

From Wonder: A Grammar. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015.

Introduction

Wonder: known and unknown, familiar and strange; arched with rainbows, tensed with shadows; source of pleasure and cause of suffering; pointing beyond itself, pointing to nothing but itself. The work that follows—pitching itself on the side of the question rather than the side of the answer, on the side of the long essay (with its heuristic undertones of experiment and overture) rather than the complete treatise (with its overtones of mastery and closure)—took shape because of a hunch that a closer reflection on wonder was long overdue. Yet why even talk of “hunches” or of dues, as if one’s thinking was always concerned to be on the pulse or in tune, scenting out intellectual mood or cultural tempo and making sure it is in time or ahead of it? The simple truth is that it belongs to wonder’s physiognomy that it commands to be thought out when it has once struck; and this is because thinking it is one of the few means by which one might hope to retain it, and if nourishing was possible, even conceivably to feed it.

The thinking that follows passes through several pathways, some of which cross and cross again, and almost all of its pathways can be counted as ways of asking a single question in different inflections: “What is wonder?” and again: “Why does wonder matter?” In following these pathways, this meditation will have speed enough to make for breathlessness. So it is worth pausing at its beginning to briefly place in view what lies ahead; and this means saying something more about how this meditation took its own beginnings and its present shape.

For every reflection needs a foothold—even reflection demanded by experience—and every quest needs a beginning—even a quest for the wonder that supplies beginnings to reflective quests—which opens up the space for pursuing it in structured ways. Like all other trains of reflection, this one owes many debts to those who have already opened up its specific space in both the recent and more distant past, foregrounding the salient themes and orienting questions through which wonder may be thought. But one of the most important debts it owes, both for its initial foothold and the structure of its reflective space, is to a recent articulation of wonder whose appeal is matched by its ability to galvanise thought;

and whose galvanising power is that of all aphoristic assertions, which offer crisp claims about what “is” in ways that invite one to plough up the earth around them.

It is a spirit of aphorism to which our mode of questioning would often seem to commit us from the very first breath. “What is wonder?” we ask; and we expect to be answered with unified claims about what wonder *is* or *isn't*. Meeting this question in a work that addresses the complex status of wonder as both stimulus of reflection and aesthetic reaction, Philip Fisher recently offered us a crisp formulation by way of response. Wonder: “a sudden experience of an extraordinary object that produces delight.”¹ It is a view—Fisher calls it an “essential definition”—whose appeal is linked to the way it speaks to many of our strongest intuitions, to those immediate intuitions that first assemble themselves when we reach for the physiognomy of wonder. “What is wonder?” we ask, and we reach for images of the face that children present to the world when confronting something seen for the first time, for the wide-eyed looks of pleasure and gasps that are suddenly torn from their lips. Reaching for images closer to our own present, we may recognise this wonder in the sudden exclamation of pleasure that escapes us before an *aurora borealis* or our excitement as we turn the shining fossil of a marine animal in our hands, thousands of years streaming through our fingers; in the wide-eyed look of the scientist as she watches the courtship dance of birds of paradise from her makeshift hide-out or the dance of celestial bodies behind the telescope’s lens.

Suddenness, novelty, pleasure: terms that put together a “grammar” of wonder and, having opened the experience of wonder to thought, hold it to a structure that would normatively answer for all of its instances. And yet—leaning now closer to the flowing surface of this statement to look—is this the only way in which we know wonder to be parsed? For peering closer, we may allow the joints of this statement to stand out one by one to interrogate them in ways that begin to break up the fluency of its aphoristic “is” and brake its speed.

For with SUDDEN we might ask: and does wonder always *strike* or might not wonder also need to be *hunted* or *stoked*? With EXTRAORDINARY we might ask: and is the extraordinary something that reveals itself or something that may also need to be discovered? And if we twice converge on the notion of a hunt, or a quest, aren't we also querying whether wonder PRODUCES or whether it may not also itself demand to be produced? That, in the same breath, is to consider: what would be the OBJECT—not only in the sense of *content* but also the more valorised notion of *objective* or *intent*—of such wonder? And is DELIGHT the self-sufficient answer? And what, finally, probing deeper into the unobtrusiveness of grammar, is the meaning of that present tense which relates delight to wonder as its cause (PRODUCES) with all the stability of the eternal that grammar places at its disposal?

