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Catherine Keller, Review of *Strange Wonder* in
Modern Theology

Mary-Jane V Rubenstein, *Wesleyan University*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/mary_jane_rubenstein/27/

recommend it to anyone who is interested in the Enlightenment and its problematic heritage.

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Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe by Mary-Jane Rubenstein (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008) xii + 256 pp.

Strange Wonder, indeed: philosophers or theologians might wonder about this choice of topic. Does it conjure up eyes wide with sophomoric reverence, unstrained by dogmatics, doubt, or deconstruction? Or does it just sound tangential to the serious problems of philosophy and theology today? As it turns out, Mary-Jane Rubenstein's first book offers one of the most gripping and timely accounts of Continental Philosophy, in the wake of Heidegger, written in English.

Meditating on the question of wonder—with its etymological “wound” (*Wunde*), its classical status as the origin of philosophy, its politics of shock and awe—Rubenstein crafts a stunningly precise opening, an invitation into the presumed impossibilities of thought, where an alternative thinking becomes possible. “Because it attends to the strangeness of the most familiar,” she writes, “such wakeful thinking might finally endure, rather than close down, the perilous openness of wonder” (p. 19). For the sake of that opening, ancient as Socrates' dialogue with the “bulging-eyed” young Theaetetus, Rubenstein tracks key closures and *disclosures* in the recent history of philosophy. She investigates, in sequence, the work of Heidegger, Levinas, Nancy, and Derrida as they find (and sometimes lose) a mode of thought beyond calculation, beyond the transcendental subject and his [sic] object-world. Not accidentally, this adventure into the limits of the speakable—for wonder, as she cites Nancy, is “nothing other than that which happens or arrives at the limits” (p. 125)—exposes the very edge where philosophy cannot lose theology. And where theology may, therefore, find fresh language for its oldest mystery.

The thesis of the book is roughly this: thinking itself “rests” upon a “groundless awe”, *thaumazein*, or apophatic indeterminacy. It “can either be inquisitively endured or it can be covered over with unquestionable premises and conclusions that obstruct further inquiry” (p. 23). In other words, the experience of wonder before the mystery of existence is the very opposite of a mystification that obstructs critical enquiry. Criticism—from Socratic not-knowing to Derridean undecidability—is the active voice of wonder; it wonders *if*. . . . But philosophy often follows Aristotle—and his Christian disciples—for whom the initiating awe is just what thought is designed to outgrow. Even in the practices of deconstructive uncertainty, wonder may not survive the simmering *skepsis*. Working in intimate affinity with her authors, especially Nancy and Derrida, Rubenstein never fails to wonder about their own inadvertent closures. Delicate in her own deconstructions, she does not read them *against* so much as *with* themselves, their more awesome selves.

Rubenstein organizes the book according to four themes, as they correspond (more or less) to her four major authors: repetition, openness, relation, decision. In her

magisterial chapter on Heidegger, she tracks the repetitions of a double movement of wonder as both terror and awe (in religion the echo of the *tremendum et fascinans* is audible). Asking what it would mean to “take up ‘this wondering as one’s abode,’” she offers a close exegesis of Heidegger’s readings of “the philo-political ur-abode: Plato’s cave” (p. 47). By situating truth in the eternal sunshine of the Forms, rather than in the transitions between the mountaintop and the cave, Plato, according to Heidegger, misses “the unconcealing work of truth itself.” For *aletheia* as unconcealment depends upon concealment: relation does not void hiddenness but needs, claims Heidegger, “a return from the sunlight.” Rubenstein demonstrates, however, through her carefully historicized reading, that Heidegger also ultimately flees “the liminality and caveliness” for which, at certain late moments, he nonetheless still calls. Within the drama that Rubenstein stages, the voice of Hannah Arendt, both loving and denouncing, raises the key question not just for Heidegger but, in a sense, for the book: the relation of wonder to responsibility. For Arendt, Heidegger’s formidable mistake—his commitment in 1933 to National Socialism—was precisely the effect of wonder: of his “taking up and accepting this faculty of wondering as [his] abode.” Wonder, Arendt charges, permits an escape from reality and its sociopolitical demands; it sweeps brilliant philosophers up into strong currents of awe—currents that include the exalted aura of dictators. Hence the dark truth of wonder’s “tendency to slip into terror” (p. 21). In one of the book’s several tours de force, Rubenstein manages to absorb the full force of Arendt’s charge, while at the same time exculpating wonder itself. Heidegger emerges neither innocent nor expendable. For Rubenstein’s response to Arendt is that, “any unquestioning capitulation to ideology, Heidegger’s included, is a matter not of too much wonder, but rather of too little” (p. 23). That loss of wonder is precisely what Rubenstein discerns in Heidegger’s betrayal of his own insight—his own analysis of the oscillating inseparability of shadows and light, concealment and revelation.

