

The Parliament of Poets



Frederick Glaysher

The Parliament of Poets

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Edited

Robert Hayden, *Collected Prose; Collected Poems*

The Parliament of Poets

An Epic Poem

Frederick Glaysher

Earthrise Press



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In memory of Robert Hayden

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Preface

The Detroit News headline for Monday, July 21, 1969, reads, “Footprints on the Moon!” I can still vividly recall watching it happen on black and white TV, as a teenager, along with my family and the many millions around the world. It fired my young fifteen-year-old imagination like nothing else I had ever known. I had always been thrilled by the entire space program, my father having worked on making the Apollo 11 heat shield for the reentry capsule. And then the incredible event itself, in prime time TV, “one giant leap for mankind.” I was there with the astronauts, walking on the moon.

For that day, my family saved the complete front-page section of *The Detroit News*. Eventually, it became my copy of the great event that dad and all the nation had worked for, the greatest technological achievement of human history. As the years went by, I found myself still thinking about our human visit to the moon, going back and re-reading that section of *The Detroit News*, as it has increasingly yellowed and brittle and frayed. The writer of the front page article made one revealing comment which he seemed to think everyone would understand and agree with: “it was not necessary to send poets to the moon.” What? The falsehood and injustice of that comment increasingly struck me, as my study of poetry and culture deepened with the years. Who did these Johnny-Come-Latelies think they were? The hubris and arrogance of Scientism seethed in that one sentence, the “two cultures” implicit in it. Poets have been on the moon for millennia.

It was the *in medias res*, “in the midst of things,” the great structural device from the ancient epic poets, that took me decades to figure out, repeatedly pouring over Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton, and every other epic poet and form, struggling again and again for the right structure. It proved to be the hardest part of the epic form, a seemingly

insurmountable challenge over which I stumbled, trying one idea after another, rejecting sketch after sketch, setting my notes aside knowing *that* way and *that* idea wasn't it, wouldn't work.

And then it came to me, while I was attending to some mundane task of life, and I rushed to my study to write it down, lest I lose it after all those years. I knew I had it with the certainty of *that's it! get it down on paper, before the phone rings or whatever, before it's gone forever*—surprise, relief, elation.

From Aristotle, I knew that the plot of *The Parliament of Poets* was the backbone of the book itself, the very crux, first and foremost, for it to work, to draw the reader into it, and to play on the great tradition, evoke it, honor it, raise everything to a higher level of seriousness and import.

And so, after over thirty years of study and thought, endless notes, more than four and a half years of writing, it is now time for readers to decide and judge. The fate of the book in their hands. Have I found and made and sung an epic vision worthy of them? Of humanity? Of you, O Gentle Reader?

Introduction

I derive the title *The Parliament of Poets* from both Chaucer and Attar, which suggests my focus is both Western and non-Western human experience. I seek to sift, ponder, and sum up not only American historical experience but the human experience of the major regions of the globe under the impact of modernism.

In a world of Quantum science, Apollo, the Greek god of poetry, calls all the poets of the nations, ancient and modern, East and West, to assemble on the moon to consult on the meaning of modernity. The Parliament of Poets sends the Persona on a Journey to the seven continents to learn from all of the spiritual and wisdom traditions of humankind. On Earth and on the moon, the poets teach him a new global, universal vision of life.

One of the major themes is the power of women and the female spirit across cultures. Another is the nature of science and religion, including Quantum Physics, as well as the “two cultures,” science and the humanities.

All the great shades appear at the Apollo 11 landing site in the Sea of Tranquility: Homer and Virgil from Greek and Roman civilization; Dante, Spenser, and Milton hail from the Judeo-Christian West; Rumi, Attar, and Hafez step forward from Islam; Du Fu and Li Po, Basho and Zeami, step forth from China and Japan; the poets of the Bhagavad Gita and the *Ramayana* meet on that plain; griots from Africa; shamans from Indonesia and Australia; Murasaki Shikibu, Emily Dickinson, and Jane Austen, poets and seers of all Ages, bards, rhapsodes, troubadours, and minstrels, major and minor, hail across the halls of time and space.

