

Enchantment and Modernity

Patrick Curry

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‘Where does reality lie? In the greatest enchantment you have ever experienced.’

(Hugo von Hofmannsthal)

My subject is enchantment, especially in relation to modernity. For most people, the word ‘enchantment’ probably has connotations that could be described as fluffy or fuzzy; it sounds like something optional compared to the real business of life. Its meaning here, however, is closer to the answers to such intensely personal questions as: what gives your life its deepest meaning? What have you found most moving, inspiring, renewing? What do you feel has intrinsic value, in and for itself, independent of how useful it might be for some other end? Such matters may be difficult to define or analyse but there is no doubting their reality or importance.

I would like explore enchantment, not in order to ‘explain’ it (which often means, in practice, to explain it away as a function of something else more fundamental or important), but rather to appreciate it more. For this purpose, it is important to respect its distinctiveness. Enchantment is not identical with the sacred as opposed to the secular, although there are certainly mutual resonances. Nor is it identical with magic – an important point, to which we shall return. In keeping with the focus on enchantment as a certain kind of human experience, it seems appropriate to approach it as such subjects have long and, in my opinion, best been approached: through the humanities.

More specifically, I welcome Freya Mathew’s introduction of the concept of onto-poetics as a metaphorical place where such matters could be honoured as well as understood. Just as enchantment is, in important part, about a way of engaging with the world, onto-poetics offers a way to engage with such engagements.¹

What is enchantment, then? Or at least, how can we recognise it? There is not a great deal of critical literature to draw upon. Although enchantment is ubiquitous in human life, it has largely been overlooked by scholars.² (The reason is to do partly with the nature of the experience, which doesn’t lend itself to articulation or analysis, and perhaps partly the rationalist formation of the academy itself). I shall try to give the most important attributes of enchantment, then compare them with those of modernity before turning to contemporary scholarly attempts to reconcile the two. I shall conclude with some cautionary reflections.

Enchantment as Wonder

The most important single hallmark of enchantment is *wonder*, as distinct from will. The significance of this point was emphasised by one of the indispensable scholars of enchantment, J.R.R. Tolkien, and before we proceed to the other characteristics, we need to grasp this one. In his major theoretical work, Tolkien initially said that *Faërie*

(his term for enchantment) ‘itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic – but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician.’ He then developed the contrast in this way: magic, he says, ‘produces, or pretends to produce, an alteration in the Primary World...it is not an art but a technique; its desire is *power* in this world, domination of things and wills.’ The ‘primal desire at the heart of *Faërie*’, in contrast, is ‘the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder.’³

Tolkien’s definition is a rich and fruitful one, and had it been noticed and absorbed by scholars concerned with the relationships between modernity and magic, we might have been spared a good deal of unhelpful confusion. As it is, the unjustified assumption that ‘magic’ and ‘enchantment’ mean basically the same thing(s) has skewed the whole debate. To pick only three examples, Saurabh Dube maintains that the ‘processes of modernity...create their own enchantments’, from ‘the dense magic of money and markets, to novel mythologies of nation and empire, to hierarchical oppositions between myth and history...’⁴ Peter Pels urges us to recognise forms of ‘the magic of modernity itself’: ‘those enchantments that are produced by practices culturally specific to modern states, economies and societies...’⁵ Finally, Alex Owen recognises that ‘Magic is all about power’ and ‘in common with all magical traditions, fin-de-siècle occultism was characterized by the will to both know and control the natural world’, but she still characterises this rationalising and colonising project as ‘fin-de-siècle enchantment’.⁶

‘Magic’ in all three cases is used to indicate a mode in which will and power is paramount, yet magic supposedly also accommodates enchantment as the epitome of wonder. Not only is this conceptually incoherent; in historical fact, modernity never wholly opposed magic. Rather it plundered and appropriated what it could use from magic while rejecting what it couldn’t. And what it could use was precisely what in magic was, and is, usable – nomothetic, iterable, generic and calculable – while what it couldn’t is, naturally, unique, non-repeatable and resistant to calculation. The former is magic proper; the latter, at least potentially, is enchantment. And since the spiritual/material distinction here is ultimately less important than the more fundamental contrast between will and wonder, magic, as Tolkien saw, includes modern science. We might even say, science *is* ‘our’ magic. This assertion is amply borne out by the history of the most aggressively modern ideological formation, science, in relation to magic; numerous historical studies have shown how early modern science, while disavowing magic by that name, borrowed heavily from its ideology (an anthropocentric exercise of power), imagery (the powerful male magus), and techniques (alchemy and natural astrology).⁷

We shall arrive at the same conclusion from different starting-points in what follows. Here let me just let me note its gist, that there are no enchantments *of* modernity; or, to put it another way, there is no such thing as *modern* enchantment. This is bad news for those who want to be both thoroughly modern and enchanted or, at least, fully open to enchantment. But the only alternative, it seems to me, is intellectual incoherence if not dishonesty.

