

Endmatter

EARTHSTRUCK

A reflection on *The Home Planet*, edited by Kelvin W. Kelley, and “The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man” by Hannah Arendt

by James E. Huchingson

In 1968 in an essay responding to exhilaration over American successes in space, Hannah Arendt wrote cautiously about the potential of spaceflight for good (“The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man,” in *Between Past and Present*; New York: Viking). She expressed reservations about the benefits of looking down upon Earth from orbit and the changes in attitude this vantage point would bring. Specifically, Arendt feared that the sheer remoteness of the astronaut’s orbital gyre from the surface of the planet would numb his (or her) empathetic connections with the world below. The distance and detachment brought about by the achievement of Einstein’s ideal of the scientist (the “observer freely poised in space”) would encourage us to see ourselves as a form of collective biological behavior, capable of systematic manipulation by “the same methods we use to study the behavior of rats.”

Arendt’s pessimism was realistic. Detachment is the *sine qua non* of violence of many sorts. In the form of uncaring, it fractures the integrity of human community by permitting members of one group to neglect the critical needs of other groups, such as Armenians, Jews, Amerindians, and women. Individually, detachment allows one person to exploit or abuse others in the marketplace, in personal relationships, and in the household. Here the victim is the customer, lover, spouse, and child. Detachment, which finally breeds aliena-

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tion, contempt, and mistrust, results inevitably in the decay of *civitas*, the virtue of community loyalty and responsibility without which a culture risks mortal decline. All too often, alienation in the political realm provides opportunity for the development of totalitarian regimes that, by magnifying their detachment from the people, govern by repression and violence.

In the larger historical sense, Arendt's warnings are candid extrapolations of the events of our century. Who would not be suspicious after the tragedies of Guernica, Dresden, Hiroshima, and Vietnam, which illustrate the detachment of technocratic control and the destruction of large populations through air power? The projected militarization of space, the ultimate high ground, by SDI and sophisticated reconnaissance satellites does little to relieve her pessimism. Flying higher and faster seem only to offer better opportunities for some people, some states, to control and destroy other people, other states.

But flight through the air is not the same as flight through space. The difference, magnified by a thousandfold increase in distance, is a difference of kind and quality. The resulting experience is profoundly different from anything that Arendt could have foreseen.

The evidence for this contention is presented in an extraordinary book, *The Home Planet*, conceived and edited by Kelvin W. Kelley for the Association of Space Explorers, a group of the hundred or so men and women (from thirteen countries) who have flown into Earth orbit or, in the case of the *Apollo* astronauts, to the lunar surface. Kelley coordinates spectacular photographs from numerous archives, including some from Soviet expeditions, and pairs them with succinct quotations from the astronauts and cosmonauts. The result is a very large volume that is at once dazzling and profound and that communicates both the existential and visual impact of seeing our planet from space.

This is no mean achievement. Several astronauts use the theological term *ineffable*, which is usually reserved for the mystic's encounter with God, to express their frustrations in detailing the experience to Earthbound readers, to us flatlanders whose idea of "big" is our mundane horizon. "I believe I never knew what the word *round* meant until I saw the Earth from space," says a Soviet cosmonaut. The horizon is raised to a perspective or range of several hundred or thousand miles, to become the circular rim of the planet itself. The result is much more than an imaginative extrapolation. "Unless you go and experience it yourself you will never know it," claims an American astronaut.

Nonetheless, *The Home Planet* evokes fellow feelings in the reader.

In addition to variety and quality, the photographs, chosen with the eye and counsel of those who have seen firsthand, convey the nearly numinous character of the planet perceived for the first time by people standing apart, at Olympian heights. The photographs range from views of various geographic regions to the entire globe, hanging in space. There is even a photograph of an "Earth rise," taken from the *Apollo* command module as it orbited the moon.

