

BOOKS

SEEING EARTH: LITERARY RESPONSES TO SPACE EXPLORATION

by Ronald Weber

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The title of Ronald Weber's new book identifies a paradox inherent in America's characteristic response to space travel: As we have journeyed toward the stars, we have felt not merely the challenge of the unknown but, more strongly, the lure of earth, a mottled green globe hung in the desolation of space. Rather than freeing us from bondage to earth, our pioneering ventures have "returned us to the planet with fresh eyes for its beauty and new appreciation of its sensual reality." By "us" Weber means to include not only the astronauts, whose firsthand descriptions of blast-off, orbiting, and reentry he dutifully records, but also their wives, scientists, philosophers, historians, serious and popular novelists, poets, and journalists who have responded in written language to visual transmissions from space. All of these efforts are rather uncomfortably subsumed within Weber's subtitle: *Literary Responses to Space Exploration*. That such a stretching of our notion of literature, even in a "brief survey," can generate only 125 pages of text suggests both the limits of Weber's critical imagination and the salient fact that most of our country's distinguished novelists and poets have, through contempt, bafflement, or indifference, ignored space travel in their writing altogether.

Weber's examination of the "space literature" that does exist consists of little more than a series of detailed paraphrases. Norman Mailer's probing, in *A Fire on the Moon*, of the mythic, pretechnological consciousness that impelled Apollo 11, receives the same cursory treatment as Alan Drury's improbable potboiler, *The Throne of Saturn*, and Betty Grissom's account of marriage to an astronaut, *Starfall*. By design, perhaps, Weber's book is less an act of interpretation than of collection and organization. His major structural ploy is to distinguish those who, with Carl Sagan, have regarded space exploration as a kind of Faustian quest, "a liberating leap into a mysterious future," from the majority of writers who have been drawn with renewed love and concern to the image of earth as the one hospitable speck in the universe.

Weber returns persistently to this latter phenomenon, but he draws few conclusions about the national or racial sources of attraction. In a book given over to vertiginous voyages, the author repeatedly shies away from intellectual exploration. Alluding to Leo Marx's *Machine in the Garden*, he notes briefly that the sunlit, rotating earth seen from outer space might rekindle the pastoral ideal of a new Eden so deeply rooted in America's literary consciousness. One wishes that Weber had gone on to explore the manifold ironies of this conceit: There is not only a new "machine in the garden," but it is satellite technology that has simultaneously propelled us beyond the realm of innocence and provided a glimpse of the ideal we have lost.

One finds this same frustrating hesitation in Weber's remarks on Joseph Campbell, who has prophesied that voyages into outer space will eventually "turn us back to inner space," replacing our dualistic conception of earth and heaven with an awareness of the eternal life within man's collective psyche. This "new" awareness is, for Campbell, really an atavistic knowledge of our archetypal nature. One expects at this point illuminating comparisons with Mailer and a general discussion of the relationship between space travel and the unconscious. We get neither, not merely because of Weber's critical reluctance, but also because of the book's unwieldy structure. Rather than treat related categories of concern together, Weber organizes his chapters according to genres (scholarly works, books by astronauts, novelists, poets, journalists, etc.), as if a likeness in form logically dictated a kinship in content. The predictable results of this classification are fragmentation and redundancy.

Regretably, the most underexamined question in Weber's book is really the most compelling: Why have the majority of our most original novelists and poets either ignored the space program or, like Bellow in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* and Updike in *Rabbit Redux*, merely used its triumphs in ironic

counterpoint to individual man's quotidian failures? Weber begs this and other questions when he writes: "As might be expected, popular novelists were drawn more centrally to space exploration than serious writers...." Why is this expected? Who could have predicted that one of the most remarkable steps in man's intellectual evolution would find its chief literary expression in middlebrow fiction? A reader late in the twenty-first century might survey the works of Heller and Doctorow, of Oates, Barth, and Hawkes, without suspecting that they witnessed the dawn of the space age. Weber's only sustained explanation for this neglect is that creative artists lack both the personal experience of space travel and the scientific background necessary for serious commentary upon it. The novelist who would write the *Moby Dick* of our own epoch must know the spaceship as intimately as Melville knew the whaling schooner. Remarkably, however, few of our major writers, apart from Mailer, seem to desire such knowledge, nor do they exhibit acute anxiety at their exclusion from it. By the same token, the sources of their disinterest surely lie beyond what Weber vaguely identifies as moral disapproval among the left-wing literati over the high cost of space exploration. Indignation of this sort would seem to demand fictional treatment.

Perhaps the real cause of literature's neglect is fear—a humanist terror in encountering an utterly inhuman realm where love, belief, and imagination have no place. As Alberto Moravia has remarked: "One does not travel, survive, or dwell in space without surrendering one's humanity." Symptomatically, Weber quotes the Italian novelist, but fails to trace his implications. Among other things, his judgment helps to explain why even science fiction writers have increasingly eschewed the lifeless findings of actual space travel and conjured byzantine fantasies set in nonexistent galaxies. By its very oversights, Weber's book calls attention to a challenge that most serious artists of the past two decades have failed to address: How is art possible in light of our Archimedean knowledge of man's isolation within a lifeless universe, infinite in time and space? Eight years before the Russian Sputnik, Thomas Mann foresaw the aesthetic crisis of the coming decades in *Doctor Faustus*: "The data of cosmic creation are nothing but a deafening bombardment of our intelligence with figures furnished with a comet's tail of a couple of dozen ciphers.... What is one to say to such an assault upon human understanding?" Sadly, we have said very little. WY