Enchantment as Embodied, Animated and Wild

Another crucial aspect of enchantment is summarised in Max Weber’s terse definition: ‘*concrete magic*’.⁸ He famously contrasted this with ‘the disenchantment of the world’ resulting from modern bureaucratisation and intellectualisation, which splits experience into the ‘iron cage’ of causality on the one hand and ineffable

mysticism on the other. The point here is that enchantment is always and necessarily both ‘material’ *and* ‘spiritual’: that is, precisely circumstantial – embodied and embedded – and simultaneously deeply mysterious, undelimitable and unmasterable.

This amalgam of what we moderns have been trained to think of as irreconcilable opposites could be developed out in a number of ways. One is through Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of embodiment, with its constitutive but unstable intertwining of self and other, subject and object, mind and body, as what he called *Flesh*. Relatedly, there is its recent elaboration, initiated by David Abram, as ecological phenomenology. Another is Val Plumwood’s philosophy of ‘self-in-relation’ or the ecological self.⁹

In the same way, enchantment also partakes of a *non-anthropocentric animism*, or what Plumwood called ‘active intentionality’, in which subjectivity (the quality of being a subject) manifests in ways which transgress the official boundaries between human/ non-human, animate/ inanimate, as well as spiritual/ material.

Philosophically, these ideas about enchantment find their fullest and most natural expression in terms of ontology: that is, *forms* or (better) *ways of life*. And the ontology of enchantment is a relational, perspectival and participatory one. Enchantment cannot be understood – in fact, it can only be traduced – within epistemology and its hypervaluation of methodology, culminating in what Mary Midgley once called ‘methodolatry’. That obsession results from the conviction that if only the correct method is correctly applied, truth will inevitably result. But such a conviction is pure faith; how could it ever be scientifically tested itself, without assuming in advance the value of its own approach? And the ‘truth’ involved is purely cognitive and propositional, as if these could ever, in practice, be divorced from emotion, the body, and the Earth.

An exclusive emphasis on questions of knowledge, representation and belief is thus beloved of many mainstream and academic philosophers because it allows them to control and restrict the agenda to epistemology, comparing what ‘they’ (whoever the natives happen to be) ‘believe’ against what ‘we’ (the ruling experts) ‘know’.

Such a question already contains the toxic modernist assumption (with older Platonist and Christian roots) of an ‘inner’ world as against an ‘outer’ one, a ‘spiritual’ self as against a ‘material’ world, and so on. In contrast, there is no significant difference between an enchanted world on the one hand and condition or ‘state of mind’ on the other. Being radically non-Cartesian, no fundamental distinction between the two is possible. Rather, enchantment accompanies the meeting of living perspectives which are both bodied *and* minded, ensouled *and* enworlded. Nor by any means must those perspectives be solely human. In enchantment, all kinds of beings, including ‘things’, can turn out to be existentially alive, subjects with their own qualities and agenda; hence its animism.

Considered from the ‘outside’, enchantment is also *impermanent* (love is indeed forever, i.e., internally, until it ends) and hence *plural*: the possibility always remains open, in principle, that it could happen again. Whether the most satisfying meal, the most beautiful music, the most glorious sex, the most wonderful walk in the countryside – these being some of the commonest ‘concrete’ dimensions of enchantment – there is no one (or One), complete and ultimate experience of enchantment that puts an end to them all. It therefore cannot be completely or permanently captured, either, even promissorially.

Finally, but not least, enchantment is irredeemably *wild*; as such, unbidable; and as such again, unusable. This is not at all to say enchantment has no effects, of course; they can be life-changing. But they cannot be controlled. By the same token,

enchantment can be invited but not commanded. (Artists know this; the best materials, the most skilled writer, painter or musician, a stellar cast – none of this guarantees a performance that truly enchants.) In contrast to anything that can, at least apparently, be manipulated mechanically, enchantment entails not mastery but existential equality; not dictation but negotiation; not programme but discovery. It follows that any attempt at a programmatic use of enchantment necessarily converts it into something else, no matter how similar that may appear to be, and its handlers want it to be, to the original. Let me repeat: enchantment cannot be used, no matter how good or progressive the cause, because any attempt to do so, being will-driven and instrumental, is already disenchanting.

