

Enchantment, Place and Space

A talk for the Sophia Centre (22 September 2020)

Patrick Curry

I want to talk today about each of these three ideas, starting with enchantment and then exploring its implications for place and space. At the end, we will briefly consider some further implications for cultural astronomy.

So, what is enchantment? [Curry] First and foremost, it is an experience of *wonder*: sheer existential wonder. [Hepburn] Its intensity can vary from charm, to delight, to full-blown joy. (We could call the last ‘radical enchantment’.) It tends to happen to us, being the kind of animals that we are, in certain contexts, notably love, nature, religion, art of all kinds, food and drink, learning, and sports.

Let’s notice right away that like everything that *is* something (not nothing, or anything), wonder has an instructive contrary: in this case, *will*. The experience of wonder as unlike as possible from those in which the chief desire and intention is to *do* something, to *make* something happen.

Relationality

A second point is that wonder is always wonder-*at*: an encounter, a meeting, across a gap [M-P] of difference, with an other. The other may be another human, another animal, or plant, or place, or sight, sound, smell, taste, texture, or idea. But whatever it is, in enchantment it *becomes*, and is realised to already *be*, another *person*, with a distinct personality and therefore ensemble of relatively enduring qualities. (There is no defensible reason to confine personhood to human beings: a typically self-serving modern and Western notion.)

So enchantment is fundamentally *relational*. Differences between you and the other don’t disappear; in fact, it is important that they don’t. Without that liminal gap, there can be no encounter; and without that, no enchantment. As W.H. Auden puts it, ‘For there to be one there first must be two.’ [Ref] But the boundaries become highly permeable, crossable in both directions, and in that crossing something fundamental emerges as deeply shared.

True relationship is always mutual, with both or all parties apprehended as well as apprehending, affected as well as affecting. Traffic that is one-way only (paradigmatically, as in a pure master-slave relation) does not qualify. [Buber] Enchantment is therefore wholly incompatible with cool hyper-separation, in which one party exercises complete control over the other and is free to manipulate them without being affected in turn. (I call this mode ‘Apollonian’.)

Nor is it the opposite, however: orgasmic unity or an ecstatic merging, in which all differences are obliterated, so there are no longer two persons engaged in experiencing, relating, discovering, creating, or indeed existing as such. (I call this mode ‘Dionysian’.)

It further follows that as an instance of true relationship – and all the more so as a particularly intense one – in enchantment, no one is in charge. In other words it is *wild*, or what Anthony

Thorley has called ‘unbiddable’. It cannot *be* used, without changing it into something very different.

This dynamic is one that enchantment shares with the natural world, where again no one is in control; the complex concatenations of qualities and powers at work constitute their own subjects and agents, so outcomes are never certain, final or complete. So there is an elective affinity, to use Goethe’s phrase, between enchantment and wild nature; or, we could say, ecology in its broadest and deepest sense. And although it’s not a point I can develop here, I would say that all the kinds of enchantment I mentioned earlier (love, etc.) are ultimately different kinds of natural enchantment.

Concrete magic

Another unvarying characteristic of enchantment is summed up in Max Weber’s description of it as ‘*concrete magic*’. [Ref] What this means is that enchantment is both precisely particular, circumstantial, embodied, even carnal, *and* inexhaustible, mysterious and spiritual. Let’s unpack this terse but rich term, starting with the ‘concrete’ part. It has two interlinked aspects. One concerns what we usually call ‘time’ and the other what we usually call ‘space’. But as we shall see, those words are misleading in this context.

Space/Moment

Unlike some mystical experience (or how it is described, at any rate), enchantment doesn’t take place nowhere in particular, a cloudy, vague elsewhere. It is always and only occurs in a *very* particular place, a *here* which is only distinctive but unique. For this reason, enchantment occurs not in a *space* but in, and as, a *place*. Or, since the Greeks had names for everything, not *topos* but *chora*.

J.R.R. Tolkien defines *Faërie* – his term for enchantment – as ‘the realm or state in which fairies have their being.’ But, he adds – and this is crucial – ‘*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.*’ [Ref] *Faërie* is thus the place where you *find* yourself when you are enchanted, and what the place where you are *becomes*. (This double dynamic, of both creating *and* discovering, never only one or the other, is typical of enchantment.)

