

THE SAVAGE POET—UNLOCKING THE UNIVERSE WITH METAPHOR

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“But he reached a place at last he had been in months before, the room with the plate-glass window across its middle where the magazine writers had hounded Armstrong until Armstrong confessed that Man explored out as salmon swim upstream. . . .”

THE NUMBER OF BOOKS PUBLISHED SINCE THE FIRST PRINTING PRESS clattered into life must by now be unguessable. Collectively their contents comprise a river of knowledge and enlightenment, but also one suspects a vast reservoir of the trivial and banal. If the voice of an individual writer is to be heard amongst the endless torrent of words he or she must develop a unique and distinctive voice. Few voices were more original or engaging than Norman Mailer's, especially when that voice spoke about the momentous events which took place on the Florida peninsula in the closing years of the 1960s (and the opening years of the decade that followed), as the men and women working for NASA responded to the fire on the Moon. To the beacon lit by John F. Kennedy when he challenged his nation to reach that distant goal.

Pugnacious and controversial, both as an individual and as a writer, Mailer never shied away from being unorthodox. And without question, *A Fire on the Moon* is strikingly different from any other book, its author referring to himself by his Aquarius star-sign throughout the unusual, provocative and often metaphysical narrative. The book reads like a novel,

at turns rhythmic and lyrical and challenging. The way Mailer describes the launch of Apollo 11 is one example of his aphoristic and quirky turn of mind:

For the flames were enormous. No one could be prepared for that. Flames flew in cataract against the cusp of the flame shield, and then sluiced along the paved ground down two opposite channels in the concrete, two underground rivers of flame which poured into the air on either side a hundred feet away, then flew a hundred feet further. Two mighty torches of flame like the wings of a yellow bird of fire flew over a field, covered a field with brilliant yellow bloomings of flame, and in the midst of it, white as a ghost, white as the white of Melville's Moby Dick, white as the shrine of the Madonna in half the churches of the world, this slim angelic mysterious ship of stages rose without sound out of its incarnation of flame and began to ascend slowly into the sky, slow as Melville's Leviathan might swim, slowly as we might swim upward in a dream looking for the air. And still no sound . . .

No writer or artist has yet to venture into space, which may help to explain why a large section of the public still views space exploration as something *apart*, as an activity removed from anything they can participate in. Yes, Al Bean (Apollo 12, Skylab 3) and Alexei Leonov (Voskhod 2, Soyuz-Apollo) took up oils and canvass on coming back from space but first and foremost they were both astronauts. Space travel was their original abiding vocation; all else flowed from that. No space agency has yet to recruit a potential space traveller on the basis of how good their use of imagery is. As Mailer says towards the end of his book: “. . . *certainly the hour of happiness would be here when men who spoke like Shakespeare rode the ships; how many eons was that away!*” The goal of sending a poet into space seems as distant now as it was then.

The question arises as to whether Mailer's superluminal fire has now been extinguished, and where and when and if it might ever be rekindled. Will humanity by-pass the Moon in favour of Mars perhaps? Will the tracks laid down by remote controlled rovers on the Red Planet prove too tempting a trail to overlook? Mechanical footsteps that will demand in due course the accompanying imprint of a human heel? *A Fire on Mars* is possibly the inevitable sequel to Mailer's intellectual voyage but it will take a different writer

from a new generation to describe what happens next. The Age of Aquarius may be over (the arc of Mailer's life having expired in 2007) but thanks to his unique voice the Age of Apollo will never die.

Written when the programme still had six more missions left to run, the book now seems like an epitaph for the whole venture, a brooding reflection on the manner and nature of the men who were willing to ride a rocket the "size of *Coventry Cathedral*" all the way to another world. And to do so without hope (beyond that provided by their own resourcefulness) of rescue or retrieval in the event of calamity or disaster. Oddly, the thought persists on reading Mailer's account that the whole era can be captured in its entirety in just this and two other books: Andrew Chaikin's *A Man on the Moon*, and Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff*. Polar opposites in style they yet combine to make a comprehensive whole.

Tucked away in my own copy of *A Fire on the Moon* (salvaged from a second hand bookshop) is a clipping from the January 1971 edition of *Time* magazine, a review of Mailer's book entitled *Reflections on a Star-Cross Aquarius*. Rescued from its time capsule it provides not just the context for the book's publication, but a literary fragment of the early 1970s. From a time when the fire of Apollo was still burning brightly enough for the exploits of its sons to be witnessed by a global audience, gazing both literally and metaphorically at the furthest of horizons.

These celestial knights (who belong to American folklore as much as any frontiersman) stand comparison with the armoured crusaders who once met where the ruins of a stone fortress now stands, perched on the cliffs at Tintagel, and whose erstwhile king now resides in Avalon. But perhaps in the context of Mailer's book a more apt analogy might be with the beacons of Gondor, lit to summon aid for the besieged city of Minas Tirith in the epic lands of Tolkien's Middle Earth. The great mountain-top pyres signalling across vast distances, kindling hope in desperate times. For metaphorical fires are surely still burning at the six Apollo landing sites and are yet visible with the naked eye if you know roughly where to look, and have enough imagination to conceive of what might have been. Mailer's single fire is perhaps more accurately described as six individual markers. Like the cosmic perspectives offered in the stories of H.G. Wells, they can still capture the eye, drawing it out into the depths of space. And it is out there, in the realm of the stargazer, that the human imagination is always at its most speculative and creative.

It is still to be hoped, and remains a cherished dream of many, that looking up at the Moon on a clear night is tantamount to gazing at a once and future home for humanity. That the two world system so vividly described in Arthur C. Clarke's *Earthlight* (1955) can yet become a reality. And perhaps, as Mailer said, we will only ever do that and "go out into space" when we can "*comprehend the world once again as poets, comprehend it as savages who knew that if the universe was a lock, its key was a metaphor.*"