

The Distance of the Moon

from *Cosmicomics*, Italo Calvino
Translated from Italian by William Weaver

Speculative Fiction: a “super genre”

Genres that are **anti-mimetic**; that depart from realism; changes the laws of what's real or possible

The imaginative realms of science fiction, fantasy, horror, superhero fiction, alternate history, utopian and dystopian fiction, supernatural fiction, futuristic

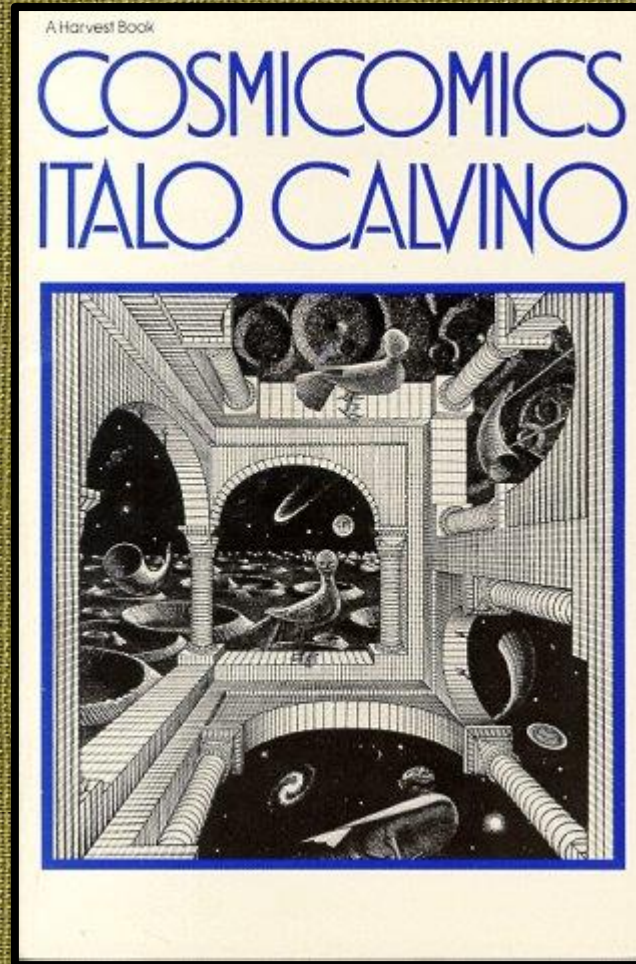
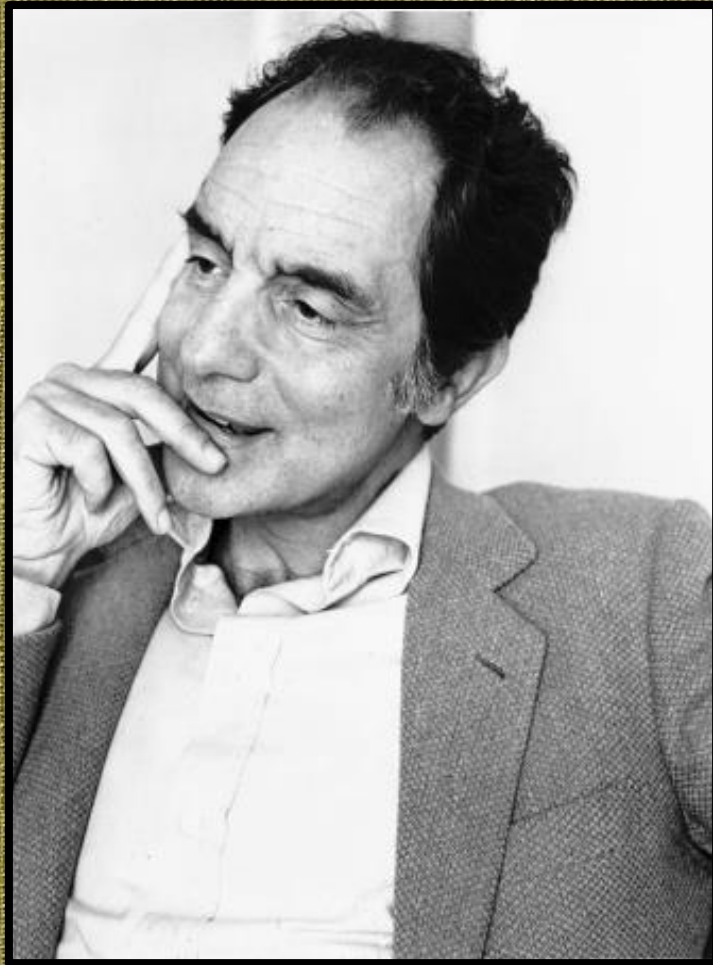
At one time, according to Sir George H. Darwin, the Moon was very close to the Earth. Then the tides gradually pushed her far away: the tides that the Moon herself causes in the Earth's waters, where the Earth slowly loses energy.