But we can’t *stay* there. For it follows from the concreteness of place, however enchanted, that it is subject to the inherent contingency of this sub-lunary, or fallen, or samsaric world. It *cannot* stay the same completely or for long. And from our side, those who are enchanted, we remain humans, not elves. Technology is as much a part of human nature as wonder, and we can only *live* somewhere between the two, and – if we are lucky – visit *Faërie* betimes, or be visited by it. [Zwicky] (By invitation only! Being unbiddable, its gates cannot be stormed.)

It follows that a healthy relationship with enchantment needs a strong ego, to let go... Or not. Karen Blixen, as she watched from the departing ship from her beloved Kenya, 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.’ [Ref]

Time/Moment

Let's turn to the 'time' aspect of enchantment's concreteness. Classically, the experience of enchantment takes place in a moment: like its place, from which it is analytically distinguishable but with which, in practice, it is inseparably entangled, a very particular moment, often (to quote the artist Etel Adnan) 'short but deep': a now which is also not only distinctive but unique. Enchantment thus happens not in *time* but in, and as, a *moment*. Not *chronos*, but *kairos*.

(By the way, if I say 'Such moments are *experienced* as unique', I risk being misunderstood as implying they are 'subjectively' perceived as unique but aren't really. But if I simply say they *are* unique, I risk being misunderstood as making an *ex cathedra* pronouncement on the 'objective' nature of moments. The truth – which we are not trained to apprehend – is that they are unique because they are experienced to be so, and they are experienced to be so because they are.)

Now it is a commonplace that in moments of enchantment, time stops or stands still. In the words of Louis MacNeice's poem 'Meeting Point', 'Time was away and somewhere else./ The waiter did not come, the clock/ Forgot them.../ Time was away and somewhere else.' [Ref] But, although I'm reluctant to even qualify the spell, let alone break it, honesty compels me to point out that time doesn't actually stop so much as slow down, however drastically. At some point, the eddy, after pausing in its protected little bay, gradually rejoins the swirling stream which never stops.

Tolkien's account of Frodo's entry into Lothlórien, the heart of enchantment in Middle-earth, includes a profound meditation on what enchantment does to time: for example, '[I]t seemed to him that he had stepped over a bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days, and was now walking in a world that was no more.... Frodo stood still, hearing far off great seas upon beaches that had long ago been washed away, and sea-birds crying whose race had perished from the earth...' Yet even Galadriel admits that in the end, 'Lothlórien will fade, and the tides of Time will sweep it away.'

The upshot of this double dose of concreteness is that enchantment *always passes*. Indeed, its passing is already inherent in the very place and moment it happens, just as 'goodbye' is in every 'hello'. Sometimes, for those blessed, or cursed, with fine apperception, even the most joyful enchantment is shot through by a poignant melancholy. It doesn't destroy the joy, but neither is it completely obscured. The wonder of childhood is continually becoming 'grown-up'; wild nature is always falling to so-called 'development'; the Elves, exemplars of enchantment, are forever passing over the Sea, leaving us behind on the shore of Middle-earth in the 'Age of Men', now known as the Anthropocene. But aren't we glad nonetheless that there are any Elves at all?

Now I may seem to have implied that time *vs* moment and space *vs* place are two pairs of pure opposites, but that would be wrong. No matter how ingenious we may be, up to and including the invention of binary code, digital operations and algorithms, we are and remain *analogue* animals: embodied, embedded, ecological. It is impossible for us to live in, let alone as, pure space or pure time. (Proust's masterpiece would have been more accurately entitled *In Search of Lost Moments*.) But we can and do live in and as moments and places, however imperfectly. So for us, time and space are peculiar kinds of moment and place, marked by their disenchanting impersonality.

This failure to be or become digital beings should not be a cause of despair. On the contrary: it means that although vulnerable, enchantment is also indestructible. Its potential is inherent in being alive. It is only possible because we are these odd, limited, finite Earthlings.

