

# EMMALEA RUSSO

## SO WHAT ABOUT THE MOON?



Photo: Michael Newton

### Question

The moon, as she waxes and wanes, demarcates the earthly realm from the eternal one. She is an incunabulum of changes. Whereas all other celestial bodies are free of our earthly physics, residing instead by ethereal law, the moon is tied to the earth – and we to it. Or, at least, that's what the geocentric cosmologies of Plato and Aristotle said, and more modern poets, too. Milton speaks of a "vast sublunary vault" in *Paradise Lost* (1667), John Donne of "dull sublunary lovers' love" in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" (1633). As Dante ascends ecstatically through the heavens of *Paradiso* (1308–20), he passes through the moon's firmament first, as the souls there speak to him of their broken vows and inconstancy.

Though scientifically disproven, this geocentric view (in which astrology still wheels and deals) has plenty to offer. And the moon, according to Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia* (c. 77–79), is "arguably the teacher of all that can be discerned in the sky."

Aside from its status as a real object and place (the aim of the space race), the moon is our primeval, undying night-light, flickering the sun's rays back to us in slices and cycles. Thus, the moon is also an imaginal zone which we fill with our visions, fears, and wishes. A televisual, oneiric, prophetic gateway. Where do images originate, and how do they land? By what light are they fueled? What life do they have? What stretches between the seen and unseen? Look to the moon. In our era of always-on screens and electric lunacies, we have become moons ourselves, orbiting the screens which are our suns. I think of Nam June Paik's 1965 installation *The Moon is the Oldest TV*, or the poet Mary Ruefle's claim, in her 2012 essay "Poetry and the Moon," that this heavenly sphere is "the first photograph, the first stilled moment, the first study in contrasts. Me here – you there."

Like analog photography, the moon's alchemical metal is silver. Strong and receptive, it collects and reverberates the sun, its surface a plate of dis- and re-membered solar shapes. As she carries and births the sun, the moon is matter and mother. Womb, kettle, bath, citadel, cauldron, egg, globe, coffin, earth. Heraclitus speaks of the moon as traveling in an impure, contaminated region – on the edge, more terrestrial than the rest of the celestials, whose lights she also gathers and sends here.

The moon bears and bares the light of the sun, making that gold, excessive light bearable to us. Just as art, per Nietzsche, who spoke of giving birth to a dancing star, is what keeps us from killing ourselves. As the light upon the lunar surface mutates, we view the veiled and silverer portions of our central star. What we'd get burnt trying to discern is shot from the body of the moon. Reflection and trance, truth and illusion, ensue.

Because of her status as an inhabited vessel, the moon is associated with extremes of motion and emotion: horror,

melodrama, excess, possessions, exorcisms, werewolves, the hounds of Diana. In his *Homeric Hymns* (c. 8th century BCE), Hesiod speaks of the moon "yoking her strong-necked glittering steeds" while steering her "deep-maned horses in the evening of the mid-month when her mighty orb is full; then her beams are brightest in the sky as she waxes, a token and a signal to mortal men." Lunar people, wrote the Renaissance astrologer William Lilly, are those who desire to slough off the cares of this world. To escape into image, to be deleted by Selene, parseleues, mock moons, is one delicious seduction of that silver room.

Like so many others, the psychoanalyst James Hillman connects the changing surface of the moon with a poetic impulse to the language of reflection, image, metaphor, and channels: "Imagine! the greatest deed of our age's heroic quest was to capture and bring home to actual earth a tangible souvenir of the physical moon. The insanity of literalism." Now, imagine lunacy as a tincture for our *insanity of literalism*. What would a lunar language look like? There are other lunacies, ancient and modern: moon sickness, an excess of moons, hallucination, mirage, mirror, cinema, television, inhabitation, mistaking the moon for the sun, each perception or emotion for high-flown truth. From the moon, all the hard and soft ways images reveal and disappear us.

We know that the behavior of animals (navigation, feeding, moods) shift with lunar cycles: Predators hunt better during the darker phases of the moon; dung beetles navigate via the moon's polarized luminescence. Plus, there's the moon's gravitational pull on the ocean tides, our own biorhythms, moods, menstruations. How could the moon *not* impact us? The moon is our one and only emissary – the chunk of chalky rock whose origins are as yet unknown, which circles us as we circle the sun. —

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