

WONDER: FROM POETICS TO POLITICS

HISTORY AS WONDER: BEGINNING WITH HISTORIOGRAPHY. By Marnie Hughes-Warrington. London: Routledge, 2018. Pp. 234.

ABSTRACT

Marnie Hughes-Warrington's book, *History as Wonder: Beginning with Historiography*, invites readers to reconsider the power of wonder as a critical concept whose theoretical implications go far beyond its evident ability to inspire historical research. Wonder is supposedly a neutral weapon for historians, one that is limited to promoting incessant curiosity about the past. Attempting to move from a poetic and aesthetic vision of wonder to a consideration of the concept's ethical and political uses, Hughes-Warrington claims that "historians since Herodotus have engaged with or responded to the efforts of thinkers who attempt to make general sense of the world, metaphysicians" (xii). In what follows, I challenge Hughes-Warrington's approach by emphasizing and exploring the epistemological questions *History as Wonder* raises about who holds the power to establish a conventional sense of the world and to what extent historical research may offer general explanations of the world without succumbing to precritical assumptions or metahistorical reductionisms.

Keywords: wonder, curiosity, postcolonial, gender, historiography, metaphysic, ethics of history

"Every view of things that is not wonderful is false."—Caroline Walker Bynum¹

I imagine that when historians receive the honor of being appointed president of the American Historical Association, they choose the subjects of their presidential addresses carefully. For those interested in historiography, a review of the subjects chosen—from Andrew Dickson White's "On Studies in General History and the History of Civilization" (1884) to John R. McNeill's "Peak Document and the Future of Historical Research" (2019)—clarifies the state of the discipline, the key subjects and methodologies of the day, and the agendas of the historians honored. In 1996, medievalist Caroline Walker Bynum chose "Wonder" as the theme (and title) of her address. Wonder matters. Yet although thousands of works have been written about rationality in philosophy, there are very few on wonder. Though a far more elusive concept, wonder has been highly influential in history, philosophy, and literature.

Marnie Hughes-Warrington argues in *History as Wonder* that "wonder plays a critical part in the history of history because it is a historiographically and metaphysically rich concept" (xvi). The origins of interest in this subject are easily traced. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle asserts that the first impulse toward

1. Caroline Walker Bynum, "Wonder," *American Historical Review* 102, no. 1 (1997), 26.

philosophy begins with wonder: "It is through wonder [*thaumazein*] that men now begin and originally began to philosophize; wondering in the first place at obvious perplexities, and then by gradual progression raising questions about the greater matters too, e.g. about the changes of the moon and of the sun, about the stars and about the origin of the universe."² History is animated by the same impulse, but it seems somehow more leaden because, in the end, it must content itself with relating the *ordinary* rather than the wonderful, as Polybius says: "an historian's object should not be to amaze his readers by a series of thrilling anecdotes; nor should he aim at producing speeches which *might* have been delivered, nor study dramatic propriety in details like a writer of a tragedy: but his function is above all to record with fidelity what was actually said or done, however commonplace it may be."³ Interest in the notion of wonder experienced a historiographical boom in the late twentieth century. That historiographical interest was a tardy legacy of what literary criticism went through a couple of decades earlier, especially following the publication of Tzvetan Todorov's influential volume, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* in 1970.⁴ As was typical of the time, early modernists were the first to embrace the innovation that informed inquiries into the real and the marvelous, spearheaded by Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*.⁵ This tendency came to medievalism by the representatives of the third generation of the Annales School, especially Jacques Le Goff,⁶ who promoted a renewed history of mentalities that built on what Marc Bloch had developed in his *Les rois thaumaturges*, published in 1923.

The subject of wonder and its derivations reached the United States as a mixture of the return of the grotesque (an echo of Romantic medievalism), the application of postmodern Derridean alterity, and the Foucauldian taste for the non-conventional, as Paul Freedman and Gabrielle M. Spiegel noted.⁷ They reflected the new medievalists' profound suspicion of order, hierarchy, authority, and patriarchy; moreover, their new tendencies were associated with the burgeoning contemporary movements of gender and postcolonial studies and their integration of what had traditionally been considered marginal and excluded. Freedman and

2. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, transl. H. Tredennick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 1:982b. See also John Llewelyn, "On the Saying that Philosophy Begins in *Thaumazein*," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 4 (2001), 48-57.

