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On Foucault's idea of an epistemic shift in the 17th century and its significance for Baroque scholarship¹

Abstract

In this article it is argued that the significance of Foucault's view of history does not lie so much in the concept of *epistemes*, as in his emphasis on radical discontinuity as a historiographic principle. His programme also challenges literary history, the question *inter alia* being how discontinuity affects periodization. This question is situated among other questions of periodization. It is argued that in Foucault's view the *a priori* of dispersion and the construction of a vertical series of series should govern periodization.

Three fruitful implications of Foucault's views for Baroque scholarship are discussed in the end, viz. that it allows the colligation of phenomena up till now viewed in isolation, the reinterpretation of phenomena already accounted for and the extension of our knowledge of the cultural matrix of the Baroque.

1. Introductory Remarks

... the great problem presented by ... historical analyses is not how continuities are established, how a single pattern is formed and preserved, how for so many different, successive minds there is a single horizon, what mode of action and what substructure is implied by the interplay of transmissions, resumptions, disappearances, and repetitions, how the origin may extend its sway well beyond

1. This is an expanded version of a paper read at the *6. Jahrestreffen des Internationalen Arbeitskreises für Barockliteratur*, Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel, Federal Republic of Germany, 22 to 25 August, 1988. The German [lecture version will appear in the proceedings of that congress.

itself to that conclusion that is never given – the problem is no longer one of tradition, of tracing a line, but one of division, of limits; it is no longer one of lasting foundations, but one of transformations that serve as new foundations, the rebuilding of foundations. (Foucault, 1972:5)²

With these words Michel Foucault sums up the programme of a new type of historiography in the introduction to his *Archeology of Knowledge*. As far as its domain of objects is concerned, the new historiography is to be roughly identical with traditional disciplines like history of ideas, history of science, history of philosophy and history of literature. But it is to differ dramatically from its predecessors with respect to the status which the concept of discontinuity is to occupy both in its methodological apparatus, and in the actual analyses carried out in the light of that methodology. As Foucault puts it, in those older disciplines the concept of discontinuity bears the “the stigma of temporal dislocation that it was the historian’s task to remove from history” (AK:8). Discontinuity is, however, destined to become the pivotal concept of new style historiography.

In keeping with this programme, the central cluster of methodological issues which Foucault attempts to settle in the *Archeology of Knowledge* is devoted to questions of how to conceptually overcome the concealment of discontinuity which, as he sees it, is a characteristic feature of traditional historiography, how to integrate the concept of discontinuity into the discourse of the history of science, how to make that concept operational, “how is one to specify the different concepts that enable us to conceive of discontinuity (threshold, rupture, break, mutation, transformation)?” (AK:5).

Foucault’s first major contribution to the history of science, *The Order of Things*, (1966)³ was published three years prior to *Archeology of Knowledge*, but it demands to be read with constant reference to the methodological positions spelled out explicitly in the later work. In *The Order of Things* Foucault attempts to trace discontinuity in the human sciences (*sciences humaines*)⁴ as they emerged in the course of the 17th century, a cluster of disciplines which, he

2. Michel Foucault. *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972). Henceforth quoted as AK.

3. Michel Foucault. *Les Mots et les choses. Une Archéologie des sciences humaines* (1966). Henceforth quoted as MC. English translation: *The Order of Things* (1970). Henceforth quoted as OT.

4. Foucault’s notion of *sciences humaines*, it should be kept in mind, is broader than German *Geisteswissenschaften*.

insists, has so far been viewed almost exclusively with an eye on continuity, with discontinuity being relegated to the status of the other of continuity, to the status, that is, of something which has to be shunned. In the detailed analyses of *The Order of Things* Foucault, true to his methodological programme, is not so much concerned with the results produced and accumulated by the human sciences in the course of nearly 400 years of enormous productivity, as with the changing rules which have informed scientific discourse during those centuries, with the rules, which have provided it with structure and function, and which have secured its recognition as scientific discourse. He is equally concerned with the speaking subject as that is inscribed into the different forms of scientific discourse, with the different positions which it has occupied, and with the different roles it has been assigned in different forms of scientific discourse.

In the introductory section of *The Order of Things*, Foucault has a highly compact sketch of the formation rules of 16th century (pre)-scientific discourse. The primary purpose of this sketch of 16th century *episteme*, Foucault's term for the ensemble of the formation rules of a type of discourse, is undoubtedly to serve as a foil for the analysis of 17th and 18th century *classical episteme*, the episteme which marks the beginnings of modern science. That, in any case, is the impression one is likely to get from reading *The Order of Things* without reference to the *Archeology of Knowledge*. If, however, one relates the contrastive analyses of 16th and mid-17th century episteme to the methodological programme of the later work it becomes clear that the transition from 16th century episteme of repetition, as Foucault calls it, to 17th century episteme of representation, is meant to be seen as an instance of discontinuity, as one of the major ruptures in European cultural history which, the study of *Archeology of Knowledge* suggests, are Foucault's major concern. The analyses of *The Order of Things*, in other words, need to be read as a first harvest of the programme of *thinking discontinuity* in the human sciences, as it is outlined in the *Archeology of Knowledge*.

