

Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm. *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences.* University of Chicago Press 2017. 400 pp. \$96.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780226403229); \$32.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780226403366).

Let me begin this review of Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm's *The Myth of Disenchantment* with something that seems very appropriate, namely a 'chant.' It regards Kelly Clarkson's song *Whole Lotta Woman*. The reason for me to open with this song is not related to the music or the lyrics of Mrs. Clarkson's canticle (in all honesty, I only listened to it once, and I did not finish the song). I refer to this song because it comes closest to a Roman dialectical expression that says that certain ladies are 'tanta' ('a whole lot'). The 'whole lotta' woman will give you great joy, but she comes with a 'price.' And it is this double characteristic of the pretty whole lotta woman that allows me to make what is, I believe, a very appropriate, although probably somewhat uncommon, analogy for Josephson-Storm's book. *The Myth of Disenchantment* is a 'whole lotta' book. Simply said, this is a splendid book. It is erudite as very few other works, and very well and clearly written. It should be read by everybody who is interested in the coming about of our intellectual modern world. Above all it should be read by everybody who has some doubts about the couple modernity-disenchantment, especially all the convinced modernists (as a test of 'faith'—and they will most probably fail their test). For those who recognize the beauty (the whole lotta) of the book, they should obviously read it. They, however, will quickly recognize that, just like the 'whole lotta' ladies, it comes with a 'price.'

Some words on the work's structure and content: the book has ten chapters, nine of which are divided into two parts. A traditional introduction and a reassuring conclusion, respectively, open and close the volume.

Josephson-Storm offers us in his introduction a very good resume of what he intends his work to offer his reader (and, I have to admit, our author never had to convince me of his thesis; I was already—as with C.S. Lewis, in *The Abolition of Man*—intrigued by the hints at a non-linear and non-progressive history of and relationship between magic, science and wisdom): 'the work that follows is first and foremost... a novel history of the human sciences that... shows how their disciplining processes occurred against a background of magic and religious revivals' (18). The story that modernity is, as Max Weber's thesis (a thesis that, as Josephson-Storm will demonstrate in the tenth chapter, is not of Weberian origin) goes, structurally rationalistic and characterized by the objectively observable *Entzauberung der Welt* (disenchantment of the world) is basically a myth that Josephson-Storm intends to demythologize. This book, in fact, intends to 'undercut the modernization thesis by revealing its paradoxical origins in the shared terrain between spiritualists, sorcerers, and scholars' (18). No progressive de-magification of the Occidental intellectual world can be discovered in the past centuries, only a reflexive dialectic (and often mixture) between the 'rational' and the 'irrational' can be detected in combination with a zealous divulcation of 'modernity's myth' and an often very conscious activity of 'occult disavowal' (the often self-imposed occlusion of one's or a theory's magical background and received influence). Josephson-Storm uses the first chapter (which is not part of the book's first section) to support these general claims by means of, mainly, sociological statistics and polls. These polls are supposed to demonstrate that disenchantment is simply not the order of the day, on either side of the Atlantic. Even if belief in God has diminished somewhat (especially in Europe), the belief in the paranormal or in the magical has not suffered a serious decline, let alone an irrevocable fall.

With the second chapter, our author leaves the more general claims behind and begins to write his novel history of the human sciences. The first theorists subjected to Josephson-Storm's work of erasure (6), of re-writing, are: first, the 'father of modern science' Francis Bacon and, second, the famous *philosophes* Diderot and D'Alembert who intended to map and divulge all human learning and knowledge. The first, as Josephson-Storm claims, was not really the advocate of strictly instrumental rationality but saw himself 'as an alchemist with a prophetic mission to recover the lost knowledge of Adam...' (45) and the *philosophes*, although they were attempting to banish God and actively fought superstition, did 'enchant nature with powers previously reserved for the divine' (57). As these first examples already demonstrate, Josephson-Storm does not want to reverse the modernity-myth. Bacon and *les philosophes* were not solely rationalist disenchanters, but neither were they exclusively magicians/alchemy and enchanters—no, they produced both dis- and enchantment in their works (61). It is this particular plot, this bimodality that will be encountered over and over again.

The third chapter studies the call for the construction of a new myth in German literary-philosophical culture of the 18th-19th century. The myth that will be constructed, and which according to our author is still our myth today, is that there is no myth. At a certain moment in history, as this myth goes, 'myth, or religion, began to give way to modern light' (65). This will be the chore of Weber's slogan of the *Entzauberung*, but, as one is able to discover in this chapter, the main characteristics of this formula were already present well before Weber. This myth of the absence-of-myth, will also allow for the first periodizations of the 'Renaissance' and the 'Enlightenment'. Friedrich Schiller, Friedrich Hölderlin, and Jacob Burckhardt are the main scholars Josephson-Storm tackles in this chapter that starts, however, with a discussion about the Pantheism Controversy (about Spinoza's heritage in late 18th century Germany) between Moses Mendelssohn and Friedrich Jacobi.

