

A Voyage to the Moon

101
pages

A Voyage to the Moon

Cyrano de Bergerac

Translated by Andrew Brown



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A Voyage to the Moon

THE MOON WAS FULL, the sky was cloudless and the clocks had just struck nine in the evening as we – four of my friends and I – made our way home from a house not far from Paris. The various thoughts inspired in us by the sight of that saffron globe provided us with topics for conversation as we walked. Our eyes grew misty as we gazed at that great star; one of us suggested that it was a small window in the sky through which the glory of the blessed could be glimpsed, while another then protested that it was the clothes horse on which Diana hangs Apollo's collars, and yet another exclaimed that it might well be the sun himself, who, having laid aside his rays in the evening, looked down through this hole to observe what people did on earth when he was no longer around.

"I'd happily join you in your enthusiastic speculations," I said. "But I will not dally with the witty, imaginative ideas you are deploying to tickle time and make it pass more quickly; what I think is that the moon is a world just like this one, and that our world is its moon."

The company gratified me with a great burst of laughter.

"Perhaps," I said to them, "there is a person on the moon at this very minute making fun of somebody else for maintaining that this globe of ours is a world."

But however much I insisted that Pythagoras, Epicurus, Democritus and, in our own time, Copernicus and Kepler had shared this opinion, I only succeeded in making them laugh more uproariously.

This thought, whose boldness fitted well with my temper, and was made all the more stubborn by contradiction, took root so deeply in me that, for the rest of the way, I was bursting with a thousand definitions of the moon to which I could not give

birth – and, by thinking up serious reasons in support of this belief, I almost convinced myself. But listen, reader, and I will tell you of the miracle, or the accident, of which Providence or Fortune availed themselves to confirm it in my mind.

I had just returned home and, seeking rest after my walk, had hardly entered my bedroom when, on my table, I found an open book that I had not placed there. It was the works of Cardano,* and although I was not intending to read it, my eyes were irresistibly drawn to a story related by this philosopher: he writes that, studying one evening by candlelight, he saw coming in through the closed doors of his room two tall elderly men; after prolonged interrogation on his part, they told him that they lived on the moon.* And saying this, they disappeared.

I was amazed both to see that a book had put itself there of its own accord and that it had done so at just that time, and open at just that particular page; I concluded that this whole chain of events was inspired by God, who wished me to reveal to mankind that the moon is a world.

“What!” I said to myself. “I have spent all day talking about a particular subject, and a book that perhaps is the only one in the world to treat of this subject just happens to fly from my bookshelves onto my table, becoming capable of reason and opening at just the place that relates such a wonderful adventure, thereby furnishing my fantasy with food for thought and my desires with new designs!... Doubtless,” I continued, “the two old men who appeared to that great philosopher must be the very same who dislodged my book and opened it at this page to spare themselves the trouble of delivering to me the same lecture they gave to Cardano.”

I mused further. “But surely I will not be able to find out the truth of the matter unless I travel up to the moon?”

I immediately answered my own question. “And why not? After all, Prometheus once climbed up to heaven to steal fire.”

The heat of these feverish monologues was succeeded by the hope of successfully carrying out this wonderful trip. In order

to realize my plans, I locked myself away in a somewhat isolated country house where, after nursing my daydreams with different ways of travelling to the moon, this is how I reached for the sky:

I tied around myself several little bottles filled with dew, and as the sun's heat attracted them, it lifted me so high that I eventually found myself above the highest clouds. But this attraction made me rise too quickly, and instead of approaching the moon as I wished, she seemed even further away from me than when I left; so I broke several of the little bottles until I felt my weight exceeding the force of attraction and started to descend back to earth.

I had had the right idea, since I landed on earth shortly afterwards; calculating from the time I had left, it should have been midnight. However, I realized that the sun was actually at its zenith and that it was midday. You can imagine how astonished I was – so astonished, indeed, that I did not know what had caused this miracle, and was arrogant enough to imagine that God had favoured my boldness by once more nailing the sun back up in the sky to shed his light on such a noble enterprise.*

I was even more bewildered because I could not recognize the country I was in. As I thought I had ascended straight up, I also thought I must have come down at the same spot from which I had left. Bearing all my accoutrements, I made my way towards a cottage from which smoke was rising, and I was hardly a pistol-shot away when I found myself surrounded by a great number of savages. They seemed completely amazed to see me – I think I must have been the first man they had ever seen wearing bottles. And what made them even more unsure of how to interpret my outlandish appearance was the fact that, as I walked, I hardly touched the ground: they did not realize that I needed only to move my body slightly, and the heat of the noonday sun's rays would make me rise up with my dew, and if I had still had a sufficient number of bottles, I might quite possibly have been swept from their sight into the air.

