

***Wunderkammer:* Linguistic, Literary and Cultural Forms of Wonder**

Graduate Conference
PhD Course in *Foreign Languages, Literatures and Cultures*
Roma Tre University

December 15-16, 2025

Thaumazein is the verb that, in ancient Greek, indicated the act of wonderment, the very spark of a thought that tended towards knowledge. Plato (*Theaetetus*, 155d) and Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, I, 2, 982b) saw this deeply human capacity as a hypothetical origin of philosophy itself. The reverberations of these intuitions can be found in the work of countless philosophers, but after secularisation and the crisis of metaphysics, it is now commonly accepted that the *Sense of Wonder* Rachel Carson refers to (1956) does not necessarily have to come from another reality but is innervated in the surrounding world. What is already known, in essence, can appear as ineffable, extraordinary, mysterious, new. The question is, what happens when knowledge escapes categorisation, when thought turns hybrid and wonderment becomes a possibility for exploration? In a world where nature and artifice, myth and science, subjects and objects of canonical and innovative beauty enter into dialogue outside any hierarchy of knowledge, knowledge becomes multidirectional and, as in a *Wunderkammer*, insinuates itself between the meshes of reality, opening up new exploratory horizons. The *Wunderkammer*, translated from German as ‘chamber of wonders’, originated in the Renaissance as an unorganised archive of rare objects and curiosities and, as the title of the conference suggests, it represents an invitation to conceive linguistic and literary culture as a non-linear confluence of experiences that intersect with human life, crossing it and deepening its meaning. The *Wunderkammer* is not just a bizarre collection of extraordinary or sometimes frightening curiosities found during one's cognitive journey, but a space that, while being interrogated, curiously questions humans in reflex, shaking some of their certainties.

Closely linked to the sphere of *logos*, the idea of wonder, in its being the source and destination of poetry (cf. Boitani and Dronke 2018), perfectly fits within the humanities. Consequently, the key points of interest of this conference are its linguistic, literary and cultural declinations and representations. Approaches to wonder, expressed for instance through the enchantment/disenchantment binomial, can be effective ways of exploring and communicating the environmental crisis (cf. Buck 2014), especially its consequences on the affective sphere. In the field of translation studies, reflections on wonder allow, for instance, to consider the aesthetic possibilities associated with machine translation and the language of A.I., as well as examine how the wide emotional spectrum associated with wonder can be linguistically conceptualised and translated (Darbor et al. 2016; Yaden et al. 2019). In the literary sphere, the topic of wonder has

always been very pervasive, persisting from ancient mythology and crossing centuries from the Middle Ages to Romanticism (here linking up with the idea of the sublime). Wonder can also take on a strongly political value, for instance in the rediscovery of fairy tales and folk tales (cf. Wood 2021), in Alejo Carpenter's *real maravilloso* and in the *global novel*, becoming the most suitable narrative mode for representing encounters with non-human life forms. Wonder can, however, conceal a dark, negative dimension, thus representing, at the same time, a valuable lens to give meaning to the complexity of the socio-political and cultural context, and an expression and representation of fetishist or unhealthy perspectives. It is no coincidence that some scholars have linked the *Wunderkammer* to colonial practices (Daston and Park 2006).

Within this ideal chamber of wonders, the forms of awe and astonishment are articulated along the folds of language, and reality can be revealed through allegory. Starting from the grey areas of this process, the conference's aim is to rediscover wonder by moving away from a vision that clearly separates the real from the imaginary, enhancing instead the creative act in its fruitful exchanges with the world from which it comes and to which it returns. Encouraging a transdisciplinary perspective, we invite participants to consider wonder through reflections of different nature, and to submit proposals related but not limited to the themes proposed below.

1. Linguistic and translation studies:

- The language of wonder: linguistic, stylistic and narrative features.
- Linguistic and translation-oriented considerations on cognitive processes related to wonder.
- Machine translation and the emotional dimension of language.
- Translation strategies in translating wonder.
- Ecolinguistics and the use of enchantment/disenchantment in narratives about the Anthropocene.
- Mood as a narratological tool.

2. Literary studies:

- Literary forms of wonder, from fairy tale to fantasy, in the different arts.
- Comparisons between marvellous and uncanny.
- Elements of wonder in utopian and dystopian narratives related to technology and AI.
- The 'marvellous real' in post-colonial and slavery contexts.
- Literary representations of the relationship between human and non-human.

3. Cultural studies:

- Wonder as a tool for analysing the socio-political context.
- Explorations of wonder from a cultural-historical perspective.
- Representations of anomalies and freaks in time.
- Sociological and anthropological readings of cultural products on the encounter between human and non-human.
- Exoticism and its connections with imperialist practices.

Terms of participation

Paper proposals (in Italian or English) of a maximum length of 350 words (excluding references) should be sent by **July 15, 2025** to the following e-mail address: graduate.llcs.romatre@gmail.com.

Proposals must include:

- Paper Title
- Author's name and affiliation
- Short bio-bibliography of the author (max. 5 lines)

Notification of acceptance will be communicated by **August 30, 2025**.

The time allocated for each speaker is a maximum of 20 minutes. Publication of the conference proceedings is planned.

Scientific-organising committee

The doctoral students of the 38th and 39th cycles of the PhD programme in *Foreign Languages, Literatures and Cultures*, Università Roma Tre: Ludovica Calogero, Valeria Ferrà, Kristina Polakova, Andrea Raso, Fabio Berlanda, Stefano Bracci Testasecca, Jessica De Matteis, Ilaria Diotallevi, Sara Nichiri.

The Teaching Board of the PhD in Foreign Languages, Literatures and Cultures.

Works cited

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Buck, Holly Jean. 2015. "On the Possibilities of a Charming Anthropocene", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 105:2, 369-377, DOI: 10.1080/00045608.2014.973005.

Carson, Rachel. [1956] 2020. *Brevi lezioni di Meraviglia. Elogio della natura per genitori e figli*, tr. M. Falconetti, Aboca Edizioni.

Darbor, K.E., Lench, H.C., Davis, W.E., Hicks, J.A. 2016. "Experiencing versus contemplating: Language use during descriptions of awe and wonder", *Cognition & Emotion*, 30:6, 1188-1196, DOI: 10.1080/02699931.2015.1042836.

Daston, Lorraine e Park, Katharine. 2006. *Le meraviglie del mondo: mostri, prodigi e fatti strani dal Medioevo all'Illuminismo*, Carocci.

Wood, Naomi (ed). 2021. *A Cultural History of Fairy Tales in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Bloomsbury Publishing.

Yaden, D.B., Kaufman, S.B., Hyde, E., Chirico, A., Gaggioli, A., Zhang, J.W., Keltner, D. 2019. "The development of the Awe Experience Scale (AWE-S): A multifactorial measure for a complex emotion", *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 14:4, 474-488.