Although one currently encounters Foucault's concept of episteme quite frequently in literary scholarship, its programmatic association with the concept of discontinuity which provides it with its cutting edge, is rarely if ever given due consideration. More often than not the concept of episteme is used as a handy catch-all term for the set of epistemological conventions of a particular period. That, no doubt, is one of the uses sanctioned by Foucault's texts. Its essential role, however, of making the thinking of discontinuity operational is rarely stressed.

Literary historians concerned with Renaissance and Baroque literature, and literary theorists concerned with period concepts, if I am not mistaken, so far

have not taken up the challenge to their methodological procedures which is contained in the conjunction of the concepts of episteme and discontinuity. That challenge might be stated as follows: have we perhaps too readily assumed that an historical order of the texts of a culture can only be construed by means of making use of the ordering potential of the concept of continuity in an attempt at constructing the whole to which the texts of that culture are to be related? Might it be possible that in explicating terms such as *Renaissance*, *Baroque* or *Mannerism* we inadvertently conceal the discontinuous features of the period under consideration, treating discontinuity as something “which, through analysis, had to be rearranged, reduced, effaced, in order to reveal the continuity of events” (AK:8).

In taking up this challenge we need not worry about the fact that Foucault himself was primarily interested in the development of the *sciences humaines*, rather than in that of literature or the arts. *The Order of Things* was indeed primarily intended as a contribution to the history of the human sciences. But the very fact that Foucault chose to exemplify both the episteme of the 16th century and its crisis, and that of the 17th and 18th century, by means of detailed analyses of works of literature and of painting suggests that he, too, viewed the epistemes analyzed and the ruptures separating them as broadly cultural phenomenā rather than phenomena which can only be identified in the human sciences. Foucault’s analyses of Cervantes’ *Don Quichot* and Velasquez’ *Las Meninas* for the purpose of demonstrating the fruitfulness of his concept of episteme, and his attempts at tracing the survival of certain elements of 16th century episteme in the works of Hölderlin, Mallarmé and Artaud entitle us, I believe, to the assumption that the epistemes analyzed and the ruptures separating them are meant to be understood as affecting the production of meaning not only in the human sciences but also in literature and visual arts, as well as in the theoretical reflection accompanying that production and its reception.

In what follows I shall first make an – admittedly somewhat speculative – attempt to find out more about the interest in discontinuity, and about the plausibility of that interest, which informs both the historical analyses of *The Order of Things* and the methodological reflections of the *Archeology of Knowledge*. Subsequently I shall turn to the question hinted at in the title of this paper: what is the possible significance for the historiography of Renaissance and Baroque literature of Foucault’s claim that there occurred an epistemic rupture towards the middle of the 17th century?

2. On Foucault’s Interest in Discontinuity

There can be little doubt that the tendency to treat the concepts of history and continuity as nearly equivalent, which appears to be inherent in our intellectual

culture, quite often induces us to keep on redescribing apparent instances of historical rupture and discontinuity until they, too, look like innocuous members of continuous chains of events. It would, however, be a serious misunderstanding of Foucault's historiographical programme if one were to view it only as yet another attempt at "savings the phenomena" – in this particular case phenomena of historical rupture and discontinuity – from being distorted and camouflaged as a result of being described by means of an unsuited kind of discourse – in this instance a form of historiographical discourse which is wedded to the idea of continuity. An attempt at likening Foucault's historiographical programme to Thomas S. Kuhn's (1970:23ff.) suggestion that the history of science should be written in terms of an alternation of normal phases and revolutionary phases, separated by rather sudden paradigm changes,⁵ would likewise miss an essential point of Foucault's programme. True, the impetus to write the history of the human sciences "true to fact", and therefore with due consideration being given to phenomena of discontinuity and rupture is present both in the programme of the *The Archeology of Knowledge* and in the analyses of *The Order of Things*, as indeed it should for the sake of empirical content. But while Kuhn's main purpose might be said to have been to demonstrate that the sciences do not develop cumulatively and under the unwavering guidance of a never-changing conception of rationality, but, instead, proceed in unpredictable revolutionary leaps, the mainspring of Foucault's interest in discontinuity would appear to have been to determine the changing positions which the speaking subject is assigned by these shifts. For Kuhn, despite the fact that standards of rationality are themselves understood to be subject to historical change, it is still the speaking subject which is master of these changes. For Foucault, by contrast, the very idea of the autonomy of the speaking subject which would still seem to inform Kuhn's analyses, is but a concomitant of a particular episteme. Adapting a felicitous formulation of Sigmund Freud one might want to claim that with Foucault and – in contrast to Kuhn – the speaking subject is no longer the master in his own epistemic house. And that, it is important to note, is as true of the speaking subject of the scientific discourse which is to be analyzed as of that of the historiographical discourse employed in the analysis of the development of scientific discourse. This view of the ephemeral place of the speaking subject in the analyzing as well as the analyzed discourse finds expression in Foucault's emphatic rejection of any attempt at grounding the history of science on an action – or a subject-theoretical foundation: "If there is one approach that I do reject, however, it is that (one might call it, broadly speaking, the phenomenological approach) which gives absolute priority to the observing subject, which attributes a constituent