Together with its inalienable attributes of ‘concrete’ and embodied, the wildness of enchantment also points to its natural dimension. We should proceed carefully here, however, in two ways. One is that we must not conflate wildness with wilderness, thereby concluding that enchantment requires the latter, understood as a nature tendentially completely free of human presence or traces. That would be mistaken both empirically (plenty of experiences of enchantment occur elsewhere) and conceptually. Wildness is the quality or attribute of uncontrollability by human will (whether individual or collective), so in relative wilderness, wildness is more obvious. But it doesn’t vanish in civilisation (say). Mark Dickinson says that *Faërie* ‘nods to the ancient universe that prevails here on earth wherever human beings are not in control’.¹⁰ But where and when are they ever really in complete control?

The other mistake would be to understand ‘natural’ in a modern, that is to say, essentially Cartesian sense. The more-than-human nature in which enchantment is rooted is living and sensuous, and its materiality is, as Plumwood says, ‘already full of form, spirit, story, agency, and glory’.¹¹

Enchantment vs. Modernity

Now if you take these characteristics as comprising a certain family resemblance or ideal type and compare them with those modernity treated the same way, it is obvious that there is a striking difference. I am referring to modernity more as a sensibility than as a period, although the two cannot be cleanly separated. The important question, as Leszek Kolakowski put it, is not when modernity ‘began’ (or ended) but ‘What is the core – whether or not explicitly expressed – of our contemporary widespread *Unbehagen an der Kultur* [‘cultural unease’]?...And the first answer that naturally comes to mind is summed up, of course, in the Weberian *Entzauberung* – disenchantment...’¹²

I obviously cannot attempt a comprehensive and nuanced treatment of modernity as such in a paper of this length. Fortunately, it is not necessary to do so. My treatment of modernity here is framed by its relationship with enchantment. In that context, we may consider modernity is as a phenomenon whose primary engines are the interlocking dynamics of corporate and commodity capitalism, techno-science, and state-power, and whose momentum is primarily expressed in neo-colonialist globalisation.¹³

Other dimensions of modernity become apparent in other perspectives. A philosophical lens reveals its hyperrationalism and metaphysical realism; the history of ideas throws into relief modernists’ obsessive search for the security of certain knowledge; critical theory stresses the paramount modernist ideology of Progress.¹⁴ But no matter which view we choose, the *sine qua non* of modernity is adequately

summed up in Val Plumwood's phrase (echoing Weber, together with Horkheimer and Adorno), 'the rational mastery of nature': the mastery of nature through reason, and the figure of the man of reason.¹⁵ And that project, being all about will, control, and power-over, is powerfully disenchanting. It results in a world, and condition, that is indeed 'grey and leafless'.¹⁶

Disenchantment results, in Weber's words, from 'the knowledge or belief that... there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.'¹⁷ (Note that one need not actually be able to do so; the *belief* that one could, when that belief is sufficiently widely and deeply held, will suffice.) And such putative mastery must be monist and universalist, for it requires a single master principle (and class of interpreters), on pain of pluralist incommensurability and thus, from this point of view, unresolvable disorder and struggle. (The opposite of monism here is not dualism, which it can and does accommodate as two aspiring monisms. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro says, the true paired complement of monism is 'multiplicity, not duality'.)¹⁸ Given the requirement for such a principle it follows, as Weber realised and Horkheimer and Adorno adumbrated, that both '[r]eason and religion deprecate and condemn the principle of magic enchantment.'¹⁹

Thus secular modernity, whose formation has been so deeply influenced by religion, requires 'the extirpation of animism'. In pursuit of its ideal – 'the system from which all and everything follows' – modernity 'makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities'. Actually, there are three kinds of quantities, corresponding to each of the above-mentioned dynamics of modernity: for capital, a single scale of value: money; for techno-science, a single kind of stuff: usually matter/energy but more recently, carbon; and for the state, a single measurable and therefore meaningful entity: the 'average' citizen.²⁰ And note how abstract indeed each of these items is, in stark contrast to the unique and sensuous qualities that are the currency of enchantment.

