“Always news, rarely good news, but, if things always remained the same, God would not have to send us so many unheard-off warning prophets in all the elements.” Early modern Europe experienced significant political, social, and religious upheaval as competing claims about the purpose, methods, and authority of knowledge vied for public attention. Commenting on contemporary culture and the political and intellectual issues of their day, early modern writers constructed panoramas in print devoted to the recurring themes of wonders, the occult, emerging scientific thinking, and gender and social mores. Knowledge about the nature of God, the natural world, and men and women demanded scholarly and princely attention. It also gained increasingly the acclaim of the literate public. European and pan-European events, reports of common superstitions, beliefs in occult causes and signs, and accounts of God’s communication with His people were widely disseminated in print and increasingly in the mainstay of the new media, the weekly and monthly newspaper.

Early modern central Europe (1500–1700) is an epoch marked by exhilarating as well as terrifying tensions between what was and what was to come. Contemporaries, among them the Neapolitan writer and philanthropist Giovan Battista Manso (1560–1645), hailed this period, specifically the seventeenth century, with infectious enthusiasm for its discoveries of new and hitherto unknown worlds (“neue und unvorstellbare Himmel”). Spurred by the invention of wondrous machines like the telescope and the microscope, which opened outward and inward horizons, scholars and patrons anticipated rapid advancement in all areas of knowledge.

Moreover, the study of human physiology led to a better understanding of the workings of the human body, and research in alchemical processes created more efficacious medicines. In short, contemporaries were enthusiastically welcoming a period that would be the envy of ensuing generations. At the close of this historical period, the German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) confirmed the sentiments expressed at its outset. He agreed that it had indeed been a century of great and important changes generated by the emergence of many new ideas and inventions to which he had significantly contributed.
The age was primarily driven by an interest in the history of science, in theories of the creation and manipulation of life, and in knowledge generation and knowledge management, which included the evolution of encyclopedism. The period’s wars, plagues, and discoveries; its expansionist drive and its crazy and indulgent fashions; and its physicality, religious intolerance and grinding poverty—in short, the way new science coexisted in the same (re)searching mind with traditional and occult beliefs—all speak to the student and scholar of today with intellectual urgency, encouraging their reconsideration. In short, it appears that we detect a bit of ourselves, of our own time in its passage in the endless factionist strife, in the fear and fascination with the strange and the wondrous, in the many new beginnings. Accordingly, the essays in this book explore several recurrent themes: the convergence of the old and the new, science and the occult, gender and social order, the local and the global, communication about and the interpretation of wonders.

Our interest in this distant period does not come without its challenges. Succeeding generations have alternately admired, pitied, or scorned this period for its purported love of exaggerated forms in literature and the visual and architectural arts, its fascination with the occult, its passion for collecting everything. Some observers smiled in admiration; others turned away, dismissive of their predecessors’ efforts at joining natural philosophy, history, mathematics, rhetoric, and theology in a universal science of knowing. They disparaged the century’s eagerness to collect, order, and categorize uncounted and diverse specimen in its overflowing chambers of wonders (Wunderkammern), early iterations of today’s museums. Even when succeeding generations of writers and philosophers made use of the information gathered in these vast encyclopedias and memory books, scholars of later decades tended to view these versions of early modern databases, the endless lists of disparate items arranged alphabetically or numerically, commentaries, and lists of quotes taken from authorities with only mild interest occasionally bordering on condescension.

Still, the global and local, male and female, the scientific, the occult, and the superstitious, all mingle and course through seventeenth-century thought and writing. An example as amusing as it is enlightening is Johannes Praetorius’s discussion of the purported ability of witches to create weather juxtaposed with a scientific tract by his contemporary Athanasius Kircher about lightning and thunder, magnetism and meteors. The modern reader will appreciate a mindset that was able to accommodate assumptions and expectations that seem to us mutually exclusive as the Praetorius and Kircher examples demonstrate.

The age these essays address, variously called the early modern, the baroque
age, the classical age, the golden age, the age of Shakespeare, and the age of the scientific revolution, witnessed an intensely productive and sometimes hostile intermingling and intertwining of the old and the new. For several decades, these were held in balance before each moved to its separate domicile in history. Not the hypothetical victory of progress over tradition or superstition, until recently considered quintessentially early modern, inspired the age, rather the fascination with the **sowohl als auch**, the both and either, seemed much more pronounced during the seventeenth century than at any other time before or since.  

Nowadays, the early modern has become a cipher for a way of reflecting on history and change that resonates with us and our thinking. Increasingly bent on dominating the known world, yet ever mindful of its social and political volatility, and now increasingly interested in ecocriticism, medical humanities, and climate studies, the early modern reflects its own deep ambivalence and imperial grandeur in its awareness, as Hardt and Negri termed it, that it was a “fragile, baroque century” (77).  

