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Review of Joshua Landy and Michael Saler, eds., *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009). 408 pages.

Readers will find this interesting collection of scholarly essays to contain a wide variety of approaches to the topic announced in the title. The constant touchstone of this text is Max Weber's famous statement: "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.'"¹ Throughout, it serves as a counterpoint for various articulations of the enchantment / disenchantment binary with the ultimate aim of the compilation being to articulate a concept of re-enchantment that is both necessary and beneficial to modernity, rather than being either an atavistic backslide toward the irrational or a simplistically sinister fetishism whose purpose is to entrench autocratic power through political and social illusionism. Instead, in their own words, they wish:

. . . to put on display a set of enchantments that are voluntary, being chosen by autonomous agents rather than insidiously imposed by power structures, respectable, compatible as they are with secular rationality, and multiple, being replacements, each one in its own way, for a Polymorphous God.²

Of all the themes that could be drawn out of the variety of essays in this book, I am inclined to highlight three, which I see as intimately interwoven. These are: (1) re-enchantment as engagement with wonder; (2) re-enchantment as remediation of desolation; (3) re-enchantment as re-connection with the world.

The first theme is addressed particularly well by Andrea Nightingale in *Broken Knowledge*. She contrasts Bacon and Descartes with Thoreau on the subject of attentional economy. Francis Bacon understood wonder to be knowledge that is broken, or an attention that has failed to find the rational, causal root of a phenomenon.³ Bacon's teleology of the role of thought is for it to account and order observed phenomena with the rational efficiency of a machine,

¹ Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David S. Owen, Tracy B. Strong, Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2004), 1.

² Joshua Landy and Michael Saler, eds, *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009), 6.

³ Landy & Saler, *The Re-Enchantment of the World*, 16.

and so it is imperative for him to avoid illusions and distortions. These are aims that Descartes is also pursuing. Nightengale writes that Descartes' project was seen by him as a project of constructing a new house of knowledge on rational foundations, meant to replace the existing "hodgepodge" of knowledge, with something more systematic, and in that respect presumably free from illusions.⁴ She suggests that this project is motivated by a fear of death and disease: phenomena that adversely affect the rational Spirit or mind, by damaging or warping its earthly house. Alienated from the world, Descartes' rational spirit seeks to attain a scientific mastery over it, constituting a disenchantment. For an alternative to this, she points to Thoreau's *Walden*, a text which also draws on the construction of a house as its anchoring theme. In this case, however the house is a true, physical construction, and Thoreau's approach is one that unites, rather than divides the senses from the soul. Whereas Descartes' project is one that seeks to fortify mind radically beyond the degenerative tendencies of physical matter, and so in opposition to them, Thoreau's embraces the tactile domain, including its bright, dark, and fathomless aspects, putting mind to work abiding in and interacting with the tangible. Thoreau seeks an attentional economy that inhabits rather than masters the world. It is exactly the mysteries of being lost in wonder at nature that facilitate this inhabiting. Nightengale writes:

If we develop Thoreau's discipline of attention and his capacity for enchantment, we will enter into an ethical and indeed erotic relationship with the world. If we can begin to see the beauty, intricacy, and complex symbiosis of nonhuman beings in the natural world, then we will want to let those beings be. Careful attention to the natural world will within a very short time, boggle the mind. Knowledge will break, and wonder will take the lead.⁵

Following the trail of wonder is not escapism or evasion, but rather the completion of the practice of being a reasoning being.

Perhaps we can call upon the figure of the detective in this regard. This is a modality which is intensely rational, and yet more. The detective is investigating a mysterious world. Bad detectives assume too much. They close this world off by over-depending on a procedural system that brooks no deviation. The gifted detective, however, will allow final judgements to remain suspended until the process of induction or investigation yields its fruit naturally and organically. They listen, observe, and let the clues assemble themselves.⁶ Only then do they perform the act of synthesis, in giving an account. True detectives wonder, but rigorously. In Michael Saler's "Waste Lands and Silly Valley's: Wittgenstein, Mass Culture and Re-Enchantment," we are shown another face of a thinker who is often associated with the most radical

⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁶ Ibid., 278 (appendixes).

disenchantment: Ludwig Wittgenstein. Saler explores Wittgenstein's anachronistic interest in "low culture;" his enjoyment of, in particular, pulp detective novels, was expressed as an appreciation for the profundity of the silly, and the loose; forms of play which can be like a tonic for the overly serious, highly pressurized metaphysicalism of "high culture."⁷ It would seem that while rationalist disenchantment seeks to replace an erroneous metaphysics of the past, it exacerbates an essential flaw in the reasoning process: the state of metaphysical or combinatorial closure that only allows what is already presupposed on a fundamental level to be cognizable. Without anywhere to go reason is locked in with itself, and ultimately ends up saying nothing. Re-enchantment can be seen as a making-supple of the epistemic process through the acknowledgement of an ur-rational domain that feeds it, that lets it breathe. The difference between the early Wittgenstein and the late Wittgenstein may be simply the recognition that play holds the clue to re-enchantment of the world.

