

Foucault's is still a name to conjure with

— despite Baudrillard's injunction to forget him —

and *Les Mots Et Les Choses*, which was englished as *The Order of Things* with its author's particular blessings, is the book which established him as the 'archaeologist of the human sciences' he took himself to be. That text disturbed the narrow *praxes* these putative sciences are in the anglophone world

— having long ago mutated into 'social sciences' there —

through the latter quarter of the last century certainly; and perhaps does so even now. The essay which opens the book, on that painting by Velasquez which has come to be called *Las Meninas*, seems to condense for display the discursive *energeia* that will sustain the excavatory labour Foucault has undertaken; and the attention bestowed on him by historians of art alone

— taken in themselves: and not as journeymen for a *science* of the human —

calls for a close consideration of the way in which Foucault advances there the astonishing claim that *in Las Meninas representation undertakes to represent itself*.

One should, properly, begin by setting out such general presuppositions as would secure the coherence of this singular proposition. But as its author does not trouble himself so neither shall I; and in what follows I shall confine myself to sifting the logical texture, so to put it, of the reading he had given the painting

but scrabbling there with as little grace, very like, as a wage hand rummaging some antique midden for potsherds. And I had better beg pardon now, as well, for all the defects of orthography the writing will exhibit.

Considering the fame of that interpretation, one might expect that it will have long been subject to scrutiny, whether hostile or sympathetic. But Foucault's disciples seem not to have trifled thus — being as large in ambition as their *maitre* perhaps — while the seeming extravagance of his formulae has sufficed his detractors. My attempt here has been to articulate certain assumptions that seem implicit in how our presumptive archaeologist of things human goes about describing his pictorial object: intending thus to gauge how coherent — in itself, and without regard to its larger import — his reading of *Las Meninas* might be.

I do not know how archaic the current custodians of Theory consider *Les Mots Et Les Choses*; and the rapid emergence and obsolescence of discursive novelty their discipline exhibits may induce them to regard as obsolete, already, one of its founding texts.

Putting things so takes Theory for an ongoing discursive endeavour: which it may no longer be: and the energies that once sustained it may have dispersed, now, and diffused themselves anyhow into what goes on as 'cultural studies.'

Certainly my narrow operations upon its introductory essay will not very much serve any large understanding of heady time in which the text emerged: those charged decades of the last century in which the political order of Occidental polities seemed vulnerable to radical undoing

but which, in retrospect, are better seen as a coda to what historians of Technology once called The First Machine Age — which began to wither soon thereafter: and whose passing occasioned the terminal confusion of ‘postmodernism’ among intellectuals ill-equipped to gauge the sea-change that *techne* was undergoing around them: the great consequence of which was the reduction of Occidental polities to provinces of McWorld.

But I shall allow myself to hope — should these ephemeral pages in a web journal come to their attention at all — that such partisans as the quondam masters of Theory still command

— or such as, among their *epigoni* who practise cultural studies, reflect now and again on their discursive origins —

will pause, how briefly ever, over the animadversions upon Foucault’s overpainting of *Las Meninas* they will find set out below.

Hostilities take up the first two, and by far longer, of the three sections that follow; they are conducted through a contesting of detail and locution that generous readers will find irksome; and the conclusions reached by their end should have made very surprising the celebrity Foucault once enjoyed in the anglophone academy. But in the third section I have, however, gone on to receive Foucault’s flamboyant traversals of *Las Meninas* as *poiesis* of some singularly performative sort — egregious as they seem, and however they obscure what may plainly be seen in the painting — and my writing will seem to have abandoned itself there to sheer fancy.

A properly historical assessment of *The Order of Things* would have to consider why its avowedly radical contemporaries in the American academy were so taken with this particular text: while heeding so little Granger’s so much more rigorous *Formal Thought and the Sciences of Man*, for instance, or Gadamer’s densely pondered *Truth and Method*, both of which address its large theme

— and the former of which registers the import of the ‘sea-change’ in *techne* just noted.