Consequently, the essays in this volume can be seen as shaping a tableau of what frequently appears as the epithet for this period, the crisis of the early modern age. While the debate among historians about the crisis or crises of the early modern has cooled considerably since the mid-seventies and early eighties, the term crisis, referring to various aspects of the century’s politics and culture, regularly reappears in the literature. It is here that Hardt and Negri locate the cradle of modernity, the birth of modern Europe.  

The fate of the people unfolded within the space that scholars and theologians described in the traditional analogy of micro- and macrocosm; mankind, the microcosm, lived within and, at the same time, mirrored the macrocosm, God and all of His creations. The records show that contemporaries believed that this century, more than any previous one, was marked by the appearance of uncounted prodigies and wonders, by comets and celestial portents. Either predicative or explicative, these comets and wonders accompanied the course of world events like an endless, albeit confusing, conversation between humankind and the divine, assiduously elucidated in print for all who could and wanted to understand.  

Secrets of nature and the established ways of knowing continued to live alongside the excitement generated by all manners of new scientific, geographical, and astronomical discoveries vying for readers’ and scholars’ attention as well as for dominance in public consciousness. These ways of knowing did not exclude each other nor did they impede each other’s movement toward alternative models of explanation. New discoveries in all areas of knowledge also did not consign previous ways of knowing to oblivion just yet. Whether
concluded by scholars or surmised by the laity, the concept of the world as a system of signs that carried many often conflicting meanings continued to encourage, and even demand, dissimilar explanatory models. In the minds of individuals, order and disorder in nature kept on signaling grave future events, great misfortunes, and horrific disasters. Moreover, as natural signs of transcendent origin, they provided messages about what God had in store for His people. The oft-made experience that the understanding of a prediction and the event that eventually emerged often did not coincide remains secondary to the fact that meaning had to be assumed.17 Natural history, a relatively recent addition to the forms of knowledge production of the seventeenth century, introduced a plethora of new information as a result of explorations abroad and experimentation at home.18

The early modern era was also the time when all knowledge increasingly was transferred and communicated in daily, weekly, monthly, or annual newsprint, such as Zeytungen, local and international Relationen, Diarien, and Avisen, which had become widely available by the middle of the century.19 At this time over thirty German cities produced regular newsprint in German, some of them several different ones.20 Added to these were the publications of the various national and international learned societies that began to appear the second half of the century.21 These journals opened windows to the world near and far by providing reports on important world events; on politics, wars, social concerns, demographic changes; and on strange natural phenomena, monster births, murders, and other noteworthy events.

Moreover, collecting, reordering, and organizing knowledge in vast compilations variously called Theatrum, Universalbibliothek, Pandecten, or commonplace books, lovers of knowledge also arranged countless specimen of natural wonders on the shelves of their museums (Wunderkammern).22

Finally, as becomes clear from the essays in this volume, knowledge, as a cultural anthropology of thought, connected all levels of discourse and all fields of inquiry. It was inscribed as much in cerebral and rational processes as in the historical constructions of the body. Moreover, knowledge on its way to becoming science generated conflicts that were communicated in a variety of discourses. This discursive multiplication represents an abiding emotional and intellectual accomplishment of the early modern period and furnishes the basic and underlying concept of this volume’s investigations.

Gerhild Williams
NOTES

1. "Immer was Neues - Selten was Gutes ... denn bleibe man bey dem Alten / so würde der eyvernde Gott jetzt wohl nicht so viel unerhörte Straff-Propheten zu uns senden / aus allen Elementen," Johannes Praetorius, Unerhörtes Prodigium von der hoch-blauen Seide / So bey Laucha um Naumburg / unlängst auffm Acker häufig angetroffen worden (Halle: 1665), 1.


8. Johannes Praetorius, Blockes-Berges Verrichtung / Oder Ausführlicher Geographischer Bericht / von den hohen trefflich alt-und berühmten Blockes-Berge: ingleichen von der Hexenfahrt / und Zaubersabbathe (Leipzig/Frankfurt/M: Johann Scheiben/Friedrich Arnsten 1668), 156-89.The relationship of German to Latin in his tracts is variable; even his German writings often contain a fair amount of Latin quotes and paraphrases. Occasionally, it also works the other way, that is, a Latin text is interspersed with German.

9. Schmale talks about the tension between a noch immer and an auch schon that marks the so-called crisis of the seventeenth century (607).


12. Aside from the texts noted above, see Schilling (1999), 273, 274 [" Krisenphänomene"], 275 ["modernisierende Veränderungskrise"], 278, to only name two instances among many; Geoffrey Parker, Europe in Crisis, 1598-1648 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001; 2nd reprint); Geoffrey Parker, Empire, War and Faith in Early Modern Europe (London: Penguin, 2002), 5.

13. "Modernity itself is defined by crisis" (76) and "In the seventeenth century the concept
of modernity as crisis was definitely consolidated” (77) in Hardt and Negri, Empire. Antonio and Michael Hardt Negri, Empire (Cambridge (Frankfurt/M.): Harvard UP (Campus Verlag), 2001).


WORKS CITED


