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Jane Bennett: The Enchantment of Modern Life

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I

The Wonder of Minor Experiences

Queasiness

“Tereza was born of the rumbling of a stomach.”¹ That is how the novelist Milan Kundera describes the genesis of one of his characters. I take Kundera to be referring to his own affective state as he sat at his typewriter one day. Queasiness is something he felt, but it also participated in thought: the quivering sac in his abdomen helped to conceive the nervous, needy persona of Tereza. Indeed, a discomfiting affect is often what initiates a story, a claim, a thesis.

The story I tell is of a contemporary world sprinkled with natural and cultural sites that have the power to “enchant.” It is a story born of my own discomfort in the presence of two images circulating in political and social theory. The first is the image of modernity as disenchanted, that is to say, as a place of dearth and alienation (when compared to a golden age of community and cosmological coherency) or a place of reason, freedom, and control (when compared to a dark and confused premodernity). For me the question is not whether disenchantment is a regrettable or a progressive historical development. It is, rather, whether the very characterization of the world as disenchanted ignores and then discourages affective attachment to that world. The question is important because the mood of enchantment may be valuable for ethical life.

The second source of my queasiness is the image of ethics as a code to which one is obligated, a set of criteria to which one assents or subscribes. In this picture, the affective dimensions of ethics are drawn too lightly. Codes and criteria are indispensable parts of ethics, and surely they will not work without a sense of obligation or subscription. But these last things are still not sufficient to the *enactment* of ethical aspirations, which requires bodily movements in space, mobilizations of heat and energy, a series of choreographed gestures, a distinctive assemblage of affective propulsions. Nor can they nurture the spirit of generosity that must suffuse ethical codes if they are to be responsive to the surprises that regularly punctuate life.²

This book tells a story of contemporary life that accentuates its moments of enchantment and explores the possibility that the affective force of those moments might be deployed to propel ethical generosity. It claims

both that the contemporary world retains the power to enchant humans and that humans can cultivate themselves so as to experience more of that effect. Enchantment is something that we encounter, that hits us, but it is also a comportment that can be fostered through deliberate strategies. One of those strategies might be to give greater expression to the sense of play, another to hone sensory receptivity to the marvelous specificity of things. Yet another way to enhance the enchantment effect is to resist the story of the disenchantment of modernity.

For that story has itself contributed to the condition it describes. Its rhetorical power has real effects. The depiction of nature and culture as orders no longer capable of inspiring deep attachment inflects the self as a creature of loss and thus discourages discernment of the marvelous vitality of bodies human and nonhuman, natural and artifactual. While I agree that there are plenty of aspects of contemporary life that fit the disenchantment story, I also think there is enough evidence of everyday enchantment to warrant the telling of an alter-tale. Such sites of enchantment today include, for example, the discovery of sophisticated modes of communication among nonhumans, the strange agency of physical systems at far-from-equilibrium states, and the animation of objects by video technologies—an animation whose effects are not fully captured by the idea of “commodity fetishism.”

To be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday. Starting from the assumption that the world has become neither inert nor devoid of surprise but continues to inspire deep and powerful attachments, I tell a tale designed to render that attachment more palpable and audible. If popular psychological wisdom has it that you have to love yourself before you can love another, my story suggests that you have to love life before you can care about anything. The wager is that, to some small but irreducible extent, one must be enamored with existence and occasionally even enchanted in the face of it in order to be capable of donating some of one’s scarce mortal resources to the service of others.

In the cultural narrative of disenchantment, the prospects for loving life—or saying “yes” to the world—are not good. What’s to love about an alienated existence on a dead planet? If, under the sway of this tale, one does encounter events or entities that provoke joyful attachment, the mood is likely to pass without comment and thus without more substantial embodiment. The disenchantment tale does reserve a divine space for enchantment; in my alter-tale, even secular life houses extraordinary goings-on. This life provokes moments of joy, and that joy can propel ethics.³ I experiment in this book with a fable of everyday marvels in order to uncover and to assess the ethical potential of the mood of enchantment.

