The Promethean Colony

Vanier College

The air was thick with the drone of Martian cicadas—it was already evening, and the slanting rays of the sun bled through the branches of trees which encircled a little suburban neighborhood in the outskirts of the capital. Commuters were returning home. There was the sound of clattering plates drifting from open windows—the tables were being laid out, and greyish smoke rose against the reddening sky from backyards where men barbecued.

Those who lived here were satisfied with their lives—they hardly ever complained, nor felt the need to progress. In fact, nothing much had changed in the last centuries; nothing much had changed since the Civil War. There were no technological advances or differences in lifestyle—the government which took over after the War had been keen on instilling a sense of stability, and they had funded a massive propaganda campaign aimed at convincing people that "things are alright". It seemed to have worked—the suburbs hummed in gentle forgetfulness, and the Martian citizens were oblivious to the history of their planet.

The inhabitants lived in darkness—the shadow of censorship had been cast by the Martian Independence Party (M.I.P.) after the Civil War to obscure the true history of Mars, to convince the citizens that their origins were purely Martian. The story—completely unknown to everyone except the President—goes as follows: two thousand years after the first colony was established on Mars, scientists had found a means by which to become self-sustained. By that time, the planet had already been terraformed—the paradigm of production and consumption already present on Earth could therefore be easily mimicked; expansive fields were plowed for food production, urban infrastructure was constructed to accommodate to the growing population, and solar-photovoltaic arrays were designed to harness energy.

Mars had become an extension of Earth—it was treated as a colonial achievement, and it mostly served as a tourist attraction and a site for scientific research. Social tensions began to

occur in the colony; those who were indigenous to Mars started to demand recognition for their particular national identity, and oppositional groups developed to combat the weight of colonialism. These parties, however—the M.I.P. being one of them—were easily subdued by the powerful armies of Earth, and Martian independence was never recognized.

However, the disaster which sparked the outbreak of the Civil War changed the course of this dialogue—around this time (five hundred years prior to the present), scientists on Earth were experimenting with new methods of space propulsion; in an attempt to surpass the efficiency of chemical rockets, researchers had embarked on the appropriately-named "Icarus Project". The aim was to facilitate interstellar travel. Prototype engines which made use of nuclear pulse had previously been designed—but these motors, which propelled themselves through a series of small nuclear explosions, were discontinued after several failed and disastrous launchings from Earth.

The "Icarus Project" was meant to surpass this failure in every sense—the prototype spacecraft was equipped with antimatter engines that had the capacity to produce up to a hundred billion times more energy than chemical rockets. Energy generation would occur when the engine annihilates a proportional mixture of matter and antimatter—for the scientists of those days, the "Icarus Project" was held in high esteem. It was believed that the project would carry humanity out of its slow technological trudge in the safest and most efficient way possible. But the opposite happened.

The Icarus Spacecraft was scheduled for launching on the fifteenth of June—it was a scorching day, and families had gathered by the fences in the distance to observe this historical moment. The countdown began—the sun was shining fiercely in the sky; three…two…one—then the spacecraft lit up like a burning strip of magnesium, and a blinding whiteness suddenly

flooded the entire landscape. There was no time to scream. Within seconds, the entire human race was annihilated; from Mars, it appeared as though a second sun was shining (if only for a few seconds) in the sky.

A tragic defect in the spacecraft's engine had led to the explosion; the electromagnetic container which held the antimatter had somehow malfunctioned a few seconds before the scheduled launching, and the antimatter had leaked out and collided with the ordinary matter of the spacecraft—annihilating it instantly.

The event sent a wave of panic through Martian society—the governmental forces that had previously held supreme control over the planet were now extinct, except for the few military bases still remaining on the Red Planet; but these were soon overtaken by rebel forces. The M.I.P. issued a manifesto calling the entire population to arms—the document was streamed to all portable devices; it heralded a dramatic change in policy, a reclamation of "Martian identity".

The streets were flooded with armed men and women who moved tsunami-like to the governmental offices of the colonial powers. The Civil War had begun. Flags of the Martian colony were ripped from flagpoles and burned in the public squares; the remaining few who were loyal to the Earth were publicly executed, and the M.I.P. filled the political void and became the new governing power.

Once the M.I.P. had established itself as the new supreme power, it had to find more convincing ways to assert Martian independence; with the overwhelming presence of Earth-sponsored infrastructure and technology, the state continued to look like a colonial extension. In consequence, M.I.P. leaders ordered the systematic destruction of all earth-related artifacts. By

now all the loyalists had been executed; next, the rebels demolished the colonial bases—they bombarded infrastructure and eradicated the launching pads. They sought to severe all contact with Earth—so that they would appear to have evolved independently—and destroyed the technology which would enable them to travel there. Martian rebels even went as far as burning important documentation which suggested Mars had been founded as an Earth colony—an entire history was essentially being destroyed, and the M.I.P. began to construct its own.