3. Polybius, *The Histories*, transl. E. S. Shuckburgh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), 2:56.

4. Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970); Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973).

5. Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Joy Kensing, *The Age of the Marvelous* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 2001).

6. Jacques Le Goff, "The Marvelous in the Medieval West," in *The Medieval Imagination*, transl. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 27-44.

7. Paul Freedman, "The Return of the Grotesque in Medieval Historiography," in *Historia a Debate: Medieval*, ed. Carlos Barros and Carlos Aguirre Rojas (Santiago de Compostela: Historia a Debate, 1995), 9-19; Paul Freedman and Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Medievalisms Old and New: The Rediscovery of Alterity in North American Medieval Studies," *American Historical Review* 103, no. 3 (1998), 677-704.

Spiegel concluded that these emerging approaches were connected with the field of cultural studies (and its natural presentist tendencies) rather than being properly *historical*. Medieval studies would function as the speculum of postmodern societies rather than as a past in itself.

These historiographic precedents show that inquiring into the concept of wonder is relevant because its deployment is usually associated with profound theoretical and practical transformations in historiography, which in turn reflect profound changes in society. The analysis of wonder (both its discourses and its realities) grants us entry into the most apparently extraordinary and peripheral historical manifestations, transforming them into ordinary and central concerns—a switch that is wholly connatural to postmodern trends. Wonder also connects with the history of emotions and collective psychologies as cultivated by Lucien Febvre in the early twentieth century,⁸ consolidated by Peter Gay's cycle of monographs, *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*,⁹ and expanded in the early twenty-first century thanks to its natural connection with the categories of class, race, and gender.¹⁰ Finally, perhaps less tangibly but more profoundly, wonder has also enabled the so-called affective turn, an extraordinarily versatile and multidisciplinary field encompassing such apparently disparate subjects as political economy, biomedicine, and the history of bodies.¹¹

The omnipresent figure of Michel Foucault looms behind these developments because of his incorruptible commitment to subversion against the normalizing tendencies that threaten to affect any area, specialty, or movement. Foucault's work is driven by the motor of curiosity. As Lauren Gilmette explains, "this curiosity attends to what is silenced under the weight of the present, to modes of flourishing latent in our social fabric."¹² Foucault himself expressed the faith that "curiosity . . . enables one to get free of oneself."¹³ He promoted the genealogical method "to incite rebellions against pernicious disciplinary productions, to produce an experience of their costs, and to open the space for an alternative tradition of critique as well as a revised understanding of autonomy."¹⁴ Foucault's inexhaustible curiosity led him to a concern not only with "what exists" but also with "what might exist." This attitude has become a constant source of inspiration for cultural studies, especially for those in the orbit of gender and postcolonial

8. Lucien Febvre, "La sensibilité et l'histoire: Comment reconstituer la vie affective d'autrefois?" *Annales d'histoire sociale* 3, no. 1/2 (1941), 5-20.

9. Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*, 5 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984-1998).

10. Barbara H. Rosenwein and Riccardo Cristiani, *What is the History of Emotions?* (Cambridge, UK, and Malden, MA: Polity, 2018).

11. Patricia T. Clough, "The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedicine, and Bodies," *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 1 (2008), 1-22; Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ed. Patricia Ticineto Clough with Jean Halley (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); and Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Cambridge, UK, and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015).

12. Lauren Gilmette, "In What We Tend to Feel Is without History: Foucault, Affect, and the Ethics of Curiosity," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 28, no. 3 (2014), 285.

13. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 2: *The Uses of Pleasure*, transl. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 8.