I want to particularly record, however, that I have not attended at all to whatever ‘postcolonial theorists’ may have got up to with our author; and readers who are interested in their subaltern doings are referred to Aijaz Ahmad’s *In Theory*.

It seems prudent now to emphasise that I mean to employ the word “discourse” in an everyday way only: much as those linguists who call themselves *pragmaticists* might.

I should note that I first encountered Foucault’s essay on *Las Meninas* more than thirty years ago, as an undergraduate reading analytic philosophy in America: and was dazzled. I am abashed to admit now that I had then imagined myself translated by its verbal flight to the outer spheres of Thought: while its ‘poesy’ may have been reviving in me the ready pleasures, only, of *the animal communion of adolescence* — happiness we must wean ourselves away from: to endure then *the ordeal of consciousness* — as Michael Oakeshott limns the passage to our adult selves in his tract *On Human Conduct*. But, to note it again, I have ended by taking the seeming poesy for poetry after all — and have received it otherwise now, I trust, than juvenile enthusiasm had.

1 Toward the beginning of the essay one finds the following constraint placed on pictures that happen to show their own makers at work: it looks, Foucault says, **as though**

h1 the painter could not at the same time be seen on the picture where he is represented, and also see that upon which he is representing something.

We find this after a charged description of the work: the pictured painter has just emerged **from a sort of vast cage projected backwards by the surface he is painting**, and now his **dark torso and bright face are half-way between the visible and the invisible**, as, **emerging from that canvas beyond our view, he moves into our gaze; but when, in a moment, he makes a step to the right, removing himself from our gaze, he will be standing exactly in front of the canvas he is painting; he will enter that region where his painting, neglected for an instant, will, for him, become visible once more, free of shadow and free of reticence.** And then comes the fictive impossibility, or interdiction perhaps, set out above.

All the text that is printed bold in the **Corbel** font, above and anywhere in what follows, is directly quoted from our text. I shall be reproducing Foucault verbatim very often, in order to *use* his words even as they are *mentioned*; and double quotes would have made a clutter.

The restriction of **h1** to **the picture where he is represented** is needed, for nothing will keep a working painter seen in the flesh from seeing **that upon which he is representing something**. The modal “as though” is silly without this restriction, of course, but its real work is evident: nothing stops a painter from picturing himself looking at his canvas and nothing, as well, stops one painter from picturing another in the act of looking at a canvas the latter might be painting.

Regarding what had preceded the interdiction of **h1**: it isn't clear that every portrait, however near or far from finish, will become **free of reticence** when a painter moves himself and his eyes back to it, away from his gazing sitters' eyes — even had the painting become suddenly reticent when he stepped away from it and into their view. But let us suppose Velasquez to have been just so singular a painter; or let us imagine, at least, that the canvas upon which *Las Meninas* shows Velasquez painting was going to bear just such a picture.

We need not suppose that the proposition in **h1** is anything that *Las Meninas* states or asserts; it is very unlikely images ever do, or could, state or assert whatever sentences do. Pictures showing their own makers at work are to be thought of as **h1** asks only, let us say, as one tries to understand *Las Meninas* as a work of art; or, if entertaining or assenting to some general claim about pictures while they look at a particular painting is not an exercise beholders of the painting would willingly perform, let us suppose that they look at *Las Meninas* as though this picture, at least, could not have shown Velasquez looking at the canvas that it shows him painting. The phrase “could not” need no longer point at a general interdiction or fictive impossibility then; and **h1** may be taken to

specify, quite simply, something its beholders must do in order to understand *Las Meninas* as a work of art. One does wonder, of course, whether Velasquez would have wanted his intended beholders to do anything of the sort as they took in his picture: or could have so wanted, even.