As the Guides show the Persona crucial sites around the globe, such as Chartres Cathedral and the temples of Asia, Angkor Wat and elsewhere, the nature of social order and

civilization in the regions of the past is explored. Modern twentieth century historical experience in all its glory and all its brutal suffering is fully confronted. The modern movement toward a global civilization is recognized and celebrated for the unprecedented future it opens to human beings. That transcendent Rose symbol of our age, the Earth itself, viewed from the heavens, one world with no visible boundaries, metaphor of the oneness of the human race, reflects its blue-green light into the blackness of the starry universe.

Undergirding my writing is the gradual, continuing development of international federal institutions. The defeat of communism and the numerous crises since then demonstrate that the slowly, painfully evolving authority of a cooperative United Nations, or a seriously developed successor institution, remains the only hope for a comparatively peaceful world.

During one period of my life I read well over two hundred books on the League of Nations and the United Nations. For the most part they were dry technical manuals or histories of primary use to diplomats and scholars. Conversely, through the actions of concrete characters, epic poems interpret history. Global social and political conditions have more than sufficiently changed to warrant a fundamental reevaluation of what has become prevailing literary and cultural thinking.

The Verse

As Milton emphasized, the masters of ancient epic poetry, Homer and Virgil, did not rhyme their poems. While their measures were different from ours, they agreed by their practice that rhyme was not essential to epic poetry. Rhyme would be a nuisance adding nothing of significance, even detracting from the music of epic song, found in its rhythmical language, blending rich vowels and consonants in harmonious agreement with flowing thought and action, like Niagra Falls in its descent, or Milton's verse paragraphs.

While my line tends to the iambic pentameter, depending on thought and need, allowing for variety, lest a slavish adherence become tedious, I relish the feminine ending, an extra half foot of measure to the ten syllables of blank verse, after the iamb, the most beautiful form in the English language.

A Prefatory Ode

To the Right Honourable Patron,
or Corporate Sponsor,
Who Never Materialized

My Lordship,

I had always hoped that you'd show up,
but you never did, much to my woe.
Ted Turner must have deleted my emails,
or some underling swiftly hit the button.
And now, it's way too late. I feel like
Samuel Johnson with his *Dictionary of
the English Language*. "Thank you, Sire,
yet I've come this far alone, and now I'm not
about to stoop to panhandling for coin."
Like everyone today, I've got the Internet,
and don't need you, and your condescension.
My shoes are old and worn, but my own.
I stand in them proudly under God's blue sky.
Like Johnson, I throw yours out the window.
Meeting also with an indifferent
literary period, I resolved
to create a new and better one, thinking
long and hard on how it was done in the past,
Cervantes, foremost, pointing the way,
with his lance, seated on Rocinante.
It would be like Lord Chesterfield who only
showed up with the dough when it was no longer
needed, wanting to take all the credit.
Would that I had only labored on
my epic a mere seven years, like Johnson,
instead of the thirty it required—since
the people deserve nothing but the best,

no matter what the personal cost to me,
and you, Sir, have done nothing to help—
not even informing me of the location
of your house that I might have appeared before
its door, with hat (had I one) in hand,
the other held out! No, you have delayed
much too long, and, again, I say,
I spurn you, as you spurned me, when most in need.
You have done me one favor, though, for
no longer do I harbor thoughts that the
Example of noble Patronage might return,
having done it all on my own, through
solitary devotion and long labor
for the glory of God and epic song,
that she might not perish forever from
the Earth, nay, revive, rally, and lead the eyes
of men, in the dark night, to the rising beauty
of our shining orb, seen, for the first time,
in its fragile delicacy, from the moon.

Your Lordship's,
or Most Honourable Chairman,
Executive of the Board,
doubtless a mega-billionaire,
I say,
Your Most Humble, Impoverished,
Servant of the Muse,

The Poet of the Moon

Gazing from the moon, we see one Earth, without borders,
Mother Earth, her embrace encircling one people,
humankind.