Five hundred years later, the M.I.P. still held supreme power—and the plan to cleanse the collective consciousness of Earth-related memories had been successful. No Martian had ever conceived of the idea that humans could possibly have come from Earth. They had been taught a false and constructed history from an early age—state-run educational systems imposed their dogma on students, and there was no tolerance for defiance. It was a well-known fact that those who asked the wrong questions had disappeared, and never returned.

The Martians thought it better to simply live without questioning; they returned home to their little gardens, relaxed with some barbeque, and plugged themselves in to their distraction-systems—besides, the citizens were continuously told that “things are alright”, and so there was not even a need to question. There had been one little hiccup, however.

The M.I.P. found that—despite their efforts—Martian citizens were still victim to that strange human impulse; they still now and then expressed a vague yearning for the Earth. This was particularly true of the young minds which had not been entirely cleansed of natural psychology.

Young men and women would often sit at the edge of craters to watch the earthrise with sad and bleary eyes. They were like children who see the ocean for the first time—mesmerized,

and filled with a vague sense of wonder. Some would often begin to cry, and they could never quite point out what had made them feel that way.

This behavior had initially sent a wave of panic through the M.I.P.—they wondered if these sentiments could endanger the Martian ideology, if citizens would begin to doubt the fabricated history of Mars as an independent state. Instead of suppressing these human impulses, the M.I.P. decided to provide the population with an explanation—they issued a public announcement defining this experience as “mystical” or “religious” thought.

They ingeniously planted the seeds of religion in the public mind, so that all ideas of Earth would automatically be understood as merely “religious”—and therefore fictional—rather than scientifically sound. The Church of Mars was officially born, and their scripture capitalized on the diasporic condition of human beings.

Earth was henceforth called the “Promised Land”—an unattainable metaphysical realm which would justify the citizens’ sense of yearning—and the entire fabricated history of Mars was accounted for by a divine being which they called “NASA”. The inspiration for the deity’s name came from cryptic inscriptions on walls of ancient ruins—the first colonial bases—long ago destroyed, which fascinated and intrigued Martian citizens.

These ruins consisted of many small bases surrounding a larger headquarters; there were remains of expansive indoor parks and structures which seemed to serve the purpose of growing produce. There was also a multitude of unfamiliar machines—generators, remains of old nuclear reactors and solar-photovoltaic arrays—which sparked rumors that the ancients had once possessed alien technology which enabled them to build these extraordinary structures.

The Church of Mars explained that—once upon a time—"our planet" had been inhospitable, a reddish mass which could hardly support human life. There were no trees; there was hardly any breathable air—in fact, the atmosphere was composed of ninety-five percent carbon dioxide and temperatures could often reach minus seventy degrees Celsius. Then, one day, the divine being which the early tribes had so admiringly named "NASA"—as proven by the inscriptions on the ruins' walls—had come down from the Heavens and given humankind a hospital environment: "whence came the trees and the earth and the food which we are blessed to eat". It was a formidable fabrication on the part of the government, but it did not always work.

Presently—in one of the suburban homes which served as a secret meeting place—there was a small congregation of youths who regarded the constructed reality of their lives with great skepticism. There were about fifteen or twenty of them—young and dangerously intelligent; these were the youths who gazed at the earthrise in vague and abstract yearning, questioning whether their origins could truly be traced back to Martian land.

They were fresh and vital; they were thirsty for truth, and profoundly dissatisfied with the constraints of living in this regime. The students were seated at makeshift desks crammed into the basement—there were no windows; the decoration was minimal, nearly non-existent except for a poster depicting the Earth which was taped to the wall in front of which an older man stood. This man was the teacher—a scientist who conducted illegal research behind the backs of the authorities, a wise figure who led the youths in this oppositional movement. He spoke, and the students sat with furrowed brows and concentrated looks.

"You see," he began. "The M.I.P. asserts and confirms that our planet was once inhospitable. Of course, this might sound a little contradictory coming from a dictatorship which

tries to convince its ‘citizens’”—here he emphasized the word in a mocking tone, making the students laugh—“that we are completely and naturally of Martian origins.

“Of course, they had no choice but to address the fact that Mars was initially not ideal for human life. The evidence is simply too blatant—if we look at the ruins of the ancients who are said to have first settled Martian land, we can clearly see that their infrastructure is technologically configured to compensate for the lack of livable conditions on Mars.

