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## 11 FOUCAULT DECODED: NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND

### I

Michel Foucault is sometimes thought of as *the* philosopher of the French Structuralist movement, the philosophical counterpart of Claude Lévi-Strauss in ethnology and Jacques Lacan in psychology. This designation of Foucault is fair enough, even though Jean Piaget has recently read Foucault out of the Structuralist establishment and Foucault himself has disclaimed any affiliation with the movement. Foucault shares with Lévi-Strauss and Lacan an interest in the deep structures of human consciousness, a conviction that study of such deep structures must begin with an analysis of language, and a conception of language which has its origins in the work of the recognized father of Structural linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure. All three thinkers proceed on the assumption that the distinction between language on the one side and human thought and action on the other must be dissolved if human phenomena are to be understood as what they truly are, that is to say, elements of a communications system.

The French Structuralists in general begin by treating all human phenomena *as if* they were linguistic phenomena. Thus, Lacan insists that psychoanalysis must begin, not with a consideration of the content of dreams, but rather with a consideration of the language in which the dream is reported by the analysand to the analyst. Between the report of the dream and its true content stands the linguistic protocol in which the report is encoded. Since the decoding of the dream requires a general theory of

language, such a theory must precede the more comprehensive theory of the psyche. So, too, Lévi-Strauss insists that before any practice of a primitive society can be understood, one must first determine the linguistic mode in which that practice, considered as an element in a system of communication and exchange, has been cast. For Lévi-Strauss, all gestures must be treated first as signs; and all systems of gestures, like any system of signs, must be referred to the modality of their relationship if their symbolic content is to be understood. Thus, for example, it is not enough to know how primitive man *names* and *uses* the various species of birds, plants, animals, and so on, in different ways; one must also determine the modality of relationship between the human and nonhuman worlds in which this naming and using operation is carried out. For Lévi-Strauss, no less than for Lacan, men always mean something other than what they say and do, and they always say and do something other than what they mean. This "something other" is given in the relationship presumed to exist between the things signified in speech or gesture and the signs used to signify them. This relationship, in turn, is the "deep structure" that must be disclosed before the interpretation of what the sign means to the one who is using it can be carried out. And this relationship, finally, can be specified by the identification of the linguistic mode in which the system of signs has been cast.

Now, Foucault in general agrees with all of this. But what makes him a post-Structuralist, not to say anti-Structuralist, thinker is the fact that he turns this interpretative strategy upon the human sciences in general and on Structuralism itself in particular. He insists that such disciplines as ethnology and psychoanalysis, even in their Structuralist forms, remain captive of the linguistic protocols in which *their* interpretations of their characteristic objects of study are cast. The Structuralist movement in general he takes as evidence of the human sciences' coming to consciousness of their own imprisonment within their characteristic modes of discourse. The two principal Structuralist disciplines, ethnology and psychoanalysis, not only comprehend the other human sciences, in the sense of transcending and explaining them; they point as well to the dissolution of belief in the "positivity" of such concepts as "man," "society," and "culture." Structuralism signals, in Foucault's judgment, the discovery by Western thought of the linguistic bases of such concepts as "man," "society," and "culture," the discovery that these concepts refer, not to things, but to linguistic formulae that have no specific referents in reality. This implies, for him, that the human sciences as they have developed in the modern period are little more than games played with the languages in which their basic concepts have been formulated. In reality, Foucault suggests, the human sciences have remained captive of the *figurative* modes of discourse in which they constituted (rather than simply signified) the objects with which they pretend to deal. And the purpose of Foucault's various studies of the evolution of the

human sciences is to disclose the figurative (and ultimately mythic) strategies that sanction the conceptualizing rituals in which these sciences characteristically indulge themselves.

Thus, Foucault views the Structuralist movement ironically, as the last phase of a development in the human sciences which began in the sixteenth century, when Western thought fell prey to the illusion that "the order of things" could be adequately represented in an "order of words," if only the *right order* of words could be found. The illusion on which all of the modern human sciences have been founded is that words enjoy a privileged status among the order of things as transparent icons, as value-neutral instruments of representation. The ascription to words of such an ontologically privileged status among the order of things is a mistake which modern linguistic theory at last has permitted to be identified. What modern linguistic theory demonstrates is that words are merely things among other things in the world, that they will always obscure as much as they reveal about the objects they are meant to signify, and that, therefore, any system of thought raised on the hope of contriving a value-neutral system of representation is fated to dissolution when the area of things that it consigns to obscurity arises to insist on its own recognition. Thus, if Foucault is ironically tolerant of the Structuralist movement, he is more than intolerantly ironic with respect to all of the so-called human sciences which preceded it: political science, sociology, psychology, philology, economics, and above all history. For him, all of the concepts devised by these "sciences" for the study of man, society, and culture are little more than abstractions of the rules of the language games that they represent. Their "theories" are simply "formalizations" of the syntactical strategies they use to name the "relationships" presumed to exist among their objects of study. And their "laws" are nothing but projections of the semantic ground presupposed by the modes of discourse in which they have "named" the objects inhabiting their respective domains of analysis.

## II

Foucault's most important work, and the one that is likely to be most interesting to historians and philosophers of history, is *Les Mots et les choses: Une Archéologie des sciences humaines*. It now is available in an English version which is entitled *The Order of Things*. This title was undoubtedly chosen in that spirit of irony which pervades the whole of Foucault's *oeuvre*. For it suggests that Foucault is another of those French rationalists who suppose that the world of things *has* an order and that disorder is introduced into the world only by the mind's incapacity to apprehend that order adequately. But, as I have indicated above, Foucault is no rationalist. On the

contrary, his aim is to return consciousness to an apprehension of the world as it might have existed before human consciousness appeared in it, a world of things which is neither orderly nor disorderly but which simply *is* what it *appears to be*. Far from believing that things have an intrinsic order, Foucault does not even honor the thing called order. Although he has recently indicated an affinity for the thought of the late Ernst Cassirer, Foucault views the mind's capacity to order the data of experience as a hindrance to a proper appreciation of the way things *really* are.

Cassirer, of course, viewed language as a mediating agency between the categories of the mind and the world given to thought in perception. Foucault, by contrast, views language as constitutive both of the categories and the perceptions to be ordered by them. It is for this reason that he reverts to the authority, not of the philosophers, but of the poets, and especially to Nietzsche and Mallarmé, the one the prophet of the word as flesh, the other the prophet of the flesh as word. With Nietzsche, Foucault insists that the dynamics of language must be looked for in a "physiology" of consciousness; and with Mallarmé, he believes that "things" exist finally in order to live in books, in an "order of words." Accordingly, Foucault appears to herald the death of things in general, and especially the death of the thing called man. But in reality he looks forward to a time when the thing called science shall disappear, when the Apollonian form of science, "hardened into Egyptian rigidity" (as Nietzsche said), shall dissolve in the Dionysiac celebration of a "revel of forms." This is why his "histories" of Western thought and practice are exercises in unmasking, demystification, and dismemberment.

Foucault celebrates the spirit of creative *disordering*, *destruction*, *unnaming*. His whole effort as a historian can be characterized as a sustained promotion of the "disremembrance of things past." Both *Les Mots et les choses* and the more recent *L'Archéologie du savoir* are attacks upon all of those histories of realistic representation which, from Hegel to Gombrich, purport to explicate the true nature of the relationship between "words and things." As thus envisaged, *Les Mots et les choses* especially can be viewed as a kind of post-Nietzschean "Phänomenologie des Geistes," which is to say that it is an account of the development of human consciousness with both the "Phänomen" and the "Geist" left out.

To be sure, *Les Mots et les choses* appears to be a history of ideas: an account of the different theories of life, wealth, and language that appeared between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries in Western Europe. But Foucault quite explicitly denies that he is interested in writing a history of the conventional sort. In fact, he regards history less as a method or a mode of thought than as a symptom of a peculiarly nineteenth-century malaise which originated in the discovery of the temporality of all things. The vaunted "historical consciousness" of the nineteenth century (and *a fortiori*

of our own time) is nothing but a formalization of a myth, itself a reaction-formation against the discovery of the *seriality* of existence. Foucault thus regards the works of professional historians with much the same attitude of contempt with which Artaud regarded the works of all modern dramatists or as Robbe-Grillet regards the work of all novelists. He is an antihistorical historian, as Artaud was the antidramatistic dramatist and as Robbe-Grillet is the antinovelistic novelist. Foucault writes "history" in order to destroy it, as a discipline, as a mode of consciousness, and as a mode of (social) existence.

