

The Work of Wonder

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I want to take this welcome opportunity to reflect on awe and attention. First, a few preliminary remarks. One is that I will take ‘awe’ to mean wonder or enchantment and pass over other possibilities, such as the sublime.¹ Second, my intention is to try to understand awe in that sense, and thereby to honour it better. I have no interest whatsoever in ‘explaining’ it. And I shall use mainly my own words to report my own conclusions; so although they usually do have a scholarly dimension, I won’t be foregrounding it.

Finally, the ultimate context for my reflections is the human-caused ecological crisis now engulfing the Earth, sometimes called ‘ecocide’. I shall concentrate on awe, and fit attention around that, but we’ll circle back to their ecological implications before the end.

What is the work of wonder? I can find three kinds for us to consider. One, how does wonder actually work? What are its dynamics? Two, what work do we need to do to enable wonder to take place? What are the conditions it needs, or at least likes? (This is where attention comes in.) And three, what work does wonder do in our lives and in the world? What are its potential effects?

Awe

If we want to know what something is, one way to get started is to ask what it is not; and a good answer in this case is, will. Wonder, enchantment, astonishment, delight, joy – these are experiences that are not, and cannot be, simply willed into existence or manufactured on demand. They are not under our control, not something we do but something that happens to us (or doesn’t). Indeed, trying to use them, to do something purposeful with them, destroys them. Their only use inheres in their use-lessness; their point is precisely in their point-lessness. They can only do their work, whatever that is, if we don’t try to *put* them to work. So whatever else wonder may be, it is not itself instrumental but sufficient unto itself.

Another helpful strategy is etymological. The word ‘enchantment’ comes from the Old French word *enchantment*, originally consisting of the Latin verb *cantare*, to sing, plus the preposition *en*, in; so it refers to the experience of being, or finding oneself, *in* a song – or by extension, any kind of enchanting narrative. The word ‘wonder’ comes from the Old English word *wundor*, originally Proto-Germanic **wundran*, meaning an astonishing or marvellous thing. In both cases, one wonders at, or is enchanted by, someone or something else. This is a second indispensable characteristic of wonder: it is relational. Wonder entails encounter. (This is already enough to dismiss the notion that it is a matter of purely personal psychology or ‘subjective’, meaning arbitrary.) Now relationship and encounter require boundaries, creating gaps which can then be crossed.² So on this and other grounds, we could say that enchantment lives in those gaps: liminal, ambiguous, ‘third’ places.³

Combining these two perspectives points us to one of J.R.R. Tolkien’s definitions of enchantment, an indispensable one, in my view: ‘a love and respect for all things, “animate” and “inanimate”, an unpossessive love of them as “other”’.⁴ Note that the distinction between animate and inanimate, although still possible, becomes unimportant. Also note the contrast

with what Tolkien's sometime student, the poet W.H. Auden, termed 'false enchantment': a desire either to possess the other or be possessed by them.⁵

Another aspect emerges in Max Weber's terse definition of enchantment as 'concrete magic'.⁶ That is, it is sensuously situated and particular, or 'material', and ineffably mysterious or 'spiritual'. It is *both*, and therefore neither one alone. Thus it cannot be corralled into the modern agenda of mastery, which begins with what Weber identified as the primary act of disenchantment: dividing everything up into two competing monisms, either 'supernatural' or 'physical', and allocating authority over each side accordingly: religionists in the first case, and scientists (originally natural philosophers) in the second.

That is why the philosophers of disenchantment par excellence, T.W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, said that both reason *and* religion outlaw the principle of enchantment, adding that 'All gods and qualities must be destroyed'.⁷ Why? Because both are necessarily plural, recursively defining and defined by all the others they are not, whereas effective disenchantment requires a *single* principle in order to rule them all and calculate everything. Therefore it must be not only single (without any incommensurable competitors) but universal (true everywhere, without exception) and abstract (transcendentally true). This has long been supplied by monotheism, of course, but more recently by His modern secular heir: money.