The Parliament of Poets

BOOK I

THE ARGUMENT

The first book proposes, in brief, the whole subject. In the midst of things, the Persona stands on the moon with the assembled poets of all nations, ancient and modern, called by the Greek god Apollo and the Nine Muses to consult on the meaning of modernity and modern Nihilism, the belief in Nothing, the dark vision of the time. Cervantes, seated on Rocinante, welcomes the Poet to the moon. A throng of poets and writers, East and West, accompany Cervantes, Du Fu and Li Po, Vyasa and Tagore, Basho and Saigyō, Rumi and Attar, Shakespeare and Samuel Johnson, Keats and Wordsworth, Jane Austen, African griots and shamans, Balla Fasseke, Merlin, Job, and many others. All consult on the threatened state of humanity, how to find and affirm a worthy vision of life, meaning, and purpose. They consult and agree they shall strive together to help the Persona by guiding him on his Journey.

O Muse, O Maid of Heaven, O Circling Moon,
O lunar glory of the midnight sky,
I call on thee to bless thy servant's tongue,
descend upon thy pillar of light,
moonbeam blessings, that from my mouth
may pour out at least a fraction of the love
I hold for thee, sweet blessings, for service
to God's creation, and His Creative Word,
the Bible's thundering verses, Brahma
of the Upanishads, Allah, the Compassionate,
Buddha's meditative mystery,
Confucius and the Dao. O Great Spirit
of the many peoples and the tribes,
if I have ever sacrificed for thee, long years,
drinking water from a wooden bowl,
hear my appeal and inspire me to sing

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the tale supernal, upon the moon,
The Parliament of Poets, assemblage
of thy devoted ones, God intoxicated,
survey the cosmos and the centuries.
O guide us, Divine Light, in consultation,
that I might draw back the curtain of time,
explore the many mansions of thy kingdom,
East and West, meet in thy shining grace,
acknowledge all factions and antinomies,
ephemera of passing light, into night,
the lunar globe raise our gaze from Earth,
grant us perspective to view anew our plight,
our fate upon this blue-green globe,
this spinning ball of pain and joy, delight,
so that we may find the path to peace,
O Great Being of the eternal universe,
near and far, immanent and transcendent,
Nature's finest glory and Beyond,
wrap us in the endless cosmos of your Love.

In the mid part of the moon, I stood,
in the midst of the Sea of Tranquility,
looking around me from rim to curving rim,
the brilliant moonscape against the blackest
black of space, stark blackness, polarities
of light and night, where a human footstep
marked a giant leap forward, in lunar dust,
For All Mankind, footsteps still all about,
undisturbed, untouched by decades of time,
destined to remain for all time, eternity,
or as near to it as we can imagine,
unlike what Robinson Crusoe found,
an ephemeral footprint on a beach,
here with instruments and a flag unfurled
in the solar wind, half a Lunar Module,

the descent platform left far behind,
the glory of the moon and all creation.

And then I saw him sitting upon his nag,
Rocinante, Don Quixote, a lance resting
across his saddle, as he leaned forward,
from next to a crater, gazing my way.
At first, shock overwhelmed me, finding myself
where I was, disoriented, disbelieving,
how could it be? I stood there without
an encumbering spacesuit, lightly clad,
in my old corduroy jacket, worn beyond
its prime, breathing in the atmosphere of the moon.
The Man of La Mancha plodded slowly on his nag,
even as I began to realize we were
not alone. A crowd of people were coming
toward me too. How could they have gotten
here as well, I wondered, my own presence
and Cervantes, still a mystery, unexplained,
beyond belief, amazement, deeply stirring,
shaking my very being, as I recalled
my flight to the moon. A creaking leather
saddle woke me further to his nearness,
as he leaned closer to me, looking annoyed,
eyeing me from his mount, "So you've finally
made it up here. What's taken you so long?
Don't give me any of your excuses.
We've all been waiting for you. Here they come.
Snap out of it and collect your wits."