Foucault proposes to substitute for history what he calls "archaeology." By this latter term he means to indicate his utter unconcern for the staple of conventional history of ideas: continuities, traditions, influences, causes, comparisons, typologies, and so on. He is interested, he tells us, only in the "ruptures," "discontinuities," and "disjunctions" in the history of consciousness, that is to say, in the *differences* between the various epochs in the history of consciousness, rather than the *similarities*. The conventional historian's interest in continuities, Foucault maintains, is merely a symptom of what he calls "temporal agoraphobia," an obsession with filled intellectual spaces. It is just as legitimate, and therapeutically more salutary for the future of the human sciences, to stress the discontinuities in Western man's thought about his own being-in-the-world. Rather than trying to grasp the diachronic evolution of the human sciences, then, Foucault tries to grasp their whole history synchronically, that is to say, as a totality the sum of which is *less* than the parts that make it up.

Thus, although *Les Mots et les choses* is about *changes* that have occurred in the human sciences between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, there is very little that can be thought of as a "story" in the book and virtually nothing that can be identified as a narrative line. What we have rather is a series of "diagnoses" of what Foucault calls "epistemes" (epistemic domains), which sanction the different "discours" (modes of discourse) within which different "sciences humaines" can be elaborated. Each of these sciences is conceived to have its own peculiar objects of study ("empiricités") and its own unique strategy for determining the relationships ("positivités") existing among the objects inhabiting its domain. But these epistemes (which function much like Kuhn's "paradigms") do not succeed one another dialectically, nor do they aggregate. They simply appear alongside one another—catastrophically, as it were, without rhyme or reason. Thus, the appearance of a new "human science" does not represent a "revolution" in thought or consciousness. A new science of life, wealth, or language does not rise up against its predecessors; it simply crystallizes alongside of them, filling up the "space" left by the "discourse" of earlier sciences. Nor does a new science take shape in the way that Hegel or the Neo-Kantians supposed, that is to say, as a manifestation of some mode of

understanding inherent in consciousness but inadequately represented in the spectrum of the sciences of a given epoch. Thus, not only does Foucault deny any continuity to the sciences; he denies continuity to consciousness in general. The so-called human sciences are in his view nothing but the forms of expression which consciousness takes in its effort to comprehend its essential mystery. As thus envisaged, the human sciences are little more than products of different wagers made by men on the possibility of grasping the secret of human life in language.

Foucault identifies four great "epochs" of epistemic coherency in what we must, by his lights, call the "chronicle" of the human sciences: the first begins in the late Middle Ages and comes to an end in the late sixteenth century; the second spans the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the third begins around 1785 and extends to the early twentieth century; and the fourth is just emerging. He refuses to see these four epochs as acts of a drama of development, or as scenes of a narrative. The transitions which mark the beginnings and ends of the epochs are not transformations of an enduring subject, but rather ruptures in Western consciousness, disjunctions or discontinuities so extreme that they effectively isolate the epochs from one another. The imagery used to characterize the epochs is not that of a "river of time" or "flow of consciousness," but that of an archipelago, a chain of epistemic islands, the deepest connections among which are unknown—and unknowable. The account Foucault gives us of the whole set of these epochs resembles one of those absurdist plays which achieve their effects by frustrating every expectation of synoptic unification that we bring to the entertainment of their individual scenes. Foucault's book thus appears to have a theme but no plot. Its theme is the representation of the order of things in the order of words in the human sciences. If it is *about* anything at all, it is about "representation" itself. But there is a hidden protagonist of this "satura" which Foucault has served up to us; and this hidden protagonist is language. In *Les Mots et les choses*, the various modes of representation which appear in the clusters of the human sciences between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries represent only the phenomenal side of the *agon* through which language itself passes on the way to its current resurrection and return to "life."

One is immediately put in mind of histories of representation offered in more conventional formats: Gombrich's *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*; Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*; Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*; and Dilthey's *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*. But Foucault's work differs from these by his resolute refusal to think of representation as "developing," "evolving," or "progressing" and by his denial of the essential "realism" of any of the human sciences. In fact, far from taking pride in Western man's efforts since



the sixteenth century to represent reality "realistically," Foucault sees the whole effort at representation as a result of a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of language. And far from seeing any progress in "realism" during the modern age, he views the whole effort of modern man to represent reality realistically as a total failure. At best the effect has had a negative result. In our own time, he says, with what appears to be a sigh of relief, language has at last returned from its Orphic descent into "representation" and appeared to us once more as what it had been all along: merely one thing among the many things that appear to perception—and just as opaque, just as mysterious as all the other "things" in the world.

Foucault's book can be said to have a "plot" after all, but the plot concerns its hidden protagonist, language. As in his earlier book on insanity, *Folie et déraison*, which told of the "disappearance" and "reappearance" of madness in the psychic economy of modern man, so too in *Les Mots et les choses* Foucault chronicles the disappearance and reappearance of language—its disappearance into "representation" and its reappearance in the place of representation when this latter has finally come to term in the Western consciousness's recognition of its failure to create human sciences with anything like the power possessed by their counterparts in the physical sciences.

It is because Foucault wants to destroy the myth of the progress of the human sciences that he foregoes the conventional explanatory strategies of intellectual history, of whatever school or persuasion. He refuses all of the "reductive" strategies that pass for explanations in traditional historical and scientific accounts. For him, the different human sciences produced by the four epochs not only employ different techniques for comprehending the objects occupying the field of the human, they are not even directed to the study of the same objects. Foucault maintains that, even though the terminology of, let us say, the natural historians of the eighteenth century and that of the biologists of the nineteenth century may contain the same lexical elements (which would seem to justify the search for analogies, influences, traditions, and the like), the differences between the "syntaxes" of eighteenth-century natural history and nineteenth-century biology are so great as to make any lexical similarities between them trivial as evidence. And so too with the sciences of language and economics developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, respectively. Between the search for a "general grammar" of the earlier period and the "philology" of the later there is as little continuity as there is between the "analysis of wealth" carried out during the Enlightenment and the "science of economics" cultivated in our own time. And this because the analysts of life, labor, and language of the two epochs inhabited different "universes of discourse," cultivated different modes of representation, and remained captives of different conceptions of the nature of the relationships obtaining between

things on the one side and words on the other. This is why, in Foucault's view, the hidden content of every putative human science must be the *mode of representation* honored by it as the sole possible way of relating words to things, without which its "talk" about the "human" world would have been impossible.

There may be ways of translating "meanings" from one universe of discourse to another, but Foucault appears to doubt it. More interestingly, he appears to be not very much disturbed by this doubt. On the contrary, since for him every "translation" is always a "reduction" (in which some crucial content is lost or suppressed), he is satisfied with what he calls "transcriptions" of the "talk" about humanity produced during the different epochs. This has important methodological implications for Foucault's approach to the study of ideas.

Foucault's suspicion of reductionism in all its form is manifested in his professed lack of interest in the relation of a work or a corpus of works to its social, economic, and political contexts. For example, to purport to "explain" transformations of consciousness between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by appealing to the "impact" of the French Revolution on social thought would be, for him, a form of *petitio principii*. For what we call the "French Revolution" was actually a complex of events which occurred extrinsically to the "formalized consciousness" of the age in which it occurred. The human sciences of that time had to make sense of the Revolution, to encode and decode it, in terms of the syntactical strategies available to them in that time and place. But an event such as the "Revolution" has no meaning except insofar as it is translated into a "fact" by application of the modalities of representation predominating at the time of its occurrence. To the formalized consciousness of any given age such an event might not even appear as a "fact" at all. And this means, for Foucault, that the formalized consciousness of an age does not change in response to "events" occurring in its neighborhood or in the domains staked out by its various human sciences. On the contrary, events gain the status of "facts" by virtue of their susceptibility to inclusion within the set of lexical lists and analysis by the syntactical strategies sanctioned by the modes of representation prevailing at a given time and place. This is especially the case when it is a matter of trying accurately to locate, identify, and analyze the primary data of such general categories of existence as "life," "labor," and "language"—the three areas of inquiry claimed as the preserve of the specifically "human" sciences. But what "life," "labor," and "language" are is nothing but what the relationship presumed to exist between words and things permits them to appear to be in a given age.

If Foucault is uninterested in relating a specific scientific work or corpus of works to its social, economic, and political context, he is even less interested in relating it to the life of its author. Just as it was once the aim of a

certain kind of art historian to write a "history of art without names," i.e., the history of artistic styles from which all references to the artists had been expunged, so too Foucault envisions a history of the human sciences without names. There is no biographical information about the figures who are mentioned as representatives of the sciences and disciplines analyzed by him. The names of individuals that do appear are merely shorthand devices for designating the texts; and the texts are in turn less important than the macroscopic configurations of formalized consciousness that they represent.