Putting all these points together, then, we find something like this: wonder or true enchantment is a sign of presence, the presence of an other who at that moment is fully apprehended. (Always a who, even if technically a thing.) But it is also more. Wonder partly *reveals* the full meaning of this other (it was always there), yet partly *creates* it (it didn't exist, in one's awareness, before this moment). So it is often attended by deep paradox, or what Paul Ricoeur calls 'tensive truth', scandalous to tidy-minded logicians.⁸

What do I mean by 'fully apprehended'? A double dynamic is at work. One, the 'concrete' other is recognised or realised, in their unique particularity, by the senses – just *this* person, song, tree or whoever it might be, in *this* place, at *this* moment. Or it might be the place or moment themselves. Simultaneously, the 'magic' other is apprehended in terms of their mysterious meaning, their 'inner lining and depth'. Or as Karen Blixen put it, 'the idea God had when He made you.'⁹ Only the imagination can do this, and it does so by engaging what is not given directly to the senses and what they grasp, but *through* them: the past that is folded up into the present, or the future that is implicit in it, or the places elsewhere that constitute this one, and so on.

This is why to actually be 'in the moment' is so far from requiring an iconoclastic destruction of the imagination in favour of the bare senses, and all the rest of the usual nonsense. It is in fact (to quote the title of a poem by Wallace Stevens) 'an act of the most august imagination.' You can't be in a moment or a place that has no depth or isn't fully real. And when that happens it is a transcendent experience of wonder, but the transcendence is immanent. It doesn't involve rising above but going more deeply in.

Conditions

Let me remind you that we cannot create, control or manipulate wonder; it is wild, and therefore unbidable. Yet it evidently has conditions, even if the best of these cannot guarantee that it will necessarily happen. (Every artist knows this.) So we are not talking about causes here, at least in the classical sense. 'Nothing "happened", but everything has changed', as the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro nicely puts it.¹⁰ But we can create the right conditions, and ask nicely. A great deal of art – all the arts – and religious ritual is about doing just that. And it can also be done in one's life, as part of a way of life.

One name for this is animism.¹¹ I define animism as a principled openness to encounters with other subjects and agency, regardless of whether the other party is technically animate or inanimate. That includes resisting the learned imperative to retrospectively redescribe such encounters as the ‘projection’ of meaning – now supposedly the prerogative of the human mind alone – onto an inert and meaningless world. This Cartesian fantasy is merely a kind of modernist virtue-signalling which helps to preserve human privilege. ‘Anthropomorphism’ does much the same work.¹²

Returning to the conditions for enchantment, I should qualify my earlier strong distinction between wonder and will. The practitioner of art or religious ritual must indeed exert a maximum of will, plus skill, to create propitious conditions for enchantment, without guaranteeing its attendance. In this way, although wonder and will are indeed entangled in practice, they remain distinct.

What are the conditions that enchantment favours? Certainly openness, respect and tolerance – all the virtues, in fact, of classical humanism at its most humane. But attention is another, because for encounter to happen, and all the more so in the particularly intense form of enchantment, *you* need to be present too. Although I will add that sometimes enchantment can summon your presence by peremptorily making itself known, so you spontaneously find yourself paying attention.

What kind of attention? It is attentive without intervening. There is no attempt to control or direct anything. Nor is it cautious, hedged with preconditions and safeguards. It is ‘fearlessly passive’, in Adorno’s pithy term; or even better, from the great travel-writer and essayist Freya Stark, ‘fearless receptivity’.¹³ Needless to say, perhaps, this quality resonates closely with Keats’s famous ‘negative capability; that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’.

The need for receptivity seems clear enough, but why must it be fearless? Because when you are present, you are vulnerable. In any relationship properly so-called – and all the more so when lost in wonder or enchanted – no one party is in complete control, so anything can happen. In other words, wonder, like more-than-human nature, in which it is rooted, is wild.¹⁴

But note that there is something valuable the will can do – maybe something only it can do – in the service of wonder. Let’s say that if we want enchantment in our lives, we can have the *intention* to pay attention. We can, and should, have a principled, even disciplined, willingness to be present for everything that is occurring. The resonance with both meditation and prayer, at least in some versions, is obvious.¹⁵ (I hope I don’t need to add that you cannot succeed in paying attention 24/7. That is not an option.)

This point brings to the fore one of our concerns here, because attention ain’t what it used to be. There is overwhelming evidence that the widespread use of various electronic and ‘social’ media is shortening attention spans, diminishing the ability to concentrate and remember, and driving down the ability and taste for deep reading, for example.¹⁶ None of these effects are anything but deliberate; we now know that great ingenuity has gone into undermining users’ impulse control, exploiting their emotional and developmental vulnerabilities, encouraging peer group pressure, and designing for addiction.