And having carved these joints open, we may begin to reach beyond our immediate intuitions and the physiognomy of wonder they assemble to attune ourselves to a broader range of intuitions, which offer the material for a rather different grammatical portrayal. For if wonder is the gasp torn from us as children when we are confronted with something hitherto unseen, there is also another kind of gasp that is torn from us as adults when we study more closely—as scientists, as philosophers, as students of spiritual techniques—what has already been a thousand

times seen and see it again. If wonder sends us looking, there is also a kind of wonder for which we may later seek—seeking out starlit skies and mountain tops, bending closer to lines of poetry, leaning closer to drops of water or snowflakes or the wings of flies to look. If wonder is the exclamation of delight faced with the *aurora borealis* or the wide-eyed look of the scientist as she watches the dance of fabulous animals or the dance of objects in the sky, this pleased response often shades dangerously into others—to a look of pained confusion, or frozen anxiety, or awed terror, before a spectacle that disturbs our expectations or overwhelms our ordinary frames of thought, pulling us too far away from the zone in which the extraordinary can be contemplated without disturbance; to something darker, bearing the texture of fear, as we confront the grandeur and enormity of the world that surrounds us.

These interpenetrating borders of feeling, of course, raise a question about how the linguistic boundaries may be drawn around “wonder” as against its conceptual siblings within the larger emotional field it inhabits. In doing so, they call attention to the fact that the question “What is wonder?” must be anchored in a consideration of our linguistic practices in the first instance, and may need to be heard as a question linguistic in kind. To attend to wonder’s status as a phenomenon of language, however, is simultaneously to attend to its exposure to historical change. And it is thus to confront the fact that questions about what wonder *is* cannot be answered judiciously without considering what wonder *has been*, and without opening ourselves to the thought that wonder has sometimes been another kind of thing, in which its borders and the feeling tones that track them have been differently configured. At the same time, to the extent that these different feeling tones—darkness and delight, fear and joy—form part of wonder’s larger emotive field, sometimes even entering its linguistic identity, this also suggests that not only our “what (is wonder)?” but our “why (wonder)?” may likewise take a more complex response, one in which we should be prepared to listen for the reasons that may make us, not only desire wonder, but strive to escape it. And attuned to these reasons, we may be also prepared for the entailment that wonder will sometimes appear within our lives, not as a natural event, but as the object of a quest with the higher pitch of a conquest—one that, in pitting us against our own will, will provoke finer-grained questions about the nature of our will to wonder, or about its unnaturalness.

Studied more closely, and unsettled from their fixity, the joints of this definition of wonder thus swing open to angles of questioning that hold the key to a deeper understanding of how wonder should be parsed, and to a more inclusive view of its grammar—of its characteristic objects, feeling tones, means of provocation and reasons for being desired. And this will be a view that, in holding wonder to the light against the broken glass of history, and against the broken glass of our language with the jagged divisions it marks between concepts, may ultimately discourage us from asking the question we are drawn to—“What is wonder?”—with expectations of a unified answer, and may make it easier for us to acknowledge that wonder is and has been many things. In doing so, it will share in the type of insight we have inherited from Wittgenstein, whose philosophical perspective provides this

meditation on wonder with its scaffolding at several junctures, and who taught us to look for the answers to large essentialising questions—“What is knowledge?” “What is time?” and so to “What is love?” or “What is wonder?”—by attending to the life such words lead in our language.

Focused by the loosened elements of this initial definition and the angles of questioning they open out to, the book that took shape can be read as an exercise at map-reading: as a venture to map some of the core aspects of wonder’s grammar, or in the more living metaphor with which we began, to plot some of the highlights of its character, sketching the passion of wonder from different angles—linguistic, historical, evaluative—in ways that bring into view the rich tracks it has carved in our intellectual history and continues to drive through our present. Not a comprehensive documentation but a heuristic starting point, not a reflection that exhausts its object but a reflection that opens it up more fully, the aim of this book is to bring wonder nearer to us as a reflective object and to provide new frameworks through which to approach it, in the hope that by thinking about wonder we may also discover why we might wish to dwell in it, and may find new ways of doing so.

The grammatical statement that provided this meditation with its initial foothold—wonder: “a sudden experience of an extraordinary object that produces delight”—has been retained as an influence on its structure throughout, as reflected most visibly in its chapter divisions, which take up the joints of this statement to interpret them in particular terms and develop them in more specific directions.

The discussion opens (Chapter 1: “WONDER”) with a question about the reasons for the singular neglect of wonder among contemporary philosophers and researchers of the emotions, surveying a number of factors that appear to position wonder as an anomaly within taxonomies of the emotions and make it recalcitrant to the analytical frameworks through which the emotions are often approached. Wonder’s adaptive significance seems harder to parse than that of many of the other emotions; its physical expression seems harder to read than the physical expression of fear or anger or grief; its invitation to action, and its constitutive judgements, seem similarly elusive compared with the other emotions we study. It is an outlook that brings an emphasis on what wonder is *not*—on what makes wonder an object of ignorance or doubt. Yet in the next moment, this outlook demands to be recalibrated by an emphasis on what we *do* know about wonder, and the access we in fact have to its identity as an emotion. It is an access that stands to be grounded in the simplest facts about our mastery of language, which enables us to speak the words of wonder and ascribe wonder to others when we see it expressed. As for all other concepts, the conceptual boundaries of wonder may be fluid and it may resist rigid definitions; yet there are still elements that can be identified as its special (if singularly thin) logic, and above all, the judgement of positive value it pronounces on its object.

