



Book Review

Glenn Willmott, *Reading for Wonder: Ecology, Ethics, Enchantment*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018; ISBN: 978-3-319-88880-4.

Reviewed by

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Author and professor Glenn Willmott's research interests include, among other topics, modernist avant-garde literature, arts, and culture. Apart from the fact that this is listed in his biography at Queens College, Kingston, Ontario, it may also be gleaned from his previous titles: *McLuhan, or Modernism in Reverse*, *Modern Animalism*, *Modernist Goods*, and *Unreal Country: Modernity in the Canadian Novel in English*. All of these feature some form of the root word "modern." Any variant of "modern" is missing from the title *Reading for Wonder: Ecology, Ethics, Enchantment*. Indeed, there are foundational elements of classical thought running through the text. For example, the third chapter is largely an exposition of Aristotle's *Poetics*. This is not to imply that the two are mutually exclusive; Willmott achieves a synergy that comes from the juxtaposition of the old and new. This aspect of juxtaposition is similar to the "wonder cabinets" Willmott occasionally references, referring to sectioned display cases for various curios. In fact, the old and new together were so fascinating, that I missed the ecological nature of the text during my first reading, although a subsequent reading revealed environmental considerations were present on nearly every page.

Reading for Wonder is divided into five chapters: "Liberating Wonder," "Finding Wonder," "Making Wonder," "Using Wonder," and "Sharing Wonder." "Liberating Wonder" unpacks the concept of wonder for exploration. "Finding Wonder" further explores the topic through an analysis of its several aspects. "Making Wonder", as mentioned above, uses Aristotle's *Poetics* to examine how wonder is developed in tragedy (which can also be used for non-tragic objects). "Using Wonder" applies the previous chapters to several examples of wonder generating texts of which two studies stand out. One is on the personified ape, a deep dive into such creations as King Kong (old and new versions), Planet of the Apes, and even a nod to Tarzan. The second standout study deals with concepts of the Pacific Paradise, starting with an overview and subsequent study of the historical and mythologized "Mutiny of the Bounty."

As stated in the preface, Willmott's purpose is threefold: to develop a theory of wonder and its implications for an ethics of the environment and social justice; to analyze the poetics of wonder in literature and expand the analysis to other art forms; and to examine good and bad concepts of wonder, focusing on the means to develop good designs for wonder; good designs being those which steer the course between disenchantment and sensationalism.

Throughout the text, Willmott uses the analogies of *bricolage* and "curiosity cabinets." Not only does he use these terms as analogy, but the book itself includes quite a collection of print and non-print examples such as *Alice in Wonderland*, science fiction comics, classical philosophy, postmodern poetry, abstract art, King Kong, and renditions of the mutiny on the H. M. S. Bounty among a wealth of other artifacts.

The introductory chapter, "Liberating Wonder" opens with the problem that wonder tends to be lost in the modern world. We have a tendency to be disenchanted. Modern humanity has discovered the ability to get along without the aid of mysterious forces, depending instead on calculation and technology. Wonder, on the other hand, is considered childish, classified as primitive and archaic in its transcendence of the practical. Willmott concedes this claim of primitivism in that wonder is irrational, ineffable, and futile. It is irrational in that it is based on mental facilities other than reason; it is ineffable because it is not readily given to clear explanation or description, and it is futile in that it is not oriented toward any practical achievement.

Disrupting the commonsense notion of wonder found in sunsets, the mating dances of birds, or other natural phenomena, Willmott describes his youthful wonder in watching McDonald's new biodegradable Big Mac containers slowly dissolve in his backyard. This may seem as un-wonderful as watching paint dry, but it underscores Willmott's contention that wonder is not limited to experiences that make one say "Wow!" In fact, he clearly delineates wonder from the "wow" experience of awe. As a teacher in the 1990's I struggled to get my students to realize that despite what the Ninja Turtles might think, not everything is "awesome." Awe is something that leaves one speechless--such as cresting the ridge of the Tetons and viewing the spectacle of Schoolhouse Glacier, with Grand Teton looming across the way, and the whole of the Teton Basin spread out to the vanishing point. The hiker is speechless in awe because there is so much to take in; one's mental circuitry can do little more than try to take it in. Wonder, on the other hand is more akin to Aristotle's concept of "discovery." It is triggered by the object of an experience that leads one to question and explore further.

Willmott spends the bulk of Chapter 2, "Finding Wonder," on eight principles of wonder. While he tangentially brings in ecological aspects of these principles through examples such as Evelyn Reilly's poem "Styrofoam," Blake's poem "Tyger," and the nature of rainbows, he focuses on the environment particularly in his development of the subsections on culture and nature, ethics, empathy, and the environment.

The third chapter "Making Wonder" takes a fairly deep dive into Aristotle's *Poetics* as a framework to analyze what goes into creating a work of wonder. Using Sophocles' *Oedipus*

Rex and Euripedes' *Medea* as his primary examples, he draws out and illustrates how Greek tragedy uses system, persona, disaccommodation, dialectic, and heteroglossia as key traits to building wonder. The tragedy must take place in a system, a lifeworld with its rules and reason. Therefore, Aristotle feels some contempt toward the use of "Deus ex Machina" as found in *Medea* since it violates the system of the world. In this lifeworld, one can watch personae, agents live their lives in a system, which, by its unfolding nature, can only be partially known. These unknown elements require the persona to navigate an ecology as an agent among agents and objects. Due to the inevitable lack of knowledge, error is almost a foregone conclusion. This is the source of disaccommodation.

Willmott's discussion of disaccommodation is limited to one paragraph in which he explains that in tragedy there is a problem, a reversal of fortunes, a loss of support, some means of disturbing the placid environment of the lifeworld. The problem set forth by this disaccommodation is resolved through dialectic in which the choices of the persona lead to discovery: that which one was blind to, is now made clear. The final element Willmott culls from *Poetics* is heteroglossia. It simply refers to varied language usage such as soliloquy, choral, and metrical forms.

Willmott extends these elements of *Poetics* beyond the Greek tragedy to three subtopics "Lyric Ecopoetics," illustrated by Emily Dickinson's "A Bird Came Down the Walk." Continuing the aviary theme, "Abstract Ecopoetics" explores Jean Miro's painting "Woman and the Birds." Thankfully, the text includes a color reproduction to assist the reader in following the author's observations. Finally, "Ethical Design" features investigations into the movies *Star Wars* and *Aliens*, followed by a return to poetry.

Ultimately, reading for reading's sake has no value apart from skill building, but in *Reading for Wonder*, Willmott proposes that through our words, whether it is how we write or how we present a text to others, it is possible to lead others to wonder. Although there are those who will remain obstinately disenchanted, at least one can hope to enhance the possibilities of insight. The "proof in the pudding" lies in the last two sections of Chapter 4: "Personified Apes" and "Pacific Paradise". Each section is 21 pages long and illustrates the theory, technique and analysis of reading for wonder. While the whole book is an enjoyable read, these sections provide a sort of "textual wonder park" that should be experienced through one's own perusal unbiased by the overview of my remarks.

Reading for Wonder would make an ideal undergraduate text for a number of classes including courses designed to rouse wonder, those for connecting the humanities and the environment, and literacy courses in general. However, its most important use might be for anyone connecting environmental justice with the humanities. I found it an excellent manual, tour guide, and wonder cabinet.

As noted, my first reading of *Reading for Wonder* left me wondering where the ecology was in the book. As part of a series dedicated to investigating contributions of literature and culture from the framework of Environmental Humanities, the text brings a plethora of insights into aspects of wonder derived from literature.