The Moon

Walter Benjamin

The light streaming down from the moon has no part in the theater of our daily existence. The terrain it illuminates so equivocally seems to belong to some counterearth or alternate earth. It is an earth different from that to which the moon is subject as satellite, for it is itself transformed into a satellite of the moon. Its broad bosom, whose breath was time, stirs no longer; the creation has finally made its way back home, and can again don the widow's veil which the day had torn off. The pale beam that stole into my room through the blinds gave me to understand this. The course of my sleep was disturbed; the moon cut through it with its coming and going. When it was there in the room and I awoke, I was effectively unhoused, for my room seemed willing to accommodate no one besides the moon.

The first things that attracted my gaze were the two cream-colored basins on the washstand. By day, it never entered my head to dwell on them. In the moonlight, however, the band of blue that ran around the upper part of the basins was a provocation. It simulated a woven band encircling a skirt-hem. And in fact the brim of each basin was curled like a frill. Between the two basins stood pot-bellied jugs, made of the same porcelain with the same floral pattern. When I climbed out of bed, they clinked, and this elinking was communicated over the washstand's marble surface to basins and bowls, glasses and carafes. As happy as I was to receive from my nocturnal surroundings a sign of life—be it only the echo of my own—it was nonetheless an unreliable sign, and was waiting, like a false friend, to dupe me at the very moment I least expected it. This was when I lifted the carafe with my hand to pour some water into a glass. The gurgling of the water, the noise with which I put down first the carafe and then the glass—it all struck my ear as repetition. For every spot on this alternate earth to which I was transported appeared wholly occupied by what once had been. Thus, each sound and each moment came toward me as the double of itself. And when I had endured this for a while, I would draw near my bed gripped by the fear of finding myself already stretched out upon it.

This anxiety did not altogether subside until I once again felt the mattress under my back. Then I fell asleep. The moonlight withdrew slowly from my room. And, often, the room already lay in darkness when I awoke for a second or third time. My hand would necessarily be the first to brave emergence from the trench of sleep, in which it had taken cover before the dream. And just as one sometimes falls prey to a previously unexploded shell even after a battle has ended, so my hand was constantly expecting to be overtaken on its way by a previously delayed dream. When the nightlight, flickering, then brought peace to my hand and me, it appeared that nothing

more remained of the world than a single, stubborn question. It may be that this question nested in the folds of the door-curtain that shielded me from noise. It may be that it was nothing but a residue of many past nights. Or, finally, it may be that it was the other side of the feeling of strangeness which the moon had brought on. The question was: Why is there anything at all in the world, why the world? With amazement, I realized that nothing in it could compel me to think the world. Its nonbeing would have struck me as not a whit more problematic than its being, which seemed to wink at nonbeing. The moon had an easy time with this being.“

My childhood was already nearing its end when, at last, the moon seemed willing to assert its claim to the earth by daylight, a claim which previously it had made only at night.85 High above the horizon-—large, but pale-— it stood, in the sky of a dream, looking down on the streets of Berlin. It was still light outside. Gathered around me were the members of my family, their bearing a little stiff, like that of figures in a daguerreotype. Only my sister was missing. “Where is Dora?”I heard my mother exclaim. Suddenly, the full moon up in the sky began ever more rapidly to expand- Coming nearer and nearer, it tore the planet asunder. The railing of the iron balcony, on which we all had taken our places overlooking the street, broke into a thousand pieces, and the bodies which had been there flew apart in all directions. The funnel created by the moon’s approach sucked everything in. Nothing could hope to pass through it unchanged. “If there is pain now, then there’s no God,” I heard myself conclude, and, at the same time, I collected what I wanted to take across. I put it all in a verse. It was my farewell. “O star and flower, spirit and dress, love, grief, time, and eternity!”B“ But even as I hastened to entrust myself to these words, I was already awake. And only now did the horror which the moon had just inspired seem to grip me for all time, without any hope of reprieve. For this awakening set no limit to the dream, as others did, disclosed no goal, but instead revealed to me that its goal had escaped the dream, and that the sovereignty of the moon–which I had come to know as a child—had dissolved before another succession of the world.

slept beneath the downy covering that enveloped the psyche like a cocoon. It was then that I would benefit from a gaze which seemed to register scarcely a third of what it actually took in. Yet even in those far-off days, when my mother used to scold me for my contrariness and my indolent dawdling, I obscurely sensed the possibility of eventually escaping her control with the help of these streets, in which I seemed to have such difficulty finding my way. At any rate, there could be no doubt that an idea [unfortunately, an illusory idea] of repudiating my mother, those like her, and the social class to which we both belonged was at the bottom of that unparalleled excitement which drove me to accost a whore in the street. It could take hours before I made my move. The horror I felt in doing so was no different from that which would have filled me in the presence of an automaton requiring merely a question to be set in motion. And so I cast my voice into the slot. The blood was singing in my ears at that point, and I could not catch the words that fell from the thickly painted lips. I fled the scene. But how many times that night did I repeat the mad routine? When I finally came to a halt beneath an entranceway, sometimes practically at dawn, I had hopelessly ensnared myself in the asphalt meshes of the street, and it was not the cleanest of hands that disentangled me.

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My childhood was already nearing its end when, at last, the moon seemed willing to assert its claim to the earth by daylight, a claim which previously it had made only at night.[85] High above the horizon—large, but pale—it stood, in the sky of a dream, looking down on the streets of Berlin. It was still light outside. Gathered around me were the members of my family, their bearing a little stiff, like that of figures in a daguerreotype. Only my sister was missing. "Where is Dora?" I heard my mother ex-

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