

# Economides, "The Ecology of Wonder in Romantic and Postmodern Literature"

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## Book Review

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Economides, Louise. *The Ecology of Wonder in Romantic and Postmodern Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

“To wonder is to wander” is the first, striking quote from Louise Economides’ book of ecocriticism. The author does, indeed, wander the complexity and implications of using the sublime, which is still the prevailing aesthetic in contemporary ecocriticism, while offering the alternative of ‘wonder.’ If the two terms intersect, Economides endeavors to highlight the differences between them and stresses that the sublime “is a primary cause of, not the solution to, our environmental crisis” (20).

Confronting several ecocritics — from William Cronon (17) to Christopher Hitt (16) and, more recently, Lee Rozelle’s *Ecosublime* (29) — who have for long studied the sublime and attempted to redefine the concept so that it would best suit the current climate of ecological awareness, Economides rejects the sublime to embrace the aesthetic of wonder and “examine ways in which [it] has been mobilized in the name of ecological conservation” (26). Economides’ study of wonder therefore complements the contemporary ecocritical discourse on aesthetic categories and the Anthropocene,<sup>1</sup> which seeks to develop “a new set of conceptual tools that might allow us to describe human agency as a geophysical force” (Boes and Marshall 2014, 61). More specifically, it addresses how “capitalist culture is producing ecological and social instability” (179).

While chapter one clarifies the author’s skeptical stance towards the sublime and her agenda of revalorizing wonder as an ecocritical concept and aesthetic, chapter two displays her first take on wonder with a comparison between Wordsworth and Coleridge. A refreshing discussion on Wordsworth sheds a light on the poet’s ambivalence towards adopting the Cartesian tendency to “control nature” or celebrating nature’s strangeness through a “wonder-based” aesthetic experience (42). While Wordsworth has trouble embracing “adult wonder,” which he describes as “a form of gross ignorance” (49) overloaded with “nostalgia” (67),<sup>2</sup> Coleridge’s use of wonder

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<sup>1</sup> One thinks, for example, of the aesthetic categories of the ‘beautiful’, the ‘gothic’, the ‘stuplime’ (see Sianne Ngai’s *Ugly Feeling* [2005]) or even, more recently, the ‘weird.’ Such notions have also been studied and used to consider ecological and political issues in their “effort of thinking the aesthetic and political together” (Ngai 2005, 3). Economides’ is especially in line with recent reappropriations of adjacent categories such as Elaine Scarry’s reaffirmation of beauty (21) or Jane Bennett’s rediscovery of enchantment in *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (34).

<sup>2</sup> While ecocritics and environmental historians have emphasized the political power of the tropes of nostalgia (Heise 2016, 7), which may be humankind’s “only hope of salvation” (Worster 1993, 3), and melancholy, Economides’ analysis of Wordsworth and Coleridge specifically criticizes the Romantics’ propensity to associate

better serves Economides' "project of imagining alternatives to oppressive custom" (74) and to illustrate "a counterexample to the sublime's political pessimism and deleterious environmental implications" (29).

Chapter three approaches Wordsworth and Shelley against the backdrop of the 'technological sublime.' As an anthropocentric aesthetic which celebrates human-made achievements, the technological sublime opens the door to industrial expansion and possibly to all sorts of abuses of nature.<sup>3</sup> Economides' reference to Emerson's *Nature* illustrates this new perspective on technology, which provides mankind with a "new power over nature" and may ultimately foster a view of nature as merely "raw material" (92) for human purposes. While Wordsworth's "work represents a critical bridge between the natural and technological sublime" (90), Economides interprets Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a critique of the technological sublime (100) in which the creature reminds the reader of "the reductive materialism and ecological ignorance which compromise the technological sublime to this day" (107).

