Martian Legacy: Ray Bradbury's The Martian Chronicles

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Beyond providing pure enjoyment for space freaks and gadget geeks, one hallmark of the best science fiction is that it offers serious examination of the cultural and psychological landscapes and ethical questions raised by our changing times. In *The Martian Chronicles,* written in the late 1940s, published in 1950, Ray Bradbury reminds us that the world will become what we make of it, and each step in re-imagining ourselves brings us steadily closer to the future.

More than prediction, however, Bradbury claims that he is writing to "prevent the future," by pointing out the failings of society. To imagine an encounter with Martians is to see ourselves anew, an experience to be both hoped for and feared as it brings the knowledge that we, too, are the "other." This is the central idea of *The Martian Chronicles,* a meditation of self and other in the tradition of Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself,* where the encounter with the other becomes a means to knowing the self, an age-old theme basic to human nature and implicit in the experience of all art and literature.

While Whitman sought to unify and direct a nation divided by the politics of civil war, Bradbury, in the aftermath of WWII and the atomic bombings of Japan, sought to redirect the course of technology and prevent the human race from self-annihilation. Both Bradbury and Whitman concentrate not on the future but on the now, inviting us to come along with them, Whitman for a walk across America, Bradbury to Mars, to see the people as they are, for what they are—individuals with emotions, desires, hopes and fears.

Of his first published story, "The Lake," Bradbury has said, "It was some sort of hybrid, something verging on the new." *The Martian Chronicles* may be seen as such a hybrid, one which resulted from the creative merging of a variety of literary techniques, steeped in the traditions of naturalism, romanticism and realism and suffused with a collage of allusions ranging from those which have been borrowed from and quoted outright—Lord Byron, Edgar Allan Poe, Sara Teasdale—to those which may or may not have been consciously assimilated into the text.

Bradbury set about his work in writing *The Martian Chronicles* with the cool critical eye of the naturalistic novelist, providing the laboratory conditions Emile Zola, in *Le roman experimental,* has set forth as necessary in order to observe the forces which work upon humans. The colonization of Mars, like the colonization of the Americas by Europeans, is characterized by greed and ignorance, fear of the natives, exploitation of the new world, and acts of genocide. This parallel is clearly drawn in the *Chronicles* episode, "And the Moon be Still as Bright," in which the Fourth Expedition to Mars arrives to discover that the Martian race has been killed off by a chicken pox virus brought to the red planet by a previous expedition, thus echoing the deadly smallpox epidemic which devastated Native American populations after the Europeans arrived on the scene. Spender, a member of the Fourth Expedition, sympathizes with the spirit of the Martians and seeks to avenge the death of the Martian race by raging against the earth crew in a manner bearing striking resemblance to the 1990's Unabomber case, in protest of the technology and greed that brought them to Mars. Spender invokes

the poetry of romanticism by reciting Byron's "So We'll Go No More A-Roving," a poem, he says, that "might have been written by the last Martian poet." The Consul's assumption of the identity of William Blackstone, the white man who went to live with the Indians, in Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* comes to mind here, as does the romantic notion of spiritual vision gotten through an affinity, accidentally stumbled upon, for the land and the collective spirit of the inhabitants who lived there before. As with the Consul's drinking, Mars becomes a way of seeing, of being, a state of mind, a vision, an addiction.

The romantic notion of the power of the imagination to reinvent ourselves, to make the world over and to place ourselves in a history, in time, in the cosmos, is explored by Bradbury with the landing of Earth people on the Martian world. At first the core of the self for the Earth people, like the purple triangle that forms the core of Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse,* can be defined as an entity with a definite shape and color: the third planet from the sun, Earth. And yet the self has a way of spreading outward, and the core is, essentially, selfless. Mrs. Ramsay's self extends limitlessly through space, through time, to include the lives of other people, the lighthouse, the rooks gathering at twilight; beyond her own death to become the house, the sky, the neglected garden, the cleaning woman, the future of the cleaning woman's son, and so on, ad infinitum. In the same way, the people from Earth become part of the timeless haunted landscape of the Martian world and the dead yet still dreaming cities of the ancient Martian race. The knowledge of this slowly creeps into the consciousness, as when the captain of the Fourth Expedition wonders: were the Martians ancestors of humans ten thousand years removed? By the time the great intellectual leap is made, the flash of brilliance, Emersons "transparent eye-ball," Borges's "The Aleph," the realization that *we* are the Martians, it has, more than likely, already become an accepted, matter of course fact of life.

And so one of Bradbury's transplanted Earth people looks back at Earth one day, trying to imagine the war he has heard about by radio and seeing nothing but a green light:

> "It's like when I was a boy," said Father Peregrine. "We heard about wars in China. But we never believed them. It was too far away. And there were too many people dying. It was impossible. Even when we saw the motion pictures we didn't believe it. Well, that's how it is now. Earth is China. It's so far away it's unbelievable. It's not here. You can't touch it. You can't even see it. All you see is a green light. Two billion people living on that light? Unbelievable! War? We don't hear the explosions."

Like the green light at the end of Daisy's dock in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,* the green light of Earth is all that is left of a world that has been lost. We are woken up out of the dream. There is realism.

Even Bradbury can't avoid realism, that ugly but inevitable footnote to our existence. Realism is the spoiler of dreams, wrecker of homes, a death that extinguishes

even desire. It brings with it the knowledge that ideas are not enough so we must act, it reduces music, however lovely, to the status of noise. Realism is the ultimate downer, as in songwriter Jimmy Webb's 1960's pop ballad, "MacArthur Park": "someone left the cake out in the rain... and we'll never have that recipe again," a feeling James Salter's character, Nedra, in the novel, *Light Years,* knows all too well.

In *The Martian Chronicles,* realism is the littering of the Martian landscape, the shattering of the beautiful crystal cities of the Martians with a single blast of gunshot, the 1940's-era plain-old-Americans transplanted to Mars, the humanity of the Martians, and the tragic awareness that mankind doesn't learn from its mistakes, that its failings loom large.

A decade after the publication of *The Martian Chronicles,* the war in Vietnam found Americans involved in the same pattern of genocidal colonization that had been inflicted on countless cultures over the course of history, a pattern Bradbury had warned against with realistic and what now seems tragically prophetic vision.

The Martian Chronicles represents an original and serious work of artistic invention and vision, firmly grounded in literary tradition. It remains a force to be reckoned with, a pivotal work which has influenced the course of literature and the thinking of scientists and of ordinary citizens who face the task—with nothing less than the biological imperative of an entire species at stake, and with it, all life as we know it—of advancing human nature and values into an age in which atomic warfare and space travel have become part of the human experience. The challenge of Mars, according to Bradbury, is to the mind.

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