(The Distance of the Moon)

Sir George H. Darwin (1845 – 1912)

Fission Theory

19th-century scientific premise that millions of years ago, the Moon was much closer to the Earth and was gradually pushed away by the tides.



first published: Italian,
1965; English, 1968

Each story takes a
scientific "fact" that
was/is believed to be
true & weaves a
speculative story

Every story takes us to
a memory in the
history of the universe

What if ...?

The Distance of the Moon

Setting: A time in an imagined past (?)
When the moon and the earth so close that at high tide one
could jump from a ladder into the Moon's gravitational pull

Story: a love triangle; a tale of unrequited love

Characters: Qfwfq, the narrator
Qfwfq's cousin, the "Deaf One"
the wife of Captain Vhd Vhd, who plays the harp
the Moon (?), Earth (?)
also Xlthlx, Captain Vhd Vhd

At one time, according to Sir George H. Darwin, the Moon was very close to the Earth. Then the tides gradually pushed her far away: the tides that the Moon herself causes in the Earth's waters, where the Earth slowly loses energy.

How well I know! -- *old Qfwfq* cried, -- the rest of you can't remember, but I can. We had her on top of us all the time, that enormous Moon: when she was full -- nights as bright as day, but with a butter-colored light -- it looked as if she were going to crush us; when she was new, she rolled around the sky like a black umbrella blown by the wind; and when she was waxing, she came forward with her horns so low she seemed about to stick into the peak of a promontory and get caught there.

Orbit? Oh, elliptical, of course: for a while it would huddle against us and then it would take flight for a while. The tides, when the Moon swung closer, rose so high nobody could hold them back. There were nights when the Moon was full and very, very low, and the tide was so high that the Moon missed a ducking in the sea by a hair's-breadth; well, let's say a few yards anyway. Climb up on the Moon? Of course we did. All you had to do was row out to it in a boat and, when you were underneath, prop a ladder against her and scramble up.

Tone? Narrator?

Exposition (contd.)

Moon's phases

Eclipses

Orbit? Oh, elliptical, of course: for a while it would huddle against us and then it would take flight for a while

The tides, when the Moon swung closer, rose so high nobody could hold them back

Changefulness

Elusive; Near-Far

Epigraph: a scientific text which advances a hypothesis/theory on the origins of (an aspect of) the universe, here, the relation of the earth & the moon

Exposition

Rising Action

"Movement 1": Particulars of the Earth, the Moon, the Journeying

"Movement 2": Conflict of Desires; interplay between masculinities & femininities

Climax: The last trip to the Moon

Falling Action

What are some of the cultural connotations that we have of the Moon?

Rising Action: (Movement 1)

Particulars of the Earth, the Moon, the Journeying

The spot where the Moon was lowest, as she went by, was off the Zinc Cliffs. We used to go out ... me, Captain Vhd Vhd, his wife, my deaf cousin, and sometimes little Xlthlx...

... On those nights the water was very calm, so silvery it looked like mercury, and the fish in it, violet-colored, unable to resist the Moon's attraction, rose to the surface, all of them, and so did the octopuses and the saffron medusas. There was always a flight of tiny creatures — little crabs, squid, and even some weeds, light and filmy, and coral plants — that broke from the sea and ended up on the Moon, hanging down from that lime-white ceiling, or else they stayed in midair, a phosphorescent swarm we had to drive off, waving banana leaves at them.