“Look at this structure, for instance”—here he held up a photograph depicting what appeared to be remains of a greenhouse; there was a murmur in the classroom—“this is a greenhouse; why would the ancients have designed such a massive structure? It can only be because Martian soil was inadequate for the growth of food. Samples of the soil around these sites show particularly concentrated amounts of several nutrients that are crucial for the growth of produce, which of course suggests that the ancients made use of fertilizers.

“Now,” he resumed, holding up a different photograph. “I’m sure all of you have seen these strange structures which stand at a distance away from the main headquarters—they appear to be nuclear reactors and solar-photovoltaic arrays, but have a close look at this structure”—he pointed to a greyish mass in the photograph—“this would appear to be a kind of processing unit which controls and maintains certain atmospheric processes. Now, there is no way to know for sure how these functioned, but they clearly indicate that humans (not divine beings) manipulated the Martian environment to somehow make it more hospitable.”

A student in the back of the classroom raised his hand; the teacher paused and gestured to the youth. “But how is this humanly possible?” he began. “How can anyone have the ability to control the environment? There’re just so many empty spaces in our understanding of these

ancient ruins. Of course, I doubt that a divine being ever had a hand in all of this—I still don't know what 'NASA' could represent, perhaps merely some kind of artistic expression? So it's not a divine being, but then… what happened? I mean, it seems that Mars became hospitable in a snap of the fingers. How is that possible?"

"Ah! That's the thing"—the teacher flung his arms in the air. "My theory is that Mars became hospitable over a long period of time, perhaps even several thousand years. Allow me to explain. Suppose that humans originate from Earth—and there is strong evidence to support this fact, one of them being that our physiology is simply incompatible with the original Martian environment.

"The first settlers would obviously attempt to make this planet livable—terraforming, in a sense. To transform a planet so that it resembles Earth. For many years I've been involved in the study of our planet—I've examined it from every point of view and have collected a large amount of geological data which allows us to trace and analyze the origins of Mars. I've merged these studies with my observations of the ancient ruins, and I suppose you could say I've synthesized them into a theory.

"To create an atmosphere like we have today involves three major steps: building up the atmosphere, raising the temperature, and finding a way to create a magnetosphere to keep it all together. The ancients would have had to make use of gases which commonly replicate the greenhouse effect in order to keep thermal energy near the surface—this would increase the temperature, and they would have had to build up the atmosphere.

"Now, the ancients must have also created a planet-wide artificial magnetosphere so that everything was held together. This could have been done in a variety of ways. Let's suppose that

the ancients deployed a magnetic dipole shield to orbit near Mars, thereby creating an artificial magnetosphere and even protecting the entire planet from solar wind and radiation. This can only make sense. There is simply no reason to believe that the human race originated in Mars."

"Yes," one of the students interrupted. "But what strikes me the most is the sheer irony of this whole ordeal. I mean—the M.I.P. has recently revealed its plans to begin a new stage of space exploration so that we can find another hospitable planet—a kind of backup planet, since Mars is becoming more and more polluted and there is just not enough space to accommodate for the growing population."

There was a murmur in the classroom; the students stirred in their seat and squirmed as though a bad memory was being awakened. The M.I.P. had made space exploration a top priority in the educational system—they were keenly aware of how unsustainable Mars was becoming, and efforts had to be made to discover another planet. But—although they held the secret of Earth in their hands—they made the entire society work towards this goal from scratch to give them the illusion that the habitability of Earth would be a breakthrough, and something never before seen.

"So we just seem to be going in circles," the student continued. "Humanity is cursed by its own intelligence—technological advancement is a sort of prison from which we can't escape. It reminds me of the story of Prometheus who is said to have stolen fire from Mount Olympus and given it to mankind. Of course, this fire represents a kind of powerful tool—in our case, technology, or simply the human desire to know.

"So the fire is figuratively unleashed in society, and Prometheus is condemned to an eternal punishment—I forgot exactly what this punishment is, but it involves a kind of cyclical

suffering. If I remember correctly, Prometheus is chained to a rock and has his liver eaten during the day by a vulture of some sort. Then, during the night, his liver regenerates only so that it can be eaten once again the next day.

"This is the kind of eternal punishment that I see in our situation—our desire to know can have and has had positive effects on humanity, but there's a flip side to this coin. A kind of manic obsession with knowledge is manifested—and this feverish desire for progress and invention distorts our natural way of being.

"We create these unnatural societies that are centered on progress and science. We build and build and build to the point where the core of our existence—our planet, for God's sake!—is obliterated and we must find another. So we find another planet, but the process repeats itself. It's a kind of eternal dissatisfaction which only brings us in a circle of suffering, just like how Prometheus has his liver eaten every day. I mean, when will this stop?"

There was a knock on the door. The knocks grew louder. Then there was a shout—a uniformed shout; a dictatorial shout. It was the M.I.P.

References

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