14. Jana Sawicki, "Queering Foucault and the Subject of Feminism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 392.

studies, as manifested in what Foucault calls “the care one takes of what exists and what might exist; a sharpened sense of reality, but one that is never immobilized before it; a readiness to find what surrounds us strange.”¹⁵ His ethics of curiosity has fueled the proliferation of a great variety of topics and interests within historiography in the last four decades; crucially, many of these topics and interests relate to the history of the feelings and affections, including the history of wonder and curiosity.

I

Hughes-Warrington set out with her *History as Wonder* to take up the theme of wonder from a fresh perspective: “my claim is that historians since Herodotus (484–425 BCE) have engaged with or responded to the efforts of thinkers who attempt to make general sense of the world, metaphysicians” (xii). The links between history and philosophy—especially their supposedly shared aim of making sense of the world by inductive or deductive means, respectively—have been explored from many points of view. The idea of doing so based on the concept of wonder is undeniably seductive, though it raises many questions.

Hughes-Warrington appears to implement this approach from a chronological perspective, as the book’s narrative thread is defined by accounts of wonder in different historical periods, including ancient Greece (chapter 1), premodern Europe (chapter 2), the premodern Islamic world (chapter 3), ancient China (chapter 4), early modern Europe (chapter 5), and modern Europe (chapter 6). Hughes-Warrington also devotes several chapters to twentieth-century topics: histories of the moving image (chapter 7), gendering wonder (chapter 8), post-colonial histories (chapter 9), and theories around the Holocaust (chapter 10).¹⁶ However, the apparent simplicity of the book’s largely chronological approach does not stifle its thematic one, since key themes recur throughout the book.

The first of those recurring themes concerns the variable relations between history and metaphysics throughout the history of historiography. In the ancient and medieval world, they were entangled. Yet with the irruption of modernity, their borders became more rigid and the relationship more complex. The postmodern era, in contrast, has linked them again, though in completely different ways from how they were linked in the ancient and medieval periods; this difference is in part because the very concept of metaphysics has changed so completely. Hughes-Warrington does not go deep enough in discussing the changes that the concept of metaphysics has undergone over the course of history even though these changes clearly determine the rules of its connectedness with history. There is a substantial difference among Aristotle’s, Aquinas’s,

15. Michel Foucault, “The Masked Philosopher,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 325.

16. In general, it seems inapt to apply the concept “premodern” to the medieval period, especially with regard to a subject like “wonder.” This may easily lead to simplifications since, as Michelle Karnes has argued convincingly, “medieval belief in marvels has strongly influenced modern assessments of the period, with the willingness of medieval people to credit them defining it as premodern and in some respects antirational. Realizing that marvels are no simpler than the imagination that sometimes contributed to them, we might better appreciate the complexity of the period that embraced them” (“Marvels in the Medieval Imagination,” *Speculum* 90, no. 2 [2015], 365).

and Derrida's approaches to metaphysics that Hughes-Warrington does not sufficiently acknowledge. However, she does detail the consequences for philosophical and historical knowledge of the progressive conversion of wonder into something with a political and ideological agenda—that is, its transformation from poetics to politics. She also recognizes that wonder operates not solely as the original Aristotelian impulse but also as a tool for transforming the world: “Derrida's writing against metaphysics of presence and in favor of responsibility for ethics is not another metaphysics of presence in disguise” (152).

In this context, wonder ceases to be a neutral impulse to approach the past aesthetically; it instead becomes an interested ethical activity rooted in the present and aimed at changing the world: “This has important implications for history making. We may think of it as focused on the past, but Derrida and [Hélène] Cixious [sic] suggest that it may be too much of the present” (154-155). In responding to an ethical rather than an aesthetic impulse, historians augment their moral responsibility: “we shoulder the terrible burden of accepting that metaphysics is revisionary, rather than descriptive” (155). Finally, the approach to subaltern voices—the traces of peoples “without history”—implies the need to embrace an ethics in which the possibility of wonder is *reclaimed* rather than spontaneously experienced.