But the texts referred to are not *analyzed*; they are simply "transcribed." And transcribed for a specific purpose: they are to be "diagnosed" to determine the nature of the disease of which they are *symptomatic*. The disease discovered in them is always linguistic. Foucault proceeds in the manner of the pathologist. He "reads" a text in the way that a specialist in carcinoma "reads" an X-ray. He is seeking a syndrome and looking for evidences of metastatic formations that will indicate a new growth of that disease which consists of the impulse to use language to "represent" the order of things in the order of words.

### III

In *L'Archéologie du savoir*, Foucault designates the area between consciousness and the nonconscious as the realm of the *énoncé*, i.e., the "enunciated" or the "worded." And he speaks of this level in such a way as to permit him to contemplate a peculiarly human activity which he calls "wording" (*l'énoncer*). The *Archéologie* asks: How is wording possible? *Les Mots et les choses* is about that kind of wording which takes as its objects the mysteries of life, labor, and language. The modalities of wording chosen to constitute a given domain of inquiry generate those different human sciences which offer themselves as explanations of the human condition, but which are actually little more than the myths by which the epistemic rituals required by the assumption of a given posture before words and things are retroactively justified.

But how are these different epochs in the chronicle of the human sciences related to one another? In *L'Archéologie du savoir*, Foucault explicitly rejects four forms of explanation of the events he has chronicled in *Les Mots et les choses*. First he rejects the so-called comparative method, which proceeds by analogical methods to define the similarities that appear to exist between different forms of thought. Then, he rejects the typological method, which seeks to establish the order, class, generic, and species characteristics of the objects presumed to inhabit the field of study. Third, he rejects the causal explanation of the phenomena of "history of ideas," all causal explanations, of whatever sort. And finally he rejects any explanation by appeal to the notion of the *Zeitgeist* or *mentalité* of an era.

But the question arises, if Foucault does not want to "explain" anything, then why does he bother to write at all? What is the point of simply "transcribing" the illusions of an epoch? The answers to these questions are to be found in Foucault's conception of the function of antihistory. By denying *all* of the conventional categories of historical description and explanation, Foucault hopes to find the "threshold" of historical consciousness itself. The "archaeology" of ideas forms a fugal counterpoint to the "history" of ideas; it is the synchronic antithesis of the compulsively diachronic representation of the phases through which formalized consciousness has passed since the fall of language into the limbo created by the unrealistic demand that it represent the order of things. The fundamental "Unbehagen der Kultur" is not—as Russell, Wittgenstein, and Sartre believed—language itself; it is the task of representation, which ascribes to language a degree of transparency that it could never achieve. And the form which this "discontent" takes in any given age or epoch is nothing but the human sciences themselves.

It is in the nature of the human sciences to attempt construction of ontologically neutral linguistic protocols by which to represent the order of things to consciousness for reflection and analysis. But since language itself is merely one thing among others, the ascription to any given linguistic protocol of this privileged status as instrument of representation is bound to result in a crucial disparity between the being of the world and the knowledge that we might have of it. This imbalance is reflected in those areas of any given discourse in which silence prevails. A science of the human is not possible, Foucault argues, not because man is qualitatively different from everything else in the cosmos, but because he is precisely the *same* as everything else. This belief that man is qualitatively different from everything else is sustained, however, by the ascription of a privileged place in the order of things to the thing called language.

"Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent": Foucault takes Wittgenstein's injunction seriously, but not because there are some words that can legitimately be spoken and others that cannot. For it is possible to *say* anything. The real reason we must remain silent about some things is that in any given effort to capture the order of things in language, we condemn a certain aspect of that order to obscurity. Since language is a "thing" like any other thing, it is by its very nature opaque. To assign to language, therefore, the task of "representing" the world of things, as though it could perform this task adequately, is a profound mistake. Any given mode of discourse is identifiable, then, not by what it permits consciousness to *say* about the world, but by what it prohibits it from saying, the area of experience that the linguistic act itself cuts off from representation in language. Speaking is a repressive act, identifiable as a specific form of repression by the area of experience that it consigns to silence.

The aim of "the archeology of ideas" is to enter into the interior of any



given mode of discourse in order to determine the point at which it consigns a certain area of experience to the limbo of things about which one cannot speak. The "chronicle" of the human sciences, as thus envisaged, comprises a series of violent acts done to the world of things on behalf of an impossible ideal of linguistic transparency. The four epochs which Foucault discerns in the chronicle of the human sciences, from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, represent discrete colonizations of the order of things by fundamentally different linguistic protocols, each of which remained imprisoned within its own peculiar wager on the adequacy of its "wording" strategy. These linguistic wagers, however, permitted the constitution of different "epistemic fields" on which different clusters of human sciences could take shape in each of the four epochs discerned. These clusters then live through a kind of plantlike cycle, or run the course of a disease. They contain a certain potentiality within them of apprehending particular bodies of data ("empiricities") and of constituting them as possible objects of study ("positivities") on which the human sciences of an age can be raised. But when a given set of human sciences has run the course of its cycle, then this set is not so much overturned as simply *displaced* by another one, which lives a similarly parasitical existence off the same primal ground of language and consciousness. Like certain species of mushrooms, a given cluster of human sciences is *deliquescent* in a precise sense: it feeds on air and liquifies by absorption of the moisture in its atmosphere. In the case of a given cluster of human sciences, this "air" is language and this "atmosphere" the area of experience excluded from examination by the original wager on the adequacy of a specific mode of discourse for representing the order of things in the order of words.

For the archaeologist of ideas, then, a given epoch of intellectual history is to be treated as the site of a dig. His object of study is not its apparent physiography, represented by the human sciences appearing within its confines, but rather the structures of linguistic wagers and epistemological commitments which originally constituted it. One begins with an examination of the prevailing "formalizations" of thought about life, labor, and language in a given epoch and moves from there to a consideration of the lexical and syntactical strategies by which objects of study are identified and the relationships among them are explicated. This analysis then yields insights into the "modes of discourse" prevailing at a given time, which in turn permits derivation of the "epistemological ground" and the "wording" activity underlying and sanctioning a given mode of discourse.

#### IV

In the so-called human sciences, the objects of perception are the phenomena of life (man in his biological essence), labor (man in his social

essence), and language (man in his cultural essence). But there are no eternally constant objects corresponding to the words *life*, *labor*, and *language*. What these terms meant in the different epochs of the history of consciousness from the sixteenth to the twentieth century changes constantly and changes, moreover, in conformity to transformations that occur on a metalinguistic level of apperception, a level on which different modes of discourse generate different categories for the constitution of the elements and relationships presumed to inhabit the "human" world.

Each of the epochs of Western cultural history, then, appears to be locked within a specific mode of discourse, which at once provides its access to "reality" and delimits the horizon of what can possibly appear as real. For example, Foucault argues, in the sixteenth century the dominant mode of discourse was informed by a desire to find the Same in the Different, to determine the extent to which any given object *resembled* another; the sciences of the sixteenth century were obsessed, in short, by the notion of Similitude. Their search for Resemblances encompassed not only the relationships between things, but also the relationship between things and the words meant to signify them. The dominant categories of the science of the age were, then, those of emulation, analogy, agreement, sympathy, and so on. And it was the testing of these categories which lay behind both the making of ornate word-lists on the one side and the various forms of "verbal magic" in which the sixteenth century indulged itself on the other. The "science" of the age presupposed that the mastery of words might provide the basis of a mastery of the things which "resembled" them. The attitude of sixteenth-century scholars with respect to words was thus essentially Edenic, or rather had as its project the recovery of that divine onomatopoeia possessed by Adam before the Fall. And the seemingly bizarre nature of the works produced by sixteenth-century scholars and scientists is comprehensible, Foucault maintains, only if set within the context of the belief that the essence of a thing could be revealed by the discovery of the word which truly signified it.

