

[The Enchantment of Nature and the Nature of Enchantment

(A paper for *Honoring Nature*)

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My subject is double, as the title says: the enchantment of nature, but also the nature of enchantment.¹ Most of what I want to say arises out of my understanding, both personal and scholarly, of what it is, and isn't. But I'll intersperse three eye-witness accounts, the better to give you a feeling for it, and to prevent things from getting too dry.

Enchantment is a fundamental human experience: the experience of wonder. So it is necessarily participatory, and therefore personal. Someone needs to actually be present for it. If you stay on the outside, merely observing, it can't happen. The word itself implies as much: from the French, originally Latin, *en chantment*: in a song. By extension, it might arise from finding yourself in a song that you are hearing or singing, or in a picture you are looking at, or a story you are reading or hearing— in fact, any kind of narrative, in the broadest sense. And the broadest sense extends well beyond human art to, say, the story of life on Earth. As William Blake put it, in his inimitably forthright way, 'to the Eyes of the Man of Imagination, Nature is Imagination itself'.²

The wonder varies in intensity from charm, to delight, to full-blown joy. We could also say 'awe'. (But note that I don't describe it as 'pleasure', the quality of which is somewhat different.) The last kind – joyful – is what I call 'radical enchantment'. It is normally something which only happens a few times in one's life, and it is often life-changing.

One important way we can throw light on a concept or value is to ask what it isn't. In this case, a clear opposite is *will*: any desire or effort to make something happen, to change something, or to make someone (including yourself) do something. If that is happening, then enchantment is not.

Okay, my first account of natural enchantment is a report dated March 23, 1926 by a Mr E.O. Grant, as reported by the writer E.B. White. It's short and simple, but to get the full import you should factor in the ultra-laconic verbal style of New England rural folk.

Saw farmer near Patten, Maine, sitting on a snowdrift about fifteen feet high, surrounded by a hundred redpolls. Birds perched on the farmer's head and shoulders. One sat on knee. Farmer told Grant that he had enjoyed the previous half hour more than any other period in his life.³

A fundamental characteristic of enchantment is that it is relational. The extent of reciprocity varies with the degree of intensity, but it is always wonder *at* another – not power *over* them. It takes place as an encounter, a meeting across a gap of difference. Those boundaries remain, but they no longer matter. So enchantment is neither hot ecstatic unity, in which both self and other disappear, nor cold, one-way control over the other. And when enchantment is radical it is most relational, with both parties – whoever and whatever they are – apprehending and affecting the other.

Furthermore, as in any true relationship, no one is in charge. What happens is determined jointly and recursively, not by only one party or the other. In other words, enchantment is

¹ For a longer and deeper treatment, see my *Enchantment: Wonder in Modern Life* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2019).

² *The Letters of William Blake* (1906), letter to Rev. John Trusler (23 August 1799).

³ *Essays of E.B. White* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977): 274.

essentially *wild* and unbiddable. And this is something it shares with nature. In the whole more-than-human natural world (to use David Abram's excellent phrase),⁴ including us but vastly greater, there are many, many agents, subjects and interests at play, and very few outcomes are entirely predictable. This is why J.R.R. Tolkien, one of enchantment's most reliable scholars, insists that it is 'perilous'.⁵ It is also why it arrives as a gift, or not at all.

What kind of relationship are we talking about? W.H. Auden distinguishes between true and false enchantment. In the true kind, you just want the enchanting other to flourish, to be well, for their own sake. With false enchantment, in contrast, you want 'either to possess the other or be possessed by them'.⁶ Tolkien (who was Auden's teacher at Oxford) asserts that enchantment is ultimately 'a love and respect for all things, "animate" and "inanimate", an unpossessive love of them as "other"'. And he added that 'This love will produce both ruth' – pity, empathy, compassion – 'and delight'.⁷ By implication, where ruthlessness or despair dominate, enchantment is absent.

Now the other party can be anyone or anything: a human being, another animal, plant, place of any kind, sight, sound, smell, taste, texture or even idea. But we are a particular kind of being; which is to say, animal; that is, Earthling: the human kind. And human nature is not, whatever our pretensions, infinitely plastic. So enchantment tends to happen with certain kinds of others and in certain domains: love, art, religion, food and drink, learning, sports, humour and, not least, nature. When radical, that means apprehending, in all its complexity, beauty and mystery, a natural place or fellow-creature, who sometimes also, all unexpectedly, apprehends you.