The chapter on Levinas takes up his “twofold opening of worldly ethics through the unworldly opening to existence” (p. 73). But the shape of his ethic derives from his rejection of Heidegger. Accusing the latter of privileging Being over beings, Levinas reverses the priority, thus opposing the beings to any totalizing Being, ethics to ontology. Rubenstein has Derrida expose this misreading of Heidegger as such. She then shows how the Levinasian Other, even with its eschatological opening into the infinite, is opposed to the “bad infinite” of a root indeterminacy, the *il y a*, *apeiron* or *tehom*. That chaotic, elemental fluidity serves as the constitutive foil of a strange recrudescence—of a sovereign subjectivity, subject to, and yet strangely subjecting of, its Other. Rubenstein thus deftly exposes “the strangely neglected conflation in Levinas’ work, not of the other and God (the concern of Derrida and Wyschogrod), but of the *self* and God.” Levinas returns finally, she warns, to the “pure and impassive identity of the transcendental ego” facing the menace of the *il y a*. Thus the “Self-itself escapes relation” (p. 96). And it is relation itself that Rubenstein now tracks. For she begins to argue that it is the openness to relation, of relation, that protects or rediscovers—beyond the closure of metaphysics—the disturbing source of wonder.

Rubenstein wonders (we may note the critical edge of wonder as verb) if it is possible, beyond any inalienable identity, “to maintain the absolute originality of relation.” Must substantive identities precede their interrelations? Here we begin to sense the constructive force of her project, the affirmative shape of an indeterminate opening hollowed out by the epistemic negation. Both Heidegger and Levinas, for all the latter’s antagonism, end up again with a nonrelational, self-identical Subject. Of her philosophical quartet, Jean Luc Nancy may sound the indispensable clue. For of all these thinkers, and indeed rare (at least among the males) upon the Continental scene, he is the one who proposes an expressly relational ontology. Reading “*Mitsein*”

as “essential to the constitution of Dasein itself,” Nancy resists Heidegger’s own perpetual recourse to a solipsistic self-identity of Dasein. For as Rubenstein demonstrates, his *Being Singular Plural* shows the plural togetherness, the inessential and linked finitude, comprising all existence. Rubenstein thus brilliantly epitomizes: “If the infinitely infinite (Hegel), the finitely finite (Heidegger), and even the finitely infinite (Levinas) all ultimately congeal into self-identical essence, then what Nancy seems to suggest is that existence as inessential can only remain infinitely inessential as *infinitely finite*” (p. 110). Here a political ethics of relation begins to work itself out through what he calls “unworking”, expressed in metaphors of enchaining or tying. “The knot,” or *lien*, which Rubenstein notes, “is no thing at all, but rather the sort of twisted ‘not’ that never returns to itself from its tarrying with the negative, or that returns, but . . . as perpetually differing from itself” (p. 119). Wonder, as for Nancy a “sign without signification, and the sign—the index or the signal—that signification is verging upon its limit” (p. 125), is thus aligned with the unworking that is a knotting together. Rubenstein points to the odd proximity to Christian theology. For he finds “grace,” his metonym for “decided existence,” there where the *Mitsein* appears as a “with-standing”—a standing with, and so a withstanding of the fury of dysrelation—and so as the opening of responsibility.