Could we put aside this worry, though, and treat **h1** as a piece of what Arthur Danto would call *deep interpretation* — and might it be that the interdiction reveals, long after the maker and intended beholders of *Las Meninas* have passed from the scene, some condition of the painting's legibility?

Supposing so poses particular dangers. If thinking of pictures as **h1** asks is a condition of understanding *Las Meninas* as a work of art, then one would have to concede, now, that neither Velasquez nor his intended beholders understood it so; and that seems too drastic. But if doing as **h1** asks is not such a condition then one would have to say how else the fictive impossibility or interdiction adumbrated there could play a role in their understanding the painting as a work of art; and it isn't clear, at all, how to set about doing that.

Foucault might not have been deterred, of course, had it turned out that thinking of pictures as **h1** asks could not have been a condition of Velasquez and his intended beholders understanding *Las Meninas* as a work of art. Perhaps he did not concern himself with how pictures are understood so, particularly — rather than recognized as *images*, simply — of something or other. But, on the other hand, the interdiction does not specify a condition of seeing *Las Meninas* merely as an image.

I shall leave aside the question of whether what was said before **h1** will induce us to look at the picture as it asks. But whether it so does or not, what is said just after complicates matters considerably. The painter **rules at the threshold of those two incompatible visibilities**, we are now told: and why, one should ask straightaway, would the visibility of the painter's body be *incompatible* with the visibility of **that upon which he is representing something**? Foucault does not pause to answer.

I had glossed the phrase "that upon which he is representing something" as "canvas" simply; but the visibility of a body is in no way incompatible with the visibility of a canvas or any other surface. One wonders now if the phrase is better glossed as "the image of whatever thing he is shown representing." Perhaps the 'visibility' of images may be supposed incompatible with the 'visibility' of objects or events — because the *process of recognizing* what appears to the eye *as an image* may differ in kind, despite occasional confusion, from the process of recognizing *visibilia* as objects or events.

What immediately follows suggests, though, that the word "incompatible" was meant to have a sort of a proleptic function only. I shall quote the passage in full. **The painter is looking, his face turned slightly and his head leaning toward one shoulder. He is staring at a point to which, even though it is invisible, we, the spectators, can easily assign an object, since it is we, ourselves, who are that point: our bodies, our faces, our eyes.** One should balk, of course, at so casual an assimilation of physical objects to the regions of physical space they seem to only occupy; but let us read on. **The spectacle he is observing is thus doubly invisible,**

we next find: **first because it is not represented within the space of the painting, and, second, because it is situated in that blind point, in that essential hiding-place into which our gaze disappears from ourselves at the moment of our actual looking.** But this is very puzzling. The spectacle the painter is supposed to be observing — **our bodies, our faces, our eyes** — is now *situated* at some 'blind point' with which that spectacle is no longer identical: and our gaze is alleged to disappear into this point. The assertion that our gaze 'disappears' at a moment of actual looking seems to nicely register the seeming paradox that, ordinarily at least, we are least present to ourselves as knowing subjects just when we are most active as such; but this disappearing is not an *event*, one should note, and the 'point' into which the gaze disappears is not any *place* that a body can occupy.

To think otherwise, carried along by the daily meanings of "disappear" and "point", is to commit something very like what Kant would have called a paralogism of reason.

At just whom or what, then, should beholders of *Las Meninas* take its pictured maker to be staring? One could, I suppose, say that eyes or *bodies whose gaze disappears at the moment of actual looking* are what we should take him to be looking at; and to take him so — to suppose that *the painter is looking out at us under this general description* — may well be a condition of understanding *Las Meninas* as a work of art. But why, though, should bodies so looked at be *doubly* invisible? They are not pictured, true, and hence not visible: but *how else* are they not visible? To maintain that what the painter is looking out at is doubly invisible we must, it appears, otherwise describe that putative object or event; and the one thing that may with some propriety be termed 'doubly invisible' here — the circumstance that **our gaze disappears from ourselves at the moment of actual looking** — cannot serve us.