A Brief Phenomenology of Enchantment

As I'm using the term, *enchantment* entails a state of wonder, and one of the distinctions of this state is the temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement. To be enchanted, then, is to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter; it is to be transfixed, spellbound. Philip Fisher describes this as a "moment of pure presence":

[T]he moment of pure presence within wonder lies in the object's difference and uniqueness being so striking to the mind that it does not remind us of anything and we find ourselves delaying in its presence for a time in which the mind does not move on by association to something else.⁴

Thoughts, but also limbs (to augment Fisher's account), are brought to rest, even as the senses continue to operate, indeed, in high gear. You notice new colors, discern details previously ignored, hear extraordinary sounds, as familiar landscapes of sense sharpen and intensify. The world comes alive as a collection of singularities. Enchantment includes, then, a condition of exhilaration or acute sensory activity. To be simultaneously transfixed in wonder and transported by sense, to be both caught up and carried away—enchantment is marked by this odd combination of somatic effects.

Fear, accompanying such an extraordinary state, also plays a role in enchantment. The thirteenth-century writer Albertus Magnus described wonder as " 'shocked surprise' . . . before the sensible appearance of a great prodigy, so that the heart experiences systole. Thus wonder is somewhat similar to fear. . . ."⁵ But fear cannot dominate if enchantment is to be, for the latter requires active engagement with objects of sensuous experience; it is a state of interactive fascination, not fall-to-your-knees awe. Unlike enchantment, overwhelming fear will not be calm and intensify perception but only shut it down.

The mood I'm calling enchantment involves, in the first instance, a surprising encounter, a meeting with something that you did not expect and are not fully prepared to engage. Contained within this surprise state are (1) a pleasurable feeling of being charmed by the novel and as yet unprocessed encounter and (2) a more *unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition. The overall effect of enchantment is a mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness, a sense of having had one's nerves or circulation or concentration powers tuned up or recharged⁶—a shot in the arm, a fleeting return to childlike excitement about life. Historians Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park note that, in early modern Europe, the terms for wonder and wonders—*admiratio*, *mirabilia*, *miracula*—"seem to have their roots in an Indo-European word for 'smile.'"⁷

One also notes that the word *enchant* is linked to the French verb *to sing: chanter*. To “en-chant”: to surround with song or incantation; hence, to cast a spell with sounds, to make fall under the sway of a magical refrain, to carry away on a sonorous stream. The philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe the refrain as having a transformative or “catalytic function: not only to increase the speed of the exchanges and reactions in that which surrounds it, but also to assure indirect interactions between elements devoid of so-called natural affinity, and thereby to form [new] organized masses.” In other words, the repetition of word sounds not only exaggerates the tempo of an ordinary phrase and not only eventually renders a meaningful phrase nonsense—it can also provoke new ideas, perspectives, and identities. In an enchanting refrain, sense become nonsense and then a new sense of things. The refrain, say Deleuze and Guattari, “turns back on itself, opens onto itself, revealing until then unheard-of potentialities, entering into other connections, setting [things] . . . adrift in the direction of other assemblages.”⁸ I emphasize throughout the book the ethical relevance of such “sonority.” The last two chapters focus on the sonorous dimension of language, which makes possible plays on words, the spell-binding effect of stories told aloud, the enchantment power of chants.

Reuse and Recycle

Near the beginning of Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*, it is mentioned that an old woman stands at the window directly across the way from Joseph K.’s room. A bit later, we are told that she peers in at K. “with truly senile inquisitiveness.” Then, after K. has been informed of his arrest, we read that the old woman has “dragged to the window an even older man, whom she was holding round the waist.” Finally, we learn that “the two old creatures . . . had enlarged their party, for behind them, towering head and shoulders above them, stood a man with a shirt open at the neck and a reddish, pointed beard, which he kept pinching and twisting with his fingers.”⁹ The old lady and her entourage are not mentioned again in the story; neither is there the slightest intimation of their relevance to the plot, which ostensibly concerns K.’s dogged pursuit of his accusation. Indeed, it was only after several readings that it occurred to me to wonder about them at all.

The onlookers are easy to ignore because they do not participate in the narrative quest—for justice, for someone in charge, for insight into the law—in which K. and I are caught up. The onlookers and their actions might be explained as red herrings, were it not for the fact that everything in Kafka’s book is one, at least with regard to the mystery of K.’s crime.