The overall result has been rather coolly summarised as ‘continuous partial attention’. One recent study argues for optimism insofar as being cheap and easily available, e-literacy will liberate new cognitive potential among previously unreached children.¹⁷ Maybe, but even if so, would such gains justify or cancel out the losses? Of course not. But as former executives and engineers of Facebook, Apple and Google line up to warn us of the dangers of what they have created, I won’t belabour the point.¹⁸

It’s not only a matter of the corporate colonization of head space, however. The use of these devices is driving an extraordinary privatization – which is to say, disenchantment – of places that used to be shared, and as such, open to unmediated experience, including

relationships. As Anthony O’Hear remarked in 2000, ‘The simple act of peacefully walking through public places’ – or sitting in them, in public parks or on public transport – ‘is now a kind of relic of the ancien régime.’¹⁹ And ironically, as privatization of the personal increases, personal privacy declines.

This is a problem, because paradoxically, in order to relate well, you need to have sufficient autonomy and integrity to be able to do so. After a certain point the more you are connected, networked and ‘befriended’, the more genuine relationship becomes impossible. In the same way, to the extent you are ‘everywhere’ you are nowhere, or as close to nowhere as it’s possible to get. And how then can you engage with precise sensuous circumstances, let alone discover their inner lining and depth?

Incidentally, I say ‘unmediated experience’ advisedly. It is a Platonic shibboleth that there is a pure or objective soul whose perception is then ‘affected’ by the senses. In the lives we actually lead, a body – or more accurately, a bodymind – is not mediation; it is what sometimes *gets* mediated.

It’s also striking that we are analogue animals often trying to adapt to, think, behave and live like digital machines. Code, the spectral life-blood of computerization, digitalization and algorithms, is, of course, binary: a zero or a one. But nothing alive is entirely and solely either a zero or a one, or any version thereof. And since there is no in between, no gap that may therefore be crossed by an encounter, true enchantment becomes homeless.

So all in all, I think we must accept that a collective process of significant cultural impoverishment is taking place, which contributes directly to the devastation of the natural world. We notice the latter less and less, both what we are doing to it and its effects. This is indeed, as Weber prophesied exactly one hundred years ago, ‘the disenchantment of the world’.

I say ‘true’ enchantment to remind us that wonder, like the relationships it consists of, is wild; so the correct attitude to it is therefore unpossessive, respectful and indeed reverent. It follows that anything that *is* being mastered and managed must be something else. And the will-to-power will have an active hand in directing it, whether crudely or subtly, for certain strictly human-centred purposes. Indeed, it is most directly realised in the marketing and advertising industries, a billion-pound industry. Since we need a name for this pseudo-enchantment, let’s call it ‘glamour’. The goal of glamour is to create false enchantment – the desire to possess someone or something, or be possessed by them – which does lend itself to managed, manipulated, packaged, sold and bought; in the words of a fashion magnate, ‘selling the dream’. We see this everywhere, on a massive scale.

And yet, and yet... People are obviously still falling in love, being transported by music, feeling deeply at home in nature and so on. In addition to this empirical fact, I do not think the world will ever become wholly disenchanted, the ‘icy night of polar darkness’ that Weber foresaw, nor even the end in fire that Robert Frost favoured, although that seems likelier. Why? Because wonder is a potential indestructibly inherent in embodied, embedded, ecological life. I have come to agree with the philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend’s late reflection that even after the critique of essentialism has done its worst, there is such a thing as human nature.²⁰ That is, a humanly-inflected nature. So you might say that enchantment is our birthright. And it only needs reawakening, because in those moments – ‘short but deep’, as the artist Etel Adnan says – all our millennia-long training in disenchantment falls away.

But let’s not get too happy. There is no reason why true enchantment couldn’t diminish and fade, becoming increasingly rare if not actually extinct, as, like an endangered wild species, its natural habitat is destroyed and appropriated. You can still see some individuals in zoos, but the real thing is inseparable from the environment it co-evolved in and with, so prisoners don’t really count; nor do images of them on the telly or computer screen, as if they could be captured by pixels... I don’t say this kind of fast-track to extinction is definitely

happening – I’m really not sure – but I do say it *could*. So let’s take these issues seriously, and treat corporate glamour, high-end cultural disenchantment and techno-boosterism with the contempt they deserve.

