Reviews


Ryan Stark has written what is in many ways a charming book, right down to its physical presentation whose quaint details give it the look and feel of an earlier age—the age evoked by Stark’s title. That title, however, is a bit misleading since his proper subject is the enduring controversy over seventeenth-century prose style, namely, the causes of its arguable shift from Jacobean and Caroline exuberance to Restoration “plainness.” Stark himself takes leave to doubt that any formal shift actually took place because the prose literature of the later seventeenth century, including that of experimental science, demonstrably retains the figured language of its predecessors—although, significantly, not to the same florid degree. In this opinion, he departs from critics like R. F. Jones, Robert Adolph, and now apparently Ian Robinson, who would yet persuade us that this literature does not and should not employ figuration, owing to the alleged influence of the “new” science. Needless to say, the attempt to abolish metaphor is at least as old as Aristotle, not to mention a linguistic impossibility since we rely on tropological usage when we want to express new ideas and practices like those science itself is perpetually producing—a point Stark makes. Nonetheless, this particular bout of expressive austerity has as its *locus classicus* in Bishop Sprat’s curiously authoritative misreading of Bacon in his *History of the Royal Society*, whom he represents as strenuously averse to figurative speech against every indication to the contrary, beginning with the “sensible and plausible elocution” that Bacon recommends in *The Advancement of Learning* for the transmission of human knowledge.

If in Stark’s formulation one pole of the stylistic controversy is again represented by experimental science, the novelty of his argument comes from experimentalism’s presumptive opponent—magic or occult knowledge—with which Stark contends the practitioners of the new science saw their own empirical and mechanical innovations in immediate and urgent competition. Such competition in his view generated the later seventeenth-century’s focus on prose decorum and specifically what Stark calls occultism’s “charmed rhetoric,” “enchanted tropes” and “numinous language,” to which he argues.
the virtuosi of the Royal Society and their supporters in the larger culture of
the Restoration took concerted exception. Accordingly, the book begins by
invoking Donne’s First Anniversary where “new philosophy” forever “calls
all in doubt,” and proceeds to describe yet again how Francis Bacon allegedly
dismantled the pre-modern world of platonizing similitude, familiar to
us from Foucault and before him, Huizinga. Stark then extends Bacon’s
enterprise of disenchantment to the chemist Daniel Sennert and Joseph
Glanvill, interspersed with a generically invidious comparison of Browne’s
notionally “occult” rhetoric in the Religio Medici with Hobbes’ account of
“scientific” usage in Leviathan, from which Stark concludes that the evidence
for a stylistic shift is ideological as against formal. That is, the issue of
prose decorum stands for other epistemological and partisan commitments
in the seventeenth century, as indeed it always has, which Stark rather
loosely associates with the Restoration’s abiding suspicions of republicans,
dissenters and the papacy.

Although Stark does not spell out the precise semantics of either party,
he attributes to the experimentalists an insistence on the evident, ordinary
and apparently conventional sense of speech, construed as undertaking the
“rhetorical cure” of occultism’s glamorous delusions, which aspired to reveal
the secrets of things hidden from the Fall, if not from the beginning of the
world. By setting such strict bounds to the signification of speech, it is Stark’s
thesis that seventeenth-century science sought not only the disenchantment
of Nature but the Word, promoting a rhetoric from which the mystical signif-
icance of the occultists has been thoroughly and finally evacuated. Unfor-
tunately, he chooses to make his case by stampeding through the literature
of the seventeenth century’s latter half, which involves juxtaposing occult
practices–astrology, alchemy, neoplatonic theurgy, Rosacrucianism, demon-
ology (a largely clerical and juridical invention that Stark calls “witchcraft”
and seems to treat as if it were practiced in fact), and more dubiously, the
Restoration bogey of “Enthusiasm”–with directions for style and speech by
the ubiquitous Bishop Sprat, Hobbes, Glanvill, Descartes, Abraham Cowley,
the Cambridge neoplatonists Wilkins and More, Meric Causaubon, Locke,
Boyle, Newton, Samuel Butler, Bishops Tillotson and Burnet, and the always
essential John Dryden, among others. The result of such a superficial survey,
in which the particular character and circumstances of a writer’s utterance
are supplanted by the arbitrary context of magic, is to make their opinions
appear more alike than they are (in the virtuosic spirit of the age Stark chris-
tens everyone a “philosopher”), and to create the false impression that they
are speaking against the occult sciences when they are not.