From a more sociological perspective, a good working definition of disenchantment (in suitably disenchanted prose) is that of Wouter Hanegraaff:

the social pressure exerted upon human beings to deny the spontaneous tendency of participation, by accepting the claims of a culturally established ideology according to which instrumental causality amounts to a worldview capable in principle of rationally explaining all aspects of reality.²¹

Such disenchantment is essential to the modern project of the rational mastery of nature, starting with its objectification and proceeding through its explanation, domestication, commodification, exploitation and where necessary extinction. In the clearest possible contrast, at the heart of enchantment is a very different kind of relationship with nature and, by the same token, a very different nature: a living or 'animist', more-than-human or 'ecocentric', and mythic nature of subjects and sensuous particulars.²² Not necessarily wilderness but, as I have already argued, wildness (as in Thoreau's famous dictum, 'In wildness is the preservation of the world'). The wildness of more-than-human nature – which is to say, the natural world that includes but vastly exceeds humanity – is just what cannot be captured, domesticated, objectified, commodified or exploited. (Not even – say it softly – by evolutionary theory, and all the more so to the extent it aspires to be the one true universal causal theory 'from which all and everything follows'.) Those things can be

done, of course, but the wild *qua* enchantment, and vice-versa, do not survive the process.

Thus, enchantment as wild corresponds precisely to nature as wild, while nature as resource directly contrasts with it. Nature as objectified object – let's give it a distinguishing capital letter: 'Nature' – requires, and produces, disenchantment. But although the modernist project is anti-enchantment, it is fully magical. Its most putatively objective discourse, that of science, gives direct rise to interventions aimed at turning the world into what its theoretical propositions claim to merely describe: inanimate, quantitative, manipulable and ethically inconsiderable matter. The English Platonist Henry More, writing in horrified admiration to René Descartes, saw it coming: 'I recognize in you not only subtle keenness but also, as it were, the sharp and cruel blade which in one blow, so to speak, dared to despoil of life and sense practically the whole race of animals, metamorphosing them into marble statues and machines'.²³

An experience of wild nature or natural wildness (which might well be, but is not necessarily, one of relative wilderness) is thus also potentially one of enchantment. One could also turn that around: no matter how 'cultural' or otherwise mediated, an experience of enchantment is fundamentally one of non-modern nature.

'Reconciling' the Two

Modernity and enchantment are therefore indeed related, but they are related as immiscible antinomies. Like oil and water, they do not and cannot mix, so where one is present the other is absent. To put it another way, modernity as such necessarily entails disenchantment, and conversely, enchantment is the experience of a condition/world that is radically non-modern.

If anything 'haunts' modernity, then, it is enchantment, not magic. As Marcel Detienne has pointed out, 'A system of thought...is founded on a series of acts of partition whose ambiguity, here as elsewhere, is to open up the terrain of their possible transgression at the very moment when they mark off a limit'.²⁴ But the relationship in this case is not symmetrical, because while modernity recognises, fears and scorns enchantment, the latter does not return the favour. Rather, in a powerful moment of enchantment, the secular pieties of modernity, such as the radical difference between 'subject' and 'object', 'man' and 'universe', 'cultural' and 'natural', simply vanish. If enchantment itself was a person, we could say that s/he simply doesn't perceive all that (something which arguably heaps more coals on a modernist's head).

Another way to put the matter, borrowing from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's description of indigenous Amerindian philosophy, is that in a modernist condition/world, every subject is considered 'an incompletely analysed object'.²⁵ Subjectivity, consciousness and life itself are anomalies, placemarkers waiting to be reduced to a purely physicalistic phenomenon. In enchantment, on the contrary, any object – including things technically inanimate – can turn out to be a subject: a stone, or star, or storm can have a personality, an agenda, and issues.²⁶

Efforts to 'reconcile' enchantment and modernity, then, in terms of 'a disenchanted enchantment' which 'delights but does not delude', make no more sense than speaking of a square circle or safe danger.²⁷ To my mind, they suggest one of two things. One is the effort to have one's enchanted cake while yet eating it. Casting back to my childhood (and even then it made an impression on me), such an attempt

was perfectly encapsulated by Linus: ‘I’ve decided to be a very rich and famous person who doesn’t really care about money, and who is very humble but still makes a lot of money and is very famous, but is very humble and rich and famous’.²⁸ The other possibility is covertly hegemonic discourse (whether consciously intended that way or not) by people who are, in effect, modernists. In any case, enchantment cannot be disenchanting and remain itself, and delight can never be definitively separated from delusion, that modernist nightmare, without engaging in a move to a putative view from nowhere, or everywhere, in order to arrive at an ‘objective’ judgement: a move which *ipso facto* disenchanting.