Hughes-Warrington is right about one of the crucial concerns facing historiography today: its tendency toward presentism and its complicity with cultural studies. However, I do not share her enthusiasm for the positive effects of this ethical turn—“metaphysics as revisionary” (155). In my experience as a medievalist, this apparently ethical impulse can end up damaging the very integrity of the past, in turn becoming something epistemologically artificial. I am therefore skeptical that this burden, which arises as a result of the politicization of metaphysics, especially in the postmodern age, is actually worth bearing. To achieve a truly ethical end in history, it is not necessary to go through the explicit revisionism the author refers to unless you seek to add another burden—that of historical manipulation.

Classical and medieval historians operated with a conception of wonder that was purely poetic and aesthetic, arising spontaneously and providing a platform to stimulate the quest for historical and philosophical knowledge. In contrast, modern historians from the age of discovery onward have abandoned this naiveté and instead sought to reflect on (and influence) the ethical and political implications concomitant with one or another conception of wonder, and in some cases they have successfully legitimized policy. Although classical and medieval historians were descriptive, modern historians tend to be prescriptive (or revisionist) in their use of wonder. Interestingly, Hughes-Warrington allows herself to be carried along by the same dynamic in the development of her own thesis. She proceeds descriptively in the initial chapters and prescriptively in the last three, which deal with theories of gender, postcolonial history, and readings of the Holocaust.

At first, she is detached from the histories she relates, but she progressively inserts herself into them until empathy is achieved in the last three chapters, where it is difficult to distinguish whether she is speaking for the authors she

cites or actually disagreeing with them. In her progressive authorial intervention, I also perceive another dimension to her book: the growing presence of the practical past at the expense of the historical past. The author progressively opts for the aim that she has assumed as the main premise of the book, seeing that “historians since Herodotus have engaged with or responded to the efforts of thinkers who attempt to make general sense of the world, metaphysicians” (xii). Hughes-Warrington’s oscillation between the historical past of the first part and the practical past of the second is not new in history. History has always operated between “that noble dream” of objectivity Peter Novick attributes to North American historiography and the critical historiography Friedrich Nietzsche describes in his second *Untimely Meditation*.¹⁷

To gain a general meaning of the world by means of the metaphysical history that Hughes-Warrington applies to historians—and seeks herself—is as noble an aspiration as what all those pursuing the dream of objectivity have striven for throughout the history of historiography, even if it has led to insignificant results. However, exactly which concept of metaphysics the author is discussing at any given moment remains unclear, as gender and postcolonial theories (chapters 8 and 9) are diametrically opposed to the quest for an overarching view of the world as undertaken by traditional metaphysics (chapters 1-6).

In the ancient world, history and metaphysics were entangled, though they reached that state by various paths. According to Hughes-Warrington, “Aristotle’s and Polybius’ writings share an interest in empirical description, with the key distinction between their writings turning on the former’s interest in natural phenomena and the latter’s interest in human action” (5). Lucian of Samosata emerges as a particularly fascinating author in this regard, especially given his sophisticated exploration of the borders between truth in history and fictional invention. His *True History* recounts a journey to the moon with the help of geese, anticipating Jules Verne by seventeen centuries.¹⁸ In the twenty-first century, the philosophy of history is still exploring those borders.¹⁹ In another

17. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Utility and Liability of History for Life,” in *The Nietzsche Reader*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 124-141; Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, transl. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 139-164.

18. On Lucian and historiography, see Aristoula Georgiadou and David H. J. Larmour, “Lucian and Historiography: *De Historia Conscribenda* and *Verae Historiae*,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.34.2 (1994), 1448-1509; Aristoula Georgiadou and David H. J. Larmour, *Lucian’s Science Fiction Novel*, *True Histories: Interpretation and Commentary* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 1998); Graham Anderson, “Lucian: Tradition versus Reality,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.34.2 (1994), 1422-1447; Adam Bartley, “The Implications of the Reception of Thucydides within Lucian’s ‘Vera Historia,’” *Hermes* 131, no. 2 (2003), 222-234. For a more general vision of this problem, see Emilio Gabba, “True History and False History in Classical Antiquity,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 71 (November 1981), 50-62; Arnaldo Momigliano, “Tradition and the Classical Historian,” *History and Theory* 11, no. 3 (1972), 279-293.