And this is the passion of this book: to disclose moments in which the thinking of wonder unfolds a strange grace of relation itself. The priority of such essential interdependence of inessential beings does not, however, come easily to fruition—as structurally one might expect—in the culminating analysis of Derrida. Rife with ethical intensities, even awesome, his tropes of the undecidable, the gift, the impossible may seem—he lends neither wonder nor relationality as such any explication. The undecidable is her best candidate for “wonder” here, as the indeterminate condition of decisions. Her elucidation of the difference between Levinas’ Other and Derrida’s “other in me” (p. 151) helpfully pries open the responsibility linked to undecidability, as that of an agent lacking self-sufficiency, belying sovereignty. The ultimate test of that ability to respond comes for her analysis in *The Gift of Death*, as she reads Derrida, reading Kierkegaard, reading Abraham. Here she finds a decision made “not by a self or an Other, but through their infinitely complicated, mutually interrupted relation at the terrifying height of absolute undecidability” (p. 175). And that is where Rubenstein’s thinking interrupts the Derridean decision—a decision in which she is implicated, perhaps infinitely. For she here pulls off another dazzling deconstruction, there where angels fear to differ. She finds fault with Derrida’s own reading of Kierkegaard: he has collapsed the knight of faith into the knight of infinite resignation—without even mentioning the latter. And, in so doing, he loses Abraham’s “absolute faith in the absurd,” exchanging its subject for one who expects nothing back. Or who makes a secret calculation for heavenly reward. But Rubenstein finds no such otherworldly bargain in the Abraham of *Fear and Trembling*. So Derrida misses the moment in which faith bottoms into wonder. His “Abraham is just like his hedgehog, ultimately a figure of being-toward-death without wonder’s being with” (p. 182). I must leave the reader in suspense as to the mystery of the hedgehog. And indeed as to how Rubenstein discerns not a mere absence of wonder in Derrida, let alone its contradiction, but indeed something strangely kindred, “its spectral double.”

Rubenstein concludes with an epiphanic meditation on the ghosts of wonder, holy and otherwise: from Otto’s *mysterium* back through Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*. She includes a foray into the shock and awe policy of the Bush regime: imposed awe, kin to colonial collections of exotic wonders, results from the “refusal of all indeterminacy.” Arendt’s concern haunts the book, which “inquisitively endures”—to the end—the dangers of its own argument. Wonder survives many wounds, we sense, but not its submission to the powers of certainty.

If one is left wondering about the relation between relation itself and wonder, indeed perhaps the feminist, queer and decolonial concrescences of the responsible indeterminacy proposed in *Strange Wonder*, one looks forward to Mary-Jane Rubenstein's next work and the growing force of her own voice. If one wishes to hear her reflect on the relation between theology and philosophy, "we are left," she writes, "with a meditation on the breath, which opens the self essentially onto every other . . ." (p. 188). If this last *ruach* feels too animal for otherworldliness, too mysterious for atheism—so much the better. Theologically, *Strange Wonder* will provide smart companionship for those working on questions of negative theology, of the responsible deconstruction of Christianity, or of a relational basis for a political theology. It will be showing up as the sort of commentary indispensable in future interpretations of her four primary sources—all the more so because it is itself so quotable. The reader can only come to the end of this book astonished.

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The Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist by Angel F. Méndez Montoya
(Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) xi + 170 pp.

There is a surprising dearth of material dealing with the philosophy and theology of food and of eating, and Angel Méndez Montoya's book is a timely investigation into one of the most interesting areas of embodied life. In this work Montoya addresses the question of the significance of food and eating to theology, taking the alimentary function of food in all its complex resonances as a model for the role of theology in nourishing human life, reorienting it towards the interdependencies between human beings in community, of human beings with ecology, and of creation with God. Montoya takes it as given that food "matters", though the question of what it is to "matter" is held open in the name of preserving a view of things that escapes reductionism: Food matters because we cannot live without it, because in some sense, as Feuerbach observed, we are what we eat, but this is significant because food is not "just food"; it always points beyond itself to speak of something greater.

Montoya's thesis is that various aspects of eating suggest a vision of theology conceived as "alimentation". Food is an occasion for human nurturing and sharing because it participates in some sense in God's superabundance and in the self-sharing of the trinity. The incarnation, and the self-giving of God becoming bread in the eucharist, continue this. The author distinguishes between nutrition, referring to discrete chemical processes, and alimentation, which considers such processes as well as their social and symbolic context. It is theology's calling, Montoya proposes, to participate in this function of the transformation of human beings by being a nurturing and sharing force, and so becoming a kind of food. This all points to an ontology which is considered "as the co-arrival of superabundance and sharing, neither absolutizing nor demanding total ownership" (p. 4).

The first chapter begins with an extended passage on making *mole*, a traditional Mexican sauce, by grinding together 33 ingredients including several varieties