



FOLLOWING THE SUN

by Bruce Mazlish

During the late 1950s, man ventured into space; by the late 1960s, he had walked on the moon. A proud Wernher von Braun, NASA's claimant to the mantle of Daedalus, compared the achievement to that moment in evolution "when aquatic life came crawling onto land."

Now we seem to be crawling back. The moon landing, for all the impact it had during that sultry July night in 1969, has scattered into small effects upon us. Our expectations fulfilled, we now seem to have lost interest. I am puzzled by the disparity between the greatness of the deed and the meanness of the result. How to explain it?

It was President John F. Kennedy, as the United States embarked in 1961 upon the Apollo program, who first aroused the American public to place the imminent adventure of space alongside the historic endeavors of Columbus, Hudson, Cabot. Space, he proclaimed, is the "new ocean" upon which "we must sail." It was a facile metaphor, and, for a while, a valid one. Compare the web of motives underlying both the Age of Apollo and the Age of Discovery. One is struck by the similarities: a desire for national prestige; a hope of gain, both economic and military; an impulse to adventure; sheer curiosity. There was, in the 15th century, also a religious factor. Even that finds a 20th-century expression in our notion of scientific "mission."

Historical analogy gives flesh to a perception of vague resemblance. It is not a rigorous form of reasoning, but it is one of the more attractive. It is, too, a fashioner of myths—durable ones that survive, like a locust's brittle armor, even after life itself has departed. Analogy, finally, has but one eye, and it sees only similarities.

As the space age has evolved, the *dissimilarities* have become more pronounced. Reality has overtaken the rationale. We have inaugurated an age of discovery, but it is not *the* Age of Discovery, and it lacks the props and resonance we were conditioned to expect.

The major difference, I believe, is that in space there are no flora and fauna. There are no people on the moon to be conquered or converted. There are no new animals to grace the parks of a Spanish king, no exotic plants to nurture in the royal



*"Surface of Mercury"
(1949) by Chesley
Bonestell, a popular
science-fiction
illustrator since
the 1930s.*

Courtesy of Chesley Bonestell.

gardens at Kew. Columbus returned with naked savages. Lewis and Clark identified 24 Indian tribes, 178 plants, and 122 animals, all of them previously unknown. Even the voyagers of the *Beagle* sailed into port with exotic, if ugly, Fuegians that titillated the English public. Space, by contrast, is "empty," and our chief harvest thus far has been in the form of rocks. Scientists profess delight. But there is not much to nourish the *public's* imagination.

If the realm of space offers so little of "human" interest, what of the explorers?

They were test pilots and fighter pilots turned astronauts. As individuals, perhaps, they were as much the salty adventurer as was Sir Francis Drake, but they never quite captured the American imagination. The first class of astronauts published an antiseptic group biography titled *We Seven*, suggestive of Charles Lindbergh's autobiography, *We*. Yet the astronauts, unlike Lindbergh, never sat in lone splendor at the controls of their craft. Backed up by an indispensable team of thousands, they were themselves utterly interchangeable, like ball bearings, or members of the Rockettes. In space, moreover, the astronauts somehow seemed dehumanized, their language at once bland and arcane, their humor forced, their behavior programmed. Lewis Mumford put his finger on it: An astronaut's life, he noted, seemed to have been reduced to "the physiological functions of breathing, eating, and excretion. By comparison, the Egyptian cult of the dead was overflowing with vitality."

There was no drama. Norman Mailer, in one of the few attempts to respond humanistically to the space venture—one thinks of such earlier analogues as Camoën's *Lusiads* and Shakespeare's *Tempest*—tries brilliantly, in *Of A Fire on the Moon*, to kindle a few sparks of imagination. He speaks of dreams that border on ecstasy (or madness); of Hemingway-esque courage (or mania); of the dread of death. But always he runs up against the dulling, cautious cult of *routine* deliberately built into the space program. He yearns for, but can find:

no curse, omen, oath, scar, or smell . . . no revel, no voice, no unnecessary chancing of human life. It was not that anybody wanted the blood of astronauts any more than they desired the death of bullfighters, auto racers, or boxers, it was that NASA had come to believe that if Apollo 11 resulted in death, all space investigation was gone, whereas in fact the irony was that the world, first sacrifices in outer space paid, would have begun to watch future flights with pain and concern.

There was, in the end, a soporific quality about the landing at Tranquility Base—an all too apt name—as if Magellan, instead of being murdered by natives in the Philippines, had uneventfully returned home and gone to work for *National Geographic*.

The cause of national prestige has fared no better. The initial impetus for the American space program was rivalry with the Soviet Union; as author-physicist Carl Sagan has observed, the cost of Apollo "should have been part of the budget of the Secretary of State." Competition is a crude, if expedient, motive for any sort of exploration. During the Age of Discovery, it led frequently to armed conflict—and public excitement. Macabre as is the thought, even a small-scale war in space would rivet American attention on the space program. Hollywood science fiction is filled with such wars—and hence, human interest. But what has happened? We have found military uses aplenty for outer space, but no call for derring-do. Nor is there any longer much sense of competition. We have already beaten the Russians to the moon. The game is over.

As for the putative economic windfall from space flight, this

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was gilding on the gold. Back in the early 1960s, NASA's Robert Jastrow and Homer Newell asserted that "the science which we do in space provides the equivalent of the gold and spices recovered from earlier voyages of exploration." Perhaps, from the point of view of the scientists, this has been the case. Among the general public, I believe the judgment is different. Certainly there have been thousands of technological spin-offs, most of them useful. But they have been indirect and haphazard, and most, had they been considered essential, could probably have been developed, far more cheaply, long ago.

How, then, are we to justify future space exploration?

I don't think we can, at least not in a way guaranteed to win majorities on Capitol Hill, or among the people. Space *exploration* has become an entirely "discretionary" activity; no longer is it deemed vital to our national security, or to our national pride. Now it is weighed against other discretionary activities—cancer research, urban renewal—and often found wanting or wasteful by comparison. These days, the space program's chief ally seems to be leftover momentum: the fact that certain programs, planned long ago, happen to be under way.

Yet, to my mind, there is an argument that suffices to justify a leap into space, one as unprovable as it is irrefutable: that it is man's destiny continually to test himself against the unknown, to know himself by his exertions. And to my defense I call upon an earlier traveler in unknown spaces, Ulysses, encountered by Dante in the *Inferno*:

"O brothers," I said, "you who
through a thousand perils have come to the West,
to the brief vigil of our senses

which is left, do not deny
experience of the unpeopled world
to be discovered by following the sun.

Consider what origin you had;
you were not created to live like brutes,
but to seek virtue and knowledge."

