The propositional form of the title of this volume, “Authority Matters”, is already unusual. Why does this claim need to be asserted? Why now? The editors make it clear that they mean to signal certain issues about authorship – a sense, perhaps, that the author may not be dead after all, that calling authorship a “function”, as Foucault famously did in 1969, does not make it go away.¹ These are matters that have, of course, been productively explored by several commentators in recent years.² In what follows I intend to shift our angle of vision on these issues by considering the question of disciplinary authority. This move involves only a slight shift of focus, though, since disciplinary authority and “authorial authority” (if I can put it that way) are closely connected terms in Foucault’s own work. It is important to recall that Foucault came to his “What Is an Author?” analysis by way of his most successful book to that point, Les Mots et les Choses (The Order of Things, 1966). And in that book’s final section he provided a pioneering account of the emergence of three major disciplines at the turn of the nineteenth century: linguistics, economics, and biology.³ It remains one of the most suggestive accounts we have for the conceptual history of disciplines.

We must recall, too, that towards the end of the “What Is an Author?” essay itself, Foucault begins to widen its sphere of

implication when he acknowledges that one can be the author of more than a book or group of books. He is especially interested in a development over the course of the nineteenth century that made it possible for some individuals to become “founders of discursivity”. Marx and Freud are his examples; they are two writers who both “established an endless possibility of discourse”. They achieved – Foucault’s term here is neo-Baconian – moments of “discursive instauration”. The author-function, says Foucault, summing up, “complex enough when one tries to situate it at the level of a book or series of texts that carry a given signature, involves still more determining factors when one tries to analyze it in larger units, such as groups of works or entire disciplines”. That, however, is as far as Foucault is willing to go in “What Is an Author?”. Just as he seemed on the verge of expanding the author-concept toward an elaboration of authority as such (at least in its modern form), and just as he broaches the question of disciplinary authority, the essay comes to a rather abrupt conclusion.

There is another tantalizing set of comments by Foucault in a lecture he gave at the Collège de France in 1976. Speaking of what he calls the previous fifteen years, he describes it as a time dominated by “the immense and proliferating criticizability of things, institutions, practices, discourses”, and of “the astonishing efficacy” of the attacks that have been directed against traditional morality and hierarchy. And yet, in spite of the “fragility” that has been discovered in these areas, the critical instruments of these discoveries have been deployed without regard to the grand theories in which those instruments have been developed. A critique undermines authority in the everyday affairs of this era, in other words, only by disrespecting the authority of just those framing theories – especially those of Freud and Marx – that supplied the critique’s tools in the first place.

From one point of view, this may turn out to be the fault of the Swedes. Twenty years earlier, in the mid 1950s, at the beginning of the period to which he alludes, Foucault was just leaving Sweden after three years at Uppsala where, as he told a Swedish interviewer in 1968, he had learned to speak amid what he called “the austere

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5 Ibid., 220.