On the face of it, Stark’s is an attractive thesis whose charm is enhanced
by the current academic fascination with early modern magic. To those who
mourn the passing of that legendary, wonder-working, demon-haunted age,
such a “prosaic” idea of the word as Stark ascribes to experimentalism
cannot compensate for the abysmal depths and ecstatic heights to which
“charmed rhetoric” once appealed, and which Stark would like somehow
to see recovered for the present day. Yet reports of magic’s demise have been
greatly exaggerated. In any culture, including our own, what we currently term “magical-thinking” goes on at all levels, alongside other intellectual behavior: it is simply a conceptual habitus of the human species, in which we may be said to mistake an ideal connection for a real one (to steal E. B. Tylor’s neat formulation), usually on suppressed or recast psychological grounds. But if Stark is perfectly right to see the issue of stylistic decorum as a “cosmological” problem, insofar as a systematic “redescription” of our world like that proposed by the new science inevitably involves a redescription of what we think our words can express, the question yet remains whether an antipathy to what he terms the “ontological” speech of magic drives the seventeenth-century stylistic controversy.

The answer is that it does not. For one thing, in the seventeenth century, any number of natural philosophers (Kepler, Boyle, Newton) were engaged in what we now regard as magic, but what for them was still calculation or experiment or theology. The lines of demarcation were just differently drawn then, as Stark himself admits, with natural philosophers contradicting not themselves but our anachronistic expectations of them—a frequent occurrence when one imposes modern categories on literature that does not recognize them. Moreover, in the history of intellectual culture, every time a new species of knowledge appears on the scene, it is obliged to make a case for the legitimacy and productivity of its innovations: a polemic is therefore inaugurated against its incumbent competitors, deploying the primal accusations of illusion, duplicity, corruption and finally sorcery or witchcraft—all of which Stark mistakenly sees as peculiar to his seventeenth-century writers. Indeed, as G. E. R. Lloyd has observed, the Greek word magia was itself invented by Hippocratic writers (from the Persian and so barbarian magia) as a pejorative term for their competitors, the traditional religious healers of the temples. Since the polemical charge of corrupting illusion in such circumstances is ancient and conventional, it is probably not literally the case in the seventeenth century, which in a most un-rhetorical fashion is how Stark takes the polemical language of his writers.

Besides, historians of science and philosophy have long recognized that another “ontology” posed a greater threat to experimentalism than magic ever could—a metaphysics that Stark rather conspicuously ignores in making his argument here. Renaissance humanism was the first to make it a target; Bacon’s most vehement polemics are directed against it; and it was a frequent object of ridicule to every seventeenth-century Baconian, many of whom (like Ben Jonson and Milton) also participated at one stage or another in the stylistic controversy. I refer of course to scholastic philosophy and, by extension, the natural science of Aristotle which, along with Galenic medicine, dominated English university curricula and other intellectual institutions like the Royal College of Physicians well into the eighteenth century. If Aristotle’s method of scientific inquiry began with observation or “what people say,” its activities of analysis and demonstration were exactly logical, which is why syllogistic is Bacon’s express target in the Novum Organum, as his title makes perfectly obvious. By contrast, scholastic philosophy assim-
lated the texts of the Aristotelian Organon to its own metaphysical purposes, practicing what amounts to an analytic logic long before Frege and Russell. It is this method to which Bacon refers by The Advancement’s memorable image of the spider’s silk, and by his own polemical emphasis on the observation of things over the manipulation of “mere” words, which is how he regarded the scientific role assigned syllogistic by Aristotle and his followers. As the incumbent authority in early modern England, the neo-aristotelian philosophy of the schools was experimentalism’s true competitor. In the meantime, the story of the stylistic controversy, both ancient and modern, still waits to be told.

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