

REFLECTING THE OTHER: PATHS OF SPECULATION IN MACLEOD'S THE OORT CLOUD

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On the mountains of truth you can never climb in vain: either you will reach a point higher up today, or you will be training your powers so that you will be able to climb higher tomorrow. (Friedrich Nietzsche)

Science fiction enables to explore and extrapolate the unbending future of mankind through speculation. What if ? Remains its watch –word, to question the probability of the improbable truth. The search for 'ET' has been an exciting project, called 'SETI' or Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence. It was started with much fanfare and, recently, is losing steam due to changes in priorities of governments or funding agencies. The story under study, projects, in to the future, the possibility of the discovery of Extra Terrestrial Intelligence. Those of our readers who have benefited from advances in medicine may recollect, and our younger readers can easily retrieve, the excitement that greeted the initial, accidental discovery of an ET intelligent in 2031. (82)

The discovery, as described, is accidental and, therefore, even more exciting than usual. It is not every day that an alien intelligence is found in this lonely universe. The innocuous reference to 'readers who have benefited from advances in medicine' and 'our younger readers can easily retrieve' clearly indicates the extrapolative nature of the story. Evidently, older persons are well taken care of by the new advances in medicine in this future world.

The ET intelligence is not the usually imagined creature of science fiction, but a more mysterious structure, not recognizable or communicable. The first downloads from the Gates Foundation asteroid prospector revealed not the potential wealth of resources expected in a carbonaceous chondrite, but a complex interior structure variously describe as "crystalline," "fractal" and "organize". (83)

Evidently, the ET is beyond human comprehension and the reverse argument may also be true. All that man could make of the alien life form are speculative in nature. No real understanding of the ET was possible, thereby adding to its position as superior beings.

The general speculation is that the ET is the product of long years of evolution, with all the attendant developments of a variety of forms and sensitivities. Billions of years of evolutionary "tuning" have given the cometary minds an exquisite sensitivity to the electromagnetic output of each others internal chemical and physical processes Despite strenuous efforts, no human communication with the extraterrestrial minds has been established.... (83)

The only recognizable aspects of these ETs are their energetic 'out gassings' and 'sensitivity to the electromagnetic output of each other's internal chemical and physical

processes.’ Years of change into alternative forms and capabilities for survival has made these ‘beings’ possibly immortal.

In human imagination, such immortality or mystery puts a mantle of ‘god’ on such beings. Man decided that these ETs from out beyond from space are like gods, since, space is the dwelling place of the gods. These gods, while indifferent, are not passive. Subtle control over their out gassings results, over very long periods, in orbital changes. (83)

Like gods of the Earth, these ‘gods’ too are silent and incommunicable. But their position as intelligent ETs is beyond doubt. They move deliberately in orbits that are not random. These movements are effected by ‘out gassings’ from the ETs. These signs of intelligence were proved by certain events:

In view of the above, it appears in retrospect unfortunate that the first probe to the Oort Cloud and beyond, launched in 2030, should have used as its initial means of propulsion a plasma sail consisting of ionized gas with in a “magnetic bubble” thousands of kilometers across. (83)

The passage of this probe brought out such a lot of “changes in the volume and intensity of intercometary communication...” (84) that the mysterious aliens of the comets were established as intelligent beings.

More significantly, the ‘first probe to the Oort Cloud and beyond, launched in 2030’ is a extrapolation of existing space technology. Many SF stories and proposals at NASA have talked about ‘plasma sail’ and “magnetic bubble” and ‘ram scoops.’ MacLeod further extrapolates on the existence of life forms in extreme conditions and links such a possibility to the beings of the Oort Cloud:

There is no reason to suppose that extremophilic consciousness is confined to minor interplanetary bodies. Perhaps the majority of the earth’s biomass consists of subterranean extremophiles. (84)

The use of scientific terminology only adds to the effect of jargon. In fact, ‘extremophilic consciousness’ merely refers to life forms that live extreme conditions. An extremophile (from Latin *extremus* meaning "extreme" and Greek *philiā* meaning "love") is an organism that thrives in physically or geochemically extreme conditions that are detrimental to most life on Earth (www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extremophile). In other words, human life itself is under threat, may not be from aliens from outer space, but most possibly from under our feet itself: Perhaps the majority of the Earth’s biomass consists of subterranean extremophiles. Watch the ground. (84)

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