But the search for similitudes carried within it the seeds of its own ultimate frustration. For the extension of the lists of similitudes and the tortured bridge-building required to *demonstrate* that any given thing could be shown in the last analysis to resemble in some way everything else ultimately succeeded only in disclosing to consciousness the fact of the essential *differentnesses* among all particular things. And this apprehension of the essential differentnesses among things led to an abandonment of that mode of discourse founded on the paradigm of resemblance. As a result, the seventeenth century set before consciousness this apprehension of Differentness as the problem to be solved. And it proposed to solve it by disposing the world of things in the modality, not of continuity, but of contiguity. In place of sympathy, emulation, agreement, and so on, the seventeenth century opted for the categories of order and measurement, conceived in essen-

tially *spatial* terms. And the crucial problem for the science of this age was that of "determining how a sign could be linked to what it signified."<sup>1</sup> Foucault describes the situation in the seventeenth century in the following terms:

The activity of the mind . . . will . . . no longer consist in *drawing things together*, in setting out on a quest for everything that might reveal some sort of kinship, attraction, or secretly shared nature within them, but, on the contrary, in *discriminating*, that is, establishing their identities, then the inevitability of the connections with all the successive degrees of a series. In this sense, discrimination imposes upon comparison the primary and fundamental investigation of difference: providing oneself by intuition with a distinct representation of things, and apprehending clearly the inevitable connection between one element in a series and that which immediately follows it. Lastly, as a final consequence, since to know is to discriminate, history and science will become separated from one another. (P. 55).

Thus, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we find on the one side erudition, providing the materials of the human sciences of life, labor, and language; and on the other science, providing the materials susceptible to analysis by measurement and serial arrangement, representable in mathematical signs. And the very success of the physical sciences would suggest the desirability of reducing the data of the human sciences to representation in a "universal language of signs." This universal language of signs would provide an instrument for representing the essential order of things to consciousness for analysis. The order of things could then be represented in a table of essential relationships in which a "knowledge based upon identity *and* difference" would be shown forth without ambiguity.

The crucial human sciences of the *âge classique* were, in Foucault's view, those of general grammar, natural history, and the analysis of wealth. Each was characterized by a search for the genetic origin of its peculiar object of study: language, life, and wealth, respectively. Analysis in these sciences proceeds in the hope of confirming the belief that, if one could discover the system of signs by which the true nature of language, organism, and wealth might be represented, one could construct an *ars combinatoria* that would permit the control of each of them (pp. 203-4). The *âge classique* hoped that, if the correct table of relationships could be discovered, one could manipulate "life," "wealth," and "language" by the manipulation of the signs that signified them.

The important point for Foucault is that the eighteenth century was strongest where it was *metaphysically* most secure, not where it was *empirically* full, and weakest where it was metaphysically insecure, not where it was empirically vacuous. The limits of natural history in the eighteenth century resided in its inability even to conceive the category of "life"; it could

only entertain the reality of different organisms, which it endlessly classified in the hope of coming upon the "web of relationships" which hold what we call "life" together in a continuum of mutually sustaining interchanges between life and death. Therefore, to view nineteenth-century biology as a continuation of eighteenth-century natural history represents a profound error to Foucault. And so too for the relationship between eighteenth-century general grammar and nineteenth-century philology or that between the eighteenth-century analysis of wealth and nineteenth-century political economy. As Foucault puts it:

Philology, biology, and political economy were established, not in the places formerly occupied by *general grammar*, *natural history*, and the *analysis of wealth*, but in an area where those forms of knowledge did not exist, in the space they left blank, in the deep gaps that separated their broad theoretical segments and that were filled with the murmur of the ontological continuum. The object of knowledge in the nineteenth century is formed in the very place where the Classical plenitude of being has fallen silent. (P. 207)

Instead of searching for the "original language," as did the general grammarians of the eighteenth century, the nineteenth-century philologists concerned themselves with the affiliations and kinships among language families presumed to be irreducible to the same ground. In place of the identification of the order, class, genus, species to which the individual organism belonged, nineteenth-century biologists pondered the problem of the *evolution* of the Different out of the Same. And in place of the analysis of wealth, nineteenth-century political economists turned to the analysis of modes of production. Thus, against the categories of Measurement and Order, which had dominated thought in the *âge classique*, we now witness the rise of the categories of Analogy and Succession as the presiding modalities of analysis in the new age (p. 218). This advent signalled the growing consciousness of the significance of Time for the understanding of life, labor, and language, and attests to the historicization of the human sciences:

From the nineteenth century, History was to deploy, in a temporal series, the analogies that connect distinct organic structures to one another. This same History will also, progressively, impose its laws on the analysis of production, the analysis of organically structured beings, and, lastly, on the analysis of linguistic groups. History gives place to analogical organic structures, just as Order opened the way to successive identities and differences [in the *âge classique*]. (P. 219)

By the term "History," of course, Foucault does not mean at all what is represented by academic historiography, that "compilation of factual successions and sequences as they may have occurred," presented in a weakly defined narrative line (p. 219). By "History" he means the "fundamental mode of being of empiricities" such that things are conceived to exist out-



side one another in an essential way, in a way different from that suggested by the spatialized table of the *âge classique*. For in fact spatial contiguity suggests the possibility of a web of relationships by which to bind things together as inhabitants of the same "timeless" field. But in the order of temporal seriality, there is no legitimate way of conceiving a ground on which all the particulars in the series can be said to have a common origin. Once beings are set upon the heaving ocean of time, in the mode of Succession, they can only be related by Analogy to one another. And the longer the temporal series is conceived to be, the more dispersed are the things that had once been ordered in the closed spatialized field of the classical table.

The question that the human sciences had to face in the nineteenth century was, What does it mean to *have* a history? This question, Foucault maintains, signals a "great mutation" in the consciousness of Western man, a mutation which has to do ultimately with "our modernity," which in turn is the sense that we have of being utterly different from all the forms of humanity known to history, with a small *b* (pp. 219-20).

The new interest in history with which the nineteenth century is conventionally credited, is—in Foucault's estimation—not a cause, but an effect of a shift that occurred on a deep structural level, from the apprehension of objects in terms of the Contiguity-Continuity relationship to apprehension of objects in terms of the Succession-Analogy relationship. What the human sciences of the eighteenth century accomplished was the revelation of the fundamental *differences* between any two objects inhabiting the perceptual field. The very completeness of the search for the *tables*, by which things contiguous in space could be made to reflect their membership in a continuous "web of relationships" that was timeless in nature, succeeded only in demonstrating that things did not in fact testify to their emplacement within such a timeless web. The response of nineteenth-century thinkers to this bankruptcy of eighteenth-century thought was to elevate the category of temporality to the status of an irreducible datum, the import of which was to direct thought to the search for the extent to which things could be related to one another *as members of specific families* of organic species, (Cuvier), modes of production, (Ricardo), and, language usages (Bopp). But the great system-makers of the nineteenth century—Hegel, Comte, Marx, Mill, and others—merely succeeded in demonstrating, in Foucault's view, the futility of trying to capture the variety of things in an order of words that would accurately place them in a temporal series that is both complete and illuminative of the way the whole temporal process is tending over the long run.

The bankruptcy of the nineteenth-century investigation of the "temporal series" was signalled by Nietzsche, who perceived correctly that the true problem which modern thought had kept hidden from itself was that of the opacity of language, the incapacity of language to serve the purpose of representation which had been foisted upon it, all unthinkingly, in the late

sixteenth century. The two great "counter-sciences" of the twentieth century, which a similarly Nietzschean insight into the opacity of language generated—psychoanalysis and ethnology—confirm, in Foucault's view, the correctness of Western man's growing realization of the impossibility of ever constructing a true science of man. For, according to Foucault, what both of these countersciences represent is a tendency to push analysis of the phenomenon "man" downward, to the level where his "humanity" disappears, and backward, to the point in time before the "human" makes its appearance. Unlike the philosophers of history of the nineteenth century, Freud and Lévi-Strauss proceed, not on the basis of the categories of Succession and Analogy, but on those of Finitude and Infinity. Moreover, both psychoanalysis and ethnology, in their most creative and radical aspects, perceive that the *barrier* to the full prosecution of the work which the human sciences must carry out is language itself. They proceed in the full recognition of the opacity, the thinginess of language, and in such a way as to render suspect to their followers the adequacy of their own linguistic characterizations of the "humanity" which they study.

## V

It is obvious that *Les Mots et les choses* has the same plotstructure as Foucault's earlier *Folie et déraison*, his history of madness in the West from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. In this book, Foucault offered what appeared to be a history of the ideas of folly and madness from the sixteenth to the end of the nineteenth century. But, as a number of reviewers pointed out, the work was less a history of either *theories* of insanity or of the *treatment* of the insane than a rambling discourse on the madness lying at the very heart of reason itself. From a consideration of a very limited body of data, Foucault purported to contrive a true account of the "underside" of thought about both reason and madness, and to expose the anxiety which underlay Western man's obsession with the problem of his own sanity.

