

Someone asked a modern historian, from an Eastern civilization of great antiquity, what were the consequences of the fall of Rome. "It is too soon to tell," the scholar replied.

Thirty years ago, human beings first voyaged to the surface of another world. What are the consequences of such an act? What does it mean? What does it matter? Or is it also too soon to tell?

Language sometimes fails. One may formulate a logical answer to a well-formed question, yet miss the point entirely. Some considerations of Apollo are misleading. It cost twenty billion of the era's dollars. It was politically motivated, so the United States could reaffirm national confidence and demonstrate technological superiority over the Soviet Union. Much of its technology was based on and shared with weapons of mass destruction. Science entered the program as a second-class player, as an afterthought. The preparations for the flights and the missions themselves were choreographed and dramatized well enough to compete with prime-time television for the attention of viewers; as theatrics, the program was a masque indeed. All these things are true. None touch the heart of Apollo.

Our ancestors stared at the Moon at night even when they had not yet become human. Legends and stories of Luna come down to us from long before anyone knew what the great silver light in the dark sky actually was. Actual voyages there are the stuff of dreams made briefly real. A generation later, the reality has begun to fade back into myth. To discuss these journeys properly, I find I must turn to the language of myth. I am reluctant to do so, for that language is more vague and less familiar than the kinds of words I more commonly use. Yet perhaps it is best for the task.

The voyages themselves were all but magical. Fantasy author C. S. Lewis wrote of an enchanted wardrobe -- a piece of furniture that serves as a stand-alone closet -- that provided a gateway to another world. Now imagine that you and I live high in a skyscraper, and come home one night to find that someone has packed the entire building chock full of high explosives. Treading a narrow path between huge crates of TNT and dripping barrels of nitroglycerine, we find our apartment similarly stuffed, except for the big closet of the master bedroom. There are three of us, equally nervous and equally brave. We enter the closet. Careful, don't touch that coat-hanger, you might kill us all! Steady now, while they set off those thousands of tons of explosives, and blow us sky-high, so high that unless we all work hard and everything goes just right, we may never come down again. Within the volume of this tiny closet, we will live, and breath, and eat, and go to the bathroom, for the next week, while our bodily functions are

monitored from afar, and while most of the world eagerly awaits our every action, reported or shown on television. Yet half way through the week, we will unbar one of the closet doors, and you know what? It will open onto another world. For twenty billion dollars, a massive government agency and a bunch of hard-boiled engineers built a crude, mechanized, pyrotechnic prototype of C. S. Lewis's magic wardrobe, and you know what? It worked.

The travelers returned to a heroes' welcome. We should hear tales of wonder from their lips. We expect to learn of new and unexpected things encountered in their wanderings. We expect them to be transformed. Were they? More importantly, were we?

Every Apollo astronaut followed a different personal journey. Some wrote books about their experiences; others have been the subjects of historians and biographers. Their paths have diverged, to places as different as academia and the corporate boardroom, to passions as different as preaching, poetry, and painting, to personal lives as different as the harsh glare of public service and the privacy of near-monastic solitude. Their human stories are part of the program. Yet if Apollo is both myth and masque, then the astronauts are both mythic figures and actors, and as for the players in Greek drama of old, we must not look to their faces but to the masks they wear, that represent their roles, to bring meaning to those who view the play.

I am haunted by the vision of the historian with whom I began my essay, for I fear it may indeed be too soon to know the consequences of Apollo, to understand the meaning of the play. After all, Greek drama is thousands of years old, and each generation still brings new insights and interpretations to its study. After all, in the history of terrestrial life, Apollo was perhaps the greatest adventure since animals began to explore the land, some half a billion years before, and we still don't know how that one will turn out. Yet there is one short-term result that I think I see, that may be worth mentioning.

Many cultures have a mythical and magical tradition called a vision quest, in which someone does something difficult and demanding, in pursuit of knowledge, or meaning, or guidance as to what things are all about. The domain of this quest involves persona, spirit, and psyche, not things ordinarily considered part of science, yet nevertheless, a vision quest resembles pure research in that if you knew what you were going to find, you wouldn't bother to go, and in that often, what you learn is different from anything you expected. Sometimes the vision quest involves physical journeying, and sometimes not, but always, something changes in the mind of the traveler. In a truly great quest, the vision discovered may also transform the community from which the

voyager has come.

I see the Apollo astronauts as wearing the masks of participants in a vision quest. The most notable transforming vision of Apollo that I can find after only thirty years, is the vision of Earth as a whole. That is of course not a new suggestion, but I think it worth discussing.

Those who remember Apollo also remember a rapid rise in awareness of the Earth as an integration of interacting ecological systems, and of humanity as an integration of interacting cultures, on a scale which is global, and which has little to do with traditional boundaries and classifications. I think there is a connection. I think the voyages away from our planet gave us a chance to look back on it and see it for the first time. I believe that awareness has propagated into the environmental and political awarenesses I have mentioned. Such a suggestion is not new. Yet there is something more.

I believe, that a vast program, kept in the public eye by its human drama, by the machinations of politics and of international relations, by the sense of being in a race, and even by its very expense, was important, and perhaps even vital, to propagate those visions so widely. We had intellectual knowledge of their reality for generations before, and much of that knowledge was sound, but few knew it: Few bothered to learn. We had artistic representations of what the Earth would look like from afar for generations, and some of them were quite good, but few saw them: Few bothered to look. Nobody listens to the words of Sophocles when the actors mumble them in their sleep. People don't pay attention until the actors stand upon a stage, and declaim. To be seen and heard, they must wear their masks, and perform their masque. Apollo was a stage. It was theater. It was vision quest presented as a public play. It was process drama, and as good drama should, it captured the minds and hearts of the audience, and left them changed and transformed.

That audience was not merely parochial and obsessively materialistic Americans, it was most of the world. I suggest that the visions I have mentioned were valuable and positive ones, perhaps especially for Americans. And for the life of me, I cannot think of another way to spread them so widely, so quickly, and so effectively, particularly at a cost so small compared to the scale of the results.

Yet I must close in humility, by echoing the words of that scholar again. What were the consequences of the Apollo program? It is way too soon to tell. Ask again in a few hundred million years.