

“Three Moons” by Matthew Pearl

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Theme: Earth and Moon: An Infinite Resonance

Writing a novel is a solitary activity, so I have been lucky over the course of writing three of them to have very engaging collaborators at my side. They did not volunteer to help, but I managed to recruit them and they have made no protest. I refer to Dante Alighieri, Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Dickens.

They are also three people that might feel welcome here at this festival, as I thank you all for making me feel welcome. The three men I name had artistic and intellectual interests that were broad, like our speakers and audience today, and they came from three of the many countries represented here: Italy, the United States, and England. I am confident that they would be intrigued by our theme here. Dante, Poe and Dickens stretched the boundaries of their epochs in every direction, including upward. The energetic connections between the moon and the earth inspired each of them in a variety of ways at theological, moral, and scientific levels. As we uncover these inspirations, we may illuminate the universes each one occupied.

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The moon is Dante's very first stop in Paradiso. It is clear that Dante has a difficult time deciding how to begin writing Paradiso. It is also difficult for readers to begin. Dante knows this, he freely admits it. Indeed, it may be one of the few works of literature that in its first pages warns readers to run away! After Inferno and Purgatorio, Paradiso presents a dramatically different format. Both of the other sections of the afterlife feel familiar enough to the reader's experience. Those otherworldly terrains possess rocks, rivers, and mountain ledges similar to our own world. By framing his journey this way, Dante manages to welcome us in to frightening places. But what to do with the setting of Paradise? Here is the ultimate segment of the afterlife, a segment not based on the physical or corporeal, but driven by spiritual and intellectual development and understanding. Dante follows Beatrice, the spirit of the woman who has guided him, through the solar system as it was understood in the 14th century. His readers would not have the benefit of Star Trek to prepare for this voyage. Then it was new. It was experimental. All along, Dante maintains that the journey is an actual one, and to sustain this conceit he must constantly renew his credibility.

It eases our transition that Dante begins with the moon. Because the

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moon is a terrain we do have some idea about. We can see it to varying degrees in our daily lives depending on when and where we look. If most of paradise is transcendent, blinding, symbolic and allegorical, the moon maintains some familiarity. It is a bridge between the earthly and sublime. Indeed, Dante's first order of business once he comes to the moon at Beatrice's side is not to ask about God, but to grapple with questions about why the moon looks the way it does from the earth. He asks about the light and dark spots on the moon. Dante is still the pilgrim at this point, bringing with him our own perspective and very human questions. In fact, the esoteric and tedious quasi-scientific discussion of the moon's spots, consuming one hundred verses, is surely one of those hurdles for any student trying to read *Paradiso* for the first time.

The moon, in Dante's cosmology and theology, holds a spiritual surprise. Dante often defies expectations. Remember when you first read the meeting with Lucifer in the 34<sup>th</sup> canto of *Inferno*? If you are like me, you probably expected the Master of Evil to be, well, more animate. Instead he drools and chews. If you are like me, when Dante finally reunites with Beatrice at the top of the mountain of Purgatorio, you might have expected her to be happy. Not to scream at him and make him cry. Poor Dante. He had come such a long way to see

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her. If we expected that after the horrors of Inferno and the torments and longing of Purgatorio to reach a place of pure and total contentment in Paradiso, we are again mistaken. Here in the moon are the souls who have broken their vows. We meet Piccarda, a nun who was forcibly removed from the convent. Of course, this is heaven, so the broken vows were out of their control. But it still matters. The sphere of the moon serves as a reflection of human shortcomings.

Heaven is everywhere in paradise. But Dante learns from his vision of the moon that there is an important symbolic difference in the spheres. Even in salvation, cosmic staging is essential. There is a hierarchy—a disorienting and important lesson about paradise. The moon remains closest to the earth not only physically but also spiritually. It carries our human flaws.

I am sometimes asked who I would like to meet out of the historical figures I have written about in my books. It is a difficult question, so perhaps it would be better to see them meet each other. It would be very entertaining to see Dante and Edgar Poe meet for dinner together.

It is said that reading Poe one would never know that Christianity

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had ever been existed. This is a very astute point. When Edgar Poe devotes a story to the moon in 1835, theology is entirely absent. Poe and Dante would have had a very tense conversation, since Dante's imagination grows out of religion and Poe has little interest in religion. In a story originally known as “Hans Phaall”, a story that would influence Jules Vernes and help launch science fiction as a genre, Poe chronicles one man's journey in a balloon from the city of Rotterdam in Holland all the way to the moon.

Hans is escaping. He is poor and tormented by creditors. He considers suicide, but instead decides on a journey to the moon. What a relevant story, in the economic world of today! The balloon that takes Hans into space is made of dirty newspapers patched together. Although written in a fairly humorous voice, there is also a type of reality to Poe's story. Hans, a laborer, uses the information in a pamphlet to invent a machine for breathing atmospheric air. In the balloon, he also takes a telescope, a barometer, and a magnetic needle. Once on his journey, Hans performs various experiments, some involving a cat that he has brought with him.