We seem to be in some difficulty now; but let us go on with the passage. So watched by the painter, **how**, Foucault now exclaims, **could we fail to see that invisibility, there in front of our eyes, since it has its own perceptible equivalent, its sealed-in figure, in the painting itself?** Let me note, once more, that the 'invisibility' that is to be 'seen' here is only the beholder's body considered under the description "not pictured in *Las Meninas*." The noun "invisibility" cannot, here, name the disappearance of the gaze at the moment of looking; and what follows seems to confirm that. **We could in effect**, Foucault next says, **guess what it is the painter is looking at if it were possible for us to glance for a moment at the canvas he is working on; but all we can see of that canvas is its texture, the horizontal and vertical bars of its stretcher, and the obliquely rising foot of the easel.**

That we must suppose the painter to be looking out at some object or event seems established now: but what follows this is only baffling. **The tall,**

monotonous rectangle occupying the whole left portion of the real picture, and representing the back of the canvas within the picture, reconstitutes in the form of a surface, Foucault then says, **the invisibility in depth of what the artist is observing: that space in which we are, and which we are.** Now “the space which we are” does seem to be a useful phrase at this juncture. It might be illuminating to say, for instance, that *our gaze disappears at the moment of looking into the space which we are*; and such a ‘space’ might well possess an ‘invisibility in depth’. This ‘space’ could not be any actual place though, we must remember, that anyone could observe; it could not, in particular, be the physical space which a beholder of *Las Meninas* happens to take up, as he looks at the picture and imagines himself looked out at by its pictured maker.

But if we resist this conflation of ‘the space which we are’ with the physical space we happen to take up while looking at *Las Meninas*, how likely will it seem, then, that **from the eyes of the painter to what he is observing there runs a compelling line that we, the onlookers, have no power of evading?** Will we still sense this line **running through the real picture and emerging from its surface to join the place from which we see the painter observing us: and in such a way that it reaches out to us ineluctably, and links us to the representation of the picture?**

The gaze of the painter does seem to hold the beholder fast, though, somehow or other; and perhaps it is true enough that

a1 *beholders of Las Meninas imagine themselves beheld by its maker in a way that links them to* **the representation of the picture** *shown there.*

The phrase “the representation of the picture” is not easily glossed here: following as it does the generic term “links”. But however that is to be done, let us grant that the pictured canvas does make the imagining postulated in **a1** a condition of understanding *Las Meninas* as a work of art: by in some way becoming, it may even turn out, the ‘perceptible equivalent’ or the ‘sealed-in figure’ of the singular ‘space which we are’. In the following paragraph we are reminded, quite properly, that we may imagine ourselves beheld by the painter **only in so far as we happen to occupy the same position as his subject: so that though greeted by that gaze we are also dismissed by it, replaced by that which was always there before we were: the model itself.** But, even so, **the painter's gaze will accept as many models as there are spectators; and now, in this precise but neutral place, the observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange.**

The utility of **h1** has become apparent, at least, whether or not the intended beholders of *Las Meninas* thought of the picture as **h1** asks: coupled with **a1** it clears the ground for this ‘ceaseless exchange’. **No gaze is stable** we are next told; **or rather, in the neutral furrow of the gaze piercing at a right angle through the canvas**

h2 subject and object, spectator and model, reverse themselves to infinity.

I do not know if **h2** says much more than “observer and observed take part in a ceaseless exchange.” But the concessive “or rather” is needed: for, on the face of it, there is no reason why subject and object should not ‘stably’ reverse themselves to infinity. Note now that one can easily imagine a sort of picture, quite different to *Las Meninas*, in beholding which **subject and object** may just as well be said to **reverse themselves to infinity**: suitably composed self-portraits which show the artist seeming to look out at the beholder — with *The Painter Observing a Prospective Sitter*, say, for their titles. In *Las Meninas*, however, **the great canvas with its back to us is supposed to exercise a second function** which nothing in our imaginary picture could: its **stubbornly invisible** surface **prevents the relation of these gazes from ever being discoverable or definitively established**.