The fourth chapter tackles the narrative of the 'birth' of religious studies. The conviction that these studies rose as a disenchanting discipline is shown to be erratic, as they emerged in a shared history with spiritualism and theosophy by which they were highly influenced (95). Edward B. Tylor, Éliphas Lévi, Max Müller, and the famous Madame Blavatsky are the main protagonists of this chapter. The fifth chapter somewhat continues on the road embarked upon in the previous chapter and studies the emergence of Folklore studies. The Scottish folklorist and classicist James G. Frazer and his masterwork, *The Golden Bough*, stand at the center of this chapter. The main discovery of this part will be that 'disenchantment appears not primarily in the theory of the master folklorists, but within the folktales themselves' (127). The sixth chapter, which concludes the first part, tells the history of one of our contemporary's most peculiar characters, namely of the occultist and magician Aleister Crowley, the 'Wickedest Man in the World.' Crowley demonstrates to be so interesting because it allows Josephson-Storm to show how 'effortlessly Crowley was able to combine Frazer's folklore studies with William James's pragmatic mysticism and Müller's sacred book, and make them the basis for his own magical and religious projects' (175). If anything, religious studies and folklore studies allowed this British occultist to enchant the world, showing once more the 'paradoxes of the disenchantment discourse' (175).

Chapter seven takes us back to Germany. Josephson-Storm starts this chapter by investigating an alternative myth, similar to the disenchantment one, namely the one that sees the West in a state of decline and degeneration into the occult. Max Nordau is the scholar studied here. Josephson-Storm then tells a similar story of occult revival, this time in post-Kantian philosophical thought and ends this chapter by focusing on Freud's ambivalent relation with the occult. Freud proves to be of double interest because with him, our author is also capable of tracing Freud's suppression of his interest in the occult. Chapter eight focusses primarily on two thinkers: on the one hand, the controversial poet

and neo-pagan mystic Ludwig Klages, and, on the other, Walter Benjamin. The scope of this chapter is to demonstrate Klages' rather substantial influence on Walter Benjamin's thought.

Walter Benjamin was, however, not the only one of the critical theory scholars who had in Horkheimer and Adorno, from the *Frankfurter Schule*, their main representatives. Chapter nine begins by tracing the minor influence esoteric knowledge had on the scholars from Frankfurt, and then ventures into their antagonism with logical positivism from the Vienna Circle. Also these Viennese positivists, as Josephson-Storm attempts to demonstrate in this second to last chapter, were 'haunted by magic and the ghosts of the very metaphysics they were working to exclude' (268). The final, and tenth chapter, takes us to Max Weber and 'his' declaration of the *Entzauberung*, the disenchantment of the world. For as much as the previous chapters have revealed that the idea of the disenchantment of the world derives from occultism, not only did Weber thus derive this theorization from the occult environment, he, as Josephson-Storm is able to demonstrate, also was an assiduous frequenter of occult circles, especially Stefan George's in the south of Switzerland, where another revival of occultism was once more taking place.

Disenchantment thus is a myth. The modern world (being itself also a myth) has never been de-magicized, and enchantment and disenchantment have been in a constant reflexive dialectical relationship. There is no mythless future waiting for us (316).

Before we venture into phrasing some minor conclusive comments, it seems opportune to uncover a number of (mainly acknowledged) ghosts that dwell in the folds of this book (the book itself is nicely enchanted). Basically, there are three. In random order, they are Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—a book with which Josephson-Storm concedes to be shadowboxing with throughout the whole of his text (242). That Horkheimer and Adorno's publication, to start with the latter ghosts, on the Enlightenment haunts Josephson-Storm's volume, can be evinced from the fact that the claim that disenchantment is a myth—this book's basic claim—was already voiced (embryonically and indirectly) by these two prominent members of the *Frankfurter Schule*. The 'Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment of the world' they wrote in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1) and enlightenment, as it proceeded in this process of disenchantment, gets ever more entangled with mythology (8). From these affirmations to Josephson-Storm's disenchantment-as-myth claim, seems only a very small step—our author also describes his book as a response to Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic* (8). Turning now to our two French ghosts, if one is not familiar with Derrida's philosophy, his presence will be somewhat more hidden. However, the underlying structure of binary oppositions, and the almost constitutional attempt to undermine the main opposition of enchantment-disenchantment (not the attempt to privilege either one, but to let them be freely at 'play'), is very Derridaian—this binary opposition is, according to Josephson-Storm, mythical and the terms themselves need to be suspended (10). Michel Foucault is already spectrally present in the subtitle (also Foucault's *Les Mots et les Choses* had the human sciences in its subtitle), but, as Josephson-Storm states in the introduction (and will repeat almost verbatim in the conclusion), there are three Foucaultian doubts about the myth of disenchantment or 'modernity paradigm' that animate the whole work (17, 304).

The first brief comment that I think is necessary is that it is a true pleasure to read this incredibly well-researched book. It is a big book (more than 400 pages of which almost 80 are dedicated to footnotes), and, as will have become evident from the brief summary of the chapters, a whole lot is constantly happening. It however, hardly ever becomes annoying to continue reading and one never gets lost in the tentacles of this complex history.

At times, if we are to phrase some critiques, Josephson-Storm seems to be deducing too much from (even multiple) references. Although our author is very critical of himself and never indulges

in easy generalizations, again, at times, certain conclusions seemed a bit farfetched. More than anything, however, I did find it a true shame that the topic of the occult disavowal hasn't been thematically treated. This, I think, would have pushed this book over the top of being 'just' splendid.

To conclude, some might remember that I began with the reference on the 'whole lotta' woman and mentioned some 'price' to pay to enjoy her company. They might still wonder what that price now exactly is for Josephson-Storm's book. Well here is my answer: if we attempt to understand *The Myth of Disenchantment* in the way the author has intended (considering a myth as an episteme or master paradigm [308]), then this book that intends to undo '*the myth that there is no myth*' (316), splendid as it is, is just another myth as well.

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