“Conflict”: Earth creatures and the World (Earth-Moon)

Rising Action: (Movement 1) Travelling to the Moon

The man at the top of the ladder, as the boat approached the Moon, would become scared and start shouting: "Stop! Stop! I'm going to bang my head!"

[...]

In reality, from the top of the ladder, standing erect on the last rung, **you could just touch the Moon if you held your arms up.**

[...]

I would cling first with one hand, then with both, and immediately I would feel ladder and boat drifting away from below me, **and the motion of the Moon would tear me from the Earth's attraction**

Rising Action: (Movement 1) Travelling to the Moon

I would cling first with one hand, then with both, and immediately I would feel ladder and boat drifting away from below me, and the motion of the Moon would tear me from the Earth's attraction. Yes, the Moon was so strong that she pulled you up; you realized this the moment you passed from one to the other: you had to swing up abruptly, with a kind of somersault, grabbing the scales, throwing your legs over your head, until your feet were on the Moon's surface.

Becoming "Subject",
The Motif of Travel

Reaching out, Clinging back

Risking

Acting/Acted upon

Rising Action: (Movement 1) Travelling to the Moon

Seen from the Earth, you looked as if you were hanging there with your head down, but for you, it was the normal position, and the only odd thing was that when you raised your eyes you saw the sea above you, glistening, with the boat and the others upside down, hanging like a bunch of grapes from the vine.

Locations of the Self: Seeing yourself and the world/in the world

Rising Action: (Movement 1) Travelling to the Moon

My cousin, the Deaf One

His **clumsy hands**, as soon as they touched the lunar surface (he was always the first to jump up from the ladder), **suddenly became deft and sensitive**. They found immediately the spot where he could hoist himself up; in fact just the pressure **of his palms seemed enough to make him stick to the satellite's crust**. Once **I even thought I saw the Moon come toward him, as he held out his hands**.

Self-Other (& Relation to the Moon)

Rising Action: (Movement 1) Travelling to the Moon

My cousin, the Deaf One (contd.)

He was just as dextrous in coming back down to Earth, an operation still more difficult. For us, it consisted in **jumping, as high as we could**, our arms upraised (seen from the Moon, that is, because seen from the Earth it looked more like a dive, **or like swimming downwards, arms at our sides**), like jumping up from the Earth in other words, only now we were without the ladder, because there was nothing to prop it against on the Moon. But instead of jumping with his arms out, my cousin bent toward the Moon's surface, his head down **as if for a somersault, then made a leap, pushing with his hands. From the boat we watched him, erect in the air as if he were supporting the Moon's enormous ball and were tossing it, striking it with his palms;**

Why is the **cousin** "the Deaf One"

Rising Action: (Movement 1) Travelling to the Moon

my deaf cousin displayed a special gift...

As for me, I occasionally misfired...

I still haven't told you everything, about the things my cousin was good at.

The emergence of other Conflicts: The Deaf Cousin & Qfwqf

The Self as "Lack"

Rising Action: (Movement 1) Travelling to the Moon

Travel as Purposive

Now, you will ask me what in the world we went up on the Moon for; I'll explain it to you. We went to collect the milk, with a big spoon and a bucket. Moon-milk was very thick, **like a kind of cream cheese**. It formed in the crevices between one scale and the next

Not in the pure state, obviously; there was a lot of refuse.

[...]

Rising Action: (Movement 2) Conflict of Desires

We fell into a special mood on those nights off the Zinc Cliffs: gay, but with a touch of suspense, as if inside our skulls, instead of the brain, we felt a fish, floating, attracted by the Moon.

[...]

The Captain's wife played the harp; she had very long arms, silvery as eels on those nights, and **armpits as dark and mysterious as sea urchins**; and the sound of the harp **was sweet and piercing, so sweet and piercing it was almost unbearable**, and we were forced to let out long cries, not so much to accompany the music **as to protect our hearing from it**.

So?

