

## The Enchantment of Learning and ‘The Fate of our Times’<sup>1</sup>

Pp. 33-51 in Angela Voss and Simon Wilson (eds), *Re-Enchanting the Academy* (Auckland/Seattle: Rubedo Press, 2017)

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I’m going to proceed by supplying some examples of the enchantment of learning before getting to the bad news: the modern academy. I’ll conclude with a look at what we might do about it. First, let me define my terms a bit. The question of what ‘enchantment’ is could be unpacked at length, but you won’t go far wrong if you remember that it is essentially a state of wonder, as opposed to will or power or any of its variations like the will-to-power and power-knowledge. ‘Learning’ includes education, although it exceeds it, and education includes the academy, meaning universities, so what I have to say ideally takes in all of them.

The ‘fate’ part of my title refers to Max Weber’s pronouncement in 1918, based on a keen mind and a lifetime of consummate scholarship, that ‘The fate of our times is characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above all, by the “disenchantment of the world”’. That disenchantment results not from thinking or reasoning as such but rather from ‘the belief...that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation’. The programme to do so has deep religious, philosophical and cultural roots in Western culture. It proceeds mainly by splitting what Weber called the ‘unity of the primitive image of the world, in which everything [is] concrete magic’, into two exhaustively polarised and hierarchically valued categories: spiritual *vs.* material, mental *vs.* physical, and, above all, Being *vs.* mere appearance.<sup>2</sup>

‘Concrete magic’ was thus Weber’s definition of enchantment: an experience of someone or something that is at once sensuous, particular and contingent *and* deeply, ineffably mysterious. When and where this happens, everything is important, even necessary, and nothing is inferior, inessential or merely phenomenal. Put at its simplest, therefore, enchantment is the realisation – in varying degrees of intensity, the becoming real – of wonder.<sup>3</sup>

### What is the Enchantment of Learning?

Now the wonder of learning, the delight of discovering what (it turns out) you wanted to know, the joy of a new world to inhabit, seen through other than your own habitual eyes—these things are so undervalued in our current educational institutions that we need to take a moment to remind ourselves of what we are talking about. Here are three examples. Niccolò Machiavelli has been exiled from Florence to his family farm, and in a letter of 10th December 1513 to his friend Francesco Vettori, he writes:

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<sup>2</sup> H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1991), 155, 139, 282.

<sup>3</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien defines enchantment as ‘the realisation, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder’; Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (eds.), *Tolkien on Fairy-stories* (London: HarperCollins, 2008), 35.

On the coming of evening, I return to my house and enter my study, and at the door I take off the day's clothing, covered with mud and dust, and put on garments regal and courtly; and re clothed appropriately, I enter the ancient courts of men of antiquity where, affectionately received, I partake of that food which only is mine and for which I was born, where I am not too timid to speak with them and ask them the reasons for their actions; and they in their courtesy answer me; and for four hours of time I feel no weariness, I forget every trouble, I do not fear poverty, death does not dismay me; I give myself over entirely to them.<sup>4</sup>

This passage is usually assumed by modern scholars to be a mere humanist trope, a literary flourish. It is both more respectful and more economical, however, to assume that Machiavelli meant exactly what he said, and that what he describes is just what happened. Or are we too jaded to believe it? Too bad for us, if so!

Another example: in 1934, after a time of sleeping rough in his long walk across Europe, the great travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor found himself a guest of the British Consul in Sofia. He luxuriated in the hot baths, clean linen and fine food, but '[b]est of all,' he said, 'the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; I leapt at it like a panther'.<sup>5</sup>

More recently still, another writer, Eva Hoffman, recalls emerging from her fortnightly trip to the local library in her Warsaw neighbourhood, the interior of which was 'a space of mystery and magic, on whose threshold I stand a humble acolyte': 'I come out, usually into the dim evening streets, enchanted with what awaits me, and as soon as I come home, I pounce on one of the volumes'.<sup>6</sup> (Note the pantherine resonance with Leigh Fermor; the soul is hungry for living knowledge, and only that can satisfy it.)