Every decision, event, proclamation, project, and scene are described with precision, but each is ultimately as rheumy as the old woman's eyes.

It seems, then, that Kafka crafts his story of the trial from the bits of experience ordinarily discarded as irrelevant to such a story. Instead of recounting those events that contribute to the reader's narrative preoccupation, Kafka names other contemporaneous events that constitute other stories. *The Trial* is less a photograph of Joseph K.'s trial than its negative: "background" objects are vivid, while one strains to discern the slightest trace of the "foreground." You wake up one day and are arrested without cause; your indignation grabs you by the throat and motivates your quest for vindication. But even as the warders make the charge against you, even as your affect kicks in, even as you hurry to clear your name, someone across the street glances out of her window, and someone near that woman puts on his shirt, leaves it open at the neck, and twists the hairs of his beard. These acts fall into the shadow of your rushing, indignant body. You note them—they are within the purview of your experience—but you pass them by. But if you were to gather up these dark, discarded scraps and peer into them, you would be on a different path, the path of a Kafka tale.

Kafka's stories might thus be read as a literary form of garbage-picking, or "reusing and recycling." What I try to do in this book is something similar: to pick up some of the experiences that lie in the wake of a familiar story—not the tale of a man wronged, but of a civilization somehow wronged because it has been "disenchanted." The disenchantment of modernity is, I contend, a powerful and rather pervasive narrative in contemporary politics and political theory. It goes something like this:

There was once a time when Nature was purposive, God was active in the details of human affairs, human and other creatures were defined by a preexisting web of relations, social life was characterized by face-to-face relations, and political order took the form of organic community. Then, this premodern world gave way to forces of scientific and instrumental rationality, secularism, individualism, and the bureaucratic state—all of which, combined, disenchant the world.¹⁰

The disenchantment tale figures nonhuman nature as more or less inert "matter"; it construes the modern West as a radical break from other cultures; and it depicts the modern self as predisposed toward rationalism, skepticism, and the problem of meaninglessness. Its versions vary according to what is identified as the primary target of the disenchantment process: selves can be disenchanted with ideals once held or heroes once admired, and so disenchantment can name an unhappy psychological state; the culture can be disenchanted, in that collective life no longer operates according to the cyclical logic of premodern or traditional forms and instead organizes itself along the lines of a linear mathematics or ratio-

nality; or nature can be the object of disenchantment, in that a spiritual dimension once found in plants, earth, sky is now nowhere to be seen.¹¹

There are more or less subtle, more or less convincing, versions of this tale, all of which posit some kind of absence or loss in the modern condition. The tale is flexible enough to accommodate both positive and negative valuations of the disenchantment process; it is told both by those who celebrate it as the fall of superstition and confusion and by those who lament it as the loss of contact with a meaningful moral universe. Even the celebrators, however, convey a sense of loss: the inevitable price for rationalization or scientization is, they say, the eclipse of wonder at the world. Max Weber makes this point when he says that life in a disenchanted world is stamped with “the imprint of meaninglessness.”¹² In this world, “there are no mysterious, incalculable forces that come into play, but rather . . . one can, . . . in principle, master all things by calculation.”¹³ Weber and other griots of enchantment are the focus of chapter 4.

Surely the very prevalence of the disenchantment story, even if it can be resisted, reveals something about contemporary experience. Although I want to weaken its hold, I am less its critic than its trash collector. With Kafka as my inspiration, I dust off and shine up what it discards, that is, the experiences of wonder and surprise that endure alongside a cynical world of business as usual, nature as manmade, and affect as the effect of commercial strategy. The experiences that I recycle, like those of Kafka’s three onlookers, are not invaders of the major tale but underground or background residents of it.

Kafka himself chooses not to give coherence to what Deleuze and Guattari might call the “minor tales” of these residents: he prefers them as fragments. Kafka also refrains from allowing the underground men to explain themselves: he prefers to let the scrappy onlookers stand silently as witnesses to the contingency of the plot that is getting all of the attention. Neither does Kafka explore the affect that their counterstory might spark, he does not allow the reader to take the flights that it might propel, and he does not experiment with how their minor story, with different affects and propulsions, might rewire the political or ethical circuitry. But I try to do these things. I weave the moments of enchantment that I find into an alter-tale, and I imagine the impact on ethical relations that such an alternative narrative might have.

