CHAPTER 5

The Historical *a priori* and the Archive

The positivity of a discourse – like that of Natural History, political economy, or clinical medicine – characterizes its unity throughout time, and well beyond individual *œuvres*, books, and texts. This unity certainly does not enable us to say of Linnaeus or Buffon, Quesnay or Turgot, Broussais or Bichat, who told the truth, who reasoned with rigour, who most conformed to his own postulates; nor does it enable us to say which of these *œuvres* was closest to a primary, or ultimate, destination, which would formulate most radically the general project of a science. But what it does reveal is the extent to which Buffon and Linnaeus (or Turgot and Quesnay, Broussais and Bichat) were talking about 'the same thing', by placing themselves at 'the same level' or at 'the same distance', by deploying 'the same conceptual field', by opposing one another on 'the same field of battle'; and it reveals, on the other hand, why one cannot say that Darwin is talking about the same thing as Diderot, that Laennec continues the work of Van Swieten, or that Jevons answers the Physiocrats. It defines a limited space of communication. A relatively small space, since it is far from possessing the breadth of a science with all its historical development, from its most distant origin to its present stage; but a more extensive space than the play of influences that have operated from one author to another, or than the domain of explicit polemics. Different *œuvres*, dispersed books, that whole mass of texts that belong to a single discursive formation – and so many authors who know or do not know one another, criticize one another, invalidate one another, pillage one another, meet without knowing it and obstinately intersect their unique discourses in a web of which they are not the masters, of which they cannot see the whole, and of whose breadth they have a very inadequate idea – all these various figures and individuals do not communicate solely by the logical succession of propositions that they advance, nor by the recurrence

of themes, nor by the obstinacy of a meaning transmitted, forgotten, and rediscovered; they communicate by the form of positivity of their discourse, or more exactly, this form of positivity (and the conditions of operation of the enunciative function) defines a field in which formal identities, thematic continuities, translations of concepts, and polemical interchanges may be deployed. Thus positivity plays the role of what might be called a *historical a priori*.

Juxtaposed these two words produce a rather startling effect; what I mean by the term is an *a priori* that is not a condition of validity for judgements, but a condition of reality for statements. It is not a question of rediscovering what might legitimize an assertion, but of freeing the conditions of emergence of statements, the law of their coexistence with others, the specific form of their mode of being, the principles according to which they survive, become transformed, and disappear. An *a priori* not of truths that might never be said, or really given to experience; but the *a priori* of a history that is given, since it is that of things actually said. The reason for using this rather barbarous term is that this *a priori* must take account of statements in their dispersion, in all the flaws opened up by their non-coherence, in their overlapping and mutual replacement, in their simultaneity, which is not unifiable, and in their succession, which is not deductible; in short, it has to take account of the fact that discourse has not only a meaning or a truth, but a history, and a specific history that does not refer it back to the laws of an alien development. It must show, for example, that the history of grammar is not the projection into the field of language and its problems of a history that is generally that of reason or of a particular mentality, a history in any case that it shares with medicine, mechanical sciences, or theology; but that it involves a type of history – a form of dispersion in time, a mode of succession, of stability, and of reactivation, a speed of deployment or rotation – that belongs to it alone, even if it is not entirely unrelated to other types of history. Moreover, this *a priori* does not elude historicity: it does not constitute, above events, and in an unmoving heaven, an atemporal structure; it is defined as the group of rules that characterize a discursive practice: but these rules are not imposed from the outside on the elements that they relate together; they are caught up in the very things that they connect; and if they are not modified with the least of them, they modify them, and are transformed with them into certain decisive thresholds. The *a priori* of positivities is not only the system of a temporal dispersion; it is itself a transformable group.

Opposed to formal *a prioris* whose jurisdiction extends without contingence, there is a purely empirical figure; but on the other hand, since it makes it possible to grasp discourses in the law of their actual development, it must be able to take account of the fact that such a discourse, at a given moment, may accept or put into operation, or, on the contrary, exclude, forget, or ignore this or that formal structure. It cannot take account (by some kind of psychological or cultural genesis) of the formal *a prioris*; but it enables us to understand how the formal *a prioris* may have in history points of contact, places of insertion, irruption, or emergence, domains or occasions of operation, and to understand how this history may be not an absolutely extrinsic contingence, not a necessity of form deploying its own dialectic, but a specific regularity. Nothing, therefore, would be more pleasant, or more inexact, than to conceive of this historical *a priori* as a formal *a priori* that is also endowed with a history: a great, unmoving, empty figure that irrupted one day on the surface of time, that exercised over men's thought a tyranny that none could escape, and which then suddenly disappeared in a totally unexpected, totally unprecedented eclipse: a transcendental syncopation, a play of intermittent forms. The formal *a priori* and the historical *a priori* neither belong to the same level nor share the same nature: if they intersect, it is because they occupy two different dimensions.

The domain of statements thus articulated in accordance with historical *a prioris*, thus characterized by different types of positivity, and divided up by distinct discursive formations, no longer has that appearance of a monotonous, endless plain that I attributed to it at the outset when I spoke of 'the surface of discourse'; it also ceases to appear as the inert, smooth, neutral element in which there arise, each according to its own movement, or driven by some obscure dynamic, themes, ideas, concepts, knowledge. We are now dealing with a complex volume, in which heterogeneous regions are differentiated or deployed, in accordance with specific rules and practices that cannot be superposed. Instead of seeing, on the great mythical book of history, lines of words that translate in visible characters thoughts that were formed in some other time and place, we have in the density of discursive practices, systems that establish statements as events (with their own conditions and domain of appearance) and things (with their own possibility and field of use). They are all these systems of statements (whether events or things) that I propose to call *archive*.