This sort of relationship with learning—not only enchanted, but passionately so—is the true benchmark for understanding, appreciating and encouraging its wonder, so let me try to tease out some of the dynamics at work. One is the seriousness of play: improvised but not random, intentional but not goal-directed, and relational, involving other beings, of whatever kind, whether physically present or imaginally. When it takes place free from any attempt to direct or manipulate or use it, play is fundamental to the way we learn how to be ourselves as well as how others tick, how to create and innovate and, perhaps most importantly, how to learn at all. The enchantment resulting from play leads you deeper into whatever you're doing, which in turn generates a deeper enchantment.

Another aspect of the enchantment of learning is the intrinsic value of what is being learned. As John Henry Newman insisted long ago in *The Idea of a University*, 'any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward'. It is valuable not for its instrumental or exchange-value, in order to attain some other goal, no matter what, but, he wrote, 'for what its very presence does for us'.<sup>7</sup> And the experience of that presence is one of wonder.

In an essay of the same title, Simon Leys has restated Newman's thesis, writing that '*a university is a place where scholars seek truth, pursue and transmit knowledge for knowledge's sake – irrespective of the consequences, implications and utility of the*

<sup>4</sup> This passage can be found, in only very slightly differing translations, in any of the many biographies of Machiavelli, e.g. Michael White, *Machiavelli: A Man Misunderstood* (London: Abacus, 2004), 183-84.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Leigh Fermor, *The Broken Road: From the Iron Gates to Mount Athos*, ed. Colin Thubron and Artemis Cooper (London: John Murray, 2013), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation* (London: Vintage Books, 1998), 26.

<sup>7</sup> John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982 [1853]), 77, 78.

*endeavour.*’ No matter how anachronistic or impractical it may seem, it is necessary, now more than ever, to insist on this humanist ideal, even if only so we can realise how far we have fallen. As Leys says, ‘When a university yields to the utilitarian temptation, it betrays its vocation and sells its soul’, without which it cannot fulfil its very *raison d’être*.<sup>8</sup>

A third dynamic is metaphor. Metaphor is the life-blood of learning, and of the humanities in particular, because there can be no empathic, imaginative or narrative understanding without understanding-*as*; that is, without the tensive truth of being, at one and the same time, who you are as the reader, listener, viewer or whatever, and simultaneously (in defiance of Aristotle’s logical laws) as the other person, or indeed thing, you are hearing, watching or reading, or about whom you are reading.

Science has different goals: explanation, prediction, mastery.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, it may start in wonder but can only progress, in its own terms, by trying to ‘resolve’ or otherwise eliminate explicit metaphor, ambiguity and paradox. To quote the Nobel Prize-winning scientist Sir Peter Medawar (in a passage I find quite chilling): ‘As science advances, particular facts are comprehended within, and therefore in a sense annihilated by, general statements of steadily increasing explanatory power and compass... In all science we are being progressively relieved of the *burden* of singular instances, the *tyranny* of the particular’.<sup>10</sup>

What is valued here is increasingly generic abstraction, whose ultimate model is mathematics. Contrast this worldview with that of Freya Stark, the great travel writer and essayist, who affirms that ‘truth is *never* average. Since there is not one single thing in the world exactly like another, the very essence of truth is that it leaps across averages to the particular...’<sup>11</sup> Certainly this kind of truth is essential to enchantment, whose ‘magic’ is always to be found in and as the ‘concrete’. But I see it essential to life itself.

This is where metaphor comes in. As its great theorist Paul Ricoeur put it, metaphor discovers as it creates, and makes as it finds.<sup>12</sup> And it does so together with an other, whoever that may be. This is not truth as accurate representation, nor as deductive syllogism, but as relationship and its effects. Hence Weber’s definition of truth, respecting its wildness and autonomy: ‘only that which *wants* to be true for all those who *want* the truth’.<sup>13</sup> The contrast with the starveling captive of modern power-knowledge could hardly be clearer.

This mode is not about knowing and manipulating an item. It is participatory, both affecting the other party or parties and being affected by them. It follows that the actual individuals involved are of paramount importance. It is above all from and in relationship with a particular (‘concrete’) teacher that one learns, and one does in a way that includes but transcends any methods or propositional content. This relationality extends to communities of teaching and learning – some of whose members (as in the experience of Machiavelli) may

<sup>8</sup> Simon Leys, ‘The Idea of a University’, pp. 461-64 in *The Hall of Uselessness: Collected Essays* (New York: NYRB, 2013): 463, 464. Emphasis in original.