5. An attempt at applying Kuhn's suggestions to the history of literary scholarship can be found in Kurt Bayerts (1981).

role to an act, which places its own point of view at the origin of all historicity – which, in short, leads to a transcendental consciousness. It seems to me that the historical analysis of scientific discourse should, in the last resort, be subject, not to a theory of the knowing subject, but rather to a theory of discursive practice.” (OT:xiv; not in MC.)

Historiography as “the locus of uninterrupted continuities” therefore must be deprived of its traditional role of offering “a privileged shelter for the sovereignty of consciousness” (AK:12). Continuous history comes into being, Foucault argues, as the “indispensable correlative of the founding function of subject” (AK:12), a role to which the latter has no title:

Making historical analysis the discourse of the continuous and making human consciousness the original subject of all historical development and all action are the two sides of the same system of thought. In this system, time is conceived in terms of totalization and revolutions are never more than moments of consciousness. (AK:12)

The usurped founding role of the subject is to be challenged by raising the question “whether the subjects responsible for scientific discourse are not determined in their situation, their function, their perceptive capacity, and their practical possibilities by conditions that dominate and even overwhelm them” (OT:xiv; not in MC). The answer to this questions is to be given by a theory of discursive practice which has as its prime task to permit describing scientific discourse “from the point of view of the rules that come into play in the very existence of such discourse,” rather than “from the point of view of the individuals who are speaking” (OT:xiv; not in MC). The purpose of this formulation is clearly to ward off any suggestion that scientific discourse – and that also goes for the discourse of the history of science – might have its origin in the prior intentions or the positing acts of the speaking subject or in the consensus of a plurality of speaking subjects. Instead, those rules, as Foucaults observes elsewhere, have their origin in a “positive unconscious of knowledge,” i.e. they are located on a level “that eludes the consciousness of the scientist and yet is part of scientific discourse,” (OT:xi; not in MC). The level of knowledge aimed at by the envisaged theory, and thus the level on which the analyses of *The Order of Things* must be assumed to be located, Foucault identifies as the “archeological” level of knowledge, in contrast to the epistemological level on which, in his view, the rejected action- and subject-theoretical models of scientific discourse are located.

In this fashion the speaking subject is demoted from the status of an originator to that of an epiphenomenon of scientific discourse. In keeping with this programme the analyses of *The Order of Things* focus on the rules of three

discontinuous forms of scientific discourse. In each the speaking subject is inscribed in a different fashion, i.e. in each it is assigned a different position and a different function. The analysis of these three forms of scientific discourse obviously has to employ its own type of science-historical discourse which thus functions like a medium of reflection for those other forms. But the rules of that meta-discourse which, in a sense, “constitutes” discontinuity just as traditional meta-discourse used to “constitute” continuity, are not explicitly discussed in *The Order of Things*. That becomes the task of the methodological reflections of the *Archeology of Knowledge*, at least to the extent that the latter work deals with the paradox that the concept of discontinuity is both an “instrument and an object of research”, and that it “divides up the field of which it is the effect” (AK:9): once again a formulation which is carefully crafted in such a way that the instrument of the production of knowledge and the object of that production can be seen as having originated contemporaneously. The message to be conveyed is clearly that just as the speaking subject of the scientific discourse analyzed has no title to the claim of a founding role, the speaking subject of the analyzing historiographical discourse does not possess such a title either. Treating the speaking subjects of both types of discourse in analogous fashion is only a matter of being consistent. But since the analyses of *The Order of Things* devoted to studying the discontinuously changing rules which made discourse “coherent and true in general”, and gave it, at the time it was written and accepted, “value and practical application as scientific discourse” (OT:xiv, not in MC), the question cannot be avoided which are the rules which provide Foucault’s own science-historical discourse with *value and practical application as scientific discourse*, and what its value and practical application consists in. Foucault briefly touches on this issue in the concluding chapter of the *Archeology of Knowledge*, but, not surprisingly perhaps, cannot justify the form of his own historical discourse except by insisting on its facticity:

... it may turn out that archeology is the name given to a part of our contemporary theoretical conjuncture. Whether this conjuncture is giving rise to an individualizable discipline, whose individual characteristics and overall limits are being outlined here, or whether it is giving rise to a set of problems whose present coherence does not mean that it will not be taken up later elsewhere, in a different way, at a higher level, or using different methods, I am in no position at the moment to decide. And, to tell you the truth, it is probably not up to me to decide. *I accept that my discourse may disappear with the figure that has borne it so far.* (AK:208; Italics BFS.)

Reinhart Kosellek, a German historian, once observed “daß jeder Darstellungsform auch eine bestimmte Erfahrung von geschichtlicher Wirklichkeit zugrunde liegt, die in die dargestellte Geschichte eingeht,” (Kosellek, 1982:11). Assuming that we are indeed entitled to perceive such a

link between a person's experience of historical reality, and the manner in which he chooses to represent that reality, we may be entitled to read this passage with an eye to locating the point of origin of Foucault's interest in discontinuity. The speaking subject of these lines – the "author" Michel Foucault⁶ – compares the facticity of his historical discourse to the facticity of his own death, and in accepting both is compelled to reject the traditional role of the construction of continuity, namely that of masking that twofold facticity. The assumption of such an "endeëtic" (see Koppe, 1977:48ff.) justification of the interest in discontinuity, as one could call it, a justification which traces that interest to certain needs, is, however, not only suggested by Foucault's own texts.⁷ It can also be seen as a programmatic counter-move to the more familiar juncture of an experience of meaningfulness and of historical continuity which, as Michael Baumgartner has shown in his study entitled *Kontinuität und Geschichte* (1972), has traditionally provided the transcendental underpinning of narrative historiography. Foucault's juncture of a twofold facticity – and thus unavailability – of discourse and death would then have to be read as a decisive rejection of the consolations offered by the traditional juncture.

On this interpretation the decision for or against Foucault's approach to historiography is ultimately an existential one: whether one opts for continuity or for discontinuity as a transcendental *a priori* underpinning of historiography will ultimately depend on one's understanding of what it means for a human being to live a life. But even if it should turn out that an *endeëtic* interpretation both of the traditional interest in continuity and of Foucault's interest in discontinuity is misguided, or if one decides against sharing Foucault's particular interest in discontinuity, regardless of how it might be argued for, the question that would remain to be confronted by the literary historian would be this: what,

6. On Foucault's view on the concept of the *author* of a text, see Foucault (1970(b)).

7. See e.g. the concluding paragraph of the *Archéologie du Savoir*:

Ils ont eu sans doute assez de mal à reconnaître que leur histoire, leur économie, leurs pratiques sociales, la langue qu'ils parlent, la mythologie de leurs ancêtres, les fables même qu'on leur racontait dans leur enfance, obéissent à des règles qui ne sont pas toutes données à leur conscience; ils ne souhaitent guère qu'on les dépossède, en outre et par surcroît, de ce discours où ils veulent pouvoir immédiatement, sans distance, ce qu'ils pensent, croient ou imaginent; ils préféreraient nier que le discours soit une pratique complexe et différenciée, obéissant à des règles et à des transformations analysables, plutôt que d'être privés de cette tendre certitude, si consolante, de pouvoir changer, sinon le monde, sinon la vie, du moins leur 'sens' par la seule fraîcheur d'une parole qui ne viendrait que d'eux-mêmes, et demeurerait au plus près de la source, indéfiniment ... (p. 274f.)

in comparison to more traditional approaches, is the yield of an approach to the history of culture which, as Foucault puts it, refuses to search for “the overall form of a civilization, the principle – material or spiritual – of a society, the significance common to all the phenomena of a period, the law that accounts for their cohesion – what is called metaphorically the ‘face’ of a period” (AK:9), and which, instead, aims “only” to deploy “the space of a dispersion” (AK:10). Foucault’s programme, in other words, remains a challenge to literary historiography, even if one is unwilling to accept its transcendental and its anthropological premises.