Enchantment just isn’t safe. In Tolkien’s parlance, drawing upon the wisdom of Northern European folk traditions, it is ‘perilous’, and it cannot be made safe without eliminating it altogether. As the American officer in Vietnam so memorably put it, ‘It became necessary to destroy the village in order to save it’.²⁹ The demand for security and certainty, being an issue of control, is irreconcilable with enchantment, and to the extent that it becomes paramount, destructive of it.

The same considerations throw into doubt Jane Bennett’s otherwise admirable attempt to forefront, and encourage the development of, enchantment ‘as a positive resource’ for an ethical socio-political praxis.³⁰ It certainly can have such an effect, but not reliably; it cannot sensibly be asked to always or only be good! And what kind of a ‘resource’ is it that cannot be used as such?

There is, however, a special case in this context, namely the apparent enchantment used by advertising, media, public relations, political spin and fashion: taken all together, a billion-pound industry (the very word, in the sense applicable here, already marks it out as modern) with a powerful commitment to engineering very particular outcomes dictated by capital. Insofar as enchantment is wild, unbiddable and unusable as such, I call the coopted and exploited simulacrum that results, and which they substitute for the original, ‘glamour’. It is ‘selling the dream’, in the words of one fashion executive; ‘the rattling of a stick inside a swill-bucket’ was what Orwell called it.³¹ The Nuremburg rallies, as the epitome of mesmerising political spin, would be another classic example.

To understand modernity and enchantment, I see it as necessary to engage in a double movement. On the one hand, we must recognise and admit the truth of the powerful disenchantment narrative, à la Weber and Horkheimer and Adorno, of an inexorably disenchanting modernity. On the other, we must also realise the limits of that narrative. Obviously, even in crudely empirical terms, both individually and collectively, enchantment does survive: in relationships, in art, in nature, in sport, in food and so on. It does so, however, not because of modernity but in spite of it; not because we are modern but because in lived practice, to borrow the title of Bruno Latour’s book, we have never been (entirely) modern.³² If this is ‘compatibility’, it’s an odd sort: a dialectic, perhaps, in which the ultimate impossibility of modernity guarantees the continuing possibility of enchantment, while the ineliminable possibility of enchantment guarantees the ultimate failure of modernity.

Modernism as an ideology – the ideology of modernity – is thus a most peculiar practice. Insofar as its ideal is a purely rational and objective system which bootstraps its own interpretation, i.e. vouchsafes its own meaning, modernism requires the bad faith of apparently contradicting the mode – practical, situated and perspectival participation – that actually enables it (along with anything else). If reality, as Hugo von Hoffmansthal suggested, consists of the deepest enchantment, then modernism is the Big Lie, because it can fool you into experiencing life and the world as meaningless.

If, in addition, we agree with Tolkien that enchantment is ‘as necessary for the health and complete functioning of the Human as is sunlight for physical life’,³³ then it becomes clear that modernism tries to withhold something we cannot live well or for long without. Thus the more consistent and thoroughgoing modernism is, the greater its vulnerability to a return of the repressed (to coin a phrase) as enchantments that are inadmissible, hence preferably unconscious, and therefore uncriticisable and even more-than-usually dangerous. The result, ironically, is that those most obsessed with being the Adult in the Room turn out to be the most infantile. And they are the people claiming, in Horkheimer and Adorno’s words, to be ‘utterly enlightened as they steer society towards barbarism’.³⁴

Test-Cases

There remains at least one potentially serious objection to answer, and a couple of traps to skirt. I hope I have made a strong theoretical case that ‘modernist enchantment’ is an oxymoron, but let us set that aside for a moment and ask: are there, as a matter of broadly observable fact, no such instances? For example, what about the strangely compelling allure (albeit uneasily repellent to others) of a shiny new shopping mall or similar space? Or experiences that are only possible through the latest technology, such as virtual reality, electronic games and so on?

Important here is the distinction between enchantment and glamour, and the power of the latter. W.H. Auden made a closely related point: ‘All folk tales recognize that there are false enchantments as well as true ones. When we are truly enchanted we desire nothing for ourselves, only that the enchanting object or person shall continue to exist. When we are falsely enchanted, we desire either to possess the enchanting being or be possessed by it.’³⁵ In effect, what Auden calls ‘false enchantment’ is what I mean by ‘glamour’. And I suspect that if (a big if) we are honest with ourselves, we can actually tell the difference between enchantment and glamour. Even so, of course, not everyone cares.