What was most original about the book, considered as a contribution to the history of ideas, was Foucault's insistence that one could not gain any valid notion about Western man's conception of the rational through study of the various theories of rationality and madness articulated by the writers on these subjects during the period in question. On the contrary, the true content of the concept of "rationality" had to be looked for in the ways that the individuals who had been designated as "insane" were *regarded*. Foucault concentrated on the questions, *Who* was regarded as insane? *How* was their insanity identified? *What* were the modes of their confinement? *How* were they treated? And *what* criteria were used to determine when, and if, they had been cured?

He claimed that the history of madness revealed no consistent progress



in the theoretical conceptualization of it as an illness, that, on the contrary, the history of the treatment of the insane revealed a consistent tendency to project very general social preconceptions and anxieties into theoretical systems which justified the confinement of whatever social group or personality type appeared to threaten society during a particular period.

Foucault identified four major periods in the history of madness: the late Middle Ages, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (*l'âge classique*), the nineteenth century, and the twentieth century. During the late Middle Ages, he maintained, the insane were regarded, not as representatives of some obscure form of anti-humanity, but, on the contrary, as a peculiarly blessed human variant, the innocence and childlike nature of which stood as reminders to "ordinary" men of their dependency on God's grace and beneficence. The "foolish" of the world were regarded as possessors of a wisdom more profound than the "foolishness of the worldly wise," as the Gospels taught. The mad were, accordingly, not only permitted to live among the putatively sane, but were even treated with respect and honored as models of the simplicity which all Christians should aspire to in the quest for salvation.

Sometime during the late sixteenth century, however, Western man's attitude toward the insane began to change radically. This change was signalled by the onset of a general fear of the insane and was manifested in a movement to exclude them from concourse with "ordinary" men, by confining them in the leprosaria recently vacated as a result of the decline of leprosy during that century. In short, insanity ceased to be regarded as a sign of blessedness, and became regarded, rather, as a sign of illness, to be "treated" by physical excommunication and confinement of those designated as insane in the "hospitals" formerly used to house lepers. This exclusion and confinement signalled, in turn, the transformation of the insane from "subjects" into "objects." Henceforth, they are treated as objects of derision, maltreatment, scorn, and amusement, but with the result of removing from ordinary men the advantages of insight into their own potentially insane natures which intimate concourse with the insane might have afforded them. All of the talk about and praise of reason which characterized the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth century was carried on, therefore, without the benefit of any direct and sympathetic understanding of its antithesis, unreason or madness. And the result was that Western man's knowledge both of reason and unreason tended to fall prey to influences of a more practical, social nature, rather than develop as a rigorous, scientific examination of what either might have consisted of.

For example, Foucault points out that the concept of madness was sometimes identified as regression to a childlike state and at other times as regression to an animal state. For some, criminality and insanity were one, while for others there was no distinction between the way the poor were to

be treated and the treatment of the insane. The insane, the criminal, and the poor were all herded into the same places of confinement, treated (or rather maltreated) in the same way, exhibited for profit and amusement, alternatively handled as animals, as criminals, and as children, but in every case dealt with inhumanly. This treatment of the insane reflected not only men's insecure notion of what their own humanity consisted of; it also reflected society's awareness of its inability to deal with the casualties of its current system of praxis. The vaunted "age of reason" dealt with the products of its failures—the poor, criminal, and mentally ill—by simply locking them away. Below or behind the treatment of those designated as worthy of confinement lay a profound anxiety about the modes of social organization and comportment characteristic of those who remained "free" and about the nature of their own self-arrogated "sanity."

A second fundamental shift of attitude toward the insane occurred at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, and it was represented by the reforms in the treatment of the insane undertaken by Tuke and Pinel. During this time, mental illness became defined as a primarily physical malady, to be treated by specifically medical means. During this time, Foucault points out, the mentally ill were differentiated from the criminal and the poor, and different modes of treatment were prescribed for each of these categories. What caused this change? In Foucault's view, the change had very little to do with the advancement of theoretical knowledge about the true nature of mental illness. Rather, if there was any advancement at all, it came as a result of more basic transformations in society. The liberation of the poor from the places of confinement, where they had been thrown in with both criminals and the mentally ill, was a response to the need for an expanded labor force during a period of industrialization. This did not mean that the poor were better treated, for they were liberated from the hospitals only to be consigned to the iron laws of labor supply and demand and the "discipline" of the factories. So too, the differentiation of the mentally ill from the criminal element reflected a new social attitude with respect to the latter rather than a theoretical advancement in the understanding of the former. For the category of the "criminal" was conflated with that of the "revolutionary" subversive element of society, which the bourgeoisie had come to fear even more than it feared the insane. In short, the distinction between the criminal and the mentally ill was a function primarily of political, rather than of scientific, considerations. The mentally ill may have profited from the elaboration of this distinction, but the basis for it resided in more generally social, rather than specifically scientific, transformations.

Needless to say, this conception of the "progress" of medicine did not endear Foucault to those who viewed its evolution as a Promethean triumph, analogous to the course of development manifested in the histories of

physics and chemistry. Foucault was suggesting, as he had suggested in his first two books, *Maladie mentale et personnalité* and *La Naissance de la clinique*, that medicine was not a science at all and that its development, far from representing a progressive understanding of the needs of the patient, was intimately tied to the ongoing praxis of society rather than to a deepening understanding of the human animal. Medical *practice*, he was arguing, represented little more than the application of ideological conceptions of the nature of man prevailing among the dominant classes of a given society at a given time. The clinic and hospital were microcosms of the attitudes toward man prevailing in the macrocosmic world of society in general. As thus envisaged, medicine was more a political than a scientific discipline; and this was especially the case with that branch of medicine purporting to deal with the mentally ill, for here the prejudices which informed the maltreatment of *any* social deviant were reflected in all their brutality, incomprehension, and lack of scientific knowledge.

It is within the context of considerations such as these that Foucault assessed the importance of Freud for Western cultural history. Freud's revolution—which represents a third shift in our attitude toward the insane—consisted of nothing more than a willingness to *listen* to the mentally ill, to try to grasp the nature of madness from *within* the experience of the insane themselves, and to use *their* perspective on the world for an understanding of the distortions present in the perceptions of the world of those who were manifestly "sane." Thus, Freud pointed the way to a reestablishment of communications not only between the mentally ill and the "healthy" but also between the "insane" and "sane" aspects of the apparently "well-adjusted personality" as well. By Foucault's account, however, Freud does not represent—any more than his "psychophysical" counterparts, such as Wundt—the establishment of a genuine *science* of the human mind. In fact, the success of Freudian psychotherapeutic technique represents to Foucault evidence for the necessity of abandoning all attempts at a formalistic theory of the human psyche, of the sort that Freud himself articulated in his later works. As against the abstract and mechanistic formalism of Freudian *theory*, the therapeutic technique that Freud worked out in his *treatment* of his patients points to the need for an approach to the study of man that is essentially hermeneutical, interpretational, or "artistic," rather than systematic or "scientific."

The real subject of *Folie et déraison* was not madness or reason, but the changing structure of relationships between those who were treated as insane and those who had arrogated to themselves the status of the sane. In Foucault's terms, this made it a history of a silence, an examination of the void which had developed between the insane and the sane in the wake of the dissolution of that dialogue between them which had prevailed during the late Middle Ages. The history of madness, as thus envisaged, was a

history of what was *not* known and what was *not* said about the subject and the changing modes of relationship between the sane and the insane as represented in the gestural language of treatment. Between the late sixteenth century and the time of Freud, dialogue had been cut off; there was a great deal of talk about what both "reason" and "folly" were, but no effort at all to decode the messages emanating from the depths of madness in the "babble" of the insane.