I believe all enchantments are ultimately natural, rooted in nature, including ourselves as natural beings. The fact that our nature includes culture doesn't change that. In other words, enchantment, like life itself, is not anthropocentric. It includes us but it isn't all about us, let alone me.

In the process of enchantment, the other *becomes*, and is realised to already *be*, in effect, another person, with a unique personality of their own. Or, we could say, an extraordinary presence. And presence takes place 'upstream' of any distinction between subject and object.⁸ This is why we must resist any attempt to understand enchantment as either merely subjective or merely objective. Radical enchantment is a whole bodymind, and therefore whole world, experience. As Wittgenstein says, 'Physiological life is of course not "life". And neither is psychological life. Life is the world.'⁹

Experiences of enchantment are thus intensely meaningful – and therefore fateful. (Even refusing them is fateful, because it always happens too late; you have already been affected.) By the same token, they are mythic. There are many modes of mythicity, and some of them with nothing to do with wonder; but when you are enchanted, you are living mythically. And although I cannot go into it into detail now, in this respect too enchantment is rooted in nature. Ultimately, as Sean Kane says, myths are not about the gods so much as 'the ideas and emotions of the Earth', whence even the gods come.'¹⁰

⁴ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

⁵ Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (eds), *Tolkien on Fairy-stories*, expanded edition, with commentary and notes (London: HarperCollins, 2008): *passim*.

⁶ W.H. Auden, *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971): 149.

⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Smith of Wootton Major*, extended edition, ed. Verlyn Flieger (London: HarperCollins, 2005): 101.

⁸ Henri Bortoft, *Taking Appearance Seriously. The Dynamic Way of Seeing in Goethe and European Thought* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2012): 103.

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, transl. G. E. M. Anscombe, rev. edn (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1979): 77e.

¹⁰ Sean Kane, *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*, rev. edn (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1998): 34.

And what does enchantment show us about the enchanting other? It partly reveals, and partly creates, a *truth*: their intrinsic value and meaning, which doesn't depend in any way on their usefulness, or exchange value in the market. William James gives almost a parable about this. 'Every Jack,' he says, 'sees in his own particular Jill charms and perfections to the enchantment of which we stolid onlookers are stone-cold. And which has the superior view of the absolute truth, he or we? Which has the more vital insight into the nature of Jill's existence, as a fact?' His answer is: Jack, of course. For he 'realises Jill concretely, and we do not.'¹¹

In my second account, the writer Richard Mabey describes listening to a nightingale sing in a Suffolk fen, under a full moon, one early May night:

He sings a stylish four-note phrase, then repeats it in a minor key. He slides into a bubbling tremolo on a single note and holds it for more than ten seconds. How does he breathe? I can't believe he is not consciously improvising. I want to clap – and with barely credible timing, a shooting star arcs over the bush in which he is singing. I'm edging closer now without realising it and am now no more than ten feet away. Nothing stops the flow of notes. They fill the air, they seem to be solid, to be doing odd things to the light. I am half-aware that my peripheral vision is closing down, and that I am riveted to the bush by this tunnel of intense sound.

At that point, 'just for a few seconds, the bird was in my head and it was me that was singing.' Then, remembering Shelley's lines describing the effect of nightingale song as 'So sweet, that joy is almost pain', Mabey questions his own response. He concludes that it is different, but 'the effort breaks the spell', and he walks regretfully away.¹²

This is a classic instance of enchantment. It includes sheer presence – participation – the relationality of wonder-at – embodied, especially as the sense of hearing, and embedded in a very particular place – the concrete magic of the bird's singing, at once 'material' and 'spiritual' – and an aspect of enchantment I haven't been able to touch on here, namely the 'tensive truth' of living metaphor.¹³ Mabey is both himself, a human, and a nightingale; and he is both singing and not singing.