Regarding the first question above, then, the test is quite simple: if the state of mind the shopping mall puts you in results in you really wanting to buy something, it is glamour. Enchantment doesn’t make you want to *do* anything at all, let alone for ourselves.

In November 2008, inhabitants of the Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai were slaughtered by young men recruited to radical political Islam from very poor communities. We know from recorded telephone transcripts that in the course of the attack, one or two of them were so awestruck by the grandeur of the setting that they had to be sharply reminded by their distant handlers of their original purpose in being there. Remember Tolkien’s formulation – ‘the realisation’, i.e. becoming real, ‘of imagined wonder’ – and these young men’s personal formation; perhaps they had only ever imagined such places and yet here they were, actually *in* one. I’m sure they were experiencing genuine enchantment. And it is instructive, both that their active mission momentarily faltered when that happened; and that it happened in a veritable temple of glamour, yet it was not an experience *of* glamour. Enchantment will not be bid, even by the masters of bidding.

The second question, concerning technologically-enabled experiences of enchantment, is also complex. On the one hand, whatever else it may be, technology is plainly an adjunct of magic as we have defined it here. As such, its purpose is, as Tolkien says, ‘immediacy: speed, reduction of labour, and reduction also to a

minimum (or vanishing point) of the gap between the idea or desire and the result or effect'.³⁶ Also unlike enchantment, technology is, in its purpose, anthropocentric; what is at stake is the realisation of 'our' desires. On the other hand, however, it enables such experiences, previously impossible, as observing the transit of Mercury against the Sun's chromosphere.³⁷ And who could deny that 'Spirited Away' and other animation feature films by Hayao Miyazaki, for example, are heavily dependent on advanced technology, yet indisputably offer enchantment? (Although I would add, not entirely mischievously, that he is well-known for hand-drawing and colouring his images.)

I think the answer in such cases must be accordingly qualified. It is true that we could have seen and been enchanted by neither transit nor film without advanced technology. But I could not have read a book without printing presses, nor viewed a painting without canvas, paint and brushes, nor heard a concert without musical instruments. In other words, I cannot see that there is a radical difference between any earlier (and continuing) art and these ones. As for the claim that future developments will change 'everything', it is nonsense. A work by Goethe, or Vermeer, or Hadyn can still speak to the heart, and when it does, the enormous changes that have taken place in the centuries since it was produced are irrelevant. In this fundamental sense, such contemporary experiences are not new. Nor are they experiences *of* technology, any more than reading Goethe is an experience *of* paper and ink as such (although that can certainly be part of the concreteness of its concrete magic).

To put it another way, you can certainly be enchanted *by* something modern. (I am thinking, for example, of John Betjeman's enraptured response to the roof of St Pancras station.) But when that happens, you having a *non*-modern experience. It is not rationalist, instrumental or programmatic, and there is certainly no mastery of nature involved; quite the contrary, it is a non-rational communion with a more-than-human nature.

In contrast to the highly directed and determined phenomenon of glamour, then, for enchantment to flourish it requires what the child psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott identified as essential to both play and psychological healing: 'allowing the objects of [one's] love and desire to move in their *own* freedom'.³⁸ What could be more nonmodernist? That ability is what T.W. Adorno aptly termed 'fearlessly passive'.³⁹ Michel Serres strikes the same note: 'Thinking begins when the desire to know is freed from any compulsion to dominate'.⁴⁰

Not surprisingly, the philosophy most friendly to enchantment turns out to be the one **many** modernists dislike, even hate, and caricature as 'relativism', postmodern or otherwise: Pyrrhonian scepticism.⁴¹ The fact that it is also a notably humane and tolerant philosophy is, again, an instructive contrast with modernism. The connection between enchantment and scepticism is not one of logical entailment, obviously; that is not a serious option in these deep and uncertain waters. A more serious question is: what practices might help enchantment as an onto-poetic way of life, including the wild animism I have identified as part of it, to survive and even flourish? I would suggest that scepticism, with its humility and openness, could help.