Postmodernism seems to confirm the author's skeptical view of the sublime. In chapter four, while theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard (109) have put forward arguments in favor of a redefinition of the sublime, Economides maintains that "sublimity cannot yield the kind of resistance these thinkers desire" (110). DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Underworld*, which have been widely analyzed in terms of ecological disruption and toxicity, serve here to demonstrate a shift from the romantic sublime towards a "postnatural aesthetic," or a form of "postmodern sublime" which highlights the absence of "nature as an 'other' to" consumer culture (120). Yet, her ideas run counter to ecocritics and sublime advocates Lee Rozelle and Cynthia Deitering inasmuch as she argues that DeLillo's "environmental sublimity" provides no hope for reform but "can be seen as a primary symptom of the economic system's totality" (130). In her comparison between Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* and Nick Haye's *The Rime of the Modern Mariner* (2011), a graphic novel which "reveals the sublime and horrific proportions of oceanic pollution" (147), Economides finds an analogous treatment of the environmental sublime which does not compel socio-political change but, rather, fosters a form of ineffective "ecological melancholy" (131).<sup>4</sup>

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wonder with an elegiac, nostalgic or "irrecoverable, Edenic phase of early life that must be given in order to meet the demands of adulthood in a fallen political domain" (74).

<sup>3</sup> Apart from David Nye, whose *American Technological Sublime* is mentioned here as a foundational text on the technological sublime, William Turner's train paintings (e.g., *Rain, Steam and Speed — The Great Western Railway*, 1844) exemplifies quite well the shift from the natural or romantic sublime toward a focus on technological wonder.

<sup>4</sup> Economides emphasizes that the "ecological politics of melancholy" is problematic inasmuch as "too exclusive a focus upon loss can impede one's ability to formulate positive alternatives to present socio-political arrangements" (136).

Although Economides wanders from wonder in the intermediate chapters by focusing on the risks of using the sublime as an ecocritical aesthetic, she returns to the notion of wonder in the final chapter. Wonder, she writes, is at the crossroads of phenomenology and defamiliarization in its attempt to find new ways of perceiving nature (153). Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "phenomenology of embodied perception," insofar as Heidegger's ontology would eventually not best serve her ecocritical agenda, Economides suggests a reaffirmation of defamiliarization as a relevant concept in "contemporary ecological politics" (157). "[A]ll language (that of both humans and animals)," she argues, "arises from embodied perception [or] the diverse ways living beings use communication to 'build worlds' within their sensory environments" (181). Forrest Gander's *A Faithful Existence* is the last theoretical basis on which she relies to leave the door open for "other studies [to] follow hers" (21) on the intangible but yet wondrous aspects of both nature and technology (192).

If Economides' book ends on Gander's optimistic tone, ecocriticism still awaits these other studies on the notion of wonder itself. Although Economides' take on wonder is insightful and sufficiently theory-based, the book itself could almost be understood as an extended pamphlet against the use of the sublime in ecocriticism rather than a comprehensive study of wonder in literature. Insofar as the sublime is rightfully conflated with the notion of wonder, more examples in favor of her argument are needed to make a compelling case for wonder itself. What is more, one could regret that, in adopting such a firm position against the sublime, the author chooses to focus on the techno-centered technological sublime whereas other more recent and ecologically-driven reappropriations of the sublime such as Jennifer Peeples' toxic sublime (2011) and Paul Outka's organic sublime (2011) were introduced prior to the publication of Economides' book.<sup>5</sup> Wonder might become an ecocritical lens that could enrich critical debates on the Anthropocene, but whether it should definitely replace the sublime is still disputable.

However, Economides' work plants the seeds for further literary investigations on wonder, which would not be constrained by genre conventions. Although the author's assessment of wonder in poetry is yet incomplete, her decision to consider various genres may encourage ecocritics to undertake studies on the rhetorical potential of wonder. Economides' writing and tone are stable and confident, and her critique of capitalist and consumerist ideologies is effectively incisive. Still, one may argue that such criticism would be possible and relevant by adopting the aesthetic of the sublime. Economides' approach remains, however, necessary and fits in our essential search

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<sup>5</sup> Peeples describes the "toxic sublime" as "the [sum of the] tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe" (Peeples 2011, 375, 380) while "[t]he organic sublime occurs when an individual becomes suddenly, painfully aware of her radical material identity, her likeness to Earth" (Outka 2011, 6).

for an aesthetic paradigm that would shift away from excessive consumerism and foster more ecological behaviors.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Such a paradigm has been promoted by critics such as Andreas Malm and Jason W. Moore who have argued capitalist mechanization is the cause of the making of a new world-ecology named the “Capitalocene,” which should be urgently unmade (Moore 2016).

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