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### PROJECT

## Describing the Indescribable: Observing New Nature, 1500–1700

The word “observation” and its sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cognates in Latin (*observatio*) and European vernaculars (Italian *osservazione*, German *Beobachtung*, Dutch *observatie*, French *observation*) had a triple meaning: first, and most ancient, to respect a ritual or other prescribed form of conduct; second, an act of focused perception on some detail, whether of texts or experience; and third, to describe that perception in words and images. All three of these meanings are in play in my project on how European naturalists observed what were for them novel phenomena during this period, but my focus will be on the third sense: how to describe the indescribable.

Encounters with radically new flora and fauna, weather, topographies, and peoples in the Far West and the Far East, as well as the creation of new phenomena through experimentation and the invention of new instruments such as the barometer, telescope, and microscope, and even the more systematic observation of phenomena known since antiquity but rarely spotted, such as the aurora borealis, taxed the language of description to the utmost. The challenge was not only to find a way to throw a net of familiar words around the Brazilians whom Michel de Montaigne met at the royal entry in Rouen in 1550 or the Aztec gold viewed by Albrecht Dürer in Antwerp in 1520; it was also to create a shared descriptive vocabulary, both quantitative and qualitative, both verbal and visual, for communication within an increasingly dense network of savants. Drawings could be and were made, but these were often as divergent as the verbal accounts. In order to be useful for the collective modes of inquiry pioneered first by the humanists and later by the academies, descriptions had to be intelligible and communicable, as well as accurate.

Not coincidentally, this period was also one of intense reflection on how language could be improved – whether by being purged of impurities, as in the case of the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca* (1612) or the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* (begun in 1635), or perfected to remove all ambiguities, as in John Wilkins' *An Essay towards a Real Character or Philosophical Language* (1668), or enriched with terms from the arts and crafts, as the botanists of the *Académie Royale des Sciences* attempted to do with color terms. The “plain language” movement in the Royal Society and the widespread critique of metaphor signaled increasing anxiety about how figurative language could undermine the project of collective empiricism.

### Recommended Reading

Daston, Lorraine, and Elizabeth Lunbeck, eds. *Histories of Scientific Observation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Daston, Lorraine. *Rivals: How Scientists Learned to Cooperate*. New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2023.

## The End of Natural Disasters

The purely natural disaster, for which no one is to blame, is an Enlightenment category. Previously, there were just disasters ("tribulationes", in medieval Latin), of mixed divine, human, and natural causation, and plenty of blame to go around. In the age of anthropogenic climate change, we are fast losing the category of the natural disaster – and with it, the concept of blameless evil. Not so long ago, the legal recognition of catastrophes for which no one was responsible, which were regrettable but beyond human reckoning or control, seemed a mark of progress: we had rid ourselves of the yoke of religious portents and chastisements, of reading divine wrath into events that were just part of the course of nature. To look for culprits for the damage caused by droughts or hurricanes seemed as benighted as hunting witches. But now enlightened opinion increasingly wonders whether natural disasters are really all that natural and poses hard questions about human responsibility – and liability.

My question is: what happens when we lose the Enlightenment category of natural disaster, and with it, the concept of blameless evil? As in the Enlightenment, great tectonic plates seem to be crashing up against one another in our heads. In the age of anthropogenic climate change and genetic engineering, the very idea of nature, autonomous and impervious to human will, seems to be dissolving. For good or for ill, the radius of human foresight and power – and with it the radius of human responsibility – has at least in our imaginations lengthened to the point that we have reversed roles with nature: no longer almighty mother (or cruel stepmother) to us cowering children, nature is now imagined as our ward, fragile and in need of our protection.

These metaphysical and moral changes are far too vast to compass in a single short talk. Here I'll concentrate on the implications of the vanishing Enlightenment category of the purely natural disaster and the concomitant concepts of blameless evil and human responsibility. But instead of tracking these developments in philosophical treatises, I'll focus on how the concrete practices of law courts and insurance companies are redefining in real time what disasters are and who's responsible for them. My premise is that this is metaphysics (and ethics) in the becoming: these new practices for dealing with disasters are reshaping how we think about what nature and responsibility mean right now.

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Daston, Lorraine J. (New York, NY,2023)

Rivals : how scientists learned to cooperate

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1853724971>

Daston, Lorraine J. (Princeton,2022)

Rules : a short history of what we live by

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1774520095>

The Lawrence Stone lectures

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1774520095>

Daston, Lorraine J. (Berlin,2018)

Gegen die Natur

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1020901233>

Against nature

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1020901233>

Daston, Lorraine J. (Chicago,2017)

Science in the archives : pasts, presents, futures

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=862821916>

Daston, Lorraine J. (Jerusalem,2015)

Before the two cultures : big science and big humanities in the nineteenth century

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=868966738>

Proceedings / The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities ; Vol. 9, No. 1

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Daston, Lorraine J. (Chicago, Ill. [u.a.],2013)

How reason almost lost its mind : the strange career of Cold War rationality

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Daston, Lorraine J. (Berlin,2012)

Festkolloquium für Hans-Jörg Rheinberger : Beiträge zum Symposium am 24. 1. 2011 im Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte

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Daston, Lorraine J. (2011)

The empire of observation, 1600-1800

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Histories of scientific observation

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