Chapter Five

Affirming the World That Swerves

The Alter-Tales in Algernon Blackwood's The Centaur *and Ursula Le Guin's* Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences

So far, the discussion of fantasy's potential to subvert normative views of the world in favor of a more sacramental vision of nature has resulted in an examination of authors who have been male, who are now deceased, and who have Christianity as their dominant worldview. We have analyzed how some environmental critics are quick to blame the Christian mythos for the separation between humans and nature, but that these Christian fantasists are using the Christian mythos in exactly the opposite way: they are subverting ways of looking at the world in order to engage with it. However, is the Christian worldview the only accessible vehicle for fantasy authors? Are there authors who have the same mythopoeic message in their fiction but are drawing perhaps a bit more widely from the mythological well? Are any of them still alive? Are any of them female? The answer to these questions is, of course, yes. The purpose of this transitional chapter is to set up two authors in particular who, through their fiction, want their readers to participate in the sense of the numinous as well as subvert their views of nature so that it is seen in a new way.

The question may be asked, "For what reason?" Since authors such as Lewis and Tolkien (and Coleridge and MacDonald), are often lumped together, it seems only logical to end the discussion here; it makes sense to discuss these authors, you may ask, so why are you bringing in Algernon Blackwood and Ursula Le Guin? However, what we face in a postmodern, posthumanist world, is the question of meaning. What about

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those authors or readers who don't subscribe to the Christian mythos but who still sense the numinous in nature? What about those for whom fantasy is now their primary means of encountering something of the spiritual but who can't find it in the postmodern world? What about those of us for whom life is disenchanted?

One approach to these issues is to draw on the form of "enchanted materialism" as offered by Jane Bennett in her work *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics*. The problem with the modern world, Bennett argues, is that our Western emphasis on rationalism and skepticism has led to a sense of meaninglessness, that anything which is nonhuman (the rocks, the wind, the earth), is merely "inert matter"; nature, as well as the whole world, becomes disenchanted.

What is at the heart of this disenchantment tale that we so often tell ourselves? Bennett argues that the tale takes many forms. Our modern, highly rational world is in direct contrast to more holistic ways of perceiving the world. Yes, we have mastery over the world, but we pay a price for it, mainly in that we feel a sense of meaninglessness. We miss the point that "progress" entails both hope and despair; and, that our only safety valves for these forms are the "recalcitrant fugitives" of the erotic and the mystical. What I am arguing is that fantasy as we have been defining it, is one of those recalcitrant fugitives that offers an alter-tale or a different way to counter the disenchantment tale.

Throughout the course of her book, Bennett argues that Eden is always at the back of the disenchantment tale. According to Bennett, in retelling the disenchantment tale through the writings of Max Weber, Hans Blumenberg, and Simon Critchley, religion is partly to blame because science has robbed the world of the gods so that the focus has shifted not to this world but to the otherworld where salvation can be found. The dismissal of this world de-sanctifies it and leads to seeing the world as disenchanted.

The alternative to the disenchantment tale, the alter-tale that Bennett offers, is a world filled with enchantment. Bennett defines enchantment as follows:

> 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 momentary immobilizing encounter; it is to be transfixed, spellbound [Bennett 5].

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And further:

> To be enchanted is to be both charmed and disturbed: Charmed by a fascinating repetition of sounds or images, disturbed to find that, although your sense-perception has become intensified, your background sense of order has flown out the door [Bennett 34].

Bennett argues that enchantment implies both a pleasurable and disruptive mood; it is a surprise that comes in the form of the unexpected. Otto's definition of the numinous also implies that which is disturbing. Otto refers to the numinous as that feeling of holiness that is devoid of any moral implications. In fact, the numinous in religion actually started off as a feeling of dread and only later evolved into more complex forms. It seems, then, that Bennett would be in agreement with our thesis: fantasy, defined broadly as any departure from consensus reality, evokes a sense of wonder at the natural world precisely because it subverts (and disturbs) our normative views of the world only to replace them with a profound sense of the numinous.

Bennett calls her enchanted materialism a neo- or quasi-pagan model that goes against a Western tradition that posits a divine creator behind the world. Throughout history, many thinkers (such as Paracelsus) were determined to find divine signs in nature, thus being influenced by Christian cosmology. Bennett asks us to consider alternatives. Can we find enchantment in a world without *telos* or intrinsic purpose? Are there any options other than the Christian for a life of enchantment? For Bennett, such enchantment can be found in various sites, including the literary, the machinic, and the electronic. Bennett's discussion covers a wide variety of sites of enchantment including Kafka, Thoreau, nanotechnology, bureaucracy, and even the 1998 Gap ad "Khakis Swing." Instead of looking to some purposive element behind all of this, enchanted materialism looks to a world where literary characters morph, nanotechnology can transform food into razor blades, khakis can dance, and nature can speak. For Bennett, surely that world is enchanted. How is it? Because enchanted materialism does not proclaim that the human is the only source of agency. In enchanted materialism, agency is distributed more widely, to include sites of enchantment that disrupt the human as center.

Drawing upon Epicurus and Lucretius, Bennett discusses the fact that the world is not disenchanted. For Epicurus, matter is wondrous

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and there need not be a divine creator behind anything. Atoms or *primordia* fall through the universe, but they do it with a twist, or a swerve, so that things are repeated but never in the same way. This swerve is what makes the world vibrant and filled with life; it is that sense of quirkiness of matter that makes all things mobile.

Bennett takes issue with ecospiritualists, those who feel that nature is dull and lifeless and their need to re-enchant nature; nature was never disenchanted for Bennett. Our forms of enchantment have just shifted. If we look, not to the heavens for the numinous, but in the unique specificity of the things of nature, there we will find our enchantment. For Bennett, "Enchantment is a feeling of being connected in an affirmative way to existence; it is to be under the momentary impression that the natural and cultural worlds *offer gifts* and, in doing so, remind us that it is good to be alive" (Bennett 156). Two such authors who offer us literary gifts are Algernon Blackwood and Ursula Le Guin. It is these authors who offer non-teleological fantasies which engage our sense of the numinous and wake us up to the marvelous specificity of nature.

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