

Wesleyan University

From the Selected Works of Mary-Jane Rubenstein

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Daniel B. Gallagher, Review of *Strange Wonder*
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Mary-Jane V Rubenstein, *Wesleyan University*



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which produce *han* are sinners. Jesus' atoning work has 'made it clear that victims of violence are not all sinners or the cursed' (p. 70). The *han*-ridden are 'not in fact sinners', rather they are the 'sinned against' (p. 78; also pp. xii, xiii, 72).

Most atonement theories teach that the divine/human Christ died on the cross. Jesus became incarnate, not the Holy Spirit, not God the Father. Does *perichoresis* mean that the Holy Spirit and God the Father participated in Christ's suffering and death on the cross? If so, how could they then help raise Christ from the dead (Rom. 1:4; 6:4; 8:11; 10:9)? Is Christ absent from the world (Matt. 28:20)? Is the Paraclete the presence of the absent Christ? Is the Paraclete 'another Jesus' (p. xiv)? Is the Paraclete Savior or is Christ? Was Jesus' death necessary to atone for sin?

Triune Atonement is part of the current debates about the atonement, an attempt at expressing Christian theology in non-Western ways, and an expression of concern about the environment and animal rights. Anyone interested in those areas should read this book.

Armand J. Boehme
Trinity Lutheran Church



Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe, Mary-Jane Rubenstein, Columbia University Press, 2008 (ISBN 978-0-231-14632-6), xii + 272 pp., hb \$45.00

Rubenstein's book is as much a grand tour of postmodern philosophy as it is an argument for the philosophical importance of 'wonder' (thaumazein). The argument is best summarized in her claim that the use of a military strategy such as 'Shock and Awe' overwhelmingly demonstrates that regardless of whether we recognize it or not theoretically, thaumazein is constitutive of human existence. 'The will toward total mastery that periodically overtakes the dominant culture when it encounters something new, bizarre, different, and/or threatening is not wonder at all, but rather a retreat from wonder – a closure of the primordially open terrain of thaumazein' (p. 186). Rubenstein believes that the oblivion of wonder has resulted in philosophy's attempt to make itself its own god by 'swallowing the very condition of its possibility' (p. 17).

Before moving to postmodern figures, Rubenstein introduces the term by rereading Plato's *Theaetetus*, an oft overlooked dialogue in which Socrates reassures his young interlocutor that the 'dizziness' felt

in thinking about difficult problems is not a liability but an asset, for 'this is where philosophy begins and nowhere else' (*Theaetetus*, 155d). According to Rubenstein, philosophy must deliberately strive to keep wonder alive, even as it endeavors to untangle thorny issues. This means it must forsake any plans to purify itself of the 'ugly and the monstrous' so as to 'keep itself open to rainbows and Harpies, the awesome and the terrifying alike' (p. 12). Whereas Aristotle considered *thaumazein* a mere stimulus for thinking, and Descartes held it to be only the means to a more determinate knowledge of things, Heidegger, whose task it was to 'return to the ground of being that ungrounds the thinking self' (p. 18), restores wonder to its proper place. Hence, despite Hannah Arendt's characterization of Heidegger as a modern-day Thales who fell into the well of Nazism by gazing too intently at the heavens, it was he who re-attuned thinking to wonder by pushing it beyond mere objectification and calculation.

Heidegger's driving motivation is based on his underlying conviction that, contra Hegel, the key to thinking is to think that which has not been thought as a self-*withholding* of being. Hence, wonder (*Erstaunen*) differs from curiosity (*Verwunderung*) in that the former is oriented toward being itself while the latter simply craves novelty. Philosophy aims at sustained wonder (*Verhaltenheit*) that neither neglects particular beings nor collapses into frenzied curiosity about them. However, by means of a meticulous comparison of two interpretations of Plato's allegory of the cave, one proposed by Heidegger in 1931 and the other in 1947, Rubenstein shows that the closer he came to *thaumazein*, the farther he ran from it. He failed to complete the 'double-movement' which she explains in the book's postlude.

Rubenstein then moves to consider Emmanuel Levinas's insistence that we turn the tables on Heidegger by giving philosophical priority to the existent rather than Being. This paves the way for his idea that ethics is inaugurated in the infinite. The 'astonishment' one feels at the very idea of God within the self or the infinity within the finite trumps any need to demonstrate the existence of God or the infinite. By surpassing every conceptual boundary, the infinite shatters all myths of interiority and aspirations toward self-mastery, fixing my gaze instead on the face of the other and disabling me from killing or asserting power over him or her. Rubenstein, however, wonders whether Levinas sneaks in a backdoor theodicy undermining the ethic of vulnerability that remains open to an indeterminacy *beyond* good and evil. She reads Jean-Luc Nancy as an attempt to keep this indeterminacy open after being's abandonment and the resulting denial of the relationality, inessentiality, and freedom that constitute existence itself. Nancy concludes that we can only 'withstand the fury' of communities, nations and histories that continually assert their own necessity. Such 'standing-with' is an opening of responsibility and an opportunity for 'decided existence'.

Yet, Rubenstein asks how 'decided existence' remains 'decided' and 'withstanding' a 'with'. If indeed it means choosing a course and sticking to it, she fears that would lead to a teleology reinscribing the violent, autonomous subject.

Rubenstein shows that deconstruction initially makes only the first move of *thaumazein*: the shocking exposure of the groundlessness, inessentiality, and unfamiliarity that lie at the very heart of the everyday. Yet, she discerns in Jacques Derrida a height of undecidability and nonself-identity that *is itself* the moment of decision and identity. Such a realization sets us on the countermovement of awe. Together, these two movements 'hold the self-as-other-as self between the unexpected and the unanticipatable, installing and interrupting responsibility as a radical hospitality toward the absurd possibility of the impossible' (p. 183). Such a double-movement of wonder takes us out of the world only to put us back into it, dismantling old possibilities in order to uncover new ones. An authentic *thaumazein* exposes existents as neither escapist nor egocentric, but rather 'always and only (in)essentially bound up with one another' (p. 133). Consequently, wonder, like religion, will never go away no matter how hard we try to overcome or suppress it.

Rubenstein shows a vast familiarity with the work of the four post-modernists treated in this book, although the minutiae of her analysis sometimes make it difficult to see where she is going and how subsequent chapters build on previous ones. Perhaps more frequent summaries would have been helpful in this regard. She also associates several terms – *thaumazein*, *yir'ah*, *admiratio*, *Erstaunen*, *l'admiration*, etc. – all of which roughly mean 'wonder' tinged with a bit 'fear' or 'awe', but she does not always sufficiently probe the differences between them. Nevertheless, thanks to her philosophical acuteness and graceful prose, her lack of sensitivity to etymological variety does no serious harm to the cogency of her argument.

Daniel B. Gallagher
Sacred Heart Major Seminary



The Holy Spirit. Guides to Theology Series, F. LeRon Shults and Andrea Hollingsworth, W B Eerdmans, 2008 (ISBN 978 0 8028 2464 6), viii + 156 pp., \$16.00/£8.99

This is a first class introduction in a short very lucid text to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. I shall definitely be using it with undergraduate students and we should be indebted to Shults and Hollingsworth. Part