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Journeys of Wonder to the Origin of Life: Narratives of Meaning in a Meaningless Universe – Carl Sagan and Richard Dawkins

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In the history of literature, there is a long tradition of travel writing which is sometimes referred to as “travellers’ tales of wonder,” a tradition which can be traced from Herodotus’s *Histories*, through Marco Polo’s accounts of his travels in the East, and to accounts by the explorers of the New World of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. [1] But according to many contemporary scholars of travel writing, this kind of narrative is no longer possible. [2] As travel writing scholar Casey Blanton puts it, “The new travel books are not our guides to places remote; nowhere is remote anymore.” [3] However, as I showed in a paper about the journey motif in Carl Sagan’s TV-show *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage* (1980), the tradition of traveller’s tales of wonder is not dead. [4] It lives on in contemporary popular science. The difference compared to the narratives of earlier times is that the site has changed: the earth is no longer at the center of attention, but rather the universe at large. In this paper I wish to pursue this topic further and focus on another kind of journey of wonder that is present in popular science: journeys to the origin of life. I do this by discussing two works of popular science that use the journey motif to approach and convey questions about the origin of life: Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos* (specifically episode 2) and Richard Dawkins’s book *The Ancestor’s Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Life* (2004). In the analysis of these works, I discuss how wonder functions as a way of creating narratives of meaning in a universe which seems devoid of meaning. Popular science is discussed as a genre in which attempts are made to reconcile the tension between the absence of meaning inherent in the scientific method on the one hand, and the human craving for meaning on the other hand.

[1] Simon Cooke, *Travellers’ Tales of Wonder: Chatwin, Naipaul, Sebald*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (2013), p. 1.

[2] Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*, London and New York: Routledge (2011), p. 59f.

[3] Casey Blanton, *Travel Writing: The Self and the World*, New York and London: Routledge (2002), p. 29.

[4] Daniel Helsing, “From the Stars and Back: The Journey Motif and the Unity of Science in Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos*”, submitted (2014).