<sup>9</sup> See the work of Mary Midgley, Paul Feyerabend and many others, including my own ‘Defending the Humanities in a Time of Ecocide’ –

<http://www.patrickcurry.co.uk/papers/Rio%20paper%20-%20Feb%202015.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Paul Feyerabend, *Conquest of Abundance: A Tale of Abstraction versus the Richness of Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 250, 251 (my emphases). Feyerabend’s discussion here is typically lucid and humane.

<sup>11</sup> Freya Stark, *Perseus in the Wind: A Life of Travel* (Tauris Parke, 2013 [1948]), 81 (her emphasis).

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, transl. Robert Czerny (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Weber quoted in Lawrence A. Schaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage: Culture, Politics, and Modernity in the Thought of Max Weber* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 118. Emphases in original.

not be present in the narrowly physical sense – and their various traditions. And it leaves thinking as only a process that does not already know, although it may sense, its conclusion in advance.

I was lucky enough to have this kind of experience in Gregory Bateson's classes at the University of California (Santa Cruz) in the mid-70s. It comprised learning new things about both the world and myself, and with each one, a significantly new world and self came into being. But not only that; the excitement was both subtler and more sweeping. To borrow Bateson's own terms, I was learning how to learn. And that only happened in his presence, in a way that cannot be reduced to concepts alone. Yet I was also aware of the presence, not literally but unmistakably nonetheless, of those from whom he had learned, and learned how to think: Blake, Lamark, his father the scientist William Bateson and, not least, the author of *The Book of Job*.

### **The Modernist Disenchantment of Learning**

Learning of this kind is under assault everywhere in the modern world, but for reasons of time and context I shall concentrate on universities, and compress even that. Also, I am addressing, in necessarily general terms, only the Anglo-American situation, and especially the British, where the situation is probably worst.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the trend is global. So what place is there now in our educational systems, including the academy, for the enchantment of learning? The answer is grim, but there are two good reasons for running this gauntlet: it's important to know what we are up against, and in order to understand enchantment it helps to be clear about what it isn't.

The principles of modern education follow from the central project of modernity: the rational mastery of nature, both human nature and non-human, in the name of efficiency, convenience and security.<sup>15</sup> This programme is pursued as impersonally as possible, through a battery of instruments of power and universally applied techniques, and its work consists of what Weber called 'rationalisation': abstracting, objectifying, explaining, domesticating, controlling, managing, commodifying, exploiting and if necessary destroying (as in the immortal words of the American major in Vietnam—which any officer of the Inquisition would have immediately grasped—'It became necessary to destroy the village in order to save it').<sup>16</sup>

The chief instrument of modernity is what the historian of technology Lewis Mumford called the Megamachine, and it has, I suggest, three engines: capital, the state, and technoscience.<sup>17</sup> Since the chief of these is capital, they work together to enforce the market

<sup>14</sup> See, among others, Stefan Collini, 'Sold Out', *London Review of Books* [henceforth *LRB*] (24.10.13): 3-12, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012), and 'Impact on the humanities', *Times Literary Supplement* [henceforth *TLS*] (13.11.09): 18-19, Anthony T. Grafton, 'Britain: The Disgrace of the Universities', *New York Review of Books* (8.4.10), Mark Slouka, 'Dehumanized: When math and science rule the school', *Harper's Magazine* (Sept. 09): 32-40, Nicholson Baker, 'Wrong Answer: The Case Against Algebra II', *Harper's Magazine* (Sept. 2013): 31-38, Caleb Crain, 'Counter Culture: Fighting for Literature in an age of algorithms', *Harper's Magazine* (July 2015): 78-83, Stefan Collini, 'Who are the spongers now?', *LRB* (21.1.16): 33-37 and, most recently, Marilynne Robinson, 'Save Our Public Universities', *Harper's Magazine* (March 2016): 29-37.

<sup>15</sup> 'The rational mastery of nature' is borrowed from Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> This took place after the destruction of the Vietnamese village Ben Trê, 7 February 1968.