19. This debate is particularly interesting for its deep theoretical and practical implications in the field of medievalism. See Suzanne Fleischman, “On the Representation of History and Fiction in the Middle Ages,” *History and Theory* 22, no. 3 (1983), 278-310; Michelle Karnes, “The Possibilities of Medieval Fiction,” *New Literary History* 51, no. 1 (2020), 209-228; Julie Orlemanski, “Who Has Fiction? Modernity, Fictionality, and the Middle Ages,” *New Literary History* 50, no. 2 (2019),

fascinating treatise, *How To Write History*, Lucian was appreciative precisely of Thucydides's realism: "he is writing a possession for evermore rather than a prize-essay for the occasion, that he does not welcome fiction but is leaving to posterity the true account of what happened."²⁰ Conversely, he criticized the false realism of some other historians—Herodotus among them—who, by contrast, allowed themselves to be carried away with the perishable glory of aesthetic adornment.

In the Middle Ages, the connection between history and metaphysics remained intact; but on the basis of the authoritative arguments of Augustine and Isidore, wonder was divided into the legitimate capacity for admiration in the presence of all natural and historical phenomena (wonder as *admiratio*) and pernicious inquiry into what lies beyond the grasp of reason (wonder as *curiositas*). This distinction would last a long time. Foucault recognized, retrospectively, that curiosity had been an ambivalent element in his work, as it had affected him "negatively through his attention to the cruel excesses of the medical-moral gaze but also positively as an unsettling and potentially transformative mode of attention that [he] calls curiosity-as-care."²¹

Early modern Europe was characterized by a great impulse to collect and explore, activities intrinsic to the scientific unfolding and geographical discoveries of the period. The *Wunderkammer* (cabinets of curiosities) are considered the precursors of modern museums. Wonder not only entailed the primary impulse of philosophy and scientific inquiry but also justifications for the colonization and evangelization of the New World, as articulated by the Spanish Jesuit missionary, anthropologist, and naturalist José de Acosta (1540–1600): "And the high and eternal wisdom of the Creator uses this natural curiosity of men to communicate the light of His holy gospel to peoples who still live in the darkness of their errors."²²

The distinction between wonder and curiosity grew firmer as the thinkers of the time, above all Descartes and Hobbes, emphasized that "[w]onder facilitates self-understanding and control and good government" whereas "curiosity signals a loss of self-control and that signals the end of society" (83). Although wonder is the initial impulse of philosophy and science, Hughes-Warrington explains, it becomes perverted without due moderation and "transforms into a curiosity that endlessly seeks out novelty" (96). Here, a new factor—novelty—enters the equation and will grow over time to become a quality in itself, regardless of its potential to last.

In the modern era, thanks to authors such as Hegel and Daniel Defoe and to Romantic literature, wonder is found in the everyday and the humble as well as in the exceptional and the marginal. Hughes-Warrington elsewhere concludes that "[i]t is easy to see the history of histories and philosophies as masculinist

145-170; Laura Ashe, *Fiction and History in England, 1066-1200* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

20. Lucian, *How to Write History*, quoted in Emily Greenwood, *Thucydides and the Shaping of History* (Liverpool: Duckworth, 2006), 115.

21. Guilmette, "In What We Tend to Feel Is without History," 292.

22. José de Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*, quoted in J. H. Elliott, *The Old World and the New, 1492-1650* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 30-31.

and imperious if you ignore some of the most unsettling, and even strangest things written in their names.”²³ This focus on what has previously been considered marginal or peripheral has contributed to the emergence and spread of alternative histories such as those analyzed by the author in her final chapters, especially those on postcolonial and gender histories. It also brings to light one of the great debates implied by the politicization of wonder: the question of the canon.