My counterstory seeks to induce an experience of the contemporary world—a world of inequity, racism, pollution, poverty, violence of all kinds—as also enchanted—not a tale of reenchantment but one that calls attention to magical sites already here. Not magical in the sense of “a set of rituals for summoning up supernatural powers within a coherent cosmology,” but in the sense of cultural practices that mark “the marvelous erupting amid the everyday.”¹⁴ I want to tell this story because I take

seriously what geographer J. K. Gibson-Graham calls “the performativity of social representations,” that is, the ways in which the cultural narratives that we use help to shape the world in which we will have to live.¹⁵ As I emphasize throughout the book, the marvelous sites highlighted and exaggerated here don’t fit neatly into either the cosmology of the Christian Middle Ages or the contemporary understanding of secularism.

Enchantment without Design

One day, Candide meets his beloved teacher Pangloss on the street. At first, Candide does not recognize him, for Pangloss “was covered with pustules, his eyes were sunken, the end of his nose rotted off, his mouth twisted, his teeth black . . .” Pangloss recounts the story of how he caught the venereal disease responsible for his disfigurement, and he also traces the source of the disease back to Columbus’s encounter with the natives of the New World. Candide decries this as the work of the devil, but Pangloss argues to the contrary:

If Columbus had not caught, on an American island, this sickness which attacks the source of generation and sometimes prevents generation entirely—which thus strikes at and defeats the greatest end of Nature itself—we should have neither chocolate nor cochineal. . . . It was all indispensable, . . . since private misfortunes make for public welfare, and therefore the more private misfortunes there are, the better everything is.¹⁶

For Pangloss the optimist, the outcome of every act is already assured: everything works out for the best. And because the world is already the best of all possible worlds, any ameliorative activity on our part is redundant. No need, for example, to help a drowning man:

. . . the air grew dark, the winds blew from all directions, and the vessel was attacked by a horrible tempest within sight of Lisbon harbor. . . . [One] sailor lurched so violently that he fell head first over the side, where he hung, clutching a fragment of the broken mast. The good Jacques [an Anabaptist] ran to his aid, and helped him to climb back on board, but in the process was himself thrown into the sea under the very eyes of the sailor, who allowed him to drown without even glancing at him. Candide rushed to the rail. . . . He wanted to dive to his rescue; but the philosopher Pangloss prevented him by proving that the bay of Lisbon had been formed expressly for this Anabaptist to drown in.¹⁷

Voltaire, the teller of this ridiculous tale, is one of many critical theorists for whom an attitude of pervasive skepticism is the authoritative marker of a social conscience. For such thinkers, the face of social justice has an eyebrow cocked in disbelief, a nose poised to sniff out power, or eyes crin-

kled with satirical laughter. For them, the quest for enchantment is always suspect, for it signals only a longing to forget about injustice, sink into naivete, and escape from politics.

Sometimes this wariness of joy is expressed as the charge of elitism—that is, only effete intellectuals have the luxury of feeling enchanted, whereas real people must cope with the real world. It surely is the case that hunger and other serious deprivations are incompatible with wonder. But the claim that the capacity for wonder is restricted to the rich, learned, and leisured, or that it finds its most vibrant expression there, is more confidently asserted than established. Even if it were true, all the more reason for privileged intellectuals to develop that capacity. For, if enchantment can foster an ethically laudable generosity of spirit, then the cultivation of an eye for the wonderful becomes something like an academic duty.

The charge of naive optimism is more probing. It raises the question of the link between enchantment and mindlessness, between joy and forgetfulness. In the chapters that follow, I do not deny such a link or its dangers, but I also argue that, in small, controlled doses, a certain forgetfulness is ethically indispensable.¹⁸ Occasions during which one's critical faculties are suspended and one is caught up in the moment can produce a kind of enjoyment—a sense of adequacy or fullness—that temporarily eclipses the anxiety endemic to critical awareness of the world's often tragic complexity. And, sometimes, even complexity can enchant, as I suggest in chapter 5. Under fortuitous conditions, the good humor of enchantment spills over into critical consciousness and tempers it, thus rendering its judgments more generous and its claims less dogmatic. I pursue a life with moments of enchantment rather than an enchanted way of life. Such moments can be cultivated and intensified by artful means. Enchantment, as I use the term, is an uneasy combination of artifice and spontaneity.