<sup>17</sup> On technoscience in particular, see Curry, 'Defending the Humanities'.

fundamentalism known as neoliberal economics, with its relentless focus on money and the ‘bottom line’, and therefore privatisation, deregulation, and ‘austerity’ for the poor. In the overdeveloped world, this imperative is obeyed by all political administrations, whether ‘conservative or ‘liberal’, and defended, ever more desperately, even as it staggers from crisis to crisis.

The dominant ideology which has justified this programme over the last few decades comprises another trinity: cognitive psychology, which defines human singularity (and therefore human privilege) as thinking, and thinking in turn as superior to all other possible candidates like emotion, imagination, intuition and so on; biology, especially neurophysiology and genetics, thus marginalising what is environmental, or rather, ecological; and neo-Darwinism, exalting a crude concept of ‘adaptation’ over all other considerations. The effect is a weird synthesis of hyper-abstraction and hyper-materialism, both in service of an ultra-determinism that elites think they will nonetheless be able to manipulate in their favour.<sup>18</sup>

What are the consequences for higher education—until recently under the rule, in the UK, of the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, and now, equally tellingly, the Ministry of Universities, Sciences and Cities? Perhaps the most obvious is the dominance of managers and administrators over academics, under the rule of VCs indistinguishable from CEOs (average annual salary: £250,000). This ascendancy is partly engineered by promoting academics with apparatchik potential over the head of those who are merely good at teaching and scholarship.

Now in order to obtain funding in these circumstances, the humanities in particular – literature, philosophy, religious studies, history and studies of the arts – have frequently been obliged, and still are, to pretend they are like sciences (themselves modelled on technoscience, with a supposedly singular scientific method).<sup>19</sup> The resulting flight from relationality, participation and subjectivity (which is now treated as a synonym for mere arbitrary preference) encourages a fetishization of methodology that slips easily into methodolatry, the worship of method. The emphasis on standardisation, quantification and ‘objectivity’ (which is enacted as depersonalisation) then redefines the field in such a way as to make them appear appropriate. Thus, applicants for funding to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, no less, are required, without a blush, to demonstrate the ‘social and economic impact’ of their work on Herodotus, or Chaucer, or Leibnitz... Good luck!

One curious and damaging effect is that what becomes valued is not the subject itself, whatever it may be, but how to study it. To pick another personal example, my first degree, in psychology, ended up teaching us students not so much about the human mind, which we had naively been expecting, as about the study of it, reduced in turn to methodology. Not

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<sup>18</sup> See Hilary Rose and Steven Rose, *Genes, Cells and Brains: The Promethean promises of the new biology* (London: Verso, 2013) and the essays in Hilary Rose and Steven Rose (eds), *Alas, Poor Darwin: Arguments Against Evolutionary Psychology* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000); Paolo Legrenzi and Carlo Umiltà, *Neuromania: On the Limits of Brain Science*, transl. Frances Anderson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Raymond Tallis, *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity* (London: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> On scientism and the humanities, see Ray Monk, ‘Wittgenstein and the Two Cultures’, *Prospect* (July 1999): 66-67; Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind. The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) and Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, ‘Scientizing the Humanities: Shifts, Collisions, Negotiations’, forthcoming (2015). The classic critique of a singular scientific method is, of course, Paul Feyerabend’s *Against Method* (London: New Left Books, 1975).

surprisingly, since our professors believed that if you get that right, the truth will necessarily follow, no matter who applies it. Ironically, this is magical thinking. The judgement of the person using the method *does* matter, in a way that cannot be formalised; rules, even algorithms, do not apply themselves. And one size does *not* fit all. Yet whatever doesn't fit the metric – whatever is real but incalculable, irreducibly qualitative, ultimately valuable rather than justifiably useful – all this gets cut or stretched until it does fit. The result is yet another disenchanting department of Procrustean Studies.

One of Saul Bellow's characters, the rebel Dean of a Midwestern university, puts it this way: 'he had taken it upon himself to pass Chicago through his own soul....there was no other way for reality to happen. Reality didn't exist "out there." It began to be real only when the soul found its underlying truth. In generalities there was no coherence—none'.<sup>20</sup> That 'underlying truth' is upstream of the disenchanting division into a knowing subject ('mind') and a known object ('world'), which creates what Bellow calls 'the generality-mind'.<sup>21</sup> This is why the concrete magic of enchantment is often unwelcome; it is truly transgressive, because it fuses what modernity tries to keep chastely apart.