The reader becomes the spectator. Opening *The Home Planet* is akin to raising the protective shade on the porthole of the *Apollo* (or *Shuttle* or *Soyuz* spacecraft) and taking in the tremendous spectacle scrolling beneath. "The planet spreads itself before you with all its incredible beauty," reports a cosmonaut. The "reddish tinge of the Sahara, the yellow of the deserts of Central Asia, and the sapphire of the oceans" illustrate the subtle beauty of Earth "in the miraculous balance of soft and brilliant hues." A French cosmonaut, Patrick Baudy, concludes that "only a child in its innocence could apprehend the purity and splendor of this vision." Indeed, a childlike naïveté/wonder suffuses many of the quotations.

The astronauts, who came from many cultural backgrounds, testify to an experience that seems to be universal, or collective, or more fundamental than even a common shaping could account for. Although the photographs and passages are of course selected, they seem to reflect the responses of those who have flown into space. Their common witness is *religious* in a broad sense of that term—of being grasped, shaken, and transformed by an unexpected and astonishing encounter. Their comments provide important evidence for a wide transformation of attitudes, now occurring, that is both induced and expressed by the exploration of space.

Since this is an extraordinary book, there is no need to continue an assessment of its quality. Instead, we should delineate its meaningful themes and what they represent for our search, philosophical and religious, for human significance in the scheme of things. *Home Planet* gives first approximations of emerging images of the Earth and the place of human life upon it that may dominate the thinking of our children's children.

Most of the dozens of succinct reports that accompany the photographs are easily gathered into common themes, one of which is the surprising existential quality of the experience for men and women whose training is almost exclusively technical. In space "we experience those uniquely human qualities: awe, curiosity, amazement," reports one astronaut. "You look down upon the Earth with a mixed feeling of delight and adoration," says another. A Soviet cosmonaut, whose exposure to Wittgenstein is probably minimal, unknowingly

paraphrases a famous remark by the Austrian philosopher: "I love . . . looking at the Earth. It isn't important who she is, just that she is." The likes of Heschel, Buber, Maslow, Heidegger, and Otto would find their existential philosophies reflected in such remarks.

Many quotations stress a second common theme: Earth as a vulnerable and finite place. "The Earth was small . . . and so touchingly alone." "The beautiful, warm, living object looks so fragile, so delicate, that if you touched it with a finger, it would crumble and fall apart."

This perception of vulnerability, combined with the theme of wonder and adoration, gives rise to a resolve to protect the planet against onslaughts by the human species. "She has generously given us everything she has amassed over the billions of years of inanimate development. We have grown strong and powerful, yet how have we answered this goodness?" The rhetorical statement of one cosmonaut is verified by another: We "are standing guard over the whole of our Earth." The most urgent task of the race "is to cherish and preserve it for future generations."

A third theme of the book is the sense of the Earth as "other." This perception is well documented in earlier quotes and, indeed, is presupposed by them. The most important spiritual spin-off of space exploration is the experience of the planet as a separate and distinct physical reality, apart from the observer, that confronts him (and her) and demands response.

Before the astronauts returned with these pictures there was no way to capture the Earth in the act of self-presentation. In all previous times, people were hampered in attempts to understand the Earth by their very proximity to its surface. It was the obscure backdrop for life and history—a woefully inadequate model atop a desk or a mosaic of photographs from low-level glimpses of an endless scroll of localities, regions, continents, and seas. Now something truly novel has been impressed upon our history: the view of the Earth adjacent to our spaceship, a neighbor.

There is no way at this time to assess the potential of this new standpoint, but we can say that it is considerable. Indeed, the editor of *Home Planet* is aware of this, and he quotes astronomer Fred Hoyle on the inside front cover: "Once a photograph of the Earth, taken from *the outside* is available . . . a new idea as powerful as any in history will be let loose."

