CHAPTER 4

The Order of Things: The Human Sciences are the Event of Animality

Saïd Chebili
Translated by Matthew Chrulew and Jeffrey Bussolini

The Order of Things is a book that, when it considers the origins of natural history together with the definition of man—a concept that appeared only in the nineteenth century—finds itself confronted with the problematic of animality.

Let us therefore try on the one hand to grasp its contour and key ideas, and on the other to identify how the discourses on natural history and man encounter the theme of our investigation. From the preface on, Foucault emphasises the continuity of his reasoning with the History of Madness. Let us read its significant lines. “The history of madness would be the history of the Other—of that which, for a given culture, is at once interior and foreign, therefore to be excluded (so as to exorcise the interior danger) but by being shut away (in order to reduce its otherness); whereas the history of the order imposed on things would be the history of the Same—of that which, for a given culture, is both dispersed and related, therefore to be distinguished by kinds and to be collected together into identities”. How does Foucault seek to assemble the history of the Same? As he says in an interview with Madeleine Chapsal, what sustains things in time and space is the system, or the set of relationships that persist and change independently of the things that they connect.

More precisely, in the preface to the English edition of Les Mots et les choses, he distances himself from the usual approach of the historian of science. In fact, he seeks “to reveal a positive unconscious of knowledge: a level that eludes

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1 Translated from chapter IV of Saïd Chebili, Figures de l’animalité dans l’œuvre de Michel Foucault (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1999), 113–133. © Editions l’Harmattan [Trans.]
2 We have often retained the use of “man” for “l’homme” following the translation of Les Mots et les choses and indicating its historical gendering. [Trans.]
the consciousness of the scientist and yet is part of scientific discourse, instead of disputing its validity and seeking to diminish its scientific nature. Thus Foucault's initial hypothesis is that the intellectual activity of a given period obeys laws that transcend the individual.

To demonstrate this he chooses three discourses, on living beings, language and wealth, to try to highlight a basis common to them. This, eluding the consciousness of the scientist, he calls the "épistémè." Epistemes differ according to the period. Foucault individualises three: the Renaissance episteme, the Classical episteme, and the modern episteme.

Before going into the detail of the text, let us emphasise that The Order of Things opens with a tale by Borges that refers to animality and triggers Foucault's laughter. Borges cites a certain Chinese encyclopedia where it is written that "animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies." This classification of Borges is indicative of the modern episteme. Before studying it in detail Foucault makes a return to the Renaissance to bring to light the order-creating structure, which operates on the principle of resemblance. Let us note here on in that the epistemes impose a certain discourse on animality peculiar to each period considered, and a certain use of the reference to animality.

1 The Renaissance Episteme: The Coexistence of the Rational and Irrational in the Description of the Animal

Holding sway until the end of the sixteenth century, the Renaissance episteme allowed the world to wind upon itself, and painting to imitate space, in a kind of constant and infinite repetition. How were things similar to one another? Foucault notes the essential forms of resemblance.

– La Convenientia (Convenience)

The convenient things have a relationship of proximity and touch each other at the edges, the extremity of one coinciding with the beginning

5 Foucault, The Order of Things, xi–xii.
6 Foucault italicises and accents "épistémè" to mark its lineage from the Greek "epistēmē"—an emphasis often elided in translations of his work. [Trans.]
7 Ibid., xvi.