

Steiner Responds to Foucault

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Steiner responds to Foucault

Let me comment very briefly on M. Foucault's screed. Neither the tone nor substance of his text would induce one to answer at length.

1. MY POINT ABOUT M. Foucault's uses of Nietzsche and Mallarmé was simple and by no means adverse. In treating them and aspects of their work as crucial to 'modernism,' as decisive in the transformation of the nineteenth-century framework, M. Foucault is treading well-worn paths. This would hardly call for notice were it not that M. Foucault's claims for originality and autonomy of insight are strident throughout.

2. M. FOUCAULT, WHO gives no evidence of any particular interest in Greek and Latin literature, simply reverses my point. It is *his* notion of the invention of the concept of "literature" that I queried. We know very little of the ways in which a Plato or a Cicero regarded their own activities as "writers." But the study of ancient rhetoric and poetics does suggest that the concept of "the literary" had an early and formal substance.

3. THE TERMS TO which M. Foucault objects are all in the *anonymous* translation of his book in the Pantheon edition. Was the translator finally unwilling to take responsibility for the frequent obscurities and verbiage in the original? I do not know. But, as M. Foucault is probably entirely aware, French is one of my first languages and I used the original text as well as the valiant translation in my review.

4. THE USES OF the word and image of "archaeology" in Kant are no recondite topic. At several points, Kant uses the term to discriminate between "contingent" and *a priori* conditionings of perception. But it is Freud's usage which seemed to me much closer to M. Foucault's. No criticism whatever was intended by this suggestion. As Lévi-Strauss has said, the very notion of an "internalized" or "genetic" history of the modes of consciousness is inevitably derivative from Freud, and will reflect Freud's comparison of the historian's or

psychologist's reconstructive probing with that of the archaeologist.

5. THE IDEA THAT grammars, kinship relations and economic structures can be considered together within a larger matrix of symbolic and informational exchange stems from the work of Lévi-Strauss. It is one of the most influential suggestions at work in current anthropology and intellectual history. M. Foucault's idiom thoroughly reflects Lévi-Strauss's pervasive force of suggestion. It is a mere red herring to say that he also draws on Turgot. Of course he does.

6. M. FOUCAULT'S MEMORY seems as defective as are his manners. The two books I referred to are the *Histoire de la folie* (1961) and the *Naissance de la clinique* (1963). I admire both very much and the term 'monograph' has nothing whatever of disparagement even when applied to a book of considerable compass.

7. M. FOUCAULT PRUDENTLY evades the main points in my article. What I suggested was that the notion of *episteme*, central to *Les Mots et les choses*, is closely analogous to more traditional concepts of "framework" and that it strikingly recalls Kuhn's "paradigms." Though Kuhn's model seems far more solidly argued and evidenced than that of the *episteme*, M. Foucault nowhere refers to it. Ditto in regard to the brilliant work done by such scholars as Frances Yates on renaissance conceptual modes. As the Pantheon edition of *The Order of Things* has no index, your readers are at the mercy of M. Foucault's claim that he cites and acknowledges his predecessors. He rarely does so and his ignorance of what has been done in England and America regarding the history of linguistics and of the life-sciences seems to be considerable.

8. M. FOUCAULT'S PHRASE "the other is supposed to have been written by a journalist" is merely scurrilous. Let me touch only on this use of "journalist." I do not have the good or bad fortune of belonging to that profession, but I greatly respect it and owe much to it. That M. Foucault owes much of his current success and elevation to the clamorous support of journalists—interviews in *L'Express*, photographs in fashionable weeklies—is no reproach whatever to his great gifts. It only makes his remark the more puerile.

The tone of M. Foucault's commentary is that of an enraged prima donna. A number of scholars in the natural sciences, in philosophy and in linguistics regard him in that light. I am in a position to know as I received several letters from American academics accusing me of taking far too favourable a view of *The Order of Things!*

Nothing in my review, which was respectful and courteous throughout, which highly praised certain aspects of the book, and which ended on a note of gratitude for the vivid intensity of M. Foucault's thought, corresponds to M. Foucault's rejoinder. The ugly spectacle which emerges from that rejoinder is entirely of M. Foucault's making. Let the reader go back to the actual text—28th February 1971—and he will judge for himself.

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