What is this tale of absurdities on/about? What is gained by transforming a scientific hypo/thesis into fantastical fiction?

- To embark on a **thought adventure** to plumb the unknown/unknowable
- To **experience imaginatively & analytically**

Beginning/Emergence of the

- Universe as we know it
- Subject-consciousness as we live it

How?

By exploring, augmenting, extending the implications of laws of attraction, gravity

- Rising Action

- “Movement 1”: Particulars of the Earth, the Moon, the Journeying

- “Movement 2”: Conflict of Desires; interplay between masculinities & femininities

An enchanted time

We fell into a **special mood on those nights** off the Zinc Cliffs: gay, but with a touch of suspense, as if inside our skulls, instead of the brain, we felt a fish, floating, attracted by the Moon. And so we navigated, playing and singing. **The Captain's wife played the harp; she had very long arms, silvery as eels on those nights, and armpits as dark and mysterious as sea urchins; and the sound of the harp was sweet and piercing, so sweet and piercing it was almost unbearable**, and we were forced to let out long cries, not so much to accompany the music as **to protect our hearing from it**

Transparent medusas rose to the sea's surface, throbbed there...

An enchanted time:

- an "unfallen" state, a primordial harmony just before/as it is being fractured
- a time when consciousness is (almost) not alienated; consciousness (almost) unawakened
- Entities/subjects (almost not) divided and emerged as separate

"T Zero"(t_0): Hunter-arrow-springing lion; radical uncertainty

This split second designated to is a universe unto itself ; the limbo between the no-longer and the not-yet

Subject: Self-Other

The (deft) Deaf Cousin & the Moon

- His **clumsy hands**, as soon as they touched the lunar surface... **suddenly became deft and sensitive**. They found immediately the spot where he could hoist himself up... Once **I even thought I saw the Moon come toward him, as he held out his hands**.
- That job of extracting lunar milk from the Moon's scales ... he had only to thrust his bare hand under the scales, or even one finger as if he were playing tricks on the Moon, surprising her, or perhaps tickling her.

The clumsy Qwqf & Mrs Vhd Vhd

- in all that groping, sometimes I ended up by seizing one of Mrs. Vhd Vhd's breasts breasts "which were round and firm, and the contact was good and secure and had an attraction as strong as the Moon's or even stronger"
- This is how the story of my love for the Captain's wife began, and my suffering.

The Climax

Surely there was something strange about that night. The sea's surface, instead of being taut as it was during the full Moon, or even arched a bit toward the sky, now seemed limp, sagging, as if the lunar magnet no longer exercised its full power. And the light, too, wasn't the same as the light of other full Moons; the night's shadows seemed somehow to have thickened. Our friends up there must have realized what was happening; in fact, they looked up at us with frightened eyes. And from their mouths and ours, at the same moment, came a cry: "The Moon's going away!"

The Falling action

I should have been happy

A long month began...

The distance spread a uniform color over everything: the alien perspectives made every image alien; herds of elephants and swarms of locusts ran over the plains, so evenly vast and dense and thickly grown that there was no difference among them.

...she who makes the Moon the Moon and, whenever she is full, sets the dogs to howling all night long, and me with them.

•
"I would have scientific data serve for propelling me out of the [fixed] habits of the imagination, and also for living the quotidian at the farthest limits of our experience"

"Literature arrives at this...through combinatory games which at a certain point become charged with preconscious content and give it voice; and it is by this liberatory way, opened by literature, that humans acquire the critical spirit and pass it on to culture and collective thought

"Literature knows the reality of levels and perhaps offers a better understanding of that reality than does any other cognitive approach"

Italo Calvino

Pathos of loss and distance

“My return was sweet, my home refound, but my thoughts were filled only with grief at having lost her, and my eyes gazed at the Moon, for ever beyond my reach, as I sought her.... She was the colour of the Moon.... she who makes the Moon the Moon ”

- The perfect world Qfwfq dreamed of --an anterior world
- The play of Associations
- Qfwfq: The one who remembers, the one who quests
- What of:
 - **The Deaf Cousin**
 - **Mrs. Vhd Vhd**