At the head of a throng of people
massing across the Sea of Tranquility,
I began to discern other old friends,
long known but never met face to face,
only in ink, the printer's art, or used to be.
In the front of the crowd, drawing near, I saw
Du Fu wrapped in Confucian reserve and robe,

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exiled, forced to wander and beg, seeking food,
crumbs at the door of the great,
hoping for an appointment from the emperor,
dreaming of a great man who would bring down
the River of Heaven to wash away
the blood of weapons, never to be used again.
Flowing behind him his robes stirred up
the moon dust, like a mist about his feet,
standing still a distance away, saying,
with elevated dignity, "You who
have been to Chang-an, welcome to the moon."
Next to him stood Li Po, friend and fellow poet.
Bai Juyi followed both, a voice for the people,
daring to speak of injustice to the emperor,
his fame reaching all the way to distant lands,
far to the East, Korea and Japan,
a Lay Buddhist of the Fragrant Mountain.
The scent of the same fragrance came from
the Japanese poets next to him, Basho,
like a monk but dust of the world upon him;
Saigyō, a monk who left his military clan;
Zeami, playwright of the court, whose plays
lay bare his time, cutting through to
another realm, like a samurai sword;
Milarepa, the Tibetan poet,
clad in cotton, wrapped in selfless practice,
detached but from Buddha's teaching of dharma.
Another fragrance, too, rose petals and poppies,
Attar and Rumi, the journey of
the hoopoe to the Simorgh, the Beloved,
delirious, whirling in a vortex of longing,
and Naguib Mahfouz, wearing a cravat.
They and many other poets flowed into
the landing site, Samuel Johnson and Thomas Gray,
Henry Vaughan and George Herbert, Dryden,

Shakespeare and Marlowe, Ben beside them,
 jostling and pushing forward, Shelley
 and John Keats, William Wordsworth, Longfellow,
 Robert Burns looking ready still to raise a pint
 for “auld lang syne,” his mountain daisy and rose,
 while Welsh bards stood on a rock with Taliesin,
 spreading out around space junk left behind,
 between and among the old instruments,
 the hardware of Tranquility Base.
 I could see now poets of the Book,
 Job of tested patience, long suffering;
 Dante, the man who had been to Hell,
 Milton, who justified the ways of God,
 song of the conquering evolution
 of the soul, the battle of good and evil,
 choosing through free will, God’s holy gift;
 Rumi’s Indian brother, reincarnated,
 Kabir, weaver of a Muslim-Hindu cloth,
 warp and woof of the One, free of duality;
 Vyasa, Kalidasa, and Tagore,
 all had come from their ashrams to the moon;
 and standing nearby, Sin-liqe-unninni,
 “O Moon God, accept my prayer,” who entered
 into the spirit of *He Who Saw the Deep*,
 out of the libraries of Babylon, Sumer,
 raised the song of Gilgamesh and Enkidu,
 their journey through Mesopotamia.
 From every land and clime, all around, they stood,
 poets of every continent, jostling
 for a sight of the poet from Earth,
 ahead of his time, new arrival, not yet
 translated to the Spirit of the universe.
 African poets and shamans, griots
 of ancient songs, singers of rituals,
 nobly held their instruments, flutes

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and calabashes, drums, ready to play
as though Balla Fasseke were about
to step forward to sing the tale of
Sogolon's son, Sundiata, unifier of
Mali and much of the Africa of his day;
Aimé Césaire saluting Africa,
Léopold Sédar Senghor, the widening world.
In "Moonglow" Christopher Okigbo,
naked before Mother Idoto.

And from the Americas, too, were tellers
of tales, Hopi and Navaho, Lakota,
Ojibwa and Iroquois, Mohican,
American tribes beyond telling, Incan
and Aztec, Aborigines of Australia,
drums and didgeridoos, island peoples.
All stood quietly on the moon, watching,
pressing to see this most curious of sights,
a supposed "white" man from the suburbs,
not long from morning prayers, plunked down on the moon.