Right from her introduction, Hughes-Warrington makes it clear that her aim is to include works that have not made it into the canon “typically covered in histories of history” (xiii). She intends to construct a new narrative, one that avoids the traditional dependence on Greek historiography: “I have *interrupted* the narrative with an analysis of Islamic, Chinese and Indian histories and metaphysics” (xviii; emphasis added). She seeks to create a global history of stories about wonder. However, her criteria for choosing certain authors and excluding others betrays the difficulty of arguing against the foundational nature of Greek historiography. Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd, for example, are Islamic thinkers whose dependence on the Greek philosophers is obvious. It is also striking that most of the historians and writers Hughes-Warrington includes in her canon in the chapter on postcolonial studies studied at European or North American universities and even continue to live in those countries. This does not detract from the authenticity of those authors with Islamic or Hindu backgrounds, but it does bring to the fore, in a tangible sense, the objective difficulty of constructing a global history—especially a global history of *historiography*—that does not challenge the integrity of the past. As J. G. A. Pocock recently argued, limits of contextualization exist that are especially sensitive to the practice of intellectual history, the field of the history of historiography.²⁴

Finally, another problematic element in Hughes-Warrington’s book is her failure to distinguish between “discourses” and “realities.” In her exploration of wonder in the Middle Ages, Bynum distinguishes, “first, a set of very sophisticated discourses produced by medieval thinkers and, second, the web of actual horror and delight we can decipher in medieval texts.”²⁵ The theoretical discussions of wonder are unearthed by tracing the philosophies and histories of the concept, a literature comprising the sources Hughes-Warrington predominantly uses. Even so, a title as generic as *History as Wonder* ought to contain more scrutiny of people’s attitudes in terms of wonder-reactions ranging from negative emotions (like anger, dread, or fear) to more positive ones (like admiration, amazement, pride, or delight). Such a study should also include a closer investigation of conduct regarding the control of those very emotions, which says so much about a society.

23. Marnie Hughes-Warrington, “Wonder Works,” *Aeon Newsletter*, October 30, 2019, <https://aeon.co/essays/history-and-philosophy-should-make-us-feel-baffled-and-strange>.

24. J. G. A. Pocock, “On the Unglobality of Contexts: Cambridge Methods and the History of Political Thought,” *Global Intellectual History* 4, no. 1 (2019), 1-14; Martin Jay, “Historical Explanation and the Event: Reflections on the Limits of Contextualization,” *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (2011), 557-571.

25. Bynum, “Wonder,” 4.

II

Beyond these points, Hughes-Warrington's book has restored to history the essential debate about wonder, to which intellectuals as influential in contemporary historiography as Hegel, Heidegger, Derrida, and Foucault have contributed. Moreover, in its most current forms, wonder connects quite naturally with post-modern trends—from postcolonial histories to gender theories—whose ultimate aim is to confer a global significance on something that has been considered marginal or peripheral since antiquity. Hughes-Warrington herself is on board with this transcendental endeavor: “At the opening of this book, I confessed that writing a book on making general sense of things in the discipline of history seemed a very odd thing to do. The expectation was that, like oil and water, the two things—history and metaphysics—could not mix, and that they would undoubtedly come into conflict with one another, or at least exist in tension” (134). However, it strikes me as over-presumptuous, and probably pernicious, to lay the task of giving a general meaning to things on the historian's shoulders. That is because, in the first place, historians are conditioned by the primary sources they use, which logically reduce their field of inquiry. Second, it remains unclear who has the authority to establish metahistorical canonical meaning. Finally, those “things” they seek to give a general meaning to are limited, at best, to the reality of the past. This means that the task of giving a general meaning to things is more suited for philosophy and literature, which admittedly have wider spheres of action and greater potential for creativity than history, as has been recognized since Aristotle.

If there is an area where history and metaphysics meet, it is in that part of poetic nature from which historians struggle to detach themselves and which Hayden White famously defined as metahistory. But going beyond the impossibility of historians completely detaching themselves from their poetic share, metahistory itself is at odds with the supposed honesty that, in one way or another, historians crave. This is what makes me distrust those who advocate, explicitly or implicitly, for the conscious political responsibility of historians to the detriment of poetics—that inescapably metaphysical sphere to which all we historians find ourselves drawn in one way or another. The more laden with agency and agenda history is, the greater the probability of distorting the past, of decontextualizing its narration.

