earth that is the typical foreign body through which satire is exercised on the present time, wistfully reasoning about the fall of human myths, parodying these myths-or all of the above. In the 1950s, U.S. and Soviet space agencies were preparing to launch the first probes to look more closely at Mars, but the spectroscopic analyses of the previous decade had dried up expectations of finding complex macroscopic life; at most, Mars might harbor vegetation, perhaps shrubs. Therefore, as in Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*, the stories featuring Martians break free from the need for scientific credibility to adopt symbolic or elegiac tones. In this period we particularly encounter some interesting Martian-foreigner figures with clear messianic traits: one of these lands in the Italian capital in 1954 and is the protagonist of Ennio Flaiano's short story *A Martian in Rome*, written in the typical notebook-diary form so dear to the Pescara-based author.

Flaiano was indeed a Martian in Italy (and so is the title of one of his biographies)⁷. He arrived in Rome in October 1922, after spending the first twelve years of his life tossed from one town to another in the Marche region; also traveling on the train to

⁶ It is estimated that in 1986 the world's nuclear arsenals contained more than 69,000 nuclear warheads, including 45,000 in the Soviet Union and about 23,000 in the United States, a number ridiculously excessive compared to deterrence needs. Source: Norris & Kristensen, *Global nuclear weapons inventories, 1945-2010*, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists vol. 66:4 p. 77 (2010).

⁷ Pascal Schembri, *A Martian in Italy. Life of Ennio Flaiano* (2010, Anordest Editions).

the capital was a group of fascists who were preparing to make their march on the capital. An individualist and liberal, frondist during the years of the Ventennio mussoliniano, he later found himself estranged from the dominant cultural and political currents in the postwar period and lived with bitterness what he perceived as the disappointed promise of building a better way. Flaiano has an ambivalent relationship with the capital, whose greater freedom he appreciates compared to his native circles, but which makes him uncomfortable with its noisy and exhibitionist character. His satire of manners sketches the grotesque profile of the Rome of cafes and trattorias, a fickle, party town, dragged along by the boom and the desire to consume, exhibit, hoard things, people, novelties, only to become saturated immediately and return to boredom; a parable that will return, for example, in the films he co-wrote for Fellini such as *La dolce vita*, and which is the central theme of *Un marziano a Roma*.

The Martian therefore lands "in his airship at the Villa Borghese, in the meadow of the gallop." Bored Rome greets the news with an overflowing joy that overcomes even the initial disbelief of the intellectuals. People embrace each other, crowd the streets, burst into spontaneous chants and applause; the capital is shot through with a frisson of hope, the feeling that "everything must change" and that "great and terrible" days lie ahead. But even change, if it ever loomed, is immediately defused and depowered. The gentle and melancholy Martian Kunt never fully explains the reasons for his earthly journey, nor does anyone else care: they are all too busy appropriating it, adapting it to their own material and mental needs and making it fit into their own worldview, from the left as well as the right, in all strata of society. The Martian is engulfed by worldly commitments and institutional representation: frustrated expectations flow into speculation, then habit and assimilation, and then finally into desecration, gossip, and boredom again. From new messiah, Kunt becomes an object of derision, like any new exotic trinket with which childish Roman society amuses itself for a while before throwing it away.

This is how it ends: no consolation comes from Mars, no uplifting messages and no salvation for mankind. This was also how the premiere of the play based on the story, performed at the Teatro Lirico in Milan in November 1960, ended. Despite the presence of a young Vittorio Gassmann as the platinum-blond-haired protagonist, the evening was a resounding failure, greeted by insults and booing just as Kunt was at the end of the story. In the volatility of interest in the Martian, it is all too easy to recognize the courses and recurrences that characterize a phenomenon that predates the dynamics of social networks and the information society, which swallows news, chews it up and spits it out after a few days to move on to something else. *A Martian's Notebook*, which contains notes in the form of an aphorism presumably drafted by

Kunt from his naive observation of Earthlings, was also published alongside the story. Removing the filter of hypocrisy brings out all the cynicism with which humans define their real aspirations and relationships with others-relationships in which the other is but a tool to satisfy themselves.