Together, Merlin and Queen Mab stood
before the crowd, he holding out his staff,
she clothed in Nature's bountiful plenty,
catching the eye of many a poet and seer.
Speaking the thought of many present,
addressing Cervantes, Merlin asked,
"What is this embodied spirit doing
here amongst us, disturbing the serenity
of our lunar home? How can this be?
Is this one of your quixotic jokes?
Did you bring him here, and what's the point?"
Cervantes, leaned slightly back in the saddle,
Rocinante snortling, giving her head
a little shake, her mangy mane taking
awhile to resettle in low gravity.
All eyes moved from Merlin to Cervantes,

who replied, once peace and quiet had resumed,
though how and why the heavenly realm,
that poets have occupied from time
immemorial, could be compromised,
still seemed to hang upon the lips of many,
glared from their eyes, full of curiosity.
Cervantes, cocking back his head with authority,
swept his eyes over the assembly
of poets, the pressing multitude, began,
“We have all experienced the loss of the
Living Presence, in modern times, even
those who would go backward show loss.
Our people all lose their way, bewildered,
science usurping the glory of the moon,
our domain, where most of us dwell even now.
Just look around at all the trash
the astronauts and scientists left behind,
scattered about the beauty of this plain.
All man’s science and technology
cannot understand the moon, mighty symbol
of eons, visible sign uplifting men’s eyes
to the heavens. You all know I speak the truth.
Many of our people, and even some of us,
cling to nostalgia, but it is not the same
as that deep experience of the Divine.”
Lifting his lance into the air, waving
it about, Rocinante leaping apace,
raising her forelegs, Cervantes exclaimed,
“Obeying Lord Apollo, I challenge you!
I call here a Parliament of Poets!
In high consultation, we shall find the way
back home, to the depths of man’s soul,
what we have all known and sung about for our
peoples, that they might find wisdom through delight.
To put it simply, not a one of us

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can bear what's put down on paper these days,
or rather computer screens and digital bytes,
so I invited all would-be poets,
tossed the gauntlet down before them,
find a way to reach the imagination
of humanity, raise a new song.
He alone chose it," waving his lance at me.
"The age produces poetasters by droves,
little songsters, lost in self, despicably
trite, cynical and despairing ditties.
This man has sacrificed for the Muse,
begged and sought her beauty, and she is here
to tell you so, if you think otherwise."
He ended, glancing toward Calliope,
all eyes following, her beauty, ever
youthful, in her wisdom, inspiring
vision in her small band of devoted ones.
Discreetly she acknowledged Cervantes' words,
bowing her head gently, in her diaphanous
gown, all the Muses behind her on the moon.
And then Cervantes said, "That is why
I called you all here and sent a guide
to lead this embodied poet to the moon.
Exceptional times require exceptional means.
We must all pitch in and help this poet
or our cause may be lost forever.
And every one of you knows you fear it,
watching what they're doing down there,
the way the world goes, from bad to worse.
Put aside the old rules about embodied spirits
not allowed amongst us. The astronauts
didn't worry about that, did they?
It's too late now. The urgency of the hour
must bring us together, For All Mankind.
We have all arrived. Let us begin."

Above the lunar landscape, in answer
 to the Man of La Mancha, astride
 Rocinante, a deafening roar went up,
 cheering assent, in the universal
 language of the world, a crescendo
 nearly blasting him out of the saddle,
 terrifying his nag, causing her to tremble.
 Cervantes looked on, knowing something had been
 achieved, some new possibility was
 lingering in the rarified lunar air.

Then stirred Celtic Merlin, stepping towards
 Cervantes, his staff in his right hand,
 saying, "We've accepted Cervantes' challenge,
 and his terms, and now I counsel we must
 select someone to preside over our
 deliberations. The high import of
 our purpose requires our united choice.
 Despite the caviling of his friends,
 Job spoke the truth even to the face of God.
 We can rely on him to tell us if
 we stray. I urge all to consider him,"
 stepping lightly aside as he ended.
 Cervantes replied, "Job's vision is beyond
 reproach, and no one debates he clung to
 his integrity, held his ground against
 the onslaught of every conventional mind,
 even as we must do now on the moon,
 this extraterrestrial globe, jewel in the sky.
 We poets have owned it for millennia,
 and must not cede it to wayward scientists
 and plunderers of the Earth, who would
 extend their selfish exploitations
 throughout the universe, debasing everything
 they touch, like Minos for a golden coin,
 corporate greed gone intergalactic.

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Meaning is the deeper fact, the deepest fact and basis of the harmony of life, amongst ourselves and all the starry cosmos.”

Having heard enough of praise, Job stepped forward, saying, “I thank Merlin and Cervantes, for thinking of me, and their good words.

I must decline the offer, however meant.