I started to move towards them, but, as if their panic had changed them into birds, they immediately melted away into a nearby forest. I still managed to catch one of them: no doubt his spirit had been willing to flee away, but his legs were weak. With considerable difficulty, for I was out of breath, I asked him how far we were from Paris, for how long people in France had been going around naked, and why they had run away from me in such terror. The man to whom I was speaking was an olive-hued old fellow who immediately threw himself at my feet. Putting his hands together behind his head, he opened his mouth and closed his eyes. He carried on mumbling for a long time, but I could not make out a thing he was saying and decided that his language was the hoarse chirruping of a mute.

Some time after, I saw a company of soldiers marching up with drums beating, and observed two of them leaving the main body to come and investigate me. When they were close enough for me to make myself heard, I asked them where I was.

“You’re in France,” they replied. “But who the devil has got you into such a state? And how is it that we don’t know you? Have the ships come in? Are you going to inform the Governor? And why have you divided your brandy out into so many bottles?”

To all their questions I retorted that the Devil had not got me into that state; the reason they didn’t know me was that they could not possibly know everybody; I was unaware that the River Seine carried sea vessels; I had no information for M. de Montbazou;* and I was not laden with brandy.

“Aha!” they said, seizing my arm, “we have a real joker here! Let’s take you the Governor – *he’ll* certainly know who you are!”

They led me towards the rest of their company as they spoke, and I learnt from them that I was in France, and yet not in Europe, since I was in New France. I was presented to M. de Montmagny, who is the Viceroy there.* He enquired after my country, my name and my quality, and when I had satisfied him by relating how my journey had been such an agreeable success (he either believed me or pretended to believe me), he

kindly had a room prepared for me in his suite of apartments. I was extremely happy to meet a man capable of lofty thoughts who showed no surprise when I told him that the earth must have turned during my elevation; having started my ascent two leagues away from Paris, I had fallen almost perpendicularly onto Canada.

That evening, as I was going to bed, he came into my room.

“I would not have come to disturb your rest,” he said, “unless I had thought that someone able to travel nine hundred leagues in half a day could do so without getting tired. But can you imagine,” he added, “what an entertaining quarrel about you I have just had with our Jesuit fathers? They are completely convinced that you are a magician, and the best grace you can hope for from them is to pretend you’re merely an impostor. Indeed, this movement you attributed to the earth is a fine paradox; what stops me sharing your opinion is that even though you left Paris yesterday, you may have arrived in this country today without the earth having turned. The sun lifted you up by means of your bottles – may it not have brought you here, since, according to Ptolemy, Tycho Brahe and the modern philosophers, the sun moves along the same route that you attribute to the earth? And, after all, what leads you to think it at all likely that the sun is motionless, when we can see it move? And why do you think that the earth turns around its centre so rapidly, when we can feel it firm beneath us?”

“Sir,” I replied, “here are the reasons that lead us to those conclusions. Firstly, it is common sense to believe that the sun has taken up its place in the centre of the universe, since all the bodies in nature need this radical fire, which dwells in the heart of the kingdom just so that it may promptly satisfy their needs and so that the cause and origin of all generation may be placed equidistant from the bodies on which it acts, just as Nature in her wisdom has placed the genitals in the middle of man, the seeds in the centre of apples and kernels in the heart of fruit, and just as the onion has a hundred skins to shelter and preserve the

precious germ from which ten million other onions may draw their essence. For this apple is in itself a little universe, and its seed, warmer than the other parts, is the sun which sheds heat around itself to preserve its globe; and this germ, in this onion, is the little sun of that little world, which warms and nourishes the vegetative salt of that whole mass.

“If we accept as much, then, since the earth needs the light, the heat and the influence of this great fire, it rotates around it to receive equally in all its parts this preservative virtue. For it would be just as ridiculous to think that this great glowing body turned around some irrelevant point than to imagine that, when we see a roasted skylark, the fireplace must have been rotated around it in order to cook it. Otherwise, if it were the sun’s job to carry out this chore, it would seem to follow that medicine needs its patient, that the strong man should bow to the weak man and the great man serve the little man, and that, rather than a ship steering a course around the coasts of a province, the province would need to be moved around the vessel.