'Magic'

What of the 'magic' part of Weber's resonant term? Don't be misled by the word itself. Much unnecessary confusion has resulted from confusing magic with enchantment. Tolkien pointed out the difference long ago. 'Magic,' he said, 'is not an art but a technique; its desire is power in this world, domination of things and wills.' Whereas 'the primal desire at the heart of Faerie [is] the realization, , of imagined wonder.' [Ref] (Realisation in two senses: enchantment becoming real, and realising that it is so. And 'independent of the conceiving mind' is a reminder that enchantment is not primarily cognitive, nor even epistemological. It involves the whole being, including its vital interdependencies.)

Thus (as Tolkien well knew), the proto-Indo-European root for 'magic' and 'machine' is the same word: **magh*, meaning to have power. Whether the means are supposedly material or occult, the goal of mastery remains. And as the philosopher John Casey says, 'Magic has a particular connection with the exercise of the will; it is a particularly direct and unmediated working of the will upon the world.' [Ref]

What Weber means by 'magic' is rather the spiritual mystery and meaning – unplumbable, inexhaustible, ineffable – of the sensuous concrete world. But this aspect of enchantment is decidedly not supernatural or transcendent and therefore essentially different from the world that can be grasped by the senses. It is not something which must therefore be added to it, or which can be withheld from it. On the contrary: enchantment's spirituality is deeply natural (as Tolkien remarks of the Elves), and wholly immanent: it is that world's and its things' 'inner lining and depth', in the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. [Ref] It only inheres in and as this world and those things – not in or as a Heaven, or realm of Ideas, or Mind, or indeed a scientifically-determined material reality which cannot be directly experienced by an embodied mind. (It's only the Platonists, whether idealist or scientific, who consider that a grievous limitation. Most of us have no idea, and they don't want to know, of the body's extraordinary sensitivity and capacities.)

Enchantment in Modernity

Enchantment is thus both concrete *and* magic, and neither one alone. That's why it cannot be corralled into the modern agenda of mastery, which proceeds by splitting everything up into two competing monisms, either concrete *or* magic, each with its priestly caste: scientific materialists for one, religious supernaturalists for the other. They fight over the prize but secretly conspire in the deceit that it's possible to carry off at all. That's why Gregory Bateson calls the 'physical'/'material' fetish of materialists and the 'psychological'/'spiritual' one of supernaturalists, 'two species of superstition [which] feed each other.'

The philosophical roots of this programme lie in Plato, but Descartes repeated it on modern steroids, to lasting effect. Hegel tried to organise an idealist takeover which Marx then inverted in order to put materialism on top... And so on. Only a few philosophers – notably Nietzsche, William James, Weber, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, Plumwood, Whitehead and Wittgenstein – have questioned the programme as a whole.

Weber identified splitting concrete magic as the primary act of disenchantment. [Ref] It generates a whole set of destructively stupid questions which disenchant, certainly not for the benefit of the enchanted. For example, ‘Is this (whatever it may be) *real*, or *imaginary*?’ ‘Is it *physical*, or *mental*?’ ‘Is it *absolutely true knowledge*, or *utter delusion*?’ And so on.

As concrete magic, enchantment cannot survive the operation. But by the same token, it keeps popping up anew to defy it. For example, enchantment partly creates and partly reveals a *truth about* the enchanting other, namely their particular priceless intrinsic value. So it is not only ‘subjective’. But to become real, it also requires someone particular, in that moment and place, to *be* enchanted and value accordingly. So it is not only ‘objective’ either.

Enchantment thus reminds us of a broader and deeper truth about life itself. Wittgenstein lays it out. Life, he says, is not merely physiological (these days, neurophysiological). Nor is it merely psychological. ‘*Life is the world*’. [Ref]

Mythos/ Logos

Let me return to the linked pairs of place/ space and moment/ time, and remind you that they are not entirely symmetrical. In our experience as living beings, place includes space but not the reverse, while moment includes time but not the reverse. Experience is *qualitative* – what we experience *are* qualia – so we cannot experience the self-identical and interchangeable units of time and space as such, but only as peculiar kinds of moments and places: usually ones marked by their *lack* of meaning, beginning with boredom, extending into lifelessness and terminating in nihilism. In Kenneth Burke’s resonant phrase, they are ‘rotten with perfection’. [Ref]

Now these four modes can be encompassed by just two. Place and moment constitute *mythos*, while time and space constitute *logos*. And these two apparent opposites are also asymmetrical. *Logos* pretends to have disposed of *mythos*, but its binary and algorithmic abstractions are philosophical cheques which, in William James’s bracingly blunt metaphor, can never be cashed in the currency of life. They are only valid in the necromantic calculations of modernist disenchantment. And that term – necromancy – is no mere rhetorical conceit; despite its rationalist trappings, the *logos* of modernity is pervaded by the will of magic.