By this term I do not mean the sum of all the texts that a culture has

kept upon its person as documents attesting to its own past, or as evidence of a continuing identity; nor do I mean the institutions, which, in a given society, make it possible to record and preserve those discourses that one wishes to remember and keep in circulation. On the contrary, it is rather the reason why so many things, said by so many men, for so long, have not emerged in accordance with the same laws of thought, or the same set of circumstances, why they are not simply the signalization, at the level of verbal performances, of what could be deployed in the order of the mind or in the order of things; but they appeared by virtue of a whole set of relations that are peculiar to the discursive level; why, instead of being adventitious figures, grafted, as it were, in a rather haphazard way, on to silent processes, they are born in accordance with specific regularities; in short, why, if there are things said – and those only – one should seek the immediate reason for them in the things that were said not in them, nor in the men that said them, but in the system of discursivity, in the enunciative possibilities and impossibilities that it lays down. The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor do they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents; but they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities; that which determines that they do not withdraw at the same pace in time, but shine, as it were, like stars, some that seem close to us shining brightly from afar off, while others that are in fact close to us are already growing pale. The archive is not that which, despite its immediate escape, safeguards the event of the statement, and preserves, for future memories, its status as an escapee; it is that which, at the very root of the statement-event, and in that which embodies it, defines at the outset *the system of its enunciability*. Nor is the archive that which collects the dust of statements that have become inert once more, and which may make possible the miracle of their resurrection; it is that which defines the mode of occurrence of the statement-thing; it is *the system of its functioning*. Far from being that which unifies everything that has been said in the great confused murmur of a discourse, far from being only that which ensures that we exist in the midst of preserved discourse, it is that which differentiates discourses in their multiple existence and specifies them in their own duration.

Between the *language* (*langue*) that defines the system of constructing possible sentences, and the *corpus* that passively collects the words that are spoken, the *archive* defines a particular level: that of a practice that causes a multiplicity of statements to emerge as so many regular events, as so many things to be dealt with and manipulated. It does not have the weight of tradition; and it does not constitute the library of all libraries, outside time and place; nor is it the welcoming oblivion that opens up to all new speech the operational field of its freedom; between tradition and oblivion, it reveals the rules of a practice that enables statements both to survive and to undergo regular modification. It is *the general system of the formation and transformation of statements.*

It is obvious that the archive of a society, a culture, or a civilization cannot be described exhaustively; or even, no doubt, the archive of a whole period. On the other hand, it is not possible for us to describe our own archive, since it is from within these rules that we speak, since it is that which gives to what we can say – and to itself, the object of our discourse – its modes of appearance, its forms of existence and coexistence, its system of accumulation, historicity, and disappearance. The archive cannot be described in its totality; and in its presence it is unavoidable. It emerges in fragments, regions, and levels, more fully, no doubt, and with greater sharpness, the greater the time that separates us from it: at most, were it not for the rarity of the documents, the greater chronological distance would be necessary to analyse it. And yet could this description of the archive be justified, could it elucidate that which makes it possible, map out the place where it speaks, control its rights and duties, test and develop its concepts – at least at this stage of the search, when it can define its possibilities only in the moment of their realization – if it persisted in describing only the most distant horizons? Should it not approach as close as possible to the positivity that governs it and the archive system that makes it possible today to speak of the archive in general? Should it not illuminate, if only in an oblique way, that enunciative field of which it is itself a part? The analysis of the archive, then, involves a privileged region: at once close to us, and different from our present existence, it is the border of time that surrounds our presence, which overhangs it, and which indicates it in its otherness; it is that which, outside ourselves, delimits us. The description of the archive deploys its possibilities (and the mastery of its possibilities) on the basis of the very discourses that have just ceased to be ours; its threshold of existence is established by the discontinuity that separates us from what we can no longer say, and from that which falls

outside our discursive practice; it begins with the outside of our own language (*langage*); its locus is the gap between our own discursive practices. In this sense, it is valid for our diagnosis. Not because it would enable us to draw up a table of our distinctive features, and to sketch out in advance the face that we will have in the future. But it deprives us of our continuities; it dissipates that temporal identity in which we are pleased to look at ourselves when we wish to exorcise the discontinuities of history; it breaks the thread of transcendental teleologies; and where anthropological thought once questioned man's being or subjectivity, it now bursts open the other, and the outside. In this sense, the diagnosis does not establish the fact of our identity by the play of distinctions. It establishes that we are difference, that our reason is the difference of discourses, our history the difference of times, our selves the difference of masks. That difference, far from being the forgotten and recovered origin, is this dispersion that we are and make.

The never completed, never wholly achieved uncovering of the archive forms the general horizon to which the description of discursive formations, the analysis of positivities, the mapping of the enunciative field belong. The right of words – which is not that of the philologists – authorizes, therefore, the use of the term *archaeology* to describe all these searches. This term does not imply the search for a beginning; it does not relate analysis to geological excavation. It designates the general theme of a description that questions the already-said at the level of its existence: of the enunciative function that operates within it, of the discursive formation, and the general archive system to which it belongs. Archaeology describes discourses as practices specified in the element of the archive.