There have been many warnings. A plangent one was sounded by the philosopher and musicologist Vladimir Jankélévitch:

In an era when pastiches of 'scientific investigation' have become quasi-universal, musicians owe it to themselves to become 'researchers' just like everyone else. But what are they looking for, in the end? A previously unknown chord? A new musico-atomic particle? It is a safe bet that a decline in inspiration translates into this thirst for innovation. Scriabin was a genuine 'researcher' because he was inspired as well. And vice versa, those with nothing to say attach exaggerated importance to novelties of vocabulary.<sup>22</sup>

This was in 1961. Now I'm not saying there weren't real insights involved, but by then structuralism was already well-established in the humanities, especially linguistics and anthropology, and all its hallmarks—objectivism, an uncritical veneration of method and an aspiration to universal truth—were disenchanting. And these, along with an unmistakably exaggerated sense of the importance of novel vocabularies, also characterize the various hermeneutics of suspicion that have excited and dominated the humanities since then: Derridian post-structuralism, Foucauldian archaeology and genealogy, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Homi Bhabha's post-colonialism, Deleuzian metaphysics and most recently the shot-gun wedding, conducted by Slavoj Žižek, of Hegel and Lacan.

The gross reductionism of cognitive psychology, neurophysiology and ultra-Darwinism is plain enough, but perhaps the time has now come to recognize these schools too as squabbling sibling offspring, born of humane studies, but sired by scientism. And too often, the outcome resembles the old medical joke: the operation was a success, although the patient died. In departments of English, for example, the patient was mostly literature itself – especially its heart: story – and consequently, reading as an enchanting experience. Readers

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<sup>20</sup> Saul Bellow, *The Dean's December* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1982), 266.

<sup>21</sup> Upstream: see the discussion in Henri Bortoft's excellent *Taking Appearance Seriously: The Dynamic Way of Seeing in Goethe and European Thought* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, transl. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003 [orig. 1961], 108. See also, for example, Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (London: Marion Boyars, 1971) and Lionel Trilling, *Mind in the Modern World* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972).

were left to find their own way to what Ricoeur called a second naïveté, and recover a sense of wonder as best they could.<sup>23</sup>

These schools' esoteric, self-referential and stylistically-challenged vocabularies are bad enough, but those of our new masters are still worse. You are probably sadly familiar with the spectral metaphors, dead on arrival, of targets, outcomes, benchmarks, outputs, resources, impacts and other items of neo-liberalese, so I'll mention only one recent example. The Warburg Institute in London, founded by scholars fleeing the Nazis, is renowned for the study of European history and culture, and its glory is an open-shelved and thematically-arranged library, which gives full scope to the possibilities of scholarly serendipity. In the course of the University of London's attempt to modernise (for which read: destroy) the Warburg Institute, the pro vice-chancellor described its library as a 'space hungry' policy that resists 'adopting sector best practice to apportion costs more transparently'.<sup>24</sup> What this means in plain English is that since the resulting benefits to scholarship cannot be quantified, they can be ignored; and since a website is cheaper to maintain than a library of what we must now call actual books, they should be mostly converted into binary pixels and then sacrificed.<sup>25</sup>

What I am describing is really new only in its scope. Already in 1969, the Canadian philosopher George Grant, in an essay on the university, decried 'this growing victory of power over wonder', in which 'technical reason has become so universal that it has closed down on openness and awe, questioning and listening'.<sup>26</sup> But these disenchanters, described by Weber even earlier as a 'nullity,' '[s]pecialists without spirit', aren't listening.<sup>27</sup> And they are no longer at the gates of the academy but in charge.