Effects

What of the work wonder does for us? Let me quote Tolkien again: “‘Faery’” – his word for enchantment – ‘is as necessary for the health and complete functioning of the Human as is sunlight for physical life...’²¹ By implication, if, for whatever reason, people cannot get it, they will settle, and pay, for glamour. Indeed, it may well be that as I have already implied, they are being systematically denied it and thus driven to seek glamour, the fast food of wonder. And they will keep coming back for more, and being supplied, for a price. For unlike enchantment, where even a yearning can satisfy in a deeper way than any appeasement, glamour never does.

But I want to take Tolkien’s remark back to another point I have already mentioned, namely that wonder reveals a *truth* about the enchanting other. William James once asked, of a scenario where Jack is deeply in love with Jill, whom everyone else sees as perfectly ordinary, who sees her more truly? He answered, surely it is Jack; he apprehends a truth about Jill which is inaccessible to the rest of us.²²

Now the most powerful of our apprehensions are those of the more-than-human natural world which formed our bodyminds and continue to inform them. That includes the most sophisticated cultural variants of art, science and religion – all of them as Earthly, as chthonic (as we say in West London), as ourselves. And not ‘merely’ so, for what else could they be?

In this case, what wonder can do for us is to reveal a deep truth about the more-than-human natural world – that is, the natural world than includes but vastly exceeds us – in all the unfathomable specificity of its countless avatars. Not its instrumental, exchange- or use-value, the currency of disenchantment, but its *intrinsic* value. One way of expressing which is: *Not for sale*. And that is a healing truth. It is good for us to know, and its benefits for mental, spiritual, social or even ecological health aren’t only ours. They feed back into care for the Earth. Indeed, I don’t think we have any chance of stopping or reversing ecocide without the truths afforded by its natural enchantments.

This point returns us to the essential immiscibility (like oil and water) of wonder and will, and wonder’s unbiddability. Another way to state the point is this: the ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood defined the program of modernity as ‘the rational mastery of nature’, including human nature.²³ I think that is correct, although it needs to be supplemented by an awareness of the extent to which modernity means just the triumph of programme. To borrow from Wallace Stevens again, on modern art, ‘It has a reason for everything. Even the lack of reason becomes a reason.’²⁴ And anything that is done for a reason, rather than for its own sake, becomes an exercise in disenchantment.

Wonder, in contrast, is a *non-modern* experience. I don’t mean anti-modern, because that’s a programme too. In fact, that’s how modernity secretly recoups and manages dissent. This is true of any deliberate irrationality – in art, for example, surrealism or Dada. Only what is *non-modern* is truly subversive.

Another way to think of this contrast is that modernity, in its programmacity, is *logos*, where enchantment is *mythos*. This can be further fleshed out in that the latter doesn’t take place in space (*topos*) but as a place (*chora*), nor in time (*chronos*) but as a moment (*kairos*). The first two items of those pairs are logos-ridden abstractions, ‘rotten with perfection’ (in Kenneth Burke’s resonant phrase), whereas the second two refer to, and honour, living experience. But *logos* and *mythos* should not be thought of as equal opposites. No one experiences time except as a kind of vampirically extended moment, nor space except as a kind of nightmarishly

extrapolated place. And *logos* is itself a mythic – and specifically Apollonian – claim. In the words of the modern Irish mystic John Moriarty, ‘myth not maths is the mother tongue.’

It follows that wonder is not – that is, it behaves in ways that are not – politically correct. But please note that it is not necessarily politically *incorrect*, either. It’s not egalitarian, or bestowed democratically, nor does it respect gender, class or race. But it doesn’t oppose those values either. It is simply, shall we say, orthogonal to them.

It also follows – and I’m emphasizing this point because it’s so hard for us human animals to resist a simian urge to meddle, interfere and direct, not to mention reach irritably after fact and reason – that wonder cannot be managed. It cannot be tested, evaluated, improved, rolled out or developed, and there can be no system or method (let alone methodology) to achieve it – even if the goal is re-enchantment! In fact, that attempt would not only be arrogant but insidious, since it would require tacitly replacing wonder with a biddable simulacrum, complete with targets, outcomes, benchmarks, assessments, impacts and other instruments of modern management; in other words, a grievous betrayal.²⁵

Difficult though it may be, even the friends of wonder need to accept, in all humility and honesty, that the most we can do is try to create and protect propitious conditions for it, in whatever contexts are offered by our lives as Earthlings – embodied, engendered and embedded beings – and then let wonder do *its* work, if it will.