Embedded within the charge of optimism is a rejection, on moral grounds, of the idea of a designed universe. Voltaire ridicules such an ontology and shows how it can engender complacency in the face of cruelty and violence. Although the experience of enchantment is often linked to a belief in a designed universe, it need not be.¹⁹ I identify sites on the contemporary cultural landscape that are capable of inspiring wonder, even an energetic love of the world. I call the effect of visits to these sites *enchantment* and draw connections between the experience of enchantment and cultivation of an ethic of generosity toward others. The fabulous world that I describe is not a purposive one, however, or, at least, it does not have to be interpreted through that lens. By choosing the term *enchantment* to describe this landscape, I contest the near monopoly over that term held by teleological perspectives, both of the traditional theolog-

ical sort described by Voltaire and the New Age varieties in which some sort of divinity remains indispensable to enchantment. This teleological model of enchantment, discussed in chapter 3, is also the one at work in the story of modernity as *disenchanted*: proponents of disenchantment share with those who lament its loss the assumption that only a teleological world is worthy of our enchantment.

I contest that assumption. A world capable of enchanting need not be designed, or predisposed toward human happiness, or expressive of intrinsic purpose or meaning. It seems that there is musicological support for this kind of enchantment, for “chant is modal music, which means that it doesn’t have the powerful drive that much of modern music has to arrive at a final harmonic destination.”²⁰ Moreover, the world that I describe as enchanted is not confined to structures, entities, and events in nature; there are also literary, machinic, and electronic sites of enchantment.

Kant best revealed how hard it is to dislodge the teleological assumption. After criticizing the “dogmatic” metaphysics of teleology (which pictures a world enchanted with divine signs), he finds himself driven to replace it with another “subjective” teleology that gives point or purpose to human existence. According to Kant’s discussion of teleological judgment, the very presence in our world of organized beings *forces* us to think in terms of purpose. Why? Consider what an organism is: it is a product of nature “in which everything is a purpose and reciprocally also a means.”²¹ In an organism, Kant says, “the parts of the thing combine into the unity of a whole because they are reciprocally cause and effect of their form.”²² What, for example, is a human lung if not an organ for breathing? The human mind resists the idea that the intricate interconnectivity that marks something as an organism can “be attributed to a blind natural mechanism.”²³ For if the parts work as parts of a whole—if that is what an organism is—then each part must appear to us as serving a purpose in relation to that whole. It seems, then, that the idea of purposiveness is embedded in our very concept of organism, as well as in our experience of encountering complexly organized natural things. Hence, Kant’s conclusion that “we must judge certain things in nature (organized beings) and their possibility in terms of the concept of final causes.”²⁴

The projection of purpose into the experience of effects is a hard habit to kick. But one of the legacies of Nietzsche is the idea that it is possible to counter the teleological tendency of one’s thought with genealogical strategies that call its necessity into question. Epicurus and Lucretius also resisted the purposive habit: they offered an enchanting but materialist explanation for how nature came to have its complexity and patterns, a materialism where matter (the “primordia”) is animated but not designed. Says Lucretius:

Not by design did the primordia of things place themselves each in their order with foreseeing mind, nor indeed did they make compact what movements each should start. But because many of them, shifting in many ways throughout the world, are harried and buffeted by blows from limitless time, by trying movements and unions of every kind, at last they fall into such dispositions as those, whereby our world of things is created and holds together.²⁵

Unlike Kant, the Epicureans did not think of a mechanistic universe as the only alternative to the subjective assumption of teleology. They were enchanted with a world without a transcendental design. More on this enchanted materialism in chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Joyful Attachment

The alter-tale that I tell first refigures what counts as enchantment and then explores its ethical potential. I think that both those who celebrate disenchantment and those who lament it remain too governed by a single model of enchantment. My quasi-pagan model of enchantment pushes against a powerful and versatile Western tradition (in the disciplines of history, philosophy, and literature) that make enchantment depend on a divine creator, Providence, or, at the very least, a physical world with some original connection to a divine will. But what is at stake in such a retelling? The answer for me has to do with the effect—always indirect—that a cultural narrative has on the ethical sensibility of its bearers.

