

## Wonder vs. Sublime in Romantic and Postmodern Literature

Iyad Mukahal

**Economides, Louise. *The Ecology of Wonder in Romantic and Postmodern Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. vii + 214 pages. ISBN 978-1-137-47750-7. E-book. \$84.99.**

An important question within ecocritical studies is whether there are forms of aesthetic experience more environmentally useful than others. Several categories have been researched by contemporary scholarship. The sublime and wonder, in particular, have garnered much attention from ecocritics. In his *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke defined the sublime as “[w]hatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime, that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (34). Burke argued that the sublime is something great and obscure that produces fear and terror. In a more elaborate reflection on aesthetic categories, Immanuel Kant talks about two forms of the sublime: the mathematical and the dynamic. Considering both, we experience the sublime as a feeling of our reason’s superiority over nature (Kant 145). Wonder was closely associated with sublimity in the Romantic imagination. According to Kant, as Economides points out, people experience one form of the sublime (the noble) with quiet wonder (78). Thus, wonder is viewed as one of the effects of the sublime.

Louise Economides’s ecocritical inquiry offers a different perspective. *The Ecology of Wonder in Romantic and Postmodern Literature*—part of the Literatures, Cultures, and the Environment series, which examines how ideas about nature are communicated in different cultures and in different eras—challenges the Romantic definitions of these aesthetic categories. Economides treats sublimity and wonder as distinct aesthetic concepts. She concludes tracing the historical development of sublimity by the claim that the aesthetics of sublimity is problematic from an ecological perspective. She also examines the technological sublime’s ecological implications, and explores melancholy in relation to ecological sublimity. Economides devotes a large part of her last chapter to the examination of the question whether wonder is a response to surprising non-human phenomena, or whether human *technē* can inspire wonder in the more-than-human world, that is, physical nature.

The Romantic tradition of addressing the relationship between humans and nature has left a lasting impression on postmodern thought. According to Economides, some contemporary writers—see Lee Rozelle’s *Ecosublime: Environmental Awe and Terror from New World to Oddworld* (2015), for example—have conflated the Romantic natural sublime with contemporary experiences of eco-sublimity (31). In doing so, she believes, they have failed to take into account some crucial historical changes that sublimity has undergone, particularly the emergence of technological sublimity, which produces the conditions identified as catalysts for eco-sublimity (31).

*The Ecology of Wonder* challenges such a conflation, focusing on wonder as an alternative to the aesthetic of sublimity. Ecocritical scholarship, Economides claims, has construed wonder as identical with awe—associated with the sublime (130). *The Ecology of Wonder* departs from such an approach, elaborating on the creative potential of wonder, discussed by Philip Fisher’s groundbreaking *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (1999). Fisher explored the role of wonder in discovery and learning, arguing that surprise and new things always arouse our desire to know more about the world (149). In a similar vein, Economides suggests that wonder opens up possibilities for acquiring new knowledge, identifying the nexus between wonder and developments in some relatively newly-introduced disciplines, such as eco-phenomenology and eco-poetics (17). In her view, wonder in wild nature can be an environmentally beneficial experience that imposes itself upon us—a reminder that our will is not all-powerful in the universe. However, Economides takes issue with contemporary writers who claim that the products of human creativity cannot stimulate authentic wonder. She contends that artifice—or what she refers to as *technē*—can enable us to experience ecosystems as wondrous (32).

Economides thus challenges both the Romantics, who associated the sublime with enlightenment, and contemporary writers, such as Rozelle, who argue that sublimity necessarily provokes progressive reform and promotes awareness. In response to contemporary writers who call for promoting ecological sublimity as an alternative to the technological sublime, Economides argues that the sublime’s historical development proves that the concept is a primary cause for the environmental crisis.

Opposing the standpoint that sublimity “should dominate ecocritical inquiry to the exclusion of other more promising aesthetics such as wonder” (21), Economides envisions wonder as an aesthetic concept that foregrounds curiosity and enquiry, and celebrates new technologies and scientific developments. She also believes that wonder can effectively establish tolerance of cultural differences in ways the sublime cannot. This requires

abandoning prejudices against new things or people from other cultures. Wonder is capable of evoking ethical action, and, at the same time, it is “an anti-foundational alternative to metaphysical belief systems . . . , making it a discourse uniquely suited to the challenges of postmodern life” (22).

All in all, the book approaches the aesthetics of the sublime from an angle different from current discussions of the relationship of aesthetics, nature, and ecology. Acknowledging that sublimity is still prevalent in present-day art, Economides takes the stance that it cannot simply be remodeled to create a system of ecological ethics. She introduces wonder as a dynamic paradigm that crosses many boundaries to offer a holistic model. Examining different texts from realms as diverse as literature, philosophy, science, and popular culture, she suggests that wonder can supplant sublimity, which has been dominant from Romanticism to the postmodern era.

The book is a call for revisiting the ecological implications of sublimity, and applying new critical approaches to the concepts of wonder and the sublime. It argues that some forms of aesthetic experience may be more environmentally useful than others. Wonder is seen as a method by which we accept the Other and tolerate cultural differences. However, the book falls short of explaining exactly how wonder can be an alternative to the sublime, doing little to elucidate how wonder can be practically separated from the sublime in its broadest sense.

I would nonetheless recommend the book to anyone interested in how the aesthetics of nature have been depicted in literary works, as I also believe that Economides’s work is a valuable source for those researching the forms of aesthetic experience within ecocritical scholarship. This book and Fisher’s *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* are among the most important studies in ecological humanities to date.

University of Debrecen

#### Works Cited

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