A first grasp on “what wonder is”—yet this is a grasp that the next tract of the discussion (Chapter 2: “DELIGHT”) takes upon itself to interrogate and extend, refining this present-tense *is* with a more strongly historical sensitisation to what wonder *has been*. Focusing the discussion is a question about what wonder “feels like” which looks past the contemporary association between wonder and pleasure,

seemingly constitutive of its identity, to track the experiential tone of wonder across a longer historical past. The first stage of the discussion engages the sweeping history of wonder as a passion of inquiry offered by Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park in their *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (1998), which makes a claim about the changing tone of wonder from pleasure to discomfort that is central to their broader view of wonder's historicity and the openness of its identity to change. The pleasurable wonder marking the "Age of the Marvellous" in the 16th and 17th centuries (so Daston and Park) is succeeded by a wonder that carries more negative affective valence, exemplified in the writings of the 18th-century philosopher Adam Smith, and heralding the historical displacement of wonder from elite culture. Having placed a broad-brushstroke sketch of wonder's larger history in view, this particular claim is interrogated through a closer examination of the notion of wonder expressed by Adam Smith and an alternative reading of its significance.

Yet pleasure and pain, in fact, have been locked in complex patterns of interdigitation throughout wonder's history; wonder has often been linked, not to delight, but to the darker elements of terror or fear. And while there are certainly important *historical* ways in which these patterns could be narrated, this is a story that can also be told in different terms—as a story of competing possibilities or conflicting approaches to wonder that cut across historical divides. The next part of the discussion follows this different mode of story-telling by drawing on another important study of wonder, Mary-Jane Rubenstein's *Strange Wonder* (2008), and on the typology of Platonic and Aristotelian wonder it articulates. Aristotle's wonder delights; Plato's bears a darker tincture—a phenomenological distinction in turn linked to the governing aspirations of each: to swiftly dissipate wonder through explanation, thereby re-establishing the mastery of reason (Aristotle); to maintain the openness of wonder in the face of fearful uncertainty and vulnerability (Plato). Approached critically, this typology suggests a way of telling the story that may be parsed as, not historical, but ethical in kind, demanding a better navigation of temptations to which intellectual activity is inherently exposed. Wonder's darkness must often be endured; just as wonder's pleasure may often require conquest. In this light, Daston and Park's view of wonder's demise can also be read again; and so can the question—is wonder still open to us?—that underpins it.

Turning away from wonder's feeling tone, the next chapter ("SUDDEN") turns to wonder's objects and its mode of striking or descent, using Philip Fisher's account in *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (1998) to first delineate the understanding of wonder's objects and mode of striking that comes most naturally to us, so as to then begin to question it. Wonder suddenly strikes, wonder breaks upon us unwilling when we are confronted with what is unfamiliar or unexpected, to then fade as novelty fades and the extraordinary is assimilated into the ordinary background of our lives. It is an account of wonder that brings its own sense of tragedy; and more importantly, one that overlooks the different senses in which the notion of the "extraordinary" may be understood, and in doing so overlooks the character of wonder as a judgement, and the ways this character lays it open to wilful cultivation.

Wonder's vision can constitute, not merely an involuntary event, but a voluntary act and practised achievement; and not an unwilled beginning, but a cultivated end. It is a cultivated achievement, in fact, that has been central to the discipline of many of our highest intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual practices—among scientists and artists, philosophers and religious thinkers. In such practices, it has often been precisely what is most ordinary (in the sense of what is regular or familiar) to which the attention has been deliberately re-oriented, inviting us to see it as worthy of wondering remark.

Wonder as an act—as an act to be willed and produced; as an experience to be quested and hunted. The next move (chapter 4: “PRODUCES”) is to take this notion of activity forward by first articulating or re-articulating it in its most rudimentary sense, that which is constituted by the practice of language. For with a richer notion of wonder's grammar now partly in view, the linguistic anchoring of wonder already articulated demands to be revisited and reinforced through a finer-grained attention to our application of the language of wonder and to the conditions that support it. And this means attending more closely to the connection between our linguistic practices and the thicker cultural practices identified as habitats for a different kind of wonder, and to the role of the latter in conditioning the intelligibility of wonder's linguistic expression.