I believe we must look to someone of wider sensibility, more universal.

My time was long ago, now the remote past, tied to an early stage of civilization.

We now must aim at the entire globe.”

Murmuring surprise and agreement rose on all sides, recognizing Job’s wisdom, as poets discussed with those nearby who might lead the deliberations forward,

but every proposal met with difficulties.

No one seemed universal enough.

Every poet had his limitations, for history limits everyone’s experience.

And then Rumi of the Sufi path, Pir

to many on the mystic way, spoke out,

“He’s here to learn. Put him in charge of consultation. He can ask what he needs to know.

Let each instruct him as best they can,

to and fro, we the ancients, he the poet

groping for the door, the path of his own soul, as it must always be, for each and every one.”

All around, the poets seemed pleased, nodding assent, talking among themselves, neighbor

to neighbor, a plan, perhaps, was plotted down.

When I saw that this idea was gaining ground,

I felt more than a little apprehensive.

How could I lead the poets of the past?

How could I stand before them, the truly great,

whom I revered, my masters and sustainers,
 great souls who had achieved where I could only dream?
 Who am I but one long tested, found wanting,
 a would-be poet, if not poetaster,
 wishing Robert Frost's arduous ordeal
 had been mine, a mere twenty years of the dark pit,
 now thrust upon the moon to my surprise.
 And yet I still yearned to learn from them,
 the more I considered it, liked the thought,
 for what had I been doing all those years
 but talking with the dead, while I poured over
 their books and poems, thinking always about
 their craft, noting their charms and style,
 choice of words and turns of phrase, relishing
 the beauty of their thought and high import,
 their souls splayed upon the printed page.
 A bit like Cervantes, or I should say,
 Cid Hamet Benengeli, if not Pierre Menard,
 in my study, falling asleep, over my books,
 waking up Don Quixote! Shades of Borges!
 Extend the conversation, so it seemed,
 right and fit, the method of the ancients.

Standing next to me, elbowing me in the ribs,
 Melville said, with a mocking seaman's drawl,
 and a sparkling eye, "What 'da ya say, matey?"
 waking me for the moment from reverie.
 I sighed, replying, "All right. I'll try to ask
 questions that do not waste your time and are
 worthy of all of you, my masters,
 whom I acknowledge, one and all. Help this
 would-be servant of the Muse, lost of late,
 aye, needing your tutelage, delighting wisdom,
 lunar apprenticeship rekindling my hope
 to intone a high and elevating song
 before the Nine Sisters of our art."

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“Now we’ve got a plan! We know how to proceed,”
bellowed Chaucer, conducting, as it were,
some ministrations for the king, royal
negotiation with the French, a parley
among pilgrims on their way to Canterbury.
Far back from where I stood, a poet shouted,
loud and direct above the lunar din,
“Now what’s your first question? Let’s hear it!”
Another broke in, with an emendation,
“Wait! Half of us will never hear him from
over here, with Rocinante shuffling about.
We can barely see him over all the heads.
Get him on top of that piece of space junk.
Good for something after all. Can’t they go
anywhere in the solar system without littering?”
he muttered, trailing off. And then I realized
he was Villon, back there with a bunch of
rough-looking French poets, passing around
a bottle of wine, Raminagrobis,
Moliere, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud, a crowd
of cut throats, Cyrano de Bergerac
with his bottles of hot air and mouth to match.
I wasn’t about to argue with them,
especially once Rabelais starting rolling
on his back, his bare arse sticking upward
while he showed his countrymen how he couldn’t
even light his own farts, on fire, on the moon,
for lack of oxygen, howling with each blast!
Cursing him with vigorous oaths and protests,
angry poets gave the fumes a wide berth till
the solar wind dispersed, carried them away.
Turning from the rollicking French, I heard
an irascible Samuel Johnson say,
“Solar system? Try universe! More than
one piece of radioactive space junk

is out there now, but what else can be expected of scientists who lack a vision worthy of humanity?”

William Blake, with a scathing look, shot back, “Well, he’s here to give it to ‘em, if they’ll listen. Fat chance that, getting over their seventeenth century retreat into the Royal Society, cleaving the soul in half. None of them would ever listen to me, and look where they’ve got us now! Near collapse!”