True scepticism is scrupulously even-handed and reflexive. It therefore has nothing to do with the dogmatic scientism of recent years that calls itself sceptical but never doubts its own truth. One of the best exemplars of humanism remains Michel de Montaigne, one of several humanists against whom the seventeenth-century scientific counter-revolution was aimed, but whose work survived and enormously influenced subsequent friends of enchantment, so to speak, such as Shakespeare and Goethe. (Stephen Toulmin is a sure-footed guide in this territory whose work I highly

recommend.)⁴² There is also the example of an equally humane philosopher of our own time who, not coincidentally, was savaged by scientific modernists: Paul Feyerabend.⁴³

On a more personal note, metaphysical scepticism also resonates with my own 60s antinomianism: why should we accept anyone's final authority, whether they are sacred/ religious *or* secular/ scientific, concerning what is real? Whatever their other differences, Professor Dawkins and the Holy Father (say) are equally keen to do so. And they and many more will equally look down on enchantment as a failure to be realistic, adult, mature and so on. But as Tolkien pointed out, the charge of escapism beloved of modernists confuses, and 'not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter. Just so a Party-spokesman might have labelled departure from the misery of the Führer's or any other Reich and even criticism of it as treachery'.⁴⁴ In the same vein, Feyerabend remarked that 'The objection that [a] scenario is 'real', and that we must adapt to it no matter what, has no weight, for it is not the only one: there are many ways of thinking and living'.⁴⁵

Enchantment and Religion

Does enchantment survive, then, as religion? Given the obvious fact that both enchantment and religion have obviously survived secularisation, this is certainly a possibility. However, I want to argue that the answer is: not really, or not quite. While that this is another subject too big to be treated comprehensively here, let me make a few comments.

The relations between religion and enchantment seem to be very delicate. For example, I am unaware of any religion without rituals, and arguably a central purpose of religious ritual is to give the participants a certain experience of enchantment. There are also profound commonalities between enchantment and the religious divine or sacred; God, for example, also tends to excite wonder, can be immanent, is unbiddable, and so on. Furthermore, some mystical experience (although not all) is indistinguishable from enchantment.

There remain serious problems, however. One follows from the claim of much, if not all, religion to be fundamentally different from, or radically more than, enchantment. This has at least two aspects which can be specified in relation to Christianity. One is made clear in the story of Jesus at the well, who says: 'Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst...' (John 4:13-14) A Buddhist equivalent would be the claim that final or complete enlightenment is possible. This cannot be plausibly asserted of enchantment; as I have said, no matter how extraordinary the love, story, food, etc., it cannot exhaust all other possible instances, or the desire from arising to 'do it again'.

The second difference follows from the persistent strains in Christianity of Platonism and Gnosticism (more high-toned and rabid, respectively), with their shared profound suspicion of and hostility to the flesh, carnality, sexuality, the feminine and the earthy. I realise that these are theologically countermanded by the implications of the Incarnation. But those domains still supposedly *need* transformation or salvation through the intervention of a spiritual and transcendental (yet male) God, and the overall emphasis remains on the powerful spiritual and transcendental current in the universalist theism epitomised by Christianity, in a complex way, and more

straightforwardly by Islam. Whereas for and in enchantment, these domains are invaluable as such, as they are; they don't need redeeming.

Another problem with identifying enchantment with religion is that inasmuch as enchantment is unbiddable, religious ritual can at most create the most favourable possible conditions for enchantment and invite it in. (This is a task, and a limit, that it shares with art.) But let's be generous and say that this is understood. That still leaves another difficulty which I suspect is insuperable, namely that every religion cannot but try to flesh out the experience of enchantment in a *particular* way, to dictate and maintain its meaning in a way that accords with its own soteriological programme. Any such programme, being systematic, is necessarily disenchanting. But enchantment, being unbiddable, cannot be controlled. It is mutually antipathetic to any sort of programme, whereas religion as a collective enterprise is unavoidably committed, at some point or another, to trying to manage enchantment and discourage the unlicensed sort. Hence in this respect, I believe (and as Weber himself realised), there is an unavoidable conflict between religion and enchantment.

Recently, Gordon Graham published a book arguing that 'the abandonment of religion... must mean the permanent disenchantment of the world, and any ambition on the part of art to remedy this is doomed to failure'.⁴⁶ The latter assertion about art may be correct, but upon close examination it turns out that Graham simply subsumes enchantment entirely within religion, something which I think is deeply problematic for the reasons just given. The result is a tautology: only religion can supply what religion supplies, and without it you haven't got any.

David Brown, in three big volumes on God and enchantment, has more to offer.⁴⁷ Based on an interesting if undertheorised identification of enchantment with the sacramental, they consider an extraordinary range of human experiences wherein it is possible to discern sacrality. They also show an admirably undogmatic ecumenism and a sensitivity to the degree that a disenchanted instrumentalism has infected religion itself. Predictably, though, their weakness is their transcendental theism. (I do not make this criticism as a secular atheist. The belief that these two positions exhaust all significant spiritual possibilities is both parochial and pernicious.)