Some astronauts' responses share a tradition of personifying Earth as the maternal other. The sense of this fourth theme of *The Home Planet* is that while the spacecraft is a womb, the space traveler

remains a child of Mother Earth. "We are all Earth's children," says a cosmonaut, "and we should treat her as our Mother." The maternal and the numinous combine to provide an impression of divinity, the Earth Goddess. Earth is to be protected like "a holy relic," and seeing it is "a glimpse of divinity."

The source of these sentiments is obvious. Humankind is a creature of Earth. She is our progenitress. Within her we were conceived, shielded by her atmosphere and nourished by her soil, and finally liberated to fly beyond her and truly look back for the first time.

Similarly, the image of the Earth Mother is unifying. It not only promotes a specieswide equality but leads to a kind of bioequality—the commonwealth of all living things in their shared identity as Earth's progeny. This sentiment is expressed as a logical conclusion of monotheism: the brotherhood of man under the Fatherhood of God. But now the bond of kinship with Earth is more concrete, less patriarchal—and to many perhaps more compelling.

Another, associated theme is the elimination of boundaries. Viewing the whole Earth, the astronauts quickly forgot the state borders imposed upon her by territorial consciousness. In reality, the surface of the planet is seamless. The ever-changing patterns beneath the spacecraft, provided by the geologic and meteorological nature of the globe, are ample enough. An Arab astronaut recalls his expanding and inclusive perception: "The first day or so we all pointed to our countries. The third or fourth day we were pointing to our continents. By the fifth day we were aware of only one Earth." These perceptions are confirmed by a cosmonaut: "And then it struck me that we are all children of our Earth. It does not matter what country you look at. We are all Earth's children, and we should treat her as our Mother."

Finally, the astronauts and cosmonauts bear witness to an inalienable sense of attachment to the Earth. Separation from the home planet by hundreds of thousands of miles only accentuated their sense of belonging. The view from afar "is so moving that you can hardly believe how emotionally attached you are to the rough patterns shifting steadily below." The exhilaration one might expect at being liberated from Earth's gravity to float freely in space, to explore the celestial bodies and endless reaches of the galaxy, is missing. The old cliché about distance and fondness holds true even with respect to interplanetary spacefaring: "A cosmonaut, should he eat bread somewhere near Mars baked from wheat raised in a space laboratory, will, believe me, think of the grain and flowers gathered on Earth."

Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, the father of Russian rocketry, is quoted as saying, "The Earth is a cradle, but man cannot live in a cradle

forever.” With all due respect, however, Tsiolkovsky’s “cradle” is more difficult to forget than either he or *Star Trek* triumphalism would have us believe!

The overall response of these astronauts/cosmonauts is reminiscent of prophets and mystics who testify to their heaven-sent revelations or insight. (The irony is that the former had to *enter* the heavens to receive theirs.) The planet unveils herself to the spacefarers as they literally fly next to her in formation.

Earth has always been understood in the cosmic hierarchy as the inferior, profane plane of existence to which the sacred descends or beyond which the hero must go to reach holy heights—Moses ascending Sinai or Muhammad rising from Jerusalem to preview paradise. But in this modern case something totally unexpected has happened. In an astonishing and unprecedented turning of the tables, Earth is discovered to be suspended in the heavens! Our mundane plane of existence has unveiled herself for what she is: *materia matrix*—the maternal source and sustainer of life, floating *out there* in the deep, black void.

So it seems that Arendt’s apprehensions are unfounded. Human penetration of space beyond the atmosphere has resulted in neither diminished stature for earthlings in their own eyes nor exploitation. Earthbound politicians, generals, and technocrats may have harbored predatory hopes when they created the technology of space-flight, but those they sent outward were transformed by the experience. By their own accounts, they have “become more full of life, softer . . . more kind and patient.”

The haughty, the high, and the mighty failed to materialize with the ascent into space. Humility (from *humus*, meaning “earthy”) instead dominates the space voyager’s response. And if we who must remain on Earth can share in the experience and be shaped by it, this legacy of our early attempts to fly into space may be one of the most important contributions of our waning century.

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