The first function of the canvas, recall, was to be the ‘perceptible equivalent’ or the ‘sealed-in figure’ of the ‘space which we are’.

This mention of a relation is more than a little puzzling though. What was said just before had suggested that some one thing, which we might call *the gaze of the subject*, is what is being **ceaselessly exchanged** as subject and object reverse themselves to infinity; there would be no plurality of gazes then, or relations between them.

Unless the phrase “these gazes” above refers, on the one hand, to the outward gaze of the painter in *Las Meninas* considered as a *particular* datum, and, on the other, to the gaze of any beholder considered so as well. But then **h2** could not be a claim about subjects and objects considered generally, as *kinds* of thing: which is what the claim appears to be. I shall, however, consider the first possibility later.

We must distinguish now, it seems, between the gaze of the observing subject and the gaze returned by the observed subject: so that what constitutes two subjects as observer and observed is no longer just the direction of a gaze. Supposing that there are distinct such kinds of gaze, then, let us see why Foucault thinks the pictured canvas can do what it is said to. That is allegedly because, as **we see only the reverse side, we do not know who we are, or what we are doing**: we cannot tell if we are **seen or seeing**. What is left implicit here, of course, is that

a2 *beholders of Las Meninas must imagine themselves being pictured on the canvas shown there*

if they are to understand it as a work of art; and one may wonder, again, if its intended beholders ever did anything like that. But supposing so even, all that Foucault can properly say is that, in doing as **a2** asks, we do not know who we are *shown as*, or what we are shown *doing*, or whether we are shown as *observing* or *observed* subjects.

Some asymmetry of situation is implied, ordinarily, when we talk of one person observing another; and an image of a person will show him or her as observed or observing just in case beholders are able to imagine themselves appropriately situated to that person. The portrayed person may only be a fictive or legendary one, of course. The crucifixion by Velasquez which is composed very like the one by Zurbaran may properly be said, by contrast with the latter, to almost remotely observe the body of Christ: rather than disclose the body of Jesus regarded with awe or love, say, or some more complex religious emotion. The possibilities are not thus exhausted. Velazquez's portrait of Innocent X represents the pope as both observed and observing one could say — compared to something like his portrait of the Duke of Modena, certainly. The look that the pictured Innocent directs at the beholder may be described, then, as at once the gaze of an observer and the gaze of an observed — while the look that Velasquez gives the jester in his picture of Sebastian Morra, on the other hand, seems the gaze that an observed subject would return his observer.

But suppose, anyhow, that beholders of *Las Meninas* do as **a2** asks and endure, as a result, some uncertainty as to whether they are shown as observing or observed on the canvas pictured there; or, should that requires too much 'feeling' of them, suppose only that

a3 *a beholder must keep in mind that, were he pictured on the canvas shown in Las Meninas, he would not know whether he was shown as observing or observed.*

We may assume in **a3** and in **a2** that, whatever he is shown as, the beholder would be shown *looking out* of that picture: so that there would be in both cases be a consequent uncertainty as to whether his look is the gaze of an observing or, as well, an observed subject: which is what seems to be required. But one must now ask why the doubt counterfactually induced in **a3**, or the actual doubt consequent on **a2**, should prevent the relation between the gazes of the observed and the observer from *ever* being discovered or established. Whatever is to be discovered or established here would be some *general* thing, surely, concerning the relation between the gaze of the observing subject and the gaze of the observed subject, when these are regarded as two *kinds* of gaze: and uncertainty about whether *some* gaze is of one kind or the other surely cannot prevent that.