3. Periodization, discontinuity and the construction of series of series

Methodological reflections on the problem of periodization usually focus on two partly overlapping groups of issues. The first group is mainly concerned with problems of definition and involves questions like: what kind of concepts – logically speaking – are concepts like *Renaissance* or *Baroque*? How are such concepts to be defined, how are they to be explicated? The answers which have been given to these questions to date involve attempts at construing concepts like these as class concepts, as ideal types or as (historical) individual names, and, depending on one’s decision about the kind of concept we are concerned with, the strategies for fixing the meaning of these concepts involve definitions on the basis of equivalences, partial definitions, ideal-typical constructions or explications.⁸ The second group of issues is mainly concerned with object-theoretical questions, i.e. with questions about the kind of properties and the kind of relations between properties which need to be specified in an attempt at giving contour to a particular period concept. Here we are, in other words, explicitly or implicitly concerned with the question of how to specify the model which is to permit us to map the period under consideration. One of the issues of this group which suggests itself with particular urgency involves the question of how to place the boundaries of a particular period, not only in a chronological sense, but also in the sense of a separation of the relevant from the irrelevant elements of the description. Here the possible solutions range from the option of defining a period concept (minimally) as a style concept to that of defining it (maximally) as a culture concept. As far as the kind of relations between properties are concerned, which are to be specified, the possibilities range from simple conjunctive listings of defining features in the form of definitions based on equivalencies, partial definitions or ideal types, to the construal of complex systemic models which, in addition to listing the

8. For a discussion of various types of concepts in the cultural sciences see e.g. Tadeusz Pawlowski 1980. *Begriffsbildung und Definition*. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter. (Sammlung Göschen. Vol. 2213.)

defining features of a period, are expected to specify causal and/or functional relations holding between the relevant properties. The varying answers given to the questions of both sets of issues provide the often vastly diverging frames of reference which serve to generate hypotheses about a particular period, and the criteria for testing those hypotheses.

Foucault's pronouncements on issues of periodization in his *Archeology of Knowledge* all address issues belonging to the second group. They are directed polemically against a type of historical construction which is dismissed as "global history". It involves the – misguided – attempt at determining "the overall form of a civilization, the principle – material or spiritual – of a society, the significance common to all the phenomena of a period, the law that accounts for their cohesion" (AK:9). Global history in this sense is to be replaced by what Foucault calls "general history" (AK:9), a construal which no longer proceeds from the assumption that "one and the same form of historicity operates upon economic structures, social institutions and customs, the inertia of mental attitudes, technological practice, political behaviour, and subjects them all to the same type of transformation" (AK:10).

Attempting to locate the pivotal concept of general history as understood by Foucault, one soon chafes across the concept of the *series*, albeit, as so often with this *author*, nestled in a whole cluster of synonyms which hinders rather than helps precision. General history as envisaged by Foucault is to challenge the principle of cohesion of global history by foregrounding "the series, divisions, limits, differences of level, shifts, chronological specificities, particular forms of rehandling (sic!), possible types of relation" (AK:10) of the period under consideration. Everything placed together synoptically by global history is now to be dispersed into various series. But the purpose of that dispersion is not, as Foucault insists, a multitude of unrelated, series-specific histories, but a series of series. And the question which needs to be asked in construing that series of series is "what form of relation may be legitimately described between these different series; what vertical system they are capable of forming; what interplay of correlation and dominance exists between them" (AK:10).

It is important not to see only old wine in new bottles in this programme of a general history, despite the fact that apparently at the end of the day what has previously been dispersed in the space of dispersion of general history is eventually to be integrated into overall *tableaux* (AK:10),⁹ and what had previously been distributed over a number of heterogeneous series is eventually

9. The English translation of *tableaux* by *tables* is rather unfortunate.

to be integrated into a higher order series of series. The programme of an historiography in the form of a construction of a series of series, which was first articulated during the final days of Russian Formalism and was further developed by the Prague Structuralists is characterized, it should not be overlooked, by an analysis on two levels, for which there is no equivalent in traditional period constructions. As can be gleaned e.g. from H.P.H. Teesing's study *Das Problem der Perioden in der Literaturgeschichte* (1949), despite its age still one of the most readable monographs on the problem of periodization, the traditional manner of viewing a period is in terms of the relation of a whole to its parts: "... jeder Teil und jede Teilfunktion [ist] vom Ganzen her bedingt und folglich nur vom Ganzen her verständlich ..." (Teesing, 1949: 55). This, it should be noted, is a statement about the conditions of the possibility of understanding a period, rather than an empirically verifiable or falsifiable statement. The part-whole relation, in other words, as it is put to use in Teesing's analyses thus can be said to function as a formal *a priori* of the construction of a period. In the case of the construction of a series of series as proposed by Foucault's idea of a general history, there are, as it were, two such *a priori*s. There is first the formal *a priori* underlying the demand that the data available be distributed in a space of dispersion. This procedure, we recall, leads to the construction of multiple series, each characterized by its own form of continuity or discontinuity, its own type of elements amenable to serial arrangement, and its own characteristic temporal extension. Only once this first formal *a priori* has done its work, so to speak, of dispersion and serialization, can the second *a priori* which involves the construction of a vertical system, i.e. of a series of series, be brought into play. As a consequence of this two-step construction a period which global history tends to view as a cohesive totality is dissolved by general history into its constituent series, and the very concept of a period or an epoch loses its holistic character.