With this linguistic anchor more firmly in place, wonder's relationship to the notion of practice or activity can then be elicited more sharply by focusing on a strain of wonder with special significance for the history of the concept. For an aspect of wonder's physiognomy that has often been picked out as one of its most distinctive features is its opposition to self-interest and utility. This opposition has figured especially prominently where wonder has been articulated in its status, not as a passion of inquiry, but an aesthetic response. And it has been elicited nowhere more brilliantly than in the particular strain of wonder—that potent mixture of terror and joy, of darkness and delight—represented by the aesthetic experience of the sublime. For the sublime, as Kant and Schopenhauer notably recount it, involves a transformation of vision that demands a conquest—a conquest of interest that is also an overcoming of the lower aspect of one's being and that places one in contact with one's higher and truer identity. In doing so, it displaces the direction of wonder and reverses our judgements about what is extraordinary or great, turning the wondering gaze away from the world in all its grandeur and inward to the subject in its higher capacity; and this is a capacity in which it is no longer mastered by, but rather masters, the world.

A moment of aesthetic vision that involves a conquest; yet we can locate this wonder against an even thicker notion of activity—one that indeed also brings out the ethical character this conquest may carry—by turning to another philosophical episode that lies embedded in the lineage of the Romantic sublime and its characteristic wonder. For shadowing the later sublime is a notion of human sublimity or greatness which achieved its highest ethical expression among ancient philosophers in the ideal of “greatness of soul,” where it was linked to a similar capacity for reversing our judgements of value and transcending the lower for the higher, and a similar displacement of wonder to the human subject in its higher

capacities. This sense of wonder was in turn enshrined in a series of philosophical practices that included the imaginary of “cosmic flight” or “cosmic consciousness,” which manifested but also nurtured the human capacity for moral and intellectual transcendence through an imaginative cultivation of vision that we may call more thickly (following Pierre Hadot) a spiritual exercise and a disciplined *askesis*.

Having brought this richer grammar of wonder more fully into view, the discussion finally turns to address one of its remaining critical joints, parsing this as a broader question (Chapter 5: “OBJECT”) about the reasons why wonder might itself form an object of will and aspiration. It is a question we may seek to answer by appropriating a framework of interrogation often applied to the emotions, considering (or reconsidering more attentively) what wonder feels like; what wonder leads us to do; what wonder tells us, or how it makes us judge. Addressing wonder’s forward-looking value as a stimulus for inquiry, however, now demands a more sensitive effort to locate this value in the larger ethical space in which it may be judged. And this means attending more openly to the connection in which wonder may stand to our modes of self-evaluation, and finally foregrounding a notion of mastery—linked with a more problematised notion of pride—that recurred in our foregoing discussion, to reflect on its status and proper role within intellectual quests.

Yet if wonder can find clear justification in the service it offers to such quests—in its ability to lead us toward the goods that structure them—wonder’s ability to “tell” yields a more complex understanding of its value. For it returns us to the basic “logic” of wonder as a judgement of positive value to make us question whether wonder could ever be demanded by its objects—a demand with the force of entitlement, a response we owe—and if not, whether there is a different way of articulating the demand at stake. From one perspective, our spades would seem to hit against bedrock, and an argument for the value of wonder would seem to demand an argument for something as basic as the value of a consciously lived life.

Yet there is, for all the brittleness of the ground we tread here, something more to be said about the value of wonder that stands to be grounded on what wonder “tells.” This can be brought out by finally returning to the wonder of the sublime—in both its Romantic embodiment and ancient antecedents—for a finer, and this time more critical, consideration of its significance and enduring relevance. For even those who do not share the substantive philosophical commitments of the sublime’s later articulators, and who may frown on the ethical spirit that breathes through their encounter with the world’s grandeur, may be able to recognise that basic encounter and its characteristic wonder, and see in it the kernel of a kind of truth-telling sufficient to make us treasure this wonder and seek it out, will it and aspire to it. This is a wonder that—sometimes; maybe on extraordinary occasions; occasions that represent the climactic product of individual journeys of formation and histories of passionate education in which the disciplining of our attention will play a crucial role—can tell us who we are.

Questioning wonder’s pleasure, questioning wonder’s suddenness, looking beyond the extraordinary that strikes us to the extraordinary which our judgement must seek out, holding up our habit of asking “what is?” to fracture it with the

pluralism of “what has been” and the contingency of “what we say,” and even so fractured, to look for answers to “why wonder?” that remain sensitive to the many “why not’s”—already this betokens enough of the ground to be covered, offering a dense map of the map-reading ahead, and sweeping over the joints of wonder’s grammar with leaps steep enough to call for bridges.

So let us peer closer to these joints to consider, beginning by putting our ear to the sources from which the EXPERIENCE of wonder first promises to be known—or to elude our knowing.

¹ Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 55.