Thus, Brown's sacrament is 'open to mystery and unpredictability', but it is still predicated upon a God 'mediated through nature and culture in experiences that have their own intrinsic value.'⁴⁸ Trying to have one's cake and eat it is clearly at work here, too. If experiences of enchantment really have their own *intrinsic* value, they do not need God to supply it; and if they do need God to have such value, then being *internally* vulnerable to the disenchantment of a divine universal principle – one that could, in principle, enable one to master them all by theological calculation ('in its degree of divine presence, this experience of enchantment rates a 5.6, that one merely 2.3') – then they are not really cases of enchantment.

There is a close parallel with Plato's attitude to love in the *Symposium*, apparently invoking love but only insofar as it is a *route* to a greater and more perfect beloved. That entails an ultimately disenchanted spiritual instrumentalism which contrasts sharply with a fundamental characteristic of enchantment: that the beloved is fully loved for her/his/its *own* sake, exactly and uniquely as such. Only such uniqueness releases the full mystery of Being inherent in the beloved being – existing – at all.

For all these reasons, I agree with the late Ronald Hepburn's careful conclusion: 'I doubt that there is a route of argument from wonder to God', but in any

case, that ‘To be evocative of wonder, an object *need not* be seen as filtering the perfections of deity.’⁴⁹

Traps

Let me assume the reader not only agrees with this analysis so far but also shares my normative preference for enchantment over modernist disenchantment. In that case, would not the logical next step be to invert the modernist platform of pure disenchantment and assert that everything is actually enchanted? That there are no objects, only subjects? Perhaps, but it would be a serious mistake, because the likeliest result would be yet another disenchanting systematic monism universalism, only now proclaimed in the name of enchantment. A great deal of New Age spiritual idealism does exactly this. That is why I was careful to say above that any object *can* turn out to be a subject, not that every object necessarily *is* one. Accordingly, the only ontological assertion about the world that is implied is that it is one in which such an experience is possible: panpsychic, perhaps. But insofar as my account is intentionally sceptical, phenomenological and pragmatic, nothing compels me to follow that line of enquiry here. More important is the creation of what Mathews calls ‘a coherent field of inquiry, or at any rate a field of further conversations.’⁵⁰

But (trap number two) would not at least a programme to re-enchant the world be just the thing? Again, the answer is no. Clearly, insofar as enchantment is unbiddable etc., it cannot figure *directly* in a programme even for its recovery. Indeed, any such programme, even the most irrationalist, being will-driven, would itself be disenchanting.⁵¹ New Age movements claiming to be engaged in actively re-enchanting the world are actually offering only cosier, kinder iron cages complete with Fairtrade products. Only semi-facetiously, imagine the possibilities if it ever became mainstream: enchantment targets, outcomes and assessments, competition for funding in an enchantment economy, enforcement squads...?⁵²

This conundrum is not quite as stark as it sounds, however. I have already noted that enchantment survives and even, perhaps, flourishes – although, to quote the poet Derek Mahon, ‘only where blind profit,/ So quick on the uptake, takes no notice of it...’⁵³ So while disavowing programmatic instrumentalism, there are still many things we can do in order to *encourage* enchantment, to create conditions for it to flourish, even, as Mathews says, to invoke it (taking it as read that invocation is not command).⁵⁴ These things require an understanding of enchantment, collective as well as individual, that respects its intrinsic value and its irreducibly distinctive nature, and that refuses to subordinate everything to ‘efficiency’ – even the efficiency of a programme to encourage it.

Finally, is the study of enchantment based on such an understanding possible in the modern academy? In a few places, certainly, but they are becoming fewer and more beleaguered as universities are increasingly pressed into the service of the modernist megamachine⁵⁵ as ‘information providers’ to ‘customers’. To that extent, and allowing for some outposts of resistance in what’s left of the humanities, those looking to study and understand enchantment might have to look elsewhere.⁵⁶

Of course, there always remains the peculiar delight that only scholarship, whether professorial or autodidactic, can offer: the enchantment *of* study. But this too can only survive, and flourish, when learning is valued not for its profitability – whether financial, political, social or, for that matter, spiritual – but for its own sake. *Caveat philologus! Caveat omnes*, come to that.

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²⁹ An American army major after the destruction of the Vietnamese village Ben Trê, 7 February 1968.

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⁵¹ Weber well knew this too; see Nicholas Gane, *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory: Rationalisation vs. Re-Enchantment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004).

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⁵⁵ Lewis Mumford's expression.

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