

## Meditation on the Moon, Aldous Leonard Huxley

### Meditation on the Moon

Materialism and mentalism—the philosophies of 'nothing but.' How wearily familiar we have become with that 'nothing but space, time, matter and motion,' that 'nothing but sex,' that 'nothing but economics'! And the no less intolerant 'nothing but spirit,' 'nothing but consciousness,' 'nothing but psychology'—how boring and tiresome they also are! 'Nothing but' is mean as well as stupid. It lacks generosity. Enough of 'nothing but.' It is time to say again, with primitive common sense (but for better reasons), 'not only, but also.'

Outside my window the night is struggling to wake; in the moonlight, the blinded garden dreams so vividly of its lost colours that the black roses are almost crimson, the trees stand expectantly on the verge of living greenness. The white-washed parapet of the terrace is brilliant against the dark-blue sky. (Does the oasis lie there below, and, beyond the last of the palm trees, is that the desert?) The white walls of the house coldly reverberate the lunar radiance. (Shall I turn to look at the Dolomites rising naked out of the long slopes of snow?) The moon is full. And not only full, but also beautiful. And not only beautiful, but also . . .

Socrates was accused by his enemies of having affirmed, heretically, that the moon was a stone. He denied the accusation. All men, said he, know that the moon is a god, and he agreed with all men. As an answer to the materialistic philosophy of 'nothing but' his retort was sensible and even scientific. More sensible and scientific, for instance, than the retort invented by D. H. Lawrence in that strange book, so true in its psychological substance, so preposterous, very often, in its pseudo-scientific form, *Fantasia of the Unconscious*. 'The moon,' writes Lawrence, 'certainly isn't a snowy cold world, like a world of our own gone cold. Nonsense. It is a globe of dynamic substance, like radium or phosphorus, coagulated upon a vivid pole of energy.' The defect of this statement is that it happens to be demonstrably untrue.

The moon is quite certainly not made of radium or phosphorus. The moon is, materially, 'a stone.' Lawrence was angry (and he did well to be angry) with the nothing-but philosophers who insist that the moon is only a stone. He knew that it was something more; he had the empirical certainty of its deep significance and importance. But he tried to explain this empirically established fact of its significance in the wrong terms—in terms of matter and not of spirit. To say that the moon is made of radium is nonsense. But to say, with Socrates, that it is made of god-stuff is strictly accurate. For there is nothing, of course, to prevent the moon from being both a stone and a god. The evidence for its stoniness and against its radiuness may be found in any children's encyclopaedia. It carries an absolute conviction. No less convincing, however, is the evidence for the moon's divinity. It may be extracted from our own experiences, from the writings of the poets, and, in fragments, even from certain text-books of physiology and medicine.

But what is this 'divinity'? How shall we define a 'god'? Expressed in psychological terms (which are primary—there is no getting behind them), a god is something that gives us the peculiar kind of feeling which Professor Otto has called 'numinous' (from the Latin *numen*, a supernatural being). Numinous feelings are the original god-stuff, from which the theory-making mind extracts the individualized gods of the

pantheons, the various attributes of the One. Once formulated, a theology evokes in its turn numinous feelings. Thus, men's terrors in face of the enigmatically dangerous universe led them to postulate the existence of angry gods; and, later, thinking about angry gods made them feel terror, even when the universe was giving them, for the moment, no cause of alarm. Emotion, rationalization, emotion—the process is circular and continuous. Man's religious life works on the principle of a hot-water system.

The moon is a stone; but it is a highly numinous stone. Or, to be more precise, it is a stone about which and because of which men and women have numinous feelings. Thus, there is a soft moonlight that can give us the peace that passes understanding. There is a moonlight that inspires a kind of awe. There is a cold and austere moonlight that tells the soul of its loneliness and desperate isolation, its insignificance or its uncleanness. There is an amorous moonlight prompting to love—to love not only for an individual but sometimes even for the whole universe. But the moon shines on the body as well as, through the windows of the eyes, within the mind. It affects the soul directly; but it can affect it also by obscure and circuitous ways—through the blood. Half the human race lives in manifest obedience to the lunar rhythm; and there is evidence to show that the physiological and therefore the spiritual life, not only of women, but of men too, mysteriously ebbs and flows with the changes of the moon.

There are unreasoned joys, inexplicable miseries, laughters and remorse without a cause. Their sudden and fantastic alternations constitute the ordinary weather of our minds. These moods, of which the more gravely numinous may be hypostasized as gods, the lighter, if we will, as hobgoblins and fairies, are the children of the blood and humours. But the blood and humours obey, among many other masters, the changing moon. Touching the soul directly through the eyes and, indirectly, along the dark channels of the blood, the moon is doubly a divinity. Even dogs and wolves, to judge at least by their nocturnal howlings, seem to feel in some dim bestial fashion a kind of numinous emotion about the full moon. Artemis, the goddess of wild things, is identified in the later mythology with Selene.

Even if we think of the moon as only a stone, we shall find its very stoniness potentially a numen. A stone gone cold. An airless, waterless stone and the prophetic image of our own earth when, some few million years from now, the senescent sun shall have lost its present fostering power . . . And so on. This passage could easily be prolonged—a Study in Purple. But I forbear. Let every reader lay on as much of the royal rhetorical colour as he finds to his taste. Anyhow, purple or no purple, there the stone is—stony. You cannot think about it for long without finding yourself invaded by one or other of several essentially numinous sentiments. These sentiments belong to one or other of two contrasted and complementary groups. The name of the first family is Sentiments of Human Insignificance, of the second, Sentiments of Human Greatness. Meditating on that derelict stone afloat there in the abyss, you may feel most numinously a worm, abject and futile in the face of wholly incomprehensible immensities.

'The silence of those infinite spaces frightens me.' You may feel as Pascal felt. Or, alternatively, you may feel as M. Paul Valéry has said that he feels. 'The silence of those infinite spaces does not frighten me.' For the spectacle of that stony astronomical moon need not necessarily make you feel like a worm. It may, on the contrary, cause you to rejoice exultantly in your manhood. There floats the stone, the

nearest and most familiar symbol of all the astronomical horrors; but the astronomers who discovered those horrors of space and time were men. The universe throws down a challenge to the human spirit; in spite of his insignificance and abjection, man has taken it up. The stone glares down at us out of the black boundlessness, a memento mori. But the fact that we know it for a memento mori justifies us in feeling a certain human pride. We have a right to our moods of sober exultation.

The end