

Other Worlds

David Crystal

But surely you must agree
Said the television interviewer
In the condescending tones
We have learned to associate
With disasters, mass destruction, and
(Tell me how does it feel?)
Death,

Surely you must agree
That there's life on other planets?
Apart from anything else
It's a statistical certainty
That the same life creating conditions
Can be found in thousands of other worlds,
Isn't it?

The expert demurred,
But he was only one of half a dozen
Experts who thought otherwise,
Or rather, who tried to keep an open mind
As they used up their once-only lives
Scanning radio waves, looking for something
Non-random.

Surely there are intelligences
Greater than ours,
She went on, accusingly,
Surely it's arrogant of us
To assume we're alone
In the whole universe,
Surely—

I switched her off.
There's nothing more arrogant
Than a surely TV interviewer
Sounding-off
(Unless it's a poet).

The next day, there was another film
About non-random behaviour,
This time in Brazil,
Where landowners were killing peasants
Hungry to distraction.
For the price of a few spare telescope parts
Some might be living still.

There's something wrong somewhere,
When people spend so much time, money,
And energy, scanning the light years
In the hope of having their prayers answered.
To the dying Brazilian or African child,
Talk about statistical certainties
Leaves them cold.

Who will answer their prayers?
We with our barns bursting at the seams
Have the power to answer them
Without need of radio telescopes,
Statisticians, or interviewers.
But what do we do instead?
We sound off,

Show off, send off into the twilight
Pioneer, Voyager, and the others
With their puny messages,
The Arecibo radio pictogram
Off to Hercules on a 24,000 mile jaunt.
Is there anybody there, say the travellers?
Notice us,
Please.

The messages tell the waiting aliens
Honest facts about ourselves, like
Where our planet is,
How males and females differ,
The chemical basis of life on earth,
And a few more salient details.
Big deal.

Voyager One even carries a message
From the United Nations,
Conveying humble human greetings
In English, but not saying a linguistic
Dicky bird about warfare, torture, terrorism,
And the other things we're inhumanly
Good at.

If you want to see real arrogance, then,
Look at the big nude white chief
With his hand raised, on the Pioneer plaque.
He's waving hello,
(But not to the Ethiopian children),
Or perhaps he's just thrown something,
A grenade, possibly.

The irony, of course,
Is that the searchers are, in a sense,
Right. We are not alone.
There is a force be with us,
But it can be sensed without telescopes.
Though further away than light years
It is nearer than our next breath.

May that force grow in us,
Work through us,
Stay with us,
Interviewers, observers,
Poets, and all,
Now,
And at the hour of our last breath.

CORRECTIONS

Peter Hebblethwaite: 'Understanding German Catholics—the work of H.G. Barnes', April issue, p. 188, line 5 : after 'Bishop Clemens August Graf' insert the bishop's surname, 'Galen'.

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Santiago Sia: 'The Doctrine of God's Immutability; introducing the modern debate', May issue, p. 224, line 15 : this should, of course, read 'Lastly, for Aquinas change implies *imperfection* ...'.