The response of historians of medicine to Foucault's *Folie et déraison* was predictable (his data were too limited, his method too aprioristic, his aim too ideological, and so forth) and, from Foucault's standpoint, predictably beside the point. For his purpose, as he had said, was to illuminate a specific modality of relationship with society between those occupying privileged places in it and those regarded as being worthy of exclusion from it. He had not pretended to present new "data," but on the basis of a certain amount of available materials, illuminate the contradictory nature of the theories of madness on the one side and the irrational nature of treatment of the insane on the other. His principal interest, as *Les Mots et les choses* made quite clear, was the unscientific nature of the human sciences in general; for, as we have seen, *Les Mots et les choses*, which has the appearance of a survey of the evolution of the human sciences from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, extends the charge of irrationality to all the sciences of life, labor, and language that came to birth during this period. In this book, moreover, the problem of how man represents his own nature and the products of that nature to himself is moved to the center of the author's concerns. And the problem of dialogue, which had been the subject of his study of the relations between the sane and the insane in *Folie et déraison*, is now extended to include the problem of language in general. Correspondingly, there is a shift of emphasis from the social matrix within which different conceptions of "human nature" arise to the linguistic matrix in which these conceptions have their origin. Different conceptions of life, labor, and language—the putative subjects of such human sciences as biology, psychology, anthropology, economics, political science, sociology, history, philology, and so on—become, in Foucault's estimation, little more than reifications of the different linguistic protocols in which their "phenomena" are constituted. For Foucault, all the talk about the nature and meaning of life, labor, and language which has been carried on from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, represents little more than that babble about rationality in which talk about madness was carried on during the same period. Men know no more about life, labor, and language today than they did during the sixteenth century, when the possibility of such talk originated in the question, How can we be sure that words *really* designate the things they are meant to signify? In the human sciences of the modern age, language has been treated in the same way that madness was treated in the age of Reason. It has



been simultaneously affirmed as a presence to consciousness and denied as a *problem* of consciousness. It has been treated simultaneously as the instrument of analysis by which the meaning of "humanity" is to be discovered and as the transparent instrument of representation by which that "humanity" is to be offered to thought for analysis. And now that language has finally been delivered from *its* prison, restored from the realm of silence to which it had been consigned by the decision to use it for "representation," the whole problematic of the human sciences has moved to a new and radically different level of contemplation.

The human sciences of our own time, Foucault argues, have tended to be both Positivistic and Eschatological. That is to say, they have simultaneously pursued the idea of value-neutrality on the one side and that of social redemption on the other. It is for this reason, he argues, that the principal systematizations of thought about the human have tended toward the poles of Formalization (as in Russell, Wittgenstein, and Chomsky) and Interpretation (as in Sartre, Freud, and Heidegger). The severed and futile condition of the human sciences for our own time, then, is signalled by the nature of the philosophies they generate: logical atomism and linguistic analysis, phenomenology and structuralism, existentialism and neo-Kantianism, all symptomatic of the want of confidence that men have in their own thought and of the discovery of the opacity of language which precludes the construction of the total system that each envisions as the fruit of its labors in the end.

But there has been a gain in this centuries-long imprisonment of language within the task of representation, the same kind of gain which Nietzsche saw as the result of two millennia of asceticism at the end of the *Genealogy*. The will has been disciplined *and* freed, disciplined by its exile from the word and freed by its return to the power of the word. But the word here referred to is not the word of Scripture; it is not a sacred word, but the word desacralized, returned to the order of things in which it has a place as one *thing* among many. The result of the desacralization of the word is to destroy the impulse to see eternal hierarchies in the order of things. Once language is freed from the task of representing the world of things, the world of things disposes itself before consciousness as precisely what it was all along: a plenum of *mere* things, no one of which can lay claim to privileged status with respect to any other. Like sanity itself, the human sciences, once they are freed from the tyranny which the repressed word exercised over them, have no need to claim the status of "sciences" at all. And man is released to a kingdom in which everything is possible because nothing is excluded from the category of the real.

As Foucault puts it at the end of *Les Mots et les choses*:

In our day, and once again Nietzsche indicated the turning-point from a long way off, it is not so much the absence or the death of God that is affirmed as the

end of man.... New gods, the same gods, are already swelling the future Ocean; man will disappear. Rather than the death of God—or, rather, in the wake of that death and in a profound correlation with it—what Nietzsche's thought heralds is the end of his murderer; it is the explosion of man's face in laughter, and the return of masks; it is the scattering of the profound stream of time by which he felt himself carried along and whose pressure he suspected in the very being of things; it is the identity of the Return of the Same with the absolute dispersion of man. (P. 385)

What we have here is not so much metaphor as a will to return to a world which existed before metaphor itself, before language. Foucault heralds the rebirth of the gods, when what he means to herald is the rebirth of a prereligious imagination.

## VI

Heady stuff, to be sure. And it is quite understandable that Foucault has been the object of attack of almost everyone who has not been simply puzzled by him. Jean Piaget has dismissed Foucault's ideas as a combination of "cleverness, . . . bare affirmations and omissions," as a "structuralism without structures." What Piaget misses most in Foucault's work is a transformational system by which to account for the displacement of one "epistemic field" by another. As Piaget puts it:

His *epistemes* follow upon, but not from one another, whether formally or dialectically. One *episteme* is not affiliated with another, either genetically or historically. The message of this "archaeology" of reason is, in short, that reason's self-transformations have no reason and that its structures appear and disappear by fortuitous mutations and as a result of momentary upsurges. The history of reason is, in other words, much like the history of species as biologists conceived of it before cybernetic structuralism came on the scene.<sup>2</sup>

But Piaget has taken Foucault's assertions about his intentions at face value, instead of subjecting what Foucault has done in *Les Mots et les choses* to analysis; for there *is* a transformational system built into Foucault's conception of the succession of forms of the human sciences, even though Foucault appears not to know that it is there.

In my view, the principal contention of *Les Mots et les choses* is correct and illuminating. The human sciences, as they unfold between the sixteenth and twentieth century, can be characterized in terms of their failure to recognize the extent to which they are each captive of language itself, their failure to see language as a problem. This is not to say that they did not study languages or seek to deal with the more general problem of representation. But Foucault appears to be right in his contention that their at-

titude vis-à-vis language itself was ambiguous. On the one hand, they could not fail to sense that thought was in some way a captive of the language in which it represented its objects to itself for analysis; on the other hand, they all sought to construct value-neutral languages by which to liberate thought from the constrictions of ordinary, or natural, languages. In part, as Foucault points out, the dream of a value-neutral language for the human sciences was inspired by the success of the physical sciences in applying stipulated languages and mathematical protocols to the analysis of their data. And this had an important effect on the development of attitudes within the human sciences with respect to the problem of language in general. It had the effect of concealing to the practitioners of the human sciences the extent to which the very constitution of their field of study was a poetic act, a genuine "making" or "invention" of a domain of inquiry, in which not only specific modes of representation are sanctioned and others excluded, but also the very contents of perception are determined.

A given scientific discipline represents a commitment to a "style" of representation, in the same way that a given genre represents a commitment to a structure of representation by which to figure the contents and relationships obtaining within a finite province of fictional occurrence. Sciences are created by the effort to reduce some area of cognitively problematical experience to comprehension in terms of some area of experience that is considered to be cognitively secured—either by established disciplines or by the ongoing "common sense" of the culture in which the creation is attempted. All systems of knowledge begin, in short, in a metaphorical characterization of something presumed to be unknown in terms of something presumed to be known, or at least familiar. Foucault's characterization of sixteenth-century human sciences represents nothing more than his ascription to those sciences of the mode of metaphor as the method used by them to enmap or encode the world of experience of that time.

Metaphor, whatever else it may be, is characterized by the assertion of a similarity between two objects offering themselves to perception as manifestly different. And the statement " $A = B$ " or " $A$  is  $B$ " signals the apprehension, in the person making it, of both a similarity and a difference between the two objects represented by the symbols on either side of the copula. But any "science" committed to the making up of a complete list of all the similarities that might be conceived to exist among things in the world—as the human sciences in the sixteenth century were, in Foucault's account, committed to do—is necessarily driven, by the logic of the list-making operation itself, to an apprehension of all the differences that might exist among things. The longer the list, the more the fact of differentness presses itself upon reflection. Since the very search for similitudes is inconceivable in the absence of any sense of differentness, the category of differentness is implicitly endowed with just as much authority as the category

of similarity in the science constructed as the solution to the problem of the relations obtaining among things. The multiplication of data in such sciences would inevitably increase the number of things appearing to be different from one another, and thereby strain the capacities of observers to discern the similarities presumed to exist among them. When the list of things resembling one another reached a certain limit, the whole operation would break down; and the fact of the apparent differentness of all things from all other things would assume the status of a primary datum of perception. At this point "science" would have to be charged with quite another task, namely, that of working out the relationships presumed to exist among different things, the only apparent relationship among which would be their existence in the mode of contiguities, i.e., spatial relationships. The dominant trope of sciences projected on this base would be that of metonymy, a word which means literally only "name displacement" but which also connotes a mode of linguistic usage by which the world of appearances is broken down into two orders of being, as in cause-effect or agent-act relationships.