Across the Atlantic, the 1960s yielded two messianic aliens of some depth, of whom only one strictly speaking is from Mars, and only one strictly speaking is of alien origin. Valentine Michael Smith is the protagonist of Robert A. Heinlein's classic *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), and he is the secret son of a pair of participants in the first human expedition to Mars. After the death of his parents and the rest of the crew, he is raised by an ancient race of wise men who, similarly to Bradbury's Martians,⁸ are but the disembodied remnants of the planet's previous inhabitants. From them he learns to manipulate matter at will, and when a second expedition brings him back to Earth, he finds himself to be both human and beyond human: the only heir of the expedition, he has immense wealth, and is legally master of Mars and a citizen of Earth. Valentine is the name of the patron saint of lovers, while Michael is derived from the rhetorical question "Who is he as god?" (*Mí kha-Él*) uttered by the archangel Michael against Lucifer, whose answer is "no one." But Heinlein reverses the answer, placing the god in each of us. In fact, in spite of the common surname, Smith is anything but an ordinary man: he is the libertarian and individualistic hero, naïve but all-powerful, who defies conformity and Puritanism, and who soon finds himself taking on the role of a stateless prophet of a religion without gods-or rather, in which everyone is god-based on a form of universal love.

The title of the novel is a biblical quotation from Exodus 2:22, which refers to the exile of the Jews in Egypt. The action of the novel takes place entirely on Earth; Mars is only hinted at at the beginning of the novel and is an idealized world in its own way, with the typical endowment of canals and ruins of an extinct civilization, populated by the mystical presences of the Martians, highly spiritual beings, reincarnations of those who had inhabited the planet in the past and who, according to Heinlein, have come to the height of consciousness by becoming the antithesis of the frustrated bourgeois respectability that has marred the spirit of the United States. The novel had a not insignificant influence on the U.S. counterculture movements

⁸ The Robert A. Heinlein who invented this mystical Mars was the same man who, after the publication of *The Martian Chronicles*, had hurled a few barbs at Bradbury for their scientific implausibility, stating that "a man who provides Mars with a dense atmosphere and a pleasant climate, a man whose writing shows that he knows nothing about ballistics or astronomy or any other modern technology would do better not to try his hand at science fiction." (Robert A. Heinlein, *Science Fiction: Its Nature, Faults, and Virtues*, in *Turning Points: Essays on the Art of Science Fiction*, ed. Damon Knight, Harper and Row, 1977, page 15, as quoted in Robert Crossley, *Imagining Mars*, translation mine).

in the 1960s and 1970s.⁹ For readers of those years, the main factor of interest in Smith's sharing cult must undoubtedly have been a sexual disinhibition from which, today as now, rather conventional fantasies transpire in which women, even when they take over the point of view, are supporting characters, always beautiful and available. But worship is not limited to sexual communion: union with the other occurs through a form of learning, *groccare*, which means deep and total knowledge, experience and acceptance of both physical and mental others and the self, which transcends the division between body and mind. The term, coined by Heinlein, was borrowed by some counterculture authors and may find an older counterpart in what, according to philosopher Igor Sibaldi, is the most authentic sense of the form of love that the Greeks meant by the term *eros*.¹⁰

Groccare is untranslatable, but in its primary meaning it means to drink: the first act of communion, in fact, is to become "water brothers" by drinking water from the same vessel, a reminder of both Christian communion and the preciousness of water, which, on Mars, is extremely scarce. The centrality of the water ritual takes its inspiration, as I mentioned earlier, from Schuyler-Miller, and had already appeared in another Heinlein novel, *Red Planet*, published in 1949 as part of the writer's children's series, where the *topos* of ancient Martians and Mars as a land of freedom opposed to the bureaucratic formalism of Earth also appear. In *Stranger in a Strange Land*, the biblical metaphor is amplified: by drinking from the same glass, one agrees to "drink" of the other, to make him one with oneself. When on Mars one of one's water brothers dies, he is eaten to become physically part of all the others.¹¹ And so it is that Smith, after founding a Church of All Worlds that incorporates elements of various religions with the transmission to followers of psychokinesis and material manipulation skills, becomes a martyr when a mob stirred up by a rival congregation lynches him. His remains are partly consumed by his followers, who inherit his enormous wealth to found new fraternities and pass on Smith's word and abilities to change society and culture around the world: the invasion of Earth thus looms in the form of proselytizing and natural selection, as those who do not acquire the powers of Martians cannot survive the threatening forces roaming the solar system.

⁹ Writer and mathematician Rudy Rucker and cultural historian Bruce Franklin have speculated that the "family" of serial killer Charles Manson was inspired by the collective rituals described in Heinlein's novel, underscoring the possible ideological drifts of this type of superhuman cult.

¹⁰ Igor Sibaldi, *Eros and Love* (Sperling & Kupfer, 2014).

¹¹ Similar rituals are also found in Frank Herbert's *Dune*, although the motives are very different.