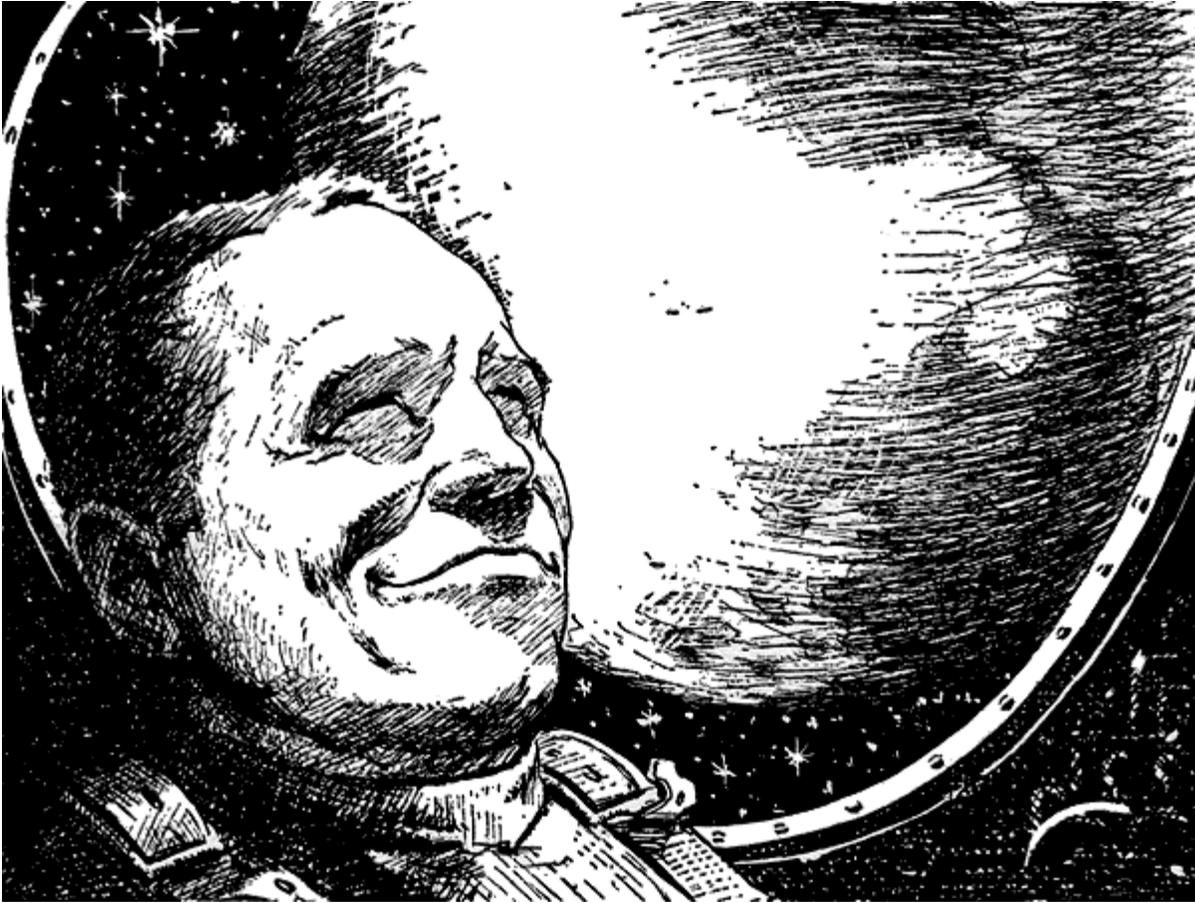


EGOCENTRIC ORBIT



It took a long time for human beings to accept that our little piece of meteoric rubble wasn't the exact and absolute center of the Universe. It does appear that way, doesn't it? It may not take so long for a spaceman to learn ...

By JOHN CORY

Illustrated by Gardner

NEAR the end of his fifteenth orbit as Greenland slipped by noiselessly below, he made the routine measurements that tested the operation of his space capsule and checked the automatic instruments which would transmit their stored data to Earth on his next pass over Control. Everything normal; all mechanical devices were operating perfectly.