By the same token, *logos* should not be considered a full contrary of *mythos*, let alone its conquerer. Why? Because *logos* is itself a profoundly mythic – and specifically Apollonian – claim. In the words of the modern Irish mystic John Moriarty, ‘myth not maths is the mother tongue.’ And when we are living intensely, we are *ipso facto* living mythically. That includes, although it is not limited to, enchantment. But when we are *disenchanted*, that does not turn us into units of pure *logos* (although that is what the transhumanists would like). No, we are simply humans oppressed by the *lack* of enchantment; which is to say, intrinsic values in our lives and worlds which do not depend on their market-value; which is to say, meaning.

Cultural Astronomy

Now let’s consider the implications of all of this for cultural astronomy. A founding premiss, as outlined by Clive Ruggles and Nicholas Saunders in 1993, seems to have been that the sky and all its contents are a passive and invariant set of natural objects, themselves meaningless, onto which individuals and cultures ‘project’ or ‘assign’ various meanings, thus ‘culturally

constructing' a meaningful universe. The sky and everything in it is thus cast as set of resources for us clever and imaginative human beings to use. [Ref]

I can't say whether this assumption is still influential, but to the extent it remains so the time has come to put it away. Whenever anyone experiences the sky as meaningful – and all the more so, as enchanting – they are engaging mythically, participating – not standing outside, merely looking on – in a moment and place in which 'inner' and 'outer', 'self' and 'world', and 'mind' and 'matter' are equal partners. They are distinguishable as qualities, but not hierarchically, and none alone have any foundational status. As Merleau-Ponty says, 'The world is wholly inside, and I am wholly outside, myself.' [Ref]

To put it another way, the meaning of the sky – its meaningfulness – is not merely subjective, any more than it is purely objective. The stars' pulse and glitter, their milky path across the sky and the ancient animals in their celestial stalls, the promise of Venus, shining in the dawn or dusk, and the other planetary wanderers in their courses, the creamy white light of the Moon in all its phases, and the mutual movements, drawing close or pulling away, of the great dance: all this life, meaning and wonder inheres in them just as much as it does in our minds.

I also invite you to consider what the language of cultural constructionism reveals about its values. The idea that the natural world is merely a set of inert resources for humans to use for their own satisfaction and convenience, for example: where has this got us today? And the sheer arrogance and privilege of assuming that humans alone are not only entitled to do this, but the only animals capable of achieving meaning at all. Then there is the melodramatic self-pity of being uniquely able to realise that, in Richard Dawkins's aggressively disenchanting words, 'a constellation is of no more significance than a patch of curiously shaped damp on the bathroom ceiling', and tough it out... Oh, it's lonely at the top! [Ref: MM]

An essentially meaningless universe (except insofar as we graciously deign to give it some) is a completely unscientific assertion, of course. Not only in fact but in principle; how could it ever be tested empirically? And how could the range of determining facts to be considered ever be non-arbitrarily restricted? No, it is a metaphysical and political *choice*. In which case – and given in addition that the universe itself is the ultimate source and home of the only meanings we can ever know – I would recommend choosing an intrinsically *meaningful* one.

In fact, the Cartesian assumptions of cultural constructionism are based squarely on the two nightmares of stupidity we have already considered. As Tim Ingold pointed out twenty years ago, a radical distinction between a material/ physical 'nature' and a mental/ social 'culture', far from being a universal truth, is itself a contingent, modern and Western project. [Ref] It therefore cannot provide an unproblematic starting-point. Indeed, it is not only contingent but a distinctly weird idea, best understood as a special or limiting case of a world more accurately and economically characterised by subjectivity, agency and participation throughout – and consequently the enchantment of encounter – where these are *not* restricted to human beings, as is recognised in the aboriginal and indigenous societies that modernity has tried to extirpate and replace.

In conclusion, I would say that in reaching for the sky, let's also consider where we are standing. In the words of Ursula Le Guin, 'True journey is return.'

Thank you.