“If you find it hard to understand how such a heavy mass can move, then tell me please: are the stars and the heavens that in your view are solid any lighter? Indeed, we are certain that the earth is round, and it is easy for us to conclude from its shape that it moves. But why suppose that the sky is round, since you cannot know this? Yet unless it has this, of all shapes, it certainly cannot move. I have nothing against your eccentrics, your concentrics or your epicycles,* but when you try to explain them, you fall into confusion – my system does not have this problem. Let us just talk about the natural causes of this movement.

“You are all forced to resort to Intelligences that move and govern your globes. I, however – without disturbing the repose of the Sovereign Being, who has doubtless created nature to be perfect, and whose wisdom has brought it to completeness (so that, having finished it in one way, he did not leave it defective in another), I can find the virtues that make the earth move in the earth itself. So my view is that the sun’s rays, together with

its influences, strike the earth as they circle round it and make it spin in the same way that we spin a globe by striking it with our hand. The vapours that continually evaporate from the earth on the side where the sun gazes down on it, bounced back by the cold of the middle region, rebound to earth, and, since they have to strike it obliquely, they make it pirouette.

“The explanation of the other two movements is even less complicated: consider, pray...”

At these words, M. de Montmagny interrupted me.

“Please do not bother – I happen to have read a few books by Gassendi on this subject.* Let me tell you what one of our fathers who shared your opinion replied to me one day.

“‘Indeed,’ he said, ‘I can well imagine that the earth turns, not for the reasons put forward by Copernicus, but because the fire of hell, as Holy Scripture teaches us, is enclosed in the centre of the earth, so that the damned trying to flee the heat of the flames climb up against the vault, and thus make the earth turn around, just as a dog makes a wheel turn around when he runs round trapped inside it.’”

We spent some time singing the praises of the good father’s zeal, and after pronouncing his panegyric, M. de Montmagny told me that, since Ptolemy’s system was so unlikely, he was amazed it was so generally accepted.

“Sir,” I replied, “most men judge only by their senses and so yield to the evidence of their eyes. Just as a man whose vessel is sailing along the coast thinks that he is motionless and the shore is moving, men turning with the earth around the sky thought it was the sky itself that was turning around them. Add to that the intolerable pride of human beings, which persuades them that nature has been made for them alone; as if it were likely that the sun, a great body, four hundred and thirty-four times bigger than the earth, had been lit only to ripen our medlars and plumpen our cabbages. As for me, I refuse to go along with the insolence of such brutes, and I believe that the planets are worlds around the sun and that the fixed stars are also suns

that have planets around them – worlds that we cannot see from here because they are too small, and their borrowed light cannot reach us.* How can anyone in good faith imagine that such spacious globes are merely great empty fields and that ours, merely because a dozen of us boastful rascals creep around on it, was built to rule over all the rest? What! Just because the sun measures out our days and our years, does that mean that it was made only so that we would not bump our heads against the walls? Not at all: if that visible god sheds light on man, it is by accident, just as the King's torch sheds its light by accident on a housebreaker prowling down the street.”*

“But,” he replied, “if, as you claim, the fixed stars are all suns, we might conclude that the world is infinite, because it is likely that the peoples on those worlds, turning around a fixed star that you consider to be a sun, are able to see above them even more fixed stars that we cannot see from here: and so on, for ever and ever.”

“There is no doubt about it,” I replied. “Just as God has made the soul immortal, he has also made the world infinite, if it is true that eternity is nothing other than a boundless length of time and the infinite a limitless extent of space. Furthermore, God himself would be finite if the world were not infinite, since he could not be where there is nothing, and he could not increase the size of the world without adding to his own extent, and starting to be where he had not been before. We can only deduce that, just as we can see Saturn and Jupiter from here, if we were on one or other of those planets, we would be able to view many worlds that are invisible from here and see that the universe is constructed in this way for ever and ever.”

“Good Heavens!” he replied. “Whatever you say, I find such an infinity impossible to understand.”