Now enchantment takes place as a unique moment – 'short but deep', in the words of the artist Etel Adnan¹⁴ – so it doesn't happen *in* time – and as a unique place, so not *in* space, either. Taking the moment first, it is a case of 'Nothing "happened", but everything has changed'.¹⁵

In that moment, time radically slows. But it doesn't altogether stop, and sooner or later the enchantment comes to an end. So the wonder of childhood is continually becoming grown-up; wild nature is always falling to so-called development; and the Elves are forever passing over the Sea, leaving us behind on the darkening shores of Middle-earth in (god help us) 'the Age of Men', now known as the Anthropocene. Hence the joy of enchantment is often bittersweet, with a poignant or melancholy quality. By the same token, the quality of

¹¹ 'Every Jack': William James, *Pragmatism and Other Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2000): 286-87.

¹² Richard Mabey, *The Barley Bird. Notes on the Suffolk Nightingale* (Woodbridge: Full Circle Editions, 2010) 17-18; cf. his *The Book of Nightingales* (London: Sinclair_ Stevenson, 1997): 8-9.

¹³ See Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor. The Creation of Meaning in Language*, transl. Robert Czerny (London: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁴ I read quotation on a notice accompanying an exhibition of her work.

¹⁵ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, MS., 'Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere', four lectures given at the University of Cambridge in 1998: 63.

enchantment is not so much desire as it is yearning, or longing. The result can be a kind of pre-emptive nostalgia. In the words of the great haiku poet Bashō, ‘Even in Kyōto, hearing the cuckoo cry, I long for Kyōto.’

Let’s turn to place. Tolkien’s name for the place of enchantment is Faërie, and he describes it as ‘the realm or state in which fairies have their being. [But] Faërie contains many things besides elves and fays...it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves...when we are enchanted.’¹⁶ So Faërie is the place you find yourself in when you are enchanted, and it is what the place where you are then becomes. And as Tolkien implies, that place is very roomy. Indeed the words of a character in John Crowley’s wondertale, ‘The farther in you go, the bigger it gets, until, at the center point, it is infinite. Or at least very, very large.’¹⁷

The difference between infinite and very, very large is ultimately crucial, however, because the latter finally has its limits. And just as enchanted moments do not last forever, however much they feel that way at the time, we cannot stay forever in Faërie, only visit or be visited by it. (We are humans, not Elves.) It follows that a healthy relationship with enchantment needs a strong ego, to let go when needs must, and not fall into futile grasping or clinging, if possible. It’s not always possible. When it came time for her to leave her beloved Kenya, Karen Blixen found that ‘It was not I who was going away, I did not have it in my power to leave Africa, but it was the country that was slowly and gravely withdrawing from me, like the sea in ebb-tide’.¹⁸

The social philosopher Max Weber defined enchantment as ‘concrete magic’.¹⁹ What he meant was that it is both utterly particular – this person, in this precise moment and place – and inexhaustibly mysterious. In other words, it is both embodied, even carnal, *and* spiritual. As I have said, after Wittgenstein, life is neither purely ‘subjective’ (a state of mind) nor purely ‘objective’ (a condition of the world); it is inextricably both. And as an especially intense experience of being alive, so is enchantment.

This means that it doesn’t fall under the rule of either of what Gregory Bateson called our two dominant ‘species of superstition’: the purportedly pure physicality of scientific materialism, on the one hand, and the supposedly pure spirituality of Romantic supernaturalism on the other.²⁰ (The latter has also been safely secularised as mainstream psychology, but it maintains the same destructive one-sidedness.)

The spiritual dimension of enchantment – its ‘magic’ – is not something floating above concrete circumstances, or added to it, as the word ‘super-natural’ implies. It only exists in, and as, those circumstances: not the contrary of the world of the senses but ‘its lining and its depth’, in the words of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty; in short, its meaning.²¹ And the farther in you go, the more ‘transcendental’ it becomes.

Third account, and one of my own, which I tell because it shows how natural enchantment goes even further in challenging the modernist prejudice which confines subjectivity and agency to ‘inside’ human heads (as if the mind, unlike the brain, had an ‘inside’ or

¹⁶ Flieger and Anderson, *Tolkien*: 32.

¹⁷ John Crowley, *Little, Big* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1982): 43.

¹⁸ Karen Blixen, *Out of Africa* (New York: Random House, 1970 [1937]): 381.