Might the trail of wonder, and even of silliness, lead to knowledge in its truest, most living sense? Is the world bigger than "the steel cage of reason?" Linda Simon credits William James with the consideration that:

. . . identity was shaped by forces outside of oneself, energies from what he called a "mother sea" that filters into ones consciousness. These energies comprised part of the hidden universe that might offer its secrets. Beyond the 'accredited and orderly facts' that science had discovered, he said, 'there ever floats a sort of dust-cloud of exceptional observations, of occurrences minute an irregular and seldom met with' that urged him not only to investigate, but even more importantly to 'renovate' the idea of what science is, what perception can encompass, and what, in fact we mean when we say we know.⁸

James compels us to consider reason as an island, and wonder as an ocean; from the latter, mysteries continuously wash up onto the beaches of the former. From the wonder come all the conditions that make reason and sustain its existence. Wonder supplies the contents, the origin, and the boundaries of operative reason. Wonder is the root of gnosis. As Daniel Jiro Tanaka writes in "Gnosophilia," "it is that incompleteness that renders the Gnostic tradition malleable and eminently suited to the purpose . . . of the critique of a disenchanted modernity."⁹ Wonder washes in from the formless and the vast, and reason charts it.

Turning to the second theme, we find that re-enchantment is also a modality by which we may heal broken and damaged spaces, be they spaces in the world, or spaces of the soul. Indeed, a sympathetic and creative magic by a parallel process would seem to accomplish both. Robert Harrison addresses this

⁷ Ibid., 71.

⁸ Ibid., 41.

⁹ Ibid., 182.

in the context of homeless gardens, where he discusses various aesthetic re-arrangements of destitute places by the folk who inhabit them. Finding a “pocket of repose in the midst of turbulence”¹⁰ may be as simple as re-arranging refuse into a composition of some sort, or extend to acts of planting and growing in barren soil or in the cracks of an asphalt wasteland. This practice seems to be a natural way in which people alter an environment for no other reason than to feel at home in it. It is a therapy of space, as if the artists were an agent of that very space itself, assisting it to heal from trauma. The organic and the wonderful are, we begin to see, one and the same. If dis-enchantment is a form of mechanization, bound, lest it be undone by entropy, to the need for continuous maintenance, then re-enchantment is the almost effortless process whereby a system regenerates itself organically. Dis-enchantment is entropic; re-enchantment is syntropic. A sense of wonder that goes beyond the mechanical binary of true and false restores us to the reality of things, with a kind of humble and playful conversion to creative agency. Re-enchantment is gnostic remediation of sense.

This remediating role is not restricted to space. R. Lanier Anderson’s essay, “Nietzsche on Redemption and Transfiguration,” shows that Nietzsche was engaged less in a destructive project than in a project of the organic remediation of value-assignment. Accordingly, Nietzsche’s “transvaluation of values” is a remediation of destitute time. He argues persuasively that Nietzsche’s intention was to address what he saw as the principle problem of the Christian notion of salvation: it rests on a promise which is deferred eternally, and renders the ‘saved’ person volitionally passive. It takes them out of their active participation in the present, and crucifies them between a past (sin), and a future (salvation), both of which are severed from the moment. In turning over one’s sins to a redemption through Christ, not only is one firstly in debt for having sinned, one is secondly in debt for having relinquished direct address of those sins to the promise of an eventual redemption which is not earned. Nietzsche saw this as incurring an un-payable double-debt that amounts to indentured servitude.¹¹ He seeks to remediate salvation itself by transforming it from a promise made to an actuality fulfilled. “The Eternal Return” is a thought experiment which illuminates a mode of evaluating choices. One performs this experiment by asking oneself the question: “Can I will that life, exactly as it has happened, could return to me eternally?” The function is meant to gage the reaction, be it horror or joy, and to act as a goad towards actions that can be eternally affirmed. The choice to engage in this way is meant to redeem the decoupling of the past from the present and to connect it to the future. For if we acknowledge that we cannot be separated from the past, and that we must bear its weight, then we are forced to make decisions in the present that respond directly to, and take responsibility for the things we would rather ignore, and pass off to another. “To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all ‘it was,’ into a ‘thus I

¹⁰ Ibid., 74.