This skepticism about giving a meaning to things does not make me mistrust theory because I am convinced that it is nearly impossible to move beyond a merely mimetic phase of history without theory—which is to say, one that would reduce our labor to a simple transcription of primary sources. But it helps me to be more aware of our dependence—whether we like it or not—on primary sources, of whatever kind. I can find no more suitable reading for this than Javier Cercas's *Soldiers of Salamis*, which depicts the frustration of a journalist unable

to complete a story set in the Spanish Civil War because he is missing a single piece of information to close his narrative circle. The journalist embarks on a systematic—and anguished—search for it, and on his tortuous trajectory, he asks himself again and again if it would be honest to invent just that one detail in order to offer a marvelous story to the public.²⁶

In fact, if wonder has gained so much currency today, that is due to its growing manipulation or politicization. Iris Marion Young warns that

the concept of wonder is dangerous. It would not be difficult to use it to imagine the other person as exotic. One can interpret wonder as a kind of distant awe before the Other that turns their transcendence into a human inscrutability. Or wonder can become a kind of prurient curiosity. I can recognize my ignorance about the other person's experience and perspective and adopt a probing, investigative mode toward her. Both stances convert the openness of wonder into a dominative desire to know and master the other person.²⁷

Wonder can be the basis for an ethics of sexual difference as well as for an ethics of gender equality.²⁸ Postmodernity remains fascinated by wonder's ability to emphasize difference but has proved ultimately skeptical about its applicability to history, suspecting it of naiveté. The perception of wonder moves, in the end, between poetics and politics. The aesthetic attitude is stirred by the neutral recognition of wonder as an impulse. The ethical attitude is stimulated by the possible manipulation of wonder. Wonder ultimately manifests itself as an ambiguous and contradictory category—a kind of femme fatale for postmodernity. Indeed, if Young brands wonder “dangerous” and Luce Irigaray defines it on the basis of “difference,”²⁹ Marguerite La Caze recognizes its benign function: “[W]onder can prevent the presumption that others will think and act like oneself and desire the same kinds of things as oneself, such that one could make decisions and judgements on their behalf. It helps us to recognize the limitations on our own power and on our imaginations. Wonder allows for openness to difference and change in the other.”³⁰ Wonder thus reappears in postmodernity as something mysterious or intangible, as an emblem of the medieval and an incarnation of the contradictory that materializes in concepts such as Derrida's “specter”: “It is a proper characteristic of the specter, if there is any, that no one can be sure if by returning it testifies to a living past or to a living future, for the *revenant* may already mark the promised return of living being. Once again untimeliness and disadjustment of the contemporary.”³¹ Derrida is against the metaphysics of presence and in favor of the responsibility of ethics. One of his key concepts is “trace,” which Hughes-Warrington connects with wonder because it “is painful, unsettling, monstrous, but it is also elusive to the person who takes responsibility

26. Javier Cercas, *Soldiers of Salamis*, transl. Anne McLean (London: Bloomsbury, 2004).

27. Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 56.

28. Marguerite La Caze, “The Encounter between Wonder and Generosity,” *Hypatia* 17, no. 3 (2002), 1-19.

29. Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, transl. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 1.

30. Marguerite La Caze, *Wonder and Generosity: Their Role in Ethics and Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 31-32.

31. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, transl. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 2006), 123.

for seeking it. Derrida signals the impossibility of capturing the trace, for that would fix it as the metaphysics of presence. . . . The trace is spectral: it appears real but you cannot touch it” (154). Wonder connects with post-rational, post-modern values because it functions “as a trigger for thought that is dissipated when understanding is achieved. Wonder is fleeting, and as something difficult to analyse because rational consideration may bring it to an end” (154). This has important implications for history-making, particularly in its eventual presentist tendency. History turns into an exploration of the present, which seems to be a paradoxical—or should we say pernicious and contradictory—operation: “we shoulder the terrible burden of accepting that metaphysics is revisionary, rather than descriptive” (155).