The effects are about as discouraging to enchantment as can be imagined: working academics forced to engage in permanent 'grant capture', complete meaningless and demeaning forms and continually adjust to change for its own sake, while students are discouraged from any apprehension of what they are studying, and why, outside the brutally instrumentalist box of career, status and money. By the same token, they are encouraged to think of themselves not as students, here first and foremost to learn, but as customers, whose priority is a practical return on their 'investment'. But for both parties, enchantment still requires (and encourages) scholarship in which the person is not just bent on mastering a passive subject but is in an ongoing relationship with it, ideally one in which a chief concern is that *it* may flourish.

The natural habitat of such scholarship in the academy has long been the humanities. There was never a time when they were wholly unhampered, of course, but now their very ground is under attack, in at least two ways. One I've mentioned; partly driven by capital and partly collaborating with it, scientism infiltrates and informs models of inquiry in unhelpful ways. Two, humanities courses are increasingly designated 'non-strategic' and cut in favour of STEM studies: science, technology, engineering and maths. (Actually, it turns out maths and even science enrolments are declining. Only technology and its subset engineering are

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<sup>23</sup> 'Hermeneutics of suspicion' was famously coined by Ricoeur; also 'second naïveté', in Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, transl. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 351-52.

<sup>24</sup> Pro vice-chancellor quoted in a letter by David Norbrook in the *LRB* (8.1.15).

<sup>25</sup> See also 'Charles Hope writes about the battle over the Warburg Institute', *LRB* (4.12.14): 32-34; Adam Gopnik, 'In the Memory Ward', *The New Yorker* (16.3.15): 34-41.

<sup>26</sup> George Grant, *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: Anansi, 1969), 116, 24.

<sup>27</sup> Gerth and Mills, *From Max Weber*, 182.

booming.)<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, the financial services industry, which actively promotes parasitic self-interest, creams off if not the best, then many of the brightest – at least 40% of Ivy League graduates, for example, in the early years of this century.<sup>29</sup>

Studies have repeatedly shown that reading on a screen rather than paper depresses both comprehension and retention, and that students who take notes with a pen rather than a laptop end up with a better grasp of the subject which they remember for longer.<sup>30</sup> Then there is the move to MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), a medium which seriously weakens the presence and personality of the particular teacher along with meaningful interaction. But replacing face-to-face learning is not driven by the desire to provide a better education, rather by its cheapness and convenience for educational institutions. The outreach is played up, but not the sacrifice in quality.

Courses cut, arbitrary demands, short-term contracts, pitiful pay, humiliating conditions, lack of trust and bullying, patronising, infantilising treatment by overseers: all these have resulted in unprecedented stress on teaching staff, especially in the humanities. At the same time, however, it must be said that academic resistance to the disenchantment of the academy has fallen short of admirable. Often it has consisted of what Marina Warner describes as ‘an ecstasy of obedience’.<sup>31</sup>

One reason is a mindset that already militates against enchantment, even without any help from modernisation. As C.S. Lewis discovered in Cambridge, ‘those who might be expected *ex officio* to have a profound and permanent appreciation of literature may in reality have nothing of the sort. They are mere professionals’.<sup>32</sup> Of course, a desire to advance one’s career is perfectly legitimate. But when it becomes the overriding concern – which is what the modern academy encourages and exploits – the effects for the enchantment of learning are dire. One is to make the institution as such, which provides that career, one’s first priority, over and above the learning it supposedly exists to serve. The resulting conspiracy of individual careers undermines true solidarity, along with one of the academy’s *raison d’être*: bringing together disinterested minds.

By the same token, excellence (which by definition stands out) is discouraged in favour of the average, individual judgement and conscience are disparaged as eccentric or dangerously maverick, and unlicensed insight is sacrificed for collective security. Mere professionalism or careerism, with no other values to defend, also offers conveniently little resistance to a managerial and technical takeover of what it actually means to be ‘professional’. That mode in turns takes the human constant that (in Leys’s words) ‘inspired talent is an intolerable insult to mediocrity’ and turns it into a principle.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See William Deresiewicz, ‘The Neoliberal Arts: How college sold its soul to the market’, *Harper’s Magazine* (Sept. 2015): 25-32, which was published after I had written this paper. (I draw comfort from the fact that despite being much better-informed than I am, Deresiewicz says many of the same things.)

<sup>29</sup> Joyce Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution: A History of Capitalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), 406.