I tell my alter-tale because it seems to me that presumptive generosity, as well as the will to social justice, are sustained by periodic bouts of being enamored with existence, and that it is too hard to love a disenchanting world. Affective fascination with a world thought to be worthy of it may help to ward off the existential resentment that plagues mortals, that is, the sense of victimization that recurrently descends upon the tragic (or absurd or incomplete) beings called human. These beings are caught in a variety of binds: they live by projecting an indefinite future for themselves, but they ultimately die; they suffer from undeserved and underdeserved punishments while harboring the indispensable idea of moral responsibility and personal accountability; they fail to live up to impossible ideals that alone can inspire them. Such is the generic human condition, which nevertheless feels as if it is directed against you in particular and thus provokes a personal sense of resentment or victimization.

According to Nietzsche's Zarathustra, goodness rarely issues from such feelings. A more powerful source of ethics, he suggests, is joy:

Verily, I may have done this and that for sufferers; but always I seemed to have done better when I learned to feel better joys. As long as there have been men,

man has felt too little joy: that alone, my brothers, is our original sin. And learning better to feel joy, we best unlearn how to do harm to others and to contrive harm.²⁶

Most commentators focus on Nietzsche's condemnation of pity as an engine of resentment. (I myself have reservations about this reductive account of pity.) But few of them note Zarathustra's positive ethical point, that is, that he endorses en-joyment over pity for the sake of an enhanced capacity to "unlearn how to do harm to others."²⁷

I agree with the Epicureans that matter is wondrous, even without purpose; I agree with Nietzsche that resentment is integral to the human condition; I agree with Zarathustra that joy enhances the prospect of ethical engagement and that one of the tasks proper to ethics is to "en-joy" the world. I also fear that acceptance of the disenchantment story, when combined with a sharp sense of the injustice of things by the Left, too often produces an enervating cynicism.

How the Story Goes

Chapter 2, "Cross-Species Encounters," explores one contemporary site of enchantment: the encounter with beings, including ourselves, who morph from one category of being to another. Here I tell the stories of a variety of interspecies crossings, some of which move between human and animal, some straddle between organism and machine, some are intraspecies journeys, some live in novels, and some are out on the streets. Resources for the stories include Michel Tournier's novel *Friday*, Kafka's ape in "A Report to an Academy," a television magazine segment about a very smart parrot, and Deleuze and Guattari's experiment with becoming a "body without organs." This chapter begins to articulate an ethical sensibility that is extended to nonhumans as well as to humans.

In Chapter 3, "The Marvelous Worlds of Paracelsus, Kant, and Deleuze," I take a look at the teleological model of enchantment of the Renaissance physician Paracelsus, for whom the world was divine prose. This is the model that many have in mind when they lament or celebrate the dis-enchantment of modernity. I then describe two other pictures of an enchanted world. The first is Kant's, who invents an amazing interior world of reason and of mental faculties capable of harmonizing with each other. The second picture comes from Kafka and from Deleuze and Guattari, where the world's enchantments reside in its material capacity for ongoing metamorphoses. There is a tendency in theoretical and popular discourse to restrict the experience of enchantment to a world like that of late medieval or Renaissance Christendom. But what happens when you

compare that cosmological model of enchantment with teleology-resistant models drawn from Kant or Deleuze? It then appears that a variety of enchanting sites continue to make their home in late modernity.

My emerging tale of enchantment exists only in dialogue with the better-known accounting of modernity as disenchanting. So I move next, in chapter 4, “Disenchantment Tales,” to an examination of several versions of the disenchantment story. The first is Max Weber’s account of how the world became “calculable”; the second is Hans Blumenberg’s grand narrative of the secularization of modernity, which draws on Weber’s account even as it celebrates secularization; the third is the version of the tale that inspires Simon Critchley’s pursuit of an ethics of “finitude.” I claim that, although the disenchantment story captures important features of contemporary life, it is also important to come to terms as closely as possible with enchanting events and affects residing within or alongside scientific calculation, instrumental reason, secularism, or disciplinary power. This seems advisable in order to induce a more visionary and expansive mood from the one that would be present if the disenchantment story held the whole field. Toward that end, I contrast an ethics built around finitude with an Epicurean picture of the world as a lively and endless flow of molecular events, where matter is animate without necessarily being animated by divine will or intent. I call this latter view an “enchanted materialism.”

