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Criticism Summary: Foucault, “Classifying”

In this chapter from *The Order of Things*, Foucault discusses the way living beings were classified under the epistemological strategies of eighteenth century natural history. He is also interested in the relationship between classification and language, which he articulates by performing a structural analysis of classification.

Foucault begins by defining “natural history” as different from both biology and history. He claims that until the Renaissance, history of a living being was “that being itself, within the whole semantic network that connected it to the world” (129). This entailed recording details such as its virtues, its symbolic significance, and the legends or stories with which it was associated – in other words, all of the linguistic and discursive associations of that given plant or animal. Natural history, however, dropped this interest in the “language deposited upon things by time” (130), finding “its locus in the gap that is now opened up between things and words” (129-130). Natural history is concerned with description and naming and constitutes “a new way of connecting things both to the eye and to discourse” (131).

In order to reduce the distance between living beings and language, natural history must bring together words and observation. In this sense, natural history “is nothing more than the nomination of the visible” (132). Natural history enables objects to be defined in relationship to four different values: the form of the plant or animal’s parts, the quantity of those parts, the way in which they are arranged in space, and their relative size. According to Foucault, this makes up the “structure” of that plant or animal. The value of this type of representation lies in its being universally acceptable – everyone can describe an object in the same way or recognize it given such a description. Foucault claims that “in this fundamental articulation of the visible, the first confrontation of language and things can now be established in a manner that excludes all uncertainty” (134). In short, structure is what allows the visible to be transcribed into language.

At this point, Foucault draws an analogy between description and the object it represents and a “proposition” and the “representation it expresses”, claiming that they are the “arrangement in a series” of the other (136). From my limited Internet scavenging, I’ve gleaned that, in structuralism, a proposition is a statement that expresses a “truth value”. Essentially, it’s a sentence that makes a claim or articulates an opinion. This part of the reading got pretty dense very quickly and I’m still trying to figure out exactly what Foucault means, but it seems that the most important idea that comes out of this is that natural history can be thought of as a language (not sure what other implications that may have in a Foucauldian framework) that reduces the visible to a “perfectly clear and always finite description” (136), so that “the roles played in language by the *proposition* and *articulation*” are the same.

Foucault then moves on to explain that natural history must not only “designate all natural entities very precisely, but it must also situate them within the system of identities and differences that unites them to and distinguishes from all the others” (138). This is what Foucault terms establishing a living beings “character”. Character is to be derived from the previously established language of description, but how this can be accomplished without needing to account for every individual feature in a description is a problem. Luckily for us, Foucault describes two techniques through which character can be established. The first is called the “System”, in which a few arbitrary elements of description are selected that will determine how everything is classified. In this case, character refers to the “structure selected to be the locus of pertinent identities and differences” (140). The second strategy is the “Method”, in which the elements by which beings are classified are deduced by subtraction. A species is described only in terms of its difference from other species, so that no descriptive elements are repeated. Then, by “arranging the later and progressively more sparse descriptions around the earlier ones, we shall be able to perceive, through the original chaos, the emergence of the general table of relations” (142). However different, the system and method accomplish the same thing: they make classification a function of “identities and differences. That is, all designation must be accomplished by means of a certain relation to all other possible designations” (144).

Foucault is worried that, after all, structures cannot be generalized into characters. He says that the problem is that it is necessary for there to be an immediately apparent, truthful similarity between structures that will allow them to “form collective designations” (145) – nature needs to be “continuous”. The continuity of nature, however, is experienced as broken up, because otherwise natural history “would already have been written by man’s everyday language” (147). In order to retain its status as a “well-constructed” language, natural history must “presuppose two groupings”: one in which continuity takes spatial form, and another in which continuity is thought of as a pattern of “temporal revolutions” (150). Foucault believes it is reductive to oppose these two views, since nature is neither fixed in a “permanent tabulation” nor are beings evolving together constantly. While these two views of nature are required simultaneously, they are complementary and cannot be reduced to each other.

Foucault concludes by arguing that natural history “covers a series of complex operations that introduce the possibility of a constant order into a totality of representations. It constitutes a whole domain of empiricity as at the same time *describable* and *orderable*” (158). Natural history must be universally valid and make it possible “both to indicate the individual and to situate it in a space of generalities that fit inside one another” (159). Foucault also claims that natural history, in its concern with classification, is not concerned with life – “it resides in its entirety in the area of language, since it is essentially a concerted use of names and since its ultimate aim is to give things their true denomination” (161).

There’s a lot of stuff to think about in this chapter. For me, some of the most difficult passages relate to his discussion of structures and about continuity and I hope we get to clarify this in class. I am also interested in the distinction Foucault gets to at the end between the study of “life” and its classification in natural history, especially as it relates to the theories of formal realism that we have encountered. I’m thinking particularly of Jameson’s *Realist Floorplan*, in which he talks about the invention of “everyday life” (Jameson, 374). Another thing that seems worthy of discussion is Foucault’s assumption that structures are universally acceptable – this seems empirically untrue to me, and also appears to be at odds with the realism we have been talking about, since it relies on subjectivity and individual experience.

In trying to connect this article to *Hard Cash*, I keep thinking about Reade’s exaggerated portrayal of how people are classified as insane. The discussion of classification reminds me (and this is probably a stretch) of the “formulas” that doctors at the various asylums in the novel apply to their patients. They, too, seem to derive a specific sort of language to manipulate information and relay it to relevant parties (such as people form the Lunacy board). I think the way they initially classify Alfred can be thought of as a use of the “System” strategy – they pick out a set of variables (insomnia, aggressiveness) through which they assign him a status.