Here we come to the core of Hughes-Warrington’s argument, and to something vital to the current historiographical debate. What began with Aristotle and Polybius as an ingenious impulse to link philosophy and history has now become a concept full of ethical implications that relates more to the present than to the past (whether philosophical reality or historical past) being investigated. In her aforementioned presidential address, Bynum used her own interrogation of the Middle Ages to identify two spheres in which this politicization of wonder might affect current historiography. In the first place, it might harm the coherence of the historical account, giving rise to the decontextualization that gender and postcolonial studies can favor in their approaches to the past: “Medieval travelers and collectors of marvels argued that awe and dread are situated, perspectival; we share this perception and give credit to feminism and postcolonial theory for it, but we suspect that such awareness shatters the possibility of writing any coherent account of the world.”³² In the second place, it might challenge the integrity of the past by applying a distorting, presentist perspective in its history: “Medieval chroniclers and occasional writers stressed the uniqueness of events rather than the trends they illustrated, their moral significance rather than their temporal causes; we fear that the particular is the trivial and that significance is merely the projection of our own values onto the past.”³³

Weighing the importance of the choice of wonder as a concept offers a better understanding of the turn experienced by Hughes-Warrington over the course of her book, which oscillates between a poetic and a political approach. In the end, she aligns with Derrida and Hélène Cixous in opting for the recognition of “metaphysics not only as descriptive but as *prescriptive*, an attempt to fix the world in ways that lifts from us the personal burden of an ethics lived in our openness and hospitality to others” (174). Wonder thus becomes an unstable

32. Bynum, “Wonder,” 25. I cannot go deeper here, but I advise the reader to consider Bynum’s interesting distinction between medieval “perspectivalism”—“a reaction of a particular ‘us’ to an ‘other’ that is ‘other’ only *relative to* the particular ‘us’” (14)—and early modern “appropriation”—“practiced by early modern rulers, explorers, and conquistadors” (23) as ways of understanding their respective approaches to wonder. This is a distinction full of theoretical and practical implications that confirm, once more, the natural complicity with the medieval and the postmodern “against” the modern. The medieval conception of wonder leads to a more respectful vision of the “other”—even if it is based on a susceptibility that is very different from postmodern empathy; the early modern understanding of wonder, by contrast, leads to a justification of the appropriation of the other via conquest or colonization.

33. *Ibid.*

concept, one that is manipulable according to the purposes of the present. Significantly, if rather contradictorily, Hughes-Warrington clings in her final section to Hannah Arendt to mitigate the negative effects of this instability. Hughes-Warrington notes that, in her warning against the drift of a consensus-alism without fixed values, Arendt is a firm guarantor of the ethic of wonder: “Consensus, as Arendt acknowledges in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* can lead to situations where evil happens because ‘[n]obody came to me and reproached me for anything in the performance of my duties’ (p. 131) Consensus, the ordinary, as chapters eight and nine stressed, renders people invisible” (186).

Beyond these questions and difficulties, the journey that Hughes-Warrington started with Aristotle and his praise of wonder ends well: “Persistent interest in the strange, the edge case, the minority voice, the little or big change in action, the other, as we have learned in this book, can be seen as the realm of the curious” (186). To surrender to wonder also implies an interest in the unconventional, the peripheral, the other, as recent trends in gender and postcolonial studies—and cultural studies in general—promote. Without wonder’s enhancement of our ability to find interest in the marginal, we would never have known Menocchio of Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976) or Bertrande de Rois of Natalie Zemon Davis’s *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983), to cite just two books among many that have so enriched contemporary historiography. Hughes-Warrington concludes: “The strange, the edge case, the minority voice, the little or big change in action, the other are not outside of our writings of history and philosophy as general attempts to make sense of things. As we noted in chapters eight and nine, they can mark its beginning” (186). Foucault appears to be knocking at the door again. But there remains hanging in the air a certain feeling of skepticism toward the task of “mak[ing] general sense of the world” (xii) that Hughes-Warrington assigns to wonder, not so much for the challenge it represents as for the possible ideologization of history that such an exercise might entail.

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