The logical situation is easily set out. There are things of some kind **A** and things of some kind **B** suppose, and then suppose that we are given a collection of things each of which is either **A** or **B**: but given them in a such a way as to keep us from knowing, in this instance, which kind each happens belong to. We are asked to conclude, from just *this instance*, that the relation between things of kind **A** and things of kind **B** could *never* be discovered or established.

There seems to be no very good reason, then, to grant Foucault's claim that through the **stubborn invisibility** of its surface

h3 **the canvas pictured in Las Meninas occludes forever the relation between the gaze of the observing subject and the gaze of the observed subject;**

or to grant the immediately following claim that **the opaque fixity** of

h4 the canvas pictured in Las Meninas renders forever unstable the play of metamorphoses between spectator and model

which is supposed to go on as we look at the work. These last propositions are being construed, to note it once more, as claims about observing and observed subjects or ‘spectators and models’ considered *generally*. But retreating to particulars, so to say, will not help. The **sovereign gaze of the painter** in *Las Meninas* is surely the gaze of an observing subject; so, if there is to be **a ceaseless exchange of observer and observed** as the work is taken in, the beholder must be able to imagine himself observing Velasquez — *the beholder must become an observing subject*. So if **h2** is to obtain now — if **subject and object** are indeed to **reverse themselves to infinity** — then the sorts of uncertainty consequent on **a2** or **a3** can make no difference to our becoming observers of the painter; and we need not grant even the weaker claim that

h5 the canvas pictured in Las Meninas occludes forever the relation between the gaze of the painter pictured there and the gaze of any beholder

when these gazes are taken as discrete particulars — for neither the ‘stubborn invisibility’ of the surface of the pictured canvas nor its ‘opaque fixity’ can obstruct how painter and beholder each become observer and observed now.

By “discrete particular” I mean the sort of thing the first atomists took their ‘particles’ to be: or were once commonly supposed to have.

Imputing to Democritus an extravagant and promiscuous atomism, which postulated indivisible *invisibilia* anyhow figured and coupling anyhow, Nietzsche imagined his antique master laughing out at Sophia’s pious lovers the taunt that *there is no knowledge but of surfaces* — as though Truth, as much as her sister Beauty, were all and only skin.

Now if gazes do not come in kinds at all — so that gazes may be as various as the circumstances ‘gazing subjects’ might find themselves in — then the individual gazes in any collocation of such would be related only by what they are directed at: by which gaze might be returning which.

Let me summarize, at the risk of tedium, the situation with regard to that stipulated relation whose discovery or establishment the pictured canvas in *Las Meninas* is said to prevent. If this relation is supposed to obtain between the gazes of observing and observed subjects *considered as kinds*, then Foucault has not shown why anything in the picture would prevent its discovery or establishment. If, on the other hand, that relation obtains between the gazes of the pictured painter and the beholder *considered as discrete particulars* — as individual *facta* that are neither ‘tokens of types’ nor ‘instances of kinds’ — then **the ceaseless exchange of observer and observed** determines that relation as much as it can possibly be determined.

We are faced with a very serious difficulty now. The claim in **h2** taken together with the claim in **h3** or in **h4** — or the weaker **h5** and **h2** together at least — seem crucial to securing Foucault's final contention that **representation undertakes to represent itself** in *Las Meninas* by **eliding the subject** who is **its foundation**. That **subject and object reverse themselves to infinity** as we look at *Las Meninas*

— as **h2** maintains —

even as the canvas that is pictured there **occludes forever the relation between the gaze of the observing subject and the gaze of the observed subject**

— as **h3** asserts —

are the putative happenings which are supposed to effect this eliding of the subject: and such elision is supposed at last to allow **representation, freed finally from the relation that was impeding it**

— one or other of the determinate relations just now canvassed between observing and observed subjects —

to **offer itself as representation in its purest form** to beholders of the work. But now, recalling that **h2** would be true of our imaginary *The Painter Observing A Prospective Sitter* if it were true of *Las Meninas*, one would have to concede

— if neither **h3** nor **h4** nor the weaker **h5** is true of the latter —

that our imaginary picture would offer itself as representation purified, also, if *Las Meninas* does.