Chapter 5, “Complexity and Enchantment,” continues to explore the category of nature and its place in the phenomenology of contemporary enchantment. According to both defenders and critics of a disenchanting modernity, a purposive nature unmarred by human culture is the best, if not the only, site capable of putting the experience of enchantment to ethical effect. Challenging that assumption, I argue that, in addition to the beauty and sublimity of nature, there also exist hi-tech, artifactual sites of enchantment. Here the work of Bruno Latour helps me to augment a Thoreau-like attachment to the Wild with technological enchantments, and the work of Ilya Prigogine (a founder of chaos theory) and Isabelle Stengers (a philosopher of science) helps me to think about material complexity as a site of enchantment. The chapter ends with a Kafkaesque consideration of the possibility that institutional complexity, in particular the encounter with bureaucratic forms, might also provoke a kind of enchantment.

In chapter 6, “Commodity Fetishism and Commodity Enchantment,” I take on the question of whether the kind of orientation toward life that I endorse can survive the widespread commercialization of culture. I argue that Marx’s notion of “commodity fetishism”—like Max Horkheimer’s and Theodor Adorno’s “culture industry” thesis—is not capacious enough to account for the affects and effects of exposure to mass-produced

entertainment. Can commodities enchant? I answer yes and examine the 1998–99 Gap advertising campaign for khaki pants to explore the link between enchantment and encounters with the mobility, even the agency, of matter.

Political and ethical dangers are associated with a project such as mine, in which I seek to narrate modernity in a way that heightens the experience of wonder within it. The term *enchantment* can name an uncritical cast of mind antithetical to reason and ethics alike. Such a concern has found thoughtful expression in recent debates about the aestheticization of ethics and politics. In a world construed as disenchanting, residual experiences of enchantment are slotted into two categories: the first is, as mentioned above, the religious or transcendental; the second is the sensuous, subjective realm of taste or aesthetics. In chapter 7, “Ethical Energetics,” I examine the view that ethics ought to be protected from the onslaught of aestheticizing forces and, drawing on the different ethical models of Kant, Schiller, Michel Foucault, and Richard Flathman, make a case for the impossibility of divorcing the affective from the ethical. The goal of my dialogue with each of these positions is to provide the reader with a clearer picture of the model of ethics within which enchantment can function as a positive resource.

Chapter 8, “Attachments and Refrains,” positions my tale of enchantment in relation to Stephen White’s notion of weak ontology and its role in contemporary social theory. The term *weak ontology* refers to a style of theorizing that includes a set of claims about human being and the fundamental character of the world, even as these claims are presented as essentially contestable. White helps me to make a case for the value of such *onto-stories*, as I call them, to political theory, in particular, the onto-story of enchanted materialism. And his assertion of the need for such tales to emphasize finitude is the important other to my own approach, which pins its ethical hopes on a feeling of plenitude and generosity. I then return to Deleuze and Guattari in order to describe the role that sound or “the refrain” plays in an onto-tale of enchantment. The chapter ends by revisiting the sites of enchantment considered in the book and by surveying a variety of other candidates in the natural and cultural worlds—other places, things, and experiences that draw out our profound and often joyful attachment to existence.

To talk in terms of the narratives of disenchantment and enchantment is to talk some big talk, to paint with broad strokes. Rather than examine political culture through specific events, or by means of a history of the ideas that shape them, or by a study of the institutional arrangements (of government, class, law, race, gender, consumption) that support them, I focus on a register of experience—the register of a cultural imaginary—that, although implicated in these other registers, is more amorphous and

less directly related to politics. But not, perhaps, less powerfully so. The story of disenchantment represents and sustains a specific range of aesthetic sensibilities; it enters into the moods, temperaments, habits, perceptual compartments, and somatic predispositions that find expression or resistance in political choices, alliances, and policies. Some portions of those sensibilities and compartments are so sedimented that they are highly resistant to reform, but there also seem to be others that are more susceptible to techniques of the self. My project is premised on those existence of those latter portions, the hope and target of my alter-tale.