Reviews


Wonder, standing at the beginning of thought (as Aristotle said), has not ceased to affect us, and so a vast history is suggested. To this largely unwritten history, this splendid book is a learned, insightful, and ingenious contribution. Spanning the history of Western civilization, “wonder” is located in an immense semantic field populated by many related terms that also have unstable and changing meanings: marvels, miracles, monsters, prodigies, curiosities, relics, “strange facts,” and so on ad absurdum and ad infinitum. Included, too, are errors and jokes of nature that challenge normal science (I am surprised not to see mention of scientific anomalies; Thomas Kuhn seems not to be in great fashion among historians of science these days). Park and Daston take us on a tour of many varieties and scenes of these exotic epiphenomena, elucidating many aspects of the intersection between nature and the second nature that is human and is itself full of wonders, as well as prone to wonder.

Wonder, according to a seventeenth-century handbook of philosophical terminology, is “amazement at a new and unfamiliar thing whose cause is unknown” (amiratio est stupor de re nova et insolita cujus causa ignorant). It is a condition caught between faith and superstition, between natural philosophy and “preternatural philosophy.” This book displays its presence through the analysis of many works and persons both familiar (among them, Bernard Mandeville, the Dutch satirist; Marsilio Ficino, the Italian Platonist; and Emperor Frederich II—himself a “wonder,” stupor mundi) and unfamiliar (Giovanni Battista Olivi, the physician; Konrad Wolfhart, the writer, and Jan Swammerdam, the Dutch microscopist.).

It is impossible to capture here the range and richness of this volume, which elicits reactions not unlike the Wunderkammer and cabinets de curiosité which it examines. The story line, or several story lines, provided by the authors avoids the vulgar Whiggery, progressivism, Weberian ideas of disenchantment, and teleology of older-fashioned history of science, inclining rather to the culturalist views of the current state of the art. Yet, this approach modifies the conventional story only a little by expanding horizons beyond professional scientific practice—which this subject requires in any case—so that, for example, “The quiet exit of demons from theology coincides in time and corresponds in structure almost exactly with the disappearance of the preternatural in respectable natural philosophy” (361).

That wonder began as, and remains, a largely visual phenomenon is marvellously displayed by the illustrations accompanying the text. Indeed, the authors might have pursued this strategy further, along the lines of Thomas Prier’s adventurous account of pre-Aristotelian “sight and wonder” in Thauma Idesthai (Gainesville, 1989). I wonder, too, that
the authors did not notice the many Biblical prodigia, mirabilia, portenta, visions, etc.—all rendered in English as “wonder(s).” However, it is part of the charm and value of this book that it provokes such lines of inquiry beyond its chosen horizons. It is in every good sense a wonderful book, throwing light not only on the age of preternatural philosophy but also on popular culture. Even today, wonders never cease—“believe it,” as Ripley says, “or not.”

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In the second half of the eighteenth century, a “science of man,” or “science of human nature,” became a project in Western European thought. In that same period, the term “social science” gained currency. Subsequently, the phrase “human sciences” arose as a cover term for the previous inquiries, taking over from alternatives such as “moral philosophy” and “Geisteswissenschaften.” Its opposite number was the natural sciences, a phrase that had also undergone a complex historical development. And, indeed, it was the inspiration of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century that inspired all of the efforts to understand human phenomena “scientifically.”

Smith’s *The Human Sciences*, part of the Norton History of Science series (edited by Porter), is an extensive tome that reflects the ambiguities and contested nature of its subject. Smith, who has been teaching the history of science and intellectual history at the University of Lancaster, delivers a “weighty” work in both senses of the word: It is an extensive work, and an important one. Smith’s range is extraordinary. He starts in the Renaissance and moves chronologically in parts devoted to the sixteenth and seventeenth, the long eighteenth, the nineteenth, and the twentieth centuries. Along the way, he touches, sometimes at length, on humanists, theologians, and medical doctors, on thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes, and on jurisprudents such as Hugo Grotius and Samuel von Pufendorf in Part II (his introduction is Part I); on John Locke and Immanuel Kant, on Julien Offray de La Mettrie, on an obscure figure named Johann Nicolaus Tetens, on wild men and orangs, and on Giambattista Vico in Part III; on philology, race, Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and Emile Durkheim, along with the emergence of academic disciplines based on some of their work, in

1 Christopher Fox, Roy Porter, and Robert Wokler (eds.), *Inventing Human Science: Eighteenth-Century Domains* (Berkeley, 1995), is a fine collection devoted to the origins of the human sciences in the Age of Reason and the inquiry into the science of human nature before that inquiry became separated into professional disciplines.