¹⁹ H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1991): 282.

²⁰ Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson, *Angels Fear. An Investigation into the Nature and Meaning of the Sacred* (London: Rider, 1987): 51.

²¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort and transl. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968): 149.

‘outside’!), sometimes grudgingly extended to a few ‘higher’ animals. But this time – as often happens – the enchanting other is not a biological entity, strictly speaking, but a wild place.

In his classic wondertale of 1871, George MacDonald says that in the country at the back of the North Wind, there is a river that ‘flows not through but over grass: its channel, instead of being rock, stones, pebbles, sand, or anything else, was of pure meadow grass, not overlong.’ In 2004, a friend took me for a walk in Nakajimadai Recreation Park in Shishigahana Shitsugen, at the foot of Mount Chokai in Akita Prefecture, Japan. And there, in a forest at the foot of the mountain, although not looking for it, I found it. I had never been for a walk with a river before. Not by, but *with*. It flowed freely where it would, not taking a predetermined or even self-created course in a riverbed but among grass, moss and dead leaves, through the forest. And we walked alongside it, the three of us keeping each other company. (The glowing blues and greens were so intense that most people, seeing the photographs I took, assume they had been Photoshopped... What an imagination my camera must have!)

At this point, I can almost hear the modernists who police this sort of thing wheeling out all the usual instruments for suppressing non-human agency and protecting human supremacy: I was ‘projecting’, or ‘imagining’, or ‘fantasizing’. But if an experience is upstream of any foundational subject/ object split, it can’t be disqualified as merely subjective by wielding a rhetorical objectivity. As Wittgenstein says, ‘If everything behaves as if a sign had meaning, then it does have meaning.’²²

Let’s return to my earlier claim that all enchantments are natural. It would be easy to go through the various kinds or sites of enchantment and show the inalienably natural dimension of each. Erotic or romantic *love* without bodies would certainly be a novelty (even virtual bodies are an impoverished version of actual), but although non-sexual, embodiment is no less integral to a beloved child or friend. Every *art*, without exception, offers an engagement with at least one of the senses, and requires such an engagement in order to be apprehended. *Religion*: surely where ritual is concerned, its precise ‘concrete’ specificities are as important as, and indeed inseparable from, their religious meaning. *Food and drink*: I need not say more. *Learning*: there is neither teaching nor learning without the world. *Sports*: there is no purely mental (or spiritual) sport, not even chess or *go*. *Humour*: what laughs, so to speak? Can there be laughter without it?

All these experiences are relational and participatory – wonder *at*, enchantment *by* – which is to say, ecological, in the broadest and deepest sense. They take place *in* nature as experiences of concrete magic, in which the carnal embodiment of the enchanted is actively present, as is that of the enchanting one, in whatever form. And ultimately they occur *as* nature: instances or incarnations of the more-than-human world, which includes us as natural beings. (It is also quite capacious enough to include spirits, gods or goddesses. Even, I daresay, cyborgs.)

In short, enchantment is an inalienable part of life. However imperilled (which I don’t deny), its potential is inherent in being alive as embodied, ecological, interdependent, finite Earthlings. But it is also wonder at *being* alive! An astonishing and humbling apprehension of ‘wild Being’ (as Merleau-Ponty calls it),²³ incarnated as this particular precious, vulnerable other being, triumphantly themselves, before another one, affirmed in your affirmation of them: you.

²² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, transl. Pears/ McGuinness (London: RKP, 1961): 3.328.

Significantly, Wittgenstein once agreed that ‘You could say of my work that it is “phenomenology”.’ (Rush Rhees, *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (Oxford University Press, 1984): 116.)

²³ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*: passim.

Despite its apparent fluffiness, then, enchantment has profound pragmatic consequences, not least respecting our relationship with the natural world. Because in the end, we will only fight to defend what we have been enchanted by and learned to value and love. Reason alone, although very important, isn't enough when it stands alone. This point finds a special resonance in the most serious crisis of all that is facing us: not COVID-19, but the ecocide of which it is only one result. Again, good policy and science are needed, but without personal wonder in and at the natural world, they are ultimately blind. It is enchantment that opens our eyes.