It takes Hans 19 days to reach the moon. On his way, Hans dreams of what the moon might be like, imagining forests and waterfalls. But

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that is not what he finds there. Perhaps a reflection of the increasing urbanization Poe witnessed in the nineteenth century, rather than an unexplored wilderness, Hans finds an actual city on the moon. It is overcrowded. It is populated by little people. Ugly little people. The moon itself has extreme temperature fluctuations, scorching heat for two weeks followed by arctic cold for the same amount of time. And this is before global warming. The people on the moon have no ears. They are idiots. They cannot speak. Though they do have politics. Yet, Hans discovers something extraordinary. Each individual on the moon corresponds to an individual back on earth.

In other words, the moon is a place of escape for Hans and for Poe's readers, but it is also not an escape. It is an alternate reality: a warped reflection of earth.

Poe, a man preoccupied by the idea of doppelgangers or doubles, must have liked the idea that on the moon were less attractive versions of people he knew back home. But there was another double or imitator at issue. Poe was very irritated because another story about journeying to the moon was published soon after his. He was even more annoyed that some readers believed the competing story to be a true account of a voyage to the moon. This was a time when science was advancing

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in ways surprising enough that space travel could be believed, even if it would be more than a hundred years later before it would actually occur.

As for the third author I have enlisted in my books, Charles Dickens, we do not have to imagine what would have happened if Dickens met Poe, like Hans dreaming of grand visions of the moon. In fact, Charles Dickens and Edgar Poe had a brief meeting in 1841 in a hotel in Philadelphia. Charles Dickens was always charming and self-involved. Poe was paranoid and suspicious. They did not like each other.

They also had very different approaches to writing. Dickens had very little interest in composing fantastic stories like Hans Pfaall. Dickens's characters kept their feet firmly on the ground. The secret to his success was that his readers could see themselves in his characters, from any class of society. The characters may dream or be enticed by fantasy, but they must negotiate their way through stark modern realities on an industrial age, whether on their way to success or death.

Here we do not find the theological significance of the moon we find

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in Dante, nor the escapist fantasy we can see in Edgar Poe. But there is power in the moon still. The moon can be plain deadly in a Charles Dickens novel. When the villains of *Oliver Twist*, Fagin and Sykes, plan to murder little Oliver, they check that there will be no moon to reveal their evil deeds. The moon - or lack of it - becomes an accomplice.

For Dickens the portrait artist, moonlight is a frequent source of bringing out moods and true character. The moon that reflects the flaws of humanity in Dante, and provides an alternate reality in Poe, reveals deep secrets and evil deeds in the moral realism of Dickens.

Of our three authors, Charles Dickens was outwardly the most successful in his own lifetime. After all, though Dante would change Italian literature forever, in his own day he was of course exiled, away from his family, and never could enter his home city again. Poe died penniless and in obscurity. His death remains shadowed in mystery. Dickens, on the other hand, died surrounded by his family in the same large estate that he used to admire as a child and dream of owning one day. He had achieved success around the world, success beyond that which any novelist had ever known.

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As we speak of the moon as a revealer of secrets, it is worth mentioning the secrets that Dickens kept from the world. You see, Dante and Poe did not lead perfect lives, but they tended to expose their personal peculiarities and eccentricities themselves, sometimes producing ridicule and suspicion. Dickens? Dickens relied on his reputation as a family man in writing novels everybody could read or enjoy. In reality, he and his wife had a very troublesome relationship. Though they had ten children together, Catherine Dickens was banished from their estate. Dickens began a relationship with Ellen Ternan, an actress half his age.

Though this kind of behavior would surely find its way into the public eye in today's culture, Dickens was so careful to keep this secret that we would not learn of her existence and name until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A remarkable fact for a man as well known as Charles Dickens.

What is the moon to us? This is a question I have asked myself in preparation for coming here. I have been eager to listen to the thoughts of so many speakers here. The moon is something of a fundamental paradox to the human mind. It is familiar, but it is exotic. It is beyond us, but it is part of our daily lives. Unlike

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the sun, we can see some of its details. It illuminates us, but only when all else is dark. Sometimes it sneaks away. Sometimes it shows itself fully with no signs of bashfulness.

As cities grew in the nineteenth century, the moonlight so important in Dickens's landscapes would grow fainter, blurred by gas and electric light. In our day, secrets do not stay secret. Especially for celebrities. Dickens today might have to explain his relationship with the actress. Poe today would have to talk about why he lied about his wife's age when they married, when she was only thirteen years old. Dante might have to tell his wife Gemma just what his fascination with Beatrice was all about.

Our scientific understanding of the moon has of course grown stronger. Our imagination about what the moon conceals may have grown fainter. Through the eyes of our literary past, we can regain some of that grand mystery.