



The Webb & The Poet

If you watched tonight's NOVA presentation of "Ultimate Space Telescope", then you had to be as amazed as the rest of us, and more. Not a dry eye in the house. What is there to compare with the voyage of the James Webb Telescope? Perhaps the 350,000 year journey that brought the earliest versions of h.sapiens to the moment we crossed the threshold from brain to mind and acquired the gifts of imagination and language. Or, perhaps it compares to the voyages that began 3-5 thousand years ago, with a few people paddling around the Pacific, the time it took to arrive on shores of a mid-Pacific paradise in their fragile vessels with only the stars to guide them.

I can't think of much else that comes close to that journey, from the time the first of our species stepped out onto the Serengeti, looked up at a night sky awash in stars and might well have posed the first of all human questions, "What the fuck is that?". Now we stand in a crow's nest high up in a million mile mast and peer at shores of the birthplace of our universe. 'Amazing!' 'Stunning!' 'Wondrous!' hardly covers it. There it is in front of us—a perfect imagination, a perfect execution, and results the likes of which no one before us has ever seen. We are poised on the edge of knowing "What the fuck it is." No matter how thick the clouds of pain and suffering of our earthly universe that obscure our vision, anyone remotely connected to some fragment of the human project that dreamed us up can't help but be impressed with what some spectacularly gifted individuals accomplished in the span of a generation.

No, we haven't arrived yet. Webbscope can only see as far as the maternity room of the birth of our universe, about 13.5 billion years ago. The actual birth ('big bang' or 'little perturbation' or whatever you want to call it) is still about 250 million years further than Webb can see. What "seeing" might even mean in those regions of the hot-plasma birthplace of our universe is a question in some doubt. But we are certainly far enough along to see about all we can manage to comprehend for a good long while. No doubt, the photos and science will just keep coming and the images be more illuminating and intriguing with each peep into our past. Except for one small matter.

There's a whole lot of images we might easily have had that we will never get to see or contemplate. In fact, the instrument for seeing them didn't even get considered for this project. That whole other view of the universe has been lost to us, it's mirrors never to be unfolded, though it might have looked as deeply into our origins as Webb will ever do, and with results as equally amazing as the ones we are starting to get from the space telescope. Sadder yet, we might have built this companion instrument for a negligible fraction of the cost of Webb and easily folded it into the package weighing in at less than a gram. But no one seems to have thought about what a few good poets might have added to revealing the universe we are trying to embrace.

It is the job of the poet to observe what otherwise goes unnoticed, and to say what otherwise cannot be said. The project of poetry, and its power to see into the distant past and far future, is a voyage that has gone on for nearly as long as the human project has gone on. A recent prototype was built by Tracy K. Smith in her "Life On Mars". It was tested on a nearer, obscure region of our universe much like Hubble's concentration on small a single spot in all that inky wonder. The wonder of what she revealed through the lenses of poetry was confirmed by a Pulitzer Prize. It was a vision of the Hubble Telescope, her father's work on that project and the dreams and practices of the human condition and the humanity she experienced in her daily life. Tracy Smith wasn't a part of the Hubble project, but through her father's work on it she certainly demonstrated the untapped potential of embedding some of our best poets in our larger scientific and social endeavors. One can only imagine what "Life on Mars" might have been like had she actually been on staff at NASA and had a front row seat to view the images of 'make it so'.

No doubt we will get more than enough back from Webb the telescope to justify what has been put into it. But we will also lose as much by not including the one item that doesn't even appear in NASA's large catalog of occupational titles and job descriptions—'poet'. Undoubtedly there will be poets who will be inspired to write poems related to the Webbscope and its images. A few pretty good ones among them, I expect. But none as well focused, with its mirrors aligned, had there been a poet onboard since the Webscope project began in 1995. The histories, celebration of events and the people, the setbacks and defeats and moments of triumph, maybe some poems as well to tell us what and where we are in our universe as much as Emerson's shot heard round the world made Concord Bridge a household name that everyone understood as the birthplace of another universe.

Yes, I am as awestruck by the visions the Webbscope is bringing to us as anyone. Still, when I look up at the night sky and contemplate its beauty, revealed as it never has been before, the question that comes first to my mind is, "NASA, Where Are The Poets?"

—red slider, july, 2022



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