<sup>30</sup> See research reported in *The Guardian Weekly* (19.12.14) and elsewhere. Relatedly, children are 34 times more likely to read storybooks daily than stories on a tablet, and four times more likely to read them for more than 30 minutes; *The Guardian Weekly* (2.2.15).

<sup>31</sup> Marina Warner, ‘Why I quit’, *LRB* 36:17 (11.11.2014): 42-43: 43. Also see her ‘Learning my lesson’, *LRB* 37:6 (19.3.2015): 8-14.

<sup>32</sup> C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1961]), 6.

<sup>33</sup> Leys, *Hall*, 42.



Partly as a result of these pressures, then, but to an extent they do not justify, academic practitioners of the humanities have been willing to abandon what people, including students, most want and need, wherein lies their enchantment: story, narrative and metaphor. If you replace understanding with explanation and interpretation with analysis (when the latter two are presented as substitutes for the former two, not versions), and add the understandable disincentive of an uncertain future career, is it any surprise that enrolments are plummeting?

### What Can We Do?

To quote someone speaking from long and bitter experience, ‘There is naught you can do other than to resist, with hope or without it.’<sup>34</sup> That seems to me to be fundamental, within universities or outside them.

We should not give up on the academy without a fight, of course, but it is not the only possible site of resistance. The Nobel Prize winning novelist J.M. Coetzee once discussed what happened to universities beginning in the 1980s and 90s, ‘as under threat of having their funding cut they allowed themselves to be turned into business enterprises, in which professors...were transformed into harried employees required to fulfil quotas under the scrutiny of professional managers’.

He reminds us that in some Eastern European countries under Communist rule, dissidents conducted night classes in their homes, teaching banned subjects and authors, adding that

If the spirit of the university is to survive, something along those lines may have to come into being in countries where tertiary education has been wholly subordinated to business principles. In other words, the real university may have to move into people’s homes and grant degrees for which the sole backing will be the names of the scholars who sign the certificates.<sup>35</sup>

We should also avail ourselves of the elders who have seen through the disenchanting modernist paradigm, and spoken truth to its power: people like some of those I have quoted, plus Edith Cobb, Ivan Illich, Neil Postman, Wendell Berry and many others. There is a powerful counter-cultural tradition, with many tributaries, upon which to draw.

Relatedly, let’s take every opportunity to value and protect teachers – and especially those who are themselves enchanted by the intrinsic worth of what they are teaching – as individuals, above and beyond any methodology, system or programme. To the extent they are diminished, so are the relationships that are integral to wonder in learning.

To this perhaps not very original advice, I would like to add something else that I feel is both important and too-little-known. It concerns re-enchantment. There is a paradox at the heart of any such desire or attempt, because enchantment is wild. It cannot be rationally administered. We might even say that it *is* what cannot be administered, managed or controlled – all modes of disenchantment. In learning, the paradox was perfectly summed by Ivan Illich: ‘what people most need to learn, they cannot be *taught*...’<sup>36</sup>

It follows that a method or programme of positive re-enchantment is doomed to failure or worse (‘worse’ is when enchantment, having died in captivity, is surreptitiously replaced by something else under the same name). Especially to be avoided is any attempt to justify it in

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<sup>34</sup> Elrond. On enchantment as a primary value in Tolkien’s work, and both its popular and critical reception, see my *Deep Roots in a Time of Frost: Essays on Tolkien* (Zurich: Walking Tree Books, 2014).

<sup>35</sup> J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), 35-6.

<sup>36</sup> Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (London: Fontana, 1975), 81.

empirical or utilitarian terms, which cedes the very ground of the debate to the modernists. ('Learning can be shown to improve if wonder is included.' 'Oh really? Ok, we'll help you organise that.' Next up: enchantment targets, impact assessment, rating your enchantment experience on a scale of one ten...)