Metonymy is the poetic strategy by which contiguous entities can be reduced to the status of functions of one another, as when the name for a part of a thing is taken for the whole thing, as in the expression "fifty sail" when it is used to signify "fifty ships." The human sciences of the eighteenth century, as described by Foucault, represent little more than epistemological projections of the trope of metonymy. It is such projections that justify the grammarians' search for the "universal grammar," the economists' search for the "true basis of wealth" in either land or gold or some such other element of production or exchange, and the natural historians' search for the essences of organic species in the contemplation of their external attributes. What the practitioners of each of these sciences do, in Foucault's account of them, is to seek the essences of the objects of study in one or another of the parts of the totalities that they investigate. Hence the endless constructions of those tables of attributes, as in Linnaeus's *Taxonomia universalis*, which are meant to reveal finally the "web of relationships" that bind the entities together into an "order of things."

The study of things under the aspect of their existence as wholes made up of discrete parts, which is the true basis of the mechanistic nature of the thought of the age, is ultimately as fated to failure as the study of things under the aspect of their similarity and differentness to one another. The closer the examination, the greater the number of "parts" that might be used to represent the nature of the whole. And debate is bound to break out over which part is the truly distinguishing aspect of the whole and by reference to which the nature of the whole ought to be signified. When one table of attributes is just as plausible as any other, then the world offers itself as a plenum of particulars which are not only all different from one another, but also appear to exist outside one another, not only within a single species



but within any given organism itself. The discovery that things not only differ from one another, but differ internally within themselves during the course of their life cycles, is the basis for that temporalization of the order of things which Foucault ascribes to nineteenth-century consciousness.

According to him, the sciences of life, labor, and language of the nineteenth century proceed on the basis of the discovery of the functional differentiation of parts within the totality and in the apprehension of the mode of Succession as the modality of the relationship between entities on the one side and among different parts of any single entity on the other. But this "grasping together" of the parts of a thing as aspects of a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts, this ascription of wholeness and organic unity to a congeries of elements in a system, is precisely the modality of relationships that is given in language by the trope of *synecdoche*. This trope is the equivalent in poetic usage of the relationship presumed to exist among things by those philosophers who speak about microcosm-macrocosm relationships.

The important point is that Foucault's talk about the human sciences of the nineteenth century as developing within the limits set by the categories of Succession and Analogy, and the secondary categories of functional interdependency and evolution, suggests the following relationship between the sciences of this and those of the preceding century: as metonymic language is to synecdochic language, so the human sciences of the eighteenth century are to the human sciences of the nineteenth century. In other words, Foucault does have both a system of explanation and a theory of the transformation of reason, or science, or consciousness, whether he knows it or will admit it or not. Both the system and the theory belong to a tradition of linguistic historicism which goes back to Vico, and beyond him to the linguistic philosophers of the Renaissance, thence to the orators and rhetoricians of classical Greece and Rome. What Foucault has done is to rediscover the importance of the projective or generational aspect of language, the extent to which it not only "represents" the world of things but also constitutes the modality of the relationships among things by the very act of assuming a posture before them. It was this aspect of language which got lost when "science" was disengaged from "rhetoric" in the seventeenth century, thereby obscuring to science itself an awareness of its own "poetic" nature.

Vico argued that there were four principal tropes, from which all figures of speech derived, and the analysis of which provided the basis for a proper understanding of the cycles through which consciousness passes in its efforts to know a world which always surpassed our capacities to know it *fully*. These four tropes served as the basis of his own theory of the four-stage cycle through which all civilizations passed, from the "age of the gods" through the "age of heroes" to the "age of men" and thence finally to the age of

decadence and dissolution, the age of the famous *ricorso*. The four tropes and their corresponding ages in the life cycle of a civilization were metaphor (the age of the gods), metonymy (the age of heroes), synecdoche (the age of men), and irony (the age of decadence and the *ricorso*).<sup>3</sup>

A similar kind of tropological reduction underlies and sustains Foucault's analysis of the course of the human sciences from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. In fact, we might say that, for Foucault, the human sciences of the twentieth century are characterizable precisely by the *Ironic relationship which they sustain with their objects*. And it can be shown that in fact he views such philosophies and systems of thought as psychoanalysis, existentialism, linguistic analysis, logical atomism, phenomenology, structuralism, and so on—all the major systems of our time—as projections of the trope of irony. Or, at least, so he would characterize them if he understood correctly what he has been about. And his own stance, which he defines as being postmodern, is postironic inasmuch as he desires to lose thought in myth once more.

## VII

It seems safe to predict that the work of Michel Foucault will not attract the ardent interest of the Anglo-American philosophical community. Foucault works in the grand tradition of Continental European philosophy, the tradition of Leibniz, Hegel, Comte, Bergson, and Heidegger, which is to say that he is a metaphysician, however much he may stress his descent from the Positivist convention. Foucault aims at a system capable of explaining *almost* everything, rather than the clarification of technical problems raised by formal logic or the usages of ordinary language. But it is precisely this systematic aspect of Foucault's work which might commend him to the attention of historians, and especially to cultural historians or historians of ideas. For with the successive appearances of six books, Foucault has established himself as a philosopher of history in the "speculative" manner of Vico, Hegel, and Spengler. At the very least, he offers an important interpretation of the evolution of the "formalized" consciousness of Western man since the late Middle Ages. Three of his works—*Folie et déraison*, *Les Mots et les choses*, and *L'Archéologie du savoir*—provide a fundamental reconceptualization of European intellectual history. In these works, Foucault raises the question of whether there is an inner logic in the evolution of the human sciences similar to that which historians have purported to find in the development of their counterparts, the physical sciences.

It should be noted immediately that Foucault does not work within the mainstream of Western historiography or within the conventions of its sub-

branch, the history of ideas. Unlike the conventional historian, who is concerned to clarify and thereby to refamiliarize his readers with the artifacts of past cultures and epochs, Foucault seeks to defamiliarize the phenomena of man, society, and culture which have been rendered all too transparent by a century of study, interpretation, and conceptual overdetermination. In this respect, Foucault represents a continuation of a tradition of historical thought which originates in Romanticism and which was taken up, in a peculiarly self-conscious form, by Nietzsche in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Since historians always deal with a subject matter that is strange, and often exotic, they often assume that their principal aim should be to render that subject matter "familiar" to their readers. What appears strange at first glance must be shown in the course of the narrative to have had sufficient reasons for its occurrence and therefore susceptible to understanding by ordinary informed common sense. Since all things historical are presumed to have had their origins in human thought and practice, it is supposed that a vaguely conceived "human nature" must be capable of recognizing something of itself in the residues of such thought and action appearing as artifacts in the historical record. *Nihil humanum mihi alienum puto*—the humanist's credo and the historian's working assumption converge in a simple faith in the transparency of all historical phenomena. Hence the essentially domesticating effect of most historical writing. By rendering the strange familiar, the historian divests the human world of the mystery in which it comes cloaked by virtue of its antiquity and origination in a different form of life from that taken as "normal" by his readers.

"To render the strange familiar" is of course only one side of that two-fold operation which Novalis, in his famous definition of Romanticism, ascribed to poetry. The other side, "to render the familiar strange," has not in general been regarded as one of the historian's primary tasks, even by those historians who conceive historiography to be an essentially literary art. The great Romantic historians—Chateaubriand, Carlyle, and Michelet—saw the matter differently. The aim of historiography, Michelet said, was "resurrection," to restore to "forgotten voices" their power to speak to living men. But, Michelet argued, resurrection was not to be confused with reconstruction, the sort of thing done by the archaeologist when he pieced together the shattered fragments of a vase in order to restore it to its original form. Resurrection meant penetrating to the deepest recesses of past lives in order to reconstitute them in all their strangeness and mystery as once vital forces, and in such a way as to remind men of the irreducible variety of human life, thereby inspiring in the living a proper humility before and reverence for their predecessors.

Nietzsche spoke in a similar vein in "The Use and Abuse of History," castigating the domesticating effect of academic historiography and urging a

poetic historiography as an antidote to the debilitating "irony" before all things human which "scholarship" engendered. To render the familiar strange, to give to the quotidian the stamp of eternity, to raise a "probably commonplace theme" to the grandeur of a universal melody—these were the highest aims that the historian as poet could aspire to. Spengler took Nietzsche seriously in this regard, asserting that his *Decline of the West* was intended to reveal the fundamental differences between civilizational forms, rather than the similarities which made them instances of generic forms of civilization (an assertion often overlooked by those who have classified Spengler as a Positivist historian in the same tradition as Toynbee). It was not the manner in which modern Western civilization was continuous with its Greek predecessor, but the extent to which it was so disjoined from it, that Spengler wanted to demonstrate. He sought to show how we are isolated *within* our peculiar modalities of experience, so much so that we could not hope to find analogues and models for the solution of the problems facing us, and thereby to enlighten us to the peculiar elements in our own present "situation."