Instead of homogeneous totalities there will now be at most especially noticeable articulations of the historical process brought about by close temporal proximity of hiatuses in several different series of the tableau under construction. The most significant methodological difference between the procedures of global and of general history with regard to the definition of period concepts must thus be seen to lie in the priority given by the latter to the construction of the series over that of series of series. And whereas the formal *a priori* of the part-whole ultimately leads to the notion of a period as an entity on the order of a homogeneous totality, of an organic whole, the formal *a priori* of the series of series as understood by Foucault can be seen to serve as barrier to such premature organicism. Foucault's choice of the term *tableau* with its connotation of artificiality, and its insistence on the constructional nature of the object which is represented by that tableau, may in fact be the result of a careful attempt at avoiding even the faintest suggestion of organic unity.

In the light of this programme of a general history, Foucault's claim about an epistemic rupture having taken place during the first half of the 17th century can obviously not be read as an attempt at delineating or defining the Baroque in competition with other available attempts at definition. In accordance with this programme Foucault starts out by isolating an individual series. In this particular case it is the *epistemic* series which has as its constituent elements various discursive formations in the sense of sets of conditions of the possibility of knowledge, of *epistemes*, in Foucault's terminology. In assembling this series Foucault can be seen to follow the method outlined by Descartes, his crown witness for the "classical" episteme of the later 17th century, in the *Regulae ad Directionem Ingenii* (1701): a series is to be set up in such a way that "its first term is a nature that we may intuit independently of any other nature; and in which the other terms are established according to increasing differences" (OT:53). For the series of epistemes analyzed in *The Order of Things* it is the episteme of the 16th century in which the category of similarity is of fundamental importance, which serves to provide that "first point" in view of which the other points are to be established according to increasing differences: first the classical episteme based on identity and difference, and then the 19th century episteme in which the role of the subject and its history come into play for the first time. In the presentation of the epistemic series in *The Order of Things* the option of assembling a tableau of a series of series, of delineating a vertical system is not expressly taken up, unless one wants to consider a few occasional remarks about, among others, the history of medicine as hints in that direction.

The discontinuity of the epistemic series which manifests itself in the abrupt transitions from one episteme to another is thus, like that of any other series, initially of a methodological nature. Just as continuity, as Baumgartner has shown, functions as the formal *a priori* of narrative historiography, discontinuity plays an analogous role for the kind of historiography Foucault has in mind. Foucault is aware of this methodological role of the concept of continuity as is evidenced by his already quoted observation that the concept of discontinuity is at the same time an instrument and an object of investigation. The same, incidentally, would seem to apply to the concept of continuity as employed by traditional narrative historiography. General history as envisaged by Foucault thus can be said to formally meet the interest in discontinuity analyzed above. In the case of the epistemic series as Foucault construes it in *The Order of Things* a material aspect is added. The discontinuous character of the series is to be viewed as not only resulting from methodological considerations; it is to be understood as an inherent property of the epistemic series. Foucault, in other words, insists on the empiricity of the discontinuity which he diagnoses in the epistemic series. It is, in his view, the law of this particular series, the type of relations by which it is characterized.

What turns the epistemic series into a series, the feature which allows integrating its elements into a series, is the concept of similarity. As he indicated in *The Order of Things* Foucault wanted to write “a history of resemblance” (OT:xxiv), a history, that is, of the changing conditions for discovering resemblances between objects. What turns this history into a discontinuous one are radically changing constraints on discovering similarity, and radically changing discursive practises which take place under the impact of one or the other constraint. The “first point” of the epistemic series, the episteme of the 16th century which, as Foucault describes it, knows of no constraints to discovering similarity, is replaced by the severely restricted *classical* episteme of the 17th century which only permits the comparison of measure and the comparison of order (OT:53); it, in turn, is replaced by the even more restricted episteme of the 19th century in which the limited reach of the historical subject becomes the decisive constraint on discovering similarity.

4. On Foucault’s claim of an epistemic rupture in the 17th century and its significance for literary historiography

What is the significance of Foucault’s construction of a discontinuous epistemic series for our understanding of 16th and 17th century literature? And what is its contribution to the problem of the periodizing of the literature of those centuries?