This information didn't surprise him, in fact, he really didn't even think about it. The previous orbits and the long simulated flights on Earth during training had made such checks routine and perfect results expected. The capsules were developed by exhaustive testing both on the ground and as empty satellites before entrusting them to carry animals and then the first human.

He returned to contemplation of the panorama passing below and above, although as he noted idly, above and below had lost some of their usual meaning. Since his capsule, like all heavenly bodies, was stable in position with respect to the entire universe and, thanks to Sir Isaac Newton and his laws, never changed, the Earth and the stars alternated over his head during each orbit.

"Up" now meant whatever was in the direction of his head. He remembered that even during his initial orbit when the Earth first appeared overhead he accepted the fact as normal. He wondered if the other two had accepted it as easily.

For there had been two men hurled into orbit before he ventured into space. Two others who had also passed the rigorous three-year training period and were selected on the basis of over-all performance to precede him. He had known them both well and wondered again what had happened on their flights. Of course, they had both returned, depending upon what your definition of return was. The capsules in which they had ventured beyond Earth had returned them living. But this was to be expected, for even the considerable hazards of descent through the atmosphere and the terrible heating which occurred were successfully surmounted by the capsule.

Naturally, it had not been expected that the satellites would have to be brought down by command from the ground. But this, too, was part of the careful planning—radio control of the retro-rockets that move the satellite out of orbit by reducing its velocity. Of course, ground control was to be used only if the astronaut failed to ignite the retro-rockets himself. He remembered everyone's surprise and relief when the first capsule was recovered and its occupant found to be alive. They had assumed that in spite of all precautions he was dead because he had not fired the rockets on the fiftieth orbit and it was necessary to bring him down on the sixty-fifth.

Recovery alive only partially solved the mystery, for the rescuers and all others were met by a haughty, stony silence from the occupant. Batteries of tests confirmed an early diagnosis: complete and utter withdrawal; absolute refusal to communicate. Therapy was unsuccessful.

The second attempt was similar in most respects, except that command return was made on the thirty-first orbit after the astronaut's failure to de-orbit at the end of the thirtieth. His incoherent babble of moons, stars, and worlds was no more helpful than the first.

Test after test confirmed that no obvious organic damage had been incurred by exposure outside of the Earth's protective atmosphere. Biopsy of even selected brain tissues seemed to show that microscopic cellular changes due to prolonged weightlessness or primary cosmic-ray bombardment, which had been suggested by some authorities, were unimportant. Somewhat reluctantly, it was decided to repeat the experiment a third time.

The launching was uneventful. He was sent into space with the precision he expected. The experience was exhilarating and, although he had anticipated each event in advance, he could not possibly have foreseen the overpowering feeling that came over him. Weightlessness he had experienced for brief periods during training, but nothing could match the heady impression of continuous freedom from gravity.

Earth passing overhead was also to be expected from the simple laws of celestial mechanics but his feeling as he watched it now was inexpressible. It occurred to him that perhaps this was indeed why he was here, because he could appreciate such experiences best. He had been told the stars would be bright, unblinking, and an infinitude in extent, but could mere descriptions or photographs convey the true seeing?

On his twenty-first orbit he completed his overseeing the entire surface of the planet in daylight. He had seen more of Earth than anyone able to tell about it, but only he had the true feeling of it. The continents were clearly visible, as were the oceans and both polar ice caps. The shapes were familiar but in only a remote way. A vague indistinctness borne of distance served to modify the outlines and he alone was seeing and understanding. On the dark side of the planet large cities were marked by indistinct light areas which paled to insignificance compared to the stars and his sun.

He speculated about the others who had only briefly experienced these sights. Undoubtedly they weren't as capable of fully grasping or appreciating any of these things as he was. It was quite clear that no one else but he could encompass the towering feeling of power and importance generated by being alone in the Universe.

At the end of the twenty-fifth orbit he disabled the radio control of the retro-rockets and sat back with satisfaction to await the next circuit of his Earth around Him.

THE END

Transcriber's Note:

This etext was produced from *Astounding Science Fiction* May 1960. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.