“Pity the poor scientists. They had to use rockets and machines to get up here.”

“Well, it took imagination, too, though some might not want to admit it, making us perhaps one in the end after all.”

“Oh, they’ll deny it, some at least. Just for spite. We don’t need to worry about them, nay-sayers.”

Next to Judeth Shakespeare, whose books have been lost, Jane Austen upbraided her countrymen,

“Do you men always have to fight and quarrel!

Have we come all this way for more of that?”

She then looked toward Cervantes, gallant knight, a damsel in distress, seeking help, waking him up to perform his duties, by default.

“All right! All right! Gentlemen, and gentlewomen,”

Cervantes pleaded from Rocinante’s back, motioning me towards the Lunar Module, or what was left of it, the descent platform, still shining gold and orange in the brilliant light.

As I climbed the rungs up the LM,

I thought, correcting the illiterate grammar,

“One small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.” Ignorant astronauts, mere technicians, mangled the opportunity for deathless words of immortal stature.

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There it was, between the rungs, as I climbed,
the plaque attesting before the cosmos
that America's journey to the moon,
President Kennedy's resonant voice,
ringing in my ears, *was* For All Mankind.
Standing on the platform, I turned, surveyed
the lunar landing site, filled with thousands
of poets from every land and clime,
every religion and path of wisdom,
every race and tribe, seers and shamans,
singers of the ages, all looked back at me,
who must have seemed a curious spectacle,
a poet without a poem, seeking instruction,
wanting to ask the masters for advice,
petitioning before them on the moon,
of all places who would ever have thought.
Took a hare-brained poet to come up with that!
I shuddered, despite myself. Many saw it,
so I thought, as I began to choke, deeply
stirred, realizing more so where I found myself.
Then Cervantes said, urging me along,
from my moon-dreaming, "All right! You're here!
What do you want to know? Let's hear it!
I proclaim the Parliament of Poets
now in session. Speak up! We're listening."
"I, I, I," I stammered, swallowing hard,
searching for something that might merit their
attention, weighing my mind, searching inside.
"Go on!" a heckling poet jabbed into
the non-existent air. "Though we have eternity,
you don't!" sending off a roar of laughter,
putting me more at ease, despite the
thousands of eyes intent upon me.
Then came back to my mind what I've often
struggled with, trying to peer into the future,

that perennially human impulse,
 thinking always of Virgil's *Aeneid*
 and his prescience. Who better to ask than he
 for the resolution of so many woes
 of our age? "Okay, I'm launching out forward.
 A question for Virgil, if I may be so bold,"
 seriousness entering my voice, welling up
 in me, seizing the moment, lest it be lost.
 "Virgil, we can't tolerate an Augustus
 in our age. What shall we do? And how?
 For thirty years I've studied and thought,
 strived to understand. What do you advise?
 Tyrannies and oppressors, Marxists and fascists,
 we've already had. Only madmen would
 want to go back to anything like that,
 and yet order erodes, deteriorates,
 moral decline and decadence deepen,
 a Slough of Despond draws in everything,
 empire grows, looms, corporate plutocracy,
 oligarchies of the billionaires, with
 no commitment to any nation or people,
 global, exploiting the masses everywhere,
 reduced to wage slaves, with wages going down,
 stripping entire nations of their wealth.
 Plato's luxurious city global now,
 spanning the Earth, trampling the poor and humble,
 and what used to be the middle class, much
 under duress, sinking below the waves,
 enervated civilizations losing the
 will to live, young men and women even
 the will to procreate, make a life together."