Finally, you may have noticed that I speak of wonder as a subject and agent in its own right. To do so is simply to respect the phenomenon (or, if you prefer, the data), refuse to engage in the modernist self-policing that makes us collaborators in the disenchantment of the world, and resolve to honour the wonder that makes life worth living. I invite you to join me, if you’re not already here.

Thank you.

REFERENCES

- ¹ I am therefore not identifying awe or wonder with the fantastic, the surreal, the Gothic or the uncanny, nor the sublime of either Kant or Burke. In my view, it is quite distinct from these, even when there is some overlap. Indeed, as Sean Kane has pointed out to me, even wonder and enchantment are not quite identical. For example, the latter allows for the possibility of ‘false enchantment’ (ref. 5 below) but the former does not. But the overlap between wonder and Auden’s ‘true enchantment’, even if not complete, is sufficient for our purposes here, so I shall use them as effectively cognate.
- ² This phenomenon, named as ‘chiasm’, was extensively explored by Maurice Merleau-Ponty.
- ³ This phenomenon was articulated and theorised by D. W. Winnicott.
- ⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Smith of Wootton Major*, extended edition, ed. Verlyn Flieger (London: HarperCollins, 2005): 101.
- ⁵ W.H. Auden, *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971): 149.
- ⁶ H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1991): 282.
- ⁷ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, transl. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002): 13, 5. An earlier version of the first point is better: ‘Reason and religion deprecate and condemn the principle of magic enchantment’ – p. 18 in the translation by John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1994).
- ⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, transl. Robert Czerny (London: Routledge, 2003). For more, see my ‘Radical Metaphor: or why Place, Nature and Narrative are Each Other but aren’t Themselves’, *EarthLines* 6 (August 2013) pp. 35-38, which is also accessible on my website.
- ⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort and transl. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968). Karen Blixen, *Out of Africa* (New York: Random House, 1970 [1937]): 183.
- ¹⁰ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, MS., ‘Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere’, 4 lectures given 17.2-10.3.1998 at the Dept. of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge: 63.
- ¹¹ Sometimes known as ‘the new animism’. See Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) and Graham Harvey (ed.), *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (Durham: Acumen, 2013).
- ¹² The work of Val Plumwood is especially acute on this point. But let me add that animism should not be confused with panpsychism; agency and subjectivity are potential, not necessary, on pain of yet another imperium which insists, in a mirror-image of the universal truth that nothing is alive, that everything is, and the corresponding injunction to see it that way.
- ¹³ Adorno quoted in Martin Jay, *Adorno* (London: Fontana, 1984): 73. Freya Stark, *Perseus in the Wind* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013 [1948]): 107. Is this ability gendered? It seems so to me, although I won’t follow it up here.
- ¹⁴ ‘More-than-human’ is, of course, from David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).
- ¹⁵ That is virtually a definition of *zazen* (sitting meditation), or *shikan-taza* (just sitting), in the Sōtō tradition of Zen Buddhism. Also cf. Simone Weil: ‘Absolute unmixed attention is prayer.’ For this quotation and very helpful discussions, I am grateful to Andy Barritt.
- ¹⁶ For a good recent(ish) discussion, see Paul Lewis, ‘Everyone is distracted. All of the time’, *The Guardian Weekly* (27.10.17).
- ¹⁷ Maryanne Wolf, *Tales of Literacy for the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- ¹⁸ E.g. Justin Rosenstein, Sean Parker, Chamath Palihapitiya and Tristan Harris. Already in 2010, there was Steve Jobs’s extraordinary response to a question about how his children liked the new iPad: ‘They haven’t used it. We limit how much technology our kids use at home.’ Too bad about all the other kids, eh?
- ¹⁹ Anthony O’Hear, ‘The Soundness of Silence’, *The Wall Street Journal* (5.5.2000).
- ²⁰ Paul K. Feyerabend, *Killing Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995?): 152. There is no suggestion here that human nature is unchanging or unaffected by circumstances; only that it possesses a stability and coherence which, despite being ultimately relative and contingent, suffice for all our purposes.
- ²¹ Tolkien: *Smith*: 101.
- ²² ‘Every Jack’: William James, *Pragmatism and Other Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2000): 286-87.
- ²³ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993).

²⁴ Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960): 167.

²⁵ For more on this in an educational context, see my ‘The Enchantment of Learning and “The Fate of our Times”’, pp. 33-51 in Angela Voss and Simon Wilson (eds), *Re-Enchanting the Academy* (Auckland/ Seattle: Rubedo Press, 2017).