Such a conception of historiography has profound implications for the assessment of the humanistic belief in a "human nature" that is everywhere and always the same, however different its manifestations at different times and places. It brings under question the very notion of a universal *humanitas* on which the historian's wager on his ability ultimately to "understand" anything human is based. And it has interesting implications for the way historians might conceive the task of narrative representation. If the historian's aim is defamiliarization rather than refamiliarization, then his posture before his audience must be fundamentally different from that which he will assume vis-à-vis his subject matter. Before the latter, he will be all sympathy and tolerance, a receiver of messages attuned to their symbolic, rather than their significative, contents; he will be a connoisseur of mysteries and obscurities, those aspects of their poetic content which get lost in translation. Before his audience, however, he will appear as the perverse critic of common sense, the subverter of science and reason, the arrogant purveyor of a "secret wisdom" that reinforces, rather than dissolves, the anxieties of current social existence.

Such a conception of historiography is consistent with the aims of much of contemporary, or at least recent, poetry. In the same way that the modern poet—Hopkins, Yeats, Stevens, Benn, Kafka, Joyce, and even Eliot—sought to return perception to an awareness of the strangeness of ordinary things, some modern historians have worked for the same effect in their depictions of the past. Such was the recommendation of Theodor Lessing's brilliant (and neglected) *Geschichte als Sinngebung der Sinnlosen* and of the whole historiographical effort of that seemingly incomprehensible product of Viennese *Schlachkultur*, Egon Friedell. A similar orientation can be



seen in such a classic of the putatively humanistic historiography as Johann Huizinga's *Waning of the Middle Ages*. Huizinga's interest in the more bizarre, not to say grotesque, manifestations of human nature in the religious life of the late Middle Ages has the effect of distancing us from the noumenal *humanitas* which we are presumed to share with its representative human agents. A similarly alienating affect can be discerned in the work of Huizinga's model, Jacob Burckhardt. Interest in the strange, bizarre, grotesque, and exotic, not in order to reduce it by psychological or sociological "unmaskings" of its seemingly commonplace contents, has the same effect in historiography that Lévi-Strauss achieves in his mandarin-like reflections on the forms of "savage" thought and action.

Unlike his more domesticating counterparts in his field of study, Lévi-Strauss does not introduce the distinction between "savage" and "civilized" minds in order finally to assert the continuities between them. On the contrary, he sets up the distinction between them in order to offer them as mutually exclusive, alternative forms of humanity, attended by the suggestion that the "savage" is the more humane of the options. Lévi-Strauss's method of analysis and explication of primitive societies is defamiliarizing in a twofold sense. On the one hand, he leaves us with a sense of how tragically far removed civilized man is from his savage, and presumably more "human," counterpart; on the other, he leaves us alienated from the modes of thought and comportment that we had formerly valued as evidences of our "civility." We are simultaneously distanced from our savage base and alienated from our civilized superstructure. In the process, the very words that we have customarily used to capture experience for reflection become suspect as possible carriers of genuine "meaning." In the complex analyses of verbal formulas which Lévi-Strauss carries out in his defamiliarizing process, words are no longer conceived to denote a reality lying outside the ambit of their usages. On the contrary, as with Mallarmé, words are conceived to connote a multilayered universe of symbols, the "meaning" of which is conceived to reside in their anaclastic self-reference. Language, in short, becomes music, the structure of which is more significant than any propositional content that might be extracted from it by logical analysis.

It is this interest in defamiliarization that permits Foucault to be classified among the Structuralists, in spite of his denial of any common cause with them. As a matter of fact, we should distinguish between two wings of the Structuralist movement: the positivist, to which we may assign Saussure, Piaget, Goldmann, and the Marxists, such as Althusser and the late Lucien Sebag; and the eschatological, to which Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, and Foucault himself belong. The positivist wing has been concerned with the scientific determination of the structures of consciousness by which men form a conception of the world they inhabit and on the basis of which they contrive modes of praxis for coming to terms with that world. Their concep-

tion of structure is primarily a functionalist, or pragmatic, one. The eschatological wing, by contrast, concentrates on the ways in which structures of consciousness actually conceal the reality of the world and, by that concealment, effectively isolate men within different, not to say mutually exclusive, universes of discourse, thought, and action. The former wing is, we may say, *integrative* in its aim, insofar as it envisages a "structure of structures" by which different modes of thought and practice might be shown to manifest a unified level of human consciousness shared by all men everywhere, whatever cultural differences they might exhibit. The latter wing is ultimately *dispersive*, inasmuch as it leads thought into the interior of a given mode of consciousness, where all of its essential mystery, opaqueness, and particularity are celebrated as evidence of the irreducible variety of human nature. It is for this reason that the eschatological branch of the Structuralist movement often appears to be profoundly antiscientific in its implications and perversely obscurantist in its methods.

As a matter of fact, Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, and Foucault all regard the Positivist form of "science" as little more than a myth, over against which they set their own, ultimately "poetic" conception of a science of the concrete and particular as a humanly beneficial alternative. But this alternative conception of science as poesis exposes them to the dangers of sectarianism. Each of the major representatives of the eschatological branch has attained to the status of a guru, with his own particular style and oracular tone, and with his own dedicated band of followers who receive the doctrines of their leaders as carriers of a "secret wisdom" hidden from the profane eyes of the uninitiated. The eschatological Structuralists, as the label I have given them is meant to imply, deal in epiphanies—not that epiphany of the Word made Flesh which is the supreme insight of their Christian counterparts from St. John the Evangelist to Karl Barth, but rather that of the "Flesh made Word," as taught in the Gospel according to St. Stéphane Mallarmé. They take seriously Mallarmé's conviction that things exist in order to live in books. For them, the whole of human life is to be treated as a "text," the *meaning* of which is nothing but what it *is*. To interpret this text is their aim. But here interpretation does not lead to the discovery of the relationship between the words in the text and the universe of things conceived to stand outside the text and to which the words of the text refer. It means, as Foucault has suggested as the key to the understanding of his method: "transcription" in such a way as to reveal the inner dynamics of the thought processes by which a given representation of the world in words is grounded in poesis. To transform prose into poetry is Foucault's purpose, and thus he is especially interested in showing how all systems of thought in the human sciences can be seen as little more than terminological formalizations of poetic closures with the world of words, rather than with the "things" they purport to represent and explain.

## NOTES

1. *Les Mots et les choses*, translated into English as *The Order of Things: Introduction to the Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1970), pp.42-43. All citations, hereafter in the text, are to this edition.

2. Jean Piaget, *Structuralism* (New York, 1970).

3. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, 1968), pars. 400-410, 443-46. The tropological nature of Structuralist thought appears to have been overlooked by commentators. To be sure, the binary system of interpretation used by Lévi-Strauss is manifestly tropological. All naming-systems, in Lévi-Strauss's view, represent some kind of dialectical resolution of the metaphoric and metonymic poles of linguistic behavior. See, for example, his *Savage Mind* (London, 1966), pp. 205-44. The same dyad is used by Jacques Lacan for decoding dreams. See his "Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious," in *Structuralism*, ed. Jacques Ehrmann (New York, 1966), pp. 101-36. And it is used as a basis for the analysis for literary styles by Roman Jakobson in "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (New York and London, 1960), pp.350-77. The tropes of metaphor and metonymy are used by these thinkers to distinguish between the diachronic and synchronic axes of linguistic usage, permitting them to use language itself as the basis for characterizing different modes of consciousness. The result is a binary theory of consciousness that threatens to dissolve into a dualism. I have argued that Foucault has simply expanded the number of tropes to the conventional quaternary classification worked out by Renaissance rhetoricians, employed by Vico in his *New Science*, and further refined by modern literary theorists such as Kenneth Burke. See, for example, Burke's *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), app. D, "Four Master Tropes," pp.503-17. I am not suggesting an influence of either Vico or Burke on Foucault, only a similarity of approach, although the first edition of Burke's book appeared in 1945. As a matter of fact, the use of the tropes as a basis for the analysis of modes of consciousness is examined by Emile Beneveniste in his "Remarks on the Function of Language in Freudian Theory," in *Problems of General Linguistics* (Coral Gables, 1971), pp.75-76. It is not generally recognized, I might add, how pervasive has been the awareness of the tropes as the basis of nonscientific modes of discourse in "dialectical" philosophy. In my view, Hegel's *Logic* represents little more than a formalization, in Hegel's own terminology, of the tropological dimensions of language; and the famous second half of Marx's chapter on commodities in *Capital* can be understood as an application of the theory of the tropes to the "language" of commodities. Foucault works in this tradition.