There is, first, the general proposal to construe the history of literature as one of a series of series or possibly even as a series of series which in turn might be an element in a higher order series of series. Such an approach to 16th and 17th century literature would depart radically from more traditional attempts at periodization. The first step to be taken would consist in tracing the characteristic profile of each series, and only the second step in constructing the *vertical* system of the series of series. The idea of an overall continuity and cohesion of a period would thus no longer form the point of departure of analysis, and the possibility that the series studied lack continuity and the series of series lack coherence would no longer be a cause for concern. Looked at from the vantage point of Foucault’s *general* history, *global* history would in fact appear as a special case characterized by the fact that the space of dispersion resulting from the first phase of the analysis proves amenable to far-reaching reintegration in the second phase of constructing a series of series. Such might be the case when a complex development proves capable of being narrated in the manner of narrative historiography.

More specifically, Foucault’s distinction between a 16th century episteme based on the notion of unrestricted similarity, and a 17th and 18th century episteme based on the opposition of similarity and difference grounded in the concepts

of order and measure (OT:82ff.) allows for “colligating”¹⁰ a great number of phenomena which so far has resisted grouping together in one series. Resemblance, as Foucault points out, had “largely guided exegesis and the interpretation of texts; it was resemblance that organized the play of symbols, made possible knowledge of things visible and invisible, and controlled the art of representing them” (OT:17). The episteme of resemblance can in fact be seen “at work” not only in the striking recurrence of concepts like *aemulatio*, *convenientia*, *analogia* of *sympathia*. The doctrine of signatures as it figures not only in emblematics and the art of the *impresa* but also in alchemy, astrology, plant lore, medicine and other forms of knowledge, the doctrine of correspondences, a poetics taking its cues from the concept of *imitatio* which obtains new contours before the backdrop of the episteme of resemblance, the macrocosm-microcosm doctrine, the Neoplatonic doctrine of love, the perception of nature as a book, a manuscript, to name but a few, can all be seen to presuppose the “historical *a priori*” (AK:126f.) of the episteme of resemblance.

The *classical* episteme of the 17th century, by contrast, severely restricts the role of resemblance, and the possibilities of gaining knowledge by discovering similarities. Knowledge is now no longer produced by means of creating concatenations of similar things, but by counterbalancing resemblance by difference, and by establishing hierarchically structured taxonomies on the basis of similarity and difference.

According to Foucault the discursive practices of both epistemes are mutually exclusive in the sciences. In literature and the visual arts, however, the transition from one to the other kind of episteme apparently resulted in characteristic ambiguities at the surfaces of the texts produced: “The age of resemblance is drawing to a close. It is leaving nothing behind it but games ... it is the privileged age of *trompe-l'oeil* painting, of the comic illusion, of the play that duplicates itself by representing another play, of the *quid pro quo*, of dreams and visions; ... it is the age in which the poetic dimension of language is defined by metaphor, simile, and allegory.” (OT:51.) Foucault here somewhat loosely speaks of the age in which metaphors, simile, and allegory define the poetic dimension of language; what is referring to is the fact that under the aegis of the classical episteme there is a growing awareness that we are *only* dealing with comparisons, metaphors or allegories whereas, under the aegis of the episteme of resemblance, we were left to believe that we were dealing with the things themselves. Thus in the subscriptions of a number of 17th century

10. On the historian's activity as one of *colligating* data see Walsh (1967:59ff.).

“realistic” Dutch emblem books we all of a sudden come across frequent hints that in the accompanying *pictura* the *sensus moralis* is “only” represented metaphorically. (See Scholz, 1984:73-106.) I.e. there is an implicit suggestion that the *sensus moralis* must not be considered as a *sensus rerum* which can directly be read off the pages of the *liber naturae* written by the hand of God, but as the product of a human capability of seeing similarities, and of articulating this kind of perception by means of metaphorical comparisons. The idea of a divinely created *mundus symbolicus* which was a concomitant of the episteme of resemblance, has given way to a perception of the world which, while it still uses the world as a source for metaphors for representing moral concepts, no longer insists on the divine *fiat* as the ultimate cause of the possibility of drawing such comparisons.