Tall and severe, laconic, Virgil stood
 among the Greek and Roman poets,
 Orpheus, still grieving for Eurydice,
 Homer, Demodokos, and Anacreon; Horace,

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Theocritus, Momus, and Symmachus;
Apollonius, poet of the Argonauts,
Callimachus, Alexandria's librarian,
Lucretius, who said of Iphigenia,
sacrificed before the Greeks sailed for Troy,
religion could cause so much evil and woe;
Ovid, lush tales of metamorphosis;
Catullus, still longing for Lesbia;
Seneca, Plautus, and Petronius;
Statius, the late echo of epic song;
Propertius, Juvenal on the Forum;
even Cicero was there, whose "Dream of
Scipio" was a poet's dream, earning him
the right forever to stand upon the moon.
I could not keep my eyes from drifting to his hands.
All the Roman great stood with Virgil,
who moved with *gravitas* toward me,
weight of vision, master of masters, whose
Aeneid I had labored over, its choice Latin
a living, immortal tongue, the beauty
of which no dust can ever sully, as long
as our fragile planet circles the sun,
before me, in toga, sizing me up.
Oh dreadful sense of unworthiness!
Our gaze met, as my question lingered,
unanswered, in the lunar vacuum,
and then he looked around briefly at the
Parliament of Poets, returned his gaze to me,
looking me in the eye the entire time,
"Know Thyself"—You know you've found your theme.
No Augustus for your age, but men speaking
to other men from all around the world,
seeking to resolve the upheavals of the day.
Consultation not unlike what we conduct
here on the moon, seeking wisdom's way.

The Mediterranean Lake has become the globe.
Have greater confidence and hold yourself aright.
Remember the plenitude of humanity.
For you this is the way back to Earth.
The deeper questions lie beyond this one.
You know that too," he said, with finality,
turning, and walking back beside Homer.
As he reached his place, blind Demodokos
was led toward me, by a young squire,
holding out in one hand a wooden bowl,
saying, "From Delphi's Pierean spring,
I proffer water so pure it can inspire
song to make even Odysseus weep.
Like Iphigenia, accept your sacrifice."
Shaken by his words, I yet reached for the bowl,
quaffed from the high spring of mountain water,
my eyes from his blind eyes again to Virgil's.
Determined not to swoon like Dante, or
further betray myself, I still felt Virgil's
reprimand, high counsel, truth of his words,
so brief yet to the point, to an apprentice,
Demodokos now standing with Phemios.
Granting the empire its proper place,
but moving on, whence true order flows,
I swung away from the assemblage,
looking behind the Lunar Module,
the Earth high above the curving horizon,
a small blue-white ball, our home, against
the blackest black of space, vast space,
wondering whether I could prove worthy
of the theme, shoulder such a load,
like Milton move beyond heroic song,
the tales of knights and kingly courts,
caparisons and jousts, mighty battles,
Beowulf's halls of kings and drinking mead,

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sing a vision beyond the Augustus of an age,
or the rule of the greedy wealthy, seeking
only their own welfare, not the common good,
find the path into the regions of the soul.

About the Author

Frederick Glaysher is an epic poet, rhapsode, poet-critic, and the author or editor of ten books.

Mr. Glaysher studied writing under a private tutorial, at the University of Michigan, with the poet Robert Hayden and edited both *Hayden's Collected Prose* (University of Michigan Press) and his *Collected Poems* (Liveright). He holds a Bachelor's and a Master's degree from University of Michigan, the latter in English.

He lived for more than fifteen years outside Michigan—in Japan, where he taught at Gunma University in Maebashi; in Poston, Arizona, on the Colorado River Indian Tribes Reservation, the site of one of the largest internment camps for Japanese-Americans during WWII; in Illinois, on the central farmlands and on the Mississippi; ultimately returning to his suburban hometown of Rochester.

A Fulbright-Hays scholar to China in 1994, he studied at Beijing University, the Buddhist Mogao Caves on the old Silk Road, and elsewhere in China, including Hong Kong and the Academia Sinica in Taiwan. While a National Endowment for the Humanities scholar in 1995 on India, he further explored the conflicts between the traditional regional civilizations of Islamic and Hindu cultures and modernity.

He has been an outspoken advocate of the United Nations, was an accredited participant at the UN Millennium Forum (2000), and attended the UNA Members Day 2012 on the Millennium Development Goals, held in the General Assembly Hall.

Explore further and chat with the author online:

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“And a fine major work it is.” —Arthur McMaster, Contributing Editor, *Poets' Quarterly*; Department of English, Converse College, South Carolina

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“Am in awe of its brilliance. Everyone must read this book.” —Anodea Judith, Novato, California, *Amazon Review*

