To build his burial chamber within a pyramid, King Cheops of Egypt (26th c. B.C.) ordered people to work in gangs of one-hundred thousand, for periods of three months. “The pyramid itself took twenty years in the building. It is a square, each side is eight-hundred feet long and the same in height….,” wrote Herodotus, in his History, early in the fifth century B.C. So began the recorded history of the oldest and only surviving example of what came to be known as the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Whatever was to be classed among them was decided in the second century B.C. by the Antipater of Sidon, a Macedonian regent. Each of the Wonders, in its time, was viewed as the greatest structure on earth. Each combines great skills of architecture and engineering, with religious convictions appropriate to place and time. Each expresses the collective pride of its makers and hence each may serve as an icon of the people who built it. Here they are, listed in the sequence they were built.

- The Great Pyramid of Giza is made of almost two and a half million blocks of stone, each weighing about two and a half tons. Built some time between 2575 and 2467 B.C., it served as the traditional tomb for the Pharaohs of Egypt,
- The Hanging Gardens of Babylon were terraced gardens. Their outer walls were said to have been 56 miles long. They were built early the 6th century B.C. by Nebuchadnezzar II, to please his wife who missed the greenery of her native Médéa, an Algerian town near Algiers that still bears the same name.
- The Temple of Artemis was a shrine to the goddess, built around 550 B.C. Constructed entirely from marble, it housed many statues, including those of Amazon women. A goddess of fertility, Artemis was pictured as draped with eggs and multiple breasts.
- The Statue of Zeus at Olympia was erected around 450 B.C. It served as the location of the Olympic games, celebrating Zeus, the king of Greek gods. His sandals and his robe were made of gold. His scepter, inlaid with metals, had an eagle perching on it.
- The Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, Turkey, was the burial place of King Maussolos. Built early in the 4th century B.C., it was decorated by the statues of people, horses, lions and other animals. Its top formed a 24 step pyramid. Visitors described it as magnificent.
The Colossus of Rhodes was a bronze statue of the sun god Helios. It was said to have been 32 meters high. Erected around 300 B.C., it was toppled by an earthquake seventy years later. Nine centuries later it was broken to pieces by Arab invaders. Its bronze was sold for scrap.

The Lighthouse of Alexandria, built around 280 B.C., was said to have been 130 meters high, with a spiral ramp leading to the top where a fire burned at night. It was a technological triumph of its age and a prototype of all later lighthouses. It was still standing in the 12th century but toward the end of the 15th century, it collapsed. Its material was used to build a fort.

What may the post-Renaissance centuries offer to match these Wonders? The Eiffel Tower? Saint Peter’s in Rome? The Big Ben? Westminster Abbey? The sculptures of the Mount Rushmore National Monument in South Dakota? Memories of the Twin Towers of Manhattan? The Berlin Wall and its copies? These objects, though impressive, do not radiate that self-possessed immensity which the ancient Seven Wonders seem to have radiated for the people of their epochs and places. They did so through a hallmark they all shared. Namely, each was built to conquer the passage of time, one may say, by brute force. By immensity. They were intended not simply to last but to outlast all other structures.

To serve as the icon of the last few centuries, I propose to identify a very different type of Wonder. As did the ancient Wonders, this one also attempts to conquer time’s passage, but not by being a structure that outlasts all others. It is not even an object. It is a way of understanding nature and placing that understanding in the service of opposing the ravages of time. It is a way of knowing that already brought about many changes. Such as an explosion of (unevenly) burgeoning familiarity with the universe and man. Such as an eruption of demands for food and general wellbeing. Such as cultural transformations that made the globalization of the earth not only possible but unavoidable.

This Wonder is called science. It may be represented by an aphorism. It is: an art of conversing with stones, with plants, with animals and with humans. The question-and-answer periods are called experiments. When it involves talking with stones, the language is mathematics. As the systems with which science converses become more complex, when stones are left behind for plants, animals and humans, the language spoken must accommodate the increasingly freer forms of causations.[3]

Instructions for these conversations with nature were born in ancient Greek philosophy, but they grew to maturity only with post-Renaissance