Foucault’s distinction of two types of episteme thus not only allows for colligating phenomena which so far could not be grouped together, perhaps a rather ironical result of an approach to the history of the human sciences aimed at demonstrating the demise of the episteme of resemblance. It also calls for the reinterpretation of phenomena already accounted for. Thus Albrecht Schöne (1968:29f.) a number of years ago proposed that the question *Credimus? An vanum reputamus?* raised by Barthélemy Aneau with regard to the relation of the emblematic *pictura* and its *sensus moralis* should be understood as an expression of a widespread doubt about the Glaubwürdigkeit der *res picta*, and he tried to account for this presumed doubt in terms of a parting of ways of the *Wahrheitsgehalt* of what is represented – e.g. the Phoenix rising from the ashes – and of what is intended – e.g. a spiritual lesson about the resurrection. As can easily be seen we are once again, as in the case of the “realist” emblems, dealing with a text informed by the classical episteme which insists on a disjunction of identity and difference, and which subsequently no longer permits seeing objects as signatures of divine truths. What characterizes Aneau’s situation is not that as a result of the doubting *Credimus?* the Phoenix loses its *Wahrheitsgehalt* which is now reserved “nur noch dem durch ihn bedeuteten Gott als dem wahren und einzigen Phönix”; if we follow Foucault’s line of thinking we would have to say instead that under the aegis of the classical episteme the Phoenix rising from the ashes can only serve as a metaphor but no longer as a signature of divine resurrection.

And finally – though this should not be understood in a limiting sense – one might use Foucault’s distinction of two epistemes as elements of a yet to be established “matrix” of 16th and 17th century cultural production. Assuming that a period concept like that of the Baroque can best be defined by means of a whole series of partial definitions, one can treat both epistemes identified by Foucault as distinctive features which are either to be found in combination or

in alternation in individual texts and in groups of texts of the 17th century. They are to be found in combination in Cervantes' *Don Quichot*, Foucault's crown witness for his claim that the advent of classical episteme caused a crisis of discursive praxis; they are found in alternation in emblem books like Michael Maier's *Atalanta Fugiens* (1617) and Roemer Visscher's *Sinnepoppen* (1641), or in texts belonging to different genres but dealing with similar objects, like Benedictus van Haeften's *Schola Cordis* (1635) and William Harvey's *De Motu cordis et sanguinis* (1628). In Michael Maier's *Atalanta Fugiens*, undoubtedly the most accomplished example of 17th century alchemical emblematics, as in Benedictus van Haeften's *Schola Cordis*, an outstanding example of 17th century heart emblematics, there is clear evidence of the episteme of resemblance in the form of the doctrine of signatures. The commentaries accompanying the Michael Maier's emblematic *picturae* and the lessons on the significance of the heart in Van Haeften's devotional work both derive the evidence for the knowledge adduced from treating the objects represented as signatures for concepts originating in a divine *fiat*. In the *Sinnepoppen*, by contrast, as already mentioned, we encounter frequent assurances that we are only looking at (visually realized) metaphors, and that consequently what is being said should be understood metaphorically only. Here it is the *pictura* as such, rather than the *res picta* which serves as the point of departure for the description. And while the similarities pointed out in the *Atalanta Fugiens* are *a deo* as a matter of course, those pointed out in the *Sinnepoppen* owe their metaphorical *signifiés* only to human ingenuity. In William Harvey's *De motu cordis et sanguinis*, finally, the heart is an object which, under the aegis of classical episteme, needs to be studied with an eye to its similarities and differences to a mechanical pump, while in Van Haeften's *Schola Cordis*, produced at about the same time, but under the aegis of an older episteme, the heart is still a text which needs to be read in an attempt at finding an answer to the question about the salvation of the soul.¹¹

It would be a rewarding effort, I believe, to scan the textual production of the 17th century with an eye to the question about the episteme which is in force in each text. The result to be expected from such an undertaking would in all likelihood be that each text studied could be subsumed under one of three headings: it would have to be assigned to one or the other episteme, or it would belong to a group of texts which are characterized by the fact that they display the transition from the episteme of resemblance to that of identity and difference, by a shift, that is, in discursive practice. If it should turn out that we are indeed always confronted with one of these three possibilities – and it is

11. See B.F. Scholz, *Het mensenhart als res significans en als res picta in Benedictus van Haeften's Schola Cordis* (Antwerpen, 1629). *Spiegel der Letteren* (forthcoming).

difficult to imagine any other possibilities in the 17th century – we would still not have at our disposal a combination of features which would allow us to define the concept of the Baroque by means of an equivalence of *definiens* and *definiendum*, but we would have an additional feature to be used in the attempt at constructing the cultural matrix of the Baroque. As an “archeological” feature it would be radically different from the stylistic and thematic features which are usually being listed when the period concept of the Baroque is under discussion.

Colligating phenomena hitherto isolated from each other, reinterpreting phenomena already accounted for, and extending our knowledge of the cultural matrix of the Baroque are undoubtedly not the only uses to which Foucault’s approach could be put by literary historians. But these are perhaps the most accessible and most fruitful ways of putting to work an approach which, it seems to be, has so far not received the attention from Baroque scholars which it deserves.

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