“Ah!” I said. “Then tell me – do you understand the nothingness beyond it any better? Not at all. When you think of that nothingness, you can imagine it only to be wind or air, and that is something; but as for the infinite, if you cannot understand it

in general, you can at least conceive of it in its parts, since it is not difficult to imagine earth, fire, water, air, stars or the heavens. Now the infinite is nothing other than a boundless interweaving of all those things. If you ask me how these worlds were made, since Holy Scripture speaks of only one world being created by God, my reply is that Scripture speaks of our world merely because it is the only one that God could be bothered to make with his own hands, but all the others that we see or do not see, hanging in the azure of the universe, are nothing other than the foam from suns purging themselves. For how could those great fires subsist if they were not attached to some matter that nourishes them?

“Now just as fire pushes away from itself the ashes choking it, and just as gold in the crucible refines itself by detaching itself from the marcasite that lessens its carat value, and just as we vomit to rid our heart of the indigestible humours that attack it, in just the same way the sun disgorges every day and purges itself of the remains of the matter that nourishes its fire. But when it has completely consumed the matter that sustains it, you can rest assured that it will spread out on every side seeking more fuel, and will batten on all the worlds that it had once made, especially those that happen to be closest; then that great fire, remixing all the bodies, will force them away pell-mell on every side just as before, and having gradually purified itself will start to serve as a sun to those little worlds it engenders by pushing them out of its sphere. It is probably this that led the Pythagoreans to predict the universal conflagration.

“It is not at all ridiculous to imagine this – New France, where we are, provides us with a most convincing example. This vast continent of America is one half of the earth, and yet, in spite of our predecessors who sailed across the ocean a thousand times, it still lay undiscovered; so it was as yet nothing more than a collection of islands, peninsulas and mountains that had arisen on our globe, when the rust from the sun as it cleansed itself was thrust out to a great distance and condensed

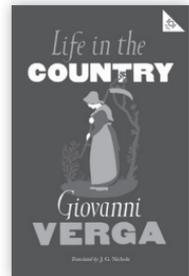
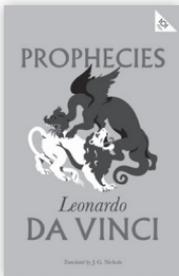
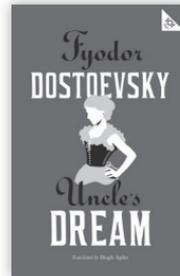
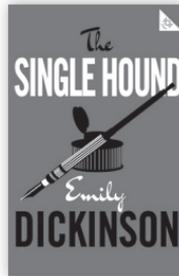
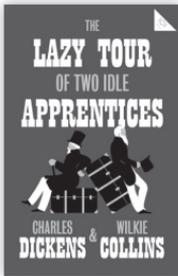
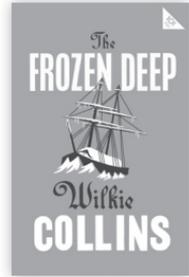
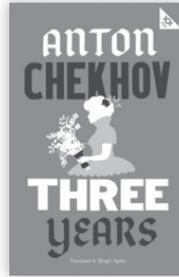
into relatively heavy balls that were then attracted towards the centre of our world, possibly little by little in tiny particles, but perhaps all at once in one great mass. This is not at all unreasonable: in fact, St Augustine would have applauded it if this country had been discovered during his lifetime; after all, that great personage, whose genius was enlightened by the Holy Spirit, assures us that in his time the earth was as flat as an oven, and swam on the water like one half of a sliced orange. But if I ever have the honour to meet you in France, I will give you my excellent telescope, so that you can observe how certain obscurities that appear as dark patches from here are worlds in the process of construction.”

My eyelids were already drooping as I came to the end of my speech, and so M. de Montmagny was obliged to wish me good night. On the next day and the following days we had similar conversations. But since, some time later, the affairs of the province required attention and put a stop to our philosophizing, I returned all the more eagerly to my plan for travelling up to the moon.

As soon as the moon rose, I would go for a walk in the woods, mulling over how to carry out my enterprise successfully. Finally, one day, on Midsummer’s Eve, as they were holding council in the fort to decide whether to help the savages of the country against the Iroquois, I went off alone behind our house and up to the summit of a tall hill, and this is what I did there:

With a machine that I had built, imagining it would be able to lift me as high as I wanted, I leapt into the air from the summit of a rock. But since I had miscalculated, I came tumbling back into the valley head over heels. I was badly shaken and went back to my room, but I was not disheartened. I took some ox marrow and rubbed it all over my body, since it was covered with bruises from head to foot, and after fortifying my heart with a bottle of cordial essence, I went back to recover my machine. But it was not there – some soldiers who had been sent into the forest to

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