¹¹ Ibid., 229.

willed it’—that alone I shall call redemption.”¹² This kind of radical, trans-temporal affirmation binds one to the past, while installing one as pilot of the present, and making it the site of salvation. Compare this to a state where one is severed / redeemed from the past but rendered a passenger with regards to the future. Nietzschean salvation is the active redemption of sins rather than the passive redemption from sins because it activates an organic regeneration of immediacy. It makes the concept of responsibility meaningful. The present locus of the affirmation is thus the point where the future concatenates, and instead of a drift towards an omega point under the aegis of an infinitely deferred promise, the present becomes the place where the future itself is forged, moving into an unknown. Wonder and mystery are resurrected as time is converted from a determinate to a creative flow. This operation reconnects the parts of time to one another by cultivating a dynamic relationship between the person and the present moment. It is a fertile space for the project of active re-enchantment of values, and an organic response to the value-debt seen by Nietzsche to stem from Christian soteriology.

When reason “overthrew” the enchanted world of the pre-enlightenment, it was on the basis of a mathematics and a cosmology of superior explanatory scope. It was quantitative empirical observations that accomplished this, in particular those directly linked to the emergence of Copernican cosmology. Could we perhaps view this shift of the last 600 years as the early stages an ongoing process, that of the psyche’s colonization of the Heliocentric cosmos, and beyond? The ‘pure’ formal rationalism that furnishes the mathematics necessary to make this initial cosmological leap is the first phase of the transformation: reason, in a flash enlarges the frame of the world, and then slowly and organically wonder re-enchants it, populating it tangibly with a heterogeneous spread of human values, with myth, with immediacy. If a ‘pure’ rationalism in a relatively short period of time provides the logical skeleton of our emerging ‘modern’ cosmology, then secular re-enchantments, over long periods of time knit together its flesh.

Becoming intimate with the world once more is the subject of the third and final theme which I have chosen to touch on. Michel Serres’ “Lyrical Essay”:¹³ What Hearing Knows, is itself quite enchanting, in the sense that “to chant” is to form sound. The reconnection to the world, Serres suggests, may be accomplished through a shift from an oracular to an aural epistemology, from watching to listening. Serres evokes the myth of Orpheus and Euridice as a suggestion that perhaps such an epistemology has been tried in the past, but failed, not on account of being incapable of gathering the knowledge, but on a weak link in the process of delivering the knowledge. Orpheus did not complete “the acoustic path to knowledge,” and ultimately succumbed to dissonance.¹⁴ He failed tragically in his quest to resurrect music (Euridice) as knowledge, because

¹² Ibid., 232. From Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1995).

¹³ As Saler and Landy put it, *The Re-Enchantment of the World*, 8.

¹⁴ Ibid., 268.

at a vital moment when it was necessary that he proceed through sound alone, he doubted, not hearing the footsteps of his lover behind him, and turned, in the process thwarting the experiment by contaminating it with sight. The eye distances objects of vision from itself. The ear, on the other hand invites the vibration in, becomes intimate with it. This intimacy lost, Euridice faded back into the background noise. Perhaps to re-enchant the world is not to set up the old (or new) visual idols, or to fetishize the vacuum that their annihilation has left, but to really listen to it, to go beyond vision as epistemology, and to go beyond the enchantment / disenchantment duality. The vestigial presence of “the cry” in human language that is found in the patterns of pitch of voice and modulation of tone reveals an underlying musicality in our communications. Serres suggests that this deep song can, under the rarest of circumstances, actually segue into a language that the world itself speaks: the chattering of birds, the chorus of a swamp.¹⁵ An aural epistemology is the resonating epistemology of the participant, no longer a passive observer, but a voice in the chorus. A science which could listen would be indistinguishable from magic. Following this line of thought, magic is a science that listens and an art that sings. The Real is a vast, boundless song, to which the most authentic response is to join in, to vibrate with, and to sing alongside of and within. Vision’s knowledge, so long victorious, proliferates, populating the world with objects and with particles. Combined with geometry it compels an assumed separation between stasis and motion that is quickly interpreted as a dichotomy between perfection and imperfection. But mathematics is acoustic even before it is optical. The intimacy of the ear, suggests Serres, is always flowing, layering, penetrating, and moving in waves. Were it to accomplish the Herculean task of becoming the foundation of a comprehensive epistemology, of hearing mathematics, it would resolve all these contradictions into immediate intimacy.¹⁶ An Orpheus that has overcome doubt, and drawn out Euridice victoriously from the underworld.

Other essays in this text flesh out these and other themes. I have only been able to touch briefly on a few of the essays in this text, but I would assure any prospective readers interested in the subject that the collection is rich, varied, and overall an excellent and helpful text that I would say “prepares the soil” for many fruitful discussions on reason, philosophy, art, ecology, poetry, music and magic. Anyone interested in these subjects as they pertain to the ideas of enchantment and disenchantment will value this book.

Peter Duchemin

¹⁵ Ibid., 267.

¹⁶ Ibid., 269.