This point, which is basic, seems to be difficult to accept, especially for progressive people, because it apparently leaves them helpless to protect or promote a sense of wonder in learning. But that is a misunderstanding. Things that matter do follow. One is that doing itself – that old itch to just *fix* things – is less important than *undoing*. Both individually and collectively, the way to encourage enchantment in learning is become aware of, and let go of, the habitual attitudes, practices and rules that suppress it.<sup>37</sup> Leave room for it, resisting the temptation to try to meddle and control the outcome, and create the conditions it favours, where profit of any kind, use-value and efficiency are not allowed to dominate.<sup>38</sup> This is not the same as making it happen. The point is to *let* it happen, and the difference is crucial. Wonder, like love, is not a method, and it cannot be applied, tested or systematically improved. All we can do is create the conditions it favours – usually through appropriate ritual for that purpose – and invite it to be present. As Robert Frost famously said, the movement in poetry is from delight to wisdom. Delight is where we must start.

We need to remember that meeting, relating and discovering, and the enchantment that accompanies them, are our birthright as embodied and ecological beings, so they are always potentially present. And we need to avoid the illusion that we know exactly what to do. The best course is therefore to place (as the poet Seamus Heaney said) our 'love and trust in the good of the indigenous'.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, I would like to leave you with this thought. As yet another poet, Wallace Stevens, puts it, 'Realism is a corruption of reality.'<sup>40</sup> This is closely related to Tolkien's point that enchantment, although irrelevant (at best) to the programme of rational mastery, 'is as necessary for the health and complete functioning of the Human as is sunlight for physical life...'<sup>41</sup>

Now it's true that modernist education denies and suppresses certain extraordinary experiences because they cannot be accommodated within the rationalist-realist worldview. But as Weber pointed out, disenchantment characteristically proceeds by dividing concrete magic 'into rational cognition and mastery of nature, on the one hand, and into "mystic" experiences, on the other'.<sup>42</sup> One side disenchants by forcing experience to be only concrete, the other by forcing to be only 'magic'. One reduces down, the other up, but neither questions the distinction they both assume, nor their shared imperial ambition. That's why Gregory

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<sup>37</sup> The therapeutic practice known as the Alexander Principle proceeds on just such a basis.

<sup>38</sup> See Anna L. Peterson's excellent *Everyday Ethics and Social Change: The Education of Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). And cf. another poet: 'In the end, we can only prepare a space, a field, for inspiration to occur. This, of course, is contrary to the way we're taught to believe we should accomplish anything: by deciding to do it, then figuring out how, then making it happen' (C.K. Williams, *In Time. Poets, Poems, and the Rest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 88).

<sup>39</sup> Heaney quoted in *Poetry Ireland Review* (2013): 27.

<sup>40</sup> Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1997), 906.

<sup>41</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *Smith of Wootton Major*, extended edition, ed. Verlyn Flieger (London: HarperCollins, 2005), 101.

<sup>42</sup> *From Max Weber*, 282.

Bateson said that ‘These two species of superstition...the supernatural and the mechanical, feed each other.’<sup>43</sup>

This truth is a clear warning not to accept the spiritual as a separate domain from the material, whatever is left over after the rest of the world has been rationalised and mechanised. So although I fully support the effort to rescue the paranormal (for want of a better term) from the enormous condescension of modernity, let’s be wary of treating it as a wholly other domain.<sup>44</sup> We need to remember that what is stigmatised by modernism as spooky, superstitious and illusory is also a dimension of being *human* and of being *alive*. As Val Plumwood says, ‘it is the space of everyday wonder and quotidian enchantment that is in need of reclamation and recovery’.<sup>45</sup>

Wonder itself is extraordinary, of course. But what it signals and shows us is the inner lining and depth of things, not as altogether somewhere else, another realm, but at the very heart of our ordinary, normal, carnal lives.<sup>46</sup> And its mystery cannot explained, as if we could stand outside it. It can, however, be lived, and celebrated, and maybe even understood.

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<sup>43</sup> Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson, *Angels Fear. An Investigation into the Nature and Meaning of the Sacred* (London: Rider, 1987), 51.

<sup>44</sup> ‘The enormous condescension of modernity’ is adapted from E.P. Thompson’s resonant phrase in *The Making of the English Working Class*, in which the last word is ‘posterity’.

<sup>45</sup> Val Plumwood, ‘Journey to the Heart of Stone’, pp. 17-36 in Fiona Becket and Terry Gifford (eds), *Culture, Creativity and Environment: New Environmentalist Criticism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 17.

<sup>46</sup> ‘Its lining and its depth’: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* ed. Claude Lefort and transl. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 144.

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