2 The proposition that **representation undertakes to represent itself** in *Las Meninas* would have gladdened historians of art: if only by making their discipline seem central to the human sciences. But such flattery would have blinded only enthusiasts, one thinks, to the logical difficulties we have pointed at. Foucault has only begun his paen though; and to resist him in full flow even the most sober among the historiographers of painting would have had to exercise vigilantly all their disciplinary caution.

Leo Steinberg, notably, was immune to the general enthusiasm: remarking simply, in an essay on *Las Meninas* that appeared a decade or so after *The Order of Things* appeared, that Foucault had a way with words.

We have just had the painter's gaze described as **sovereign**; we next read that **as soon as they place the spectator in the field of their gaze, the painter's eyes seize hold of him, force him to enter the picture, assign him a place at once privileged and inescapable, levy their luminous and visible tribute from him, and project it upon the inaccessible surface of the canvas within the picture**. It is odd to think of the sight one's body affords another as a *tribute* exacted by his or her eyes; and tribute must, I suppose, always be luminous. But the enthusiast for whom the

pictured painter already **rules at the threshold of two incompatible visibilities** with **a sovereign gaze** might let himself be seized and taxed so, however; and he will be ready to agree then that

h6 the beholder of *Las Meninas* sees his invisibility made visible to the painter pictured there, and transposed into an image forever invisible to himself;

and be just as ready, very like, to receive **a shock** from that.

Now the noun “invisibility” here might be a name either for the singular **space which the beholder is**: or for his body considered as *an object not pictured in Las Meninas*. The first is what his gaze is said to ‘disappear’ into; and maybe he does actually see this ‘invisibility’ in the pictured canvas which is its **sealed-in figure**. But such ‘invisibility’ could not, possibly, be **transposed into an image** that is visible to the painter. Our bodies may be *thought* to become visible to the painter when we do as the injunctions in **a2** or **a3** above ask; but we do not in any sense *see* their *invisibility* being made visible to him or transposed into an image in doing so. It seems, then, that neither possible referent for “invisibility” will make **h6** a plausible claim about what beholders of *Las Meninas* might actually see: the putative shock is administered by Foucault’s words alone, and not at all by the picture.

It is produced by simple device of always using “invisible” where “unseen” or “not seen” would do just as well: where the latter, in fact, would have been more accurate. And if the shock of **h6** is **made more inevitable still**, the **marginal trap** that does the work is the rush of ‘poetry’ in how Foucault goes on to describe the way the pictured scene is lit.

I shall have to reproduce the passage entirely. **At the extreme right, the picture is lit by a window represented in very sharp perspective; so sharp that we can scarcely see more than the embrasure; so that the flood of light streaming through it bathes at the same time, and with equal generosity, two neighbouring spaces, overlapping but irreducible; the surface of the painting, together with the volume it represents — which is to say, the painter's studio, or the salon in which his easel is now set up — and, in front of that surface, the real volume occupied by the spectator (or, again, the unreal site of the model).**

Note that the perspective lines would not be less sharp if we could see a deal more than the embrasure; and the light would be equally generous if somewhat more of the window were shown.

There is much more to come, but it seems prudent to interrupt here. Foucault appears to distinguish **the surface of the painting** from what this surface is said to represent; and he must mean by ‘surface’ the painted *motifs* and the areas between

— using the word “motif” as Wollheim does in *Painting as an Art* —

which motifs, seen as images of objects all inhabiting *one place*, together enable *Las Meninas* to picture a studio or salon. But if that is so, then this surface could not possibly be **bathed** by the light from the window. A motif on the canvas *is actually lit* by whatever light happens to fall on the canvas as we look at the picture; while the object of which that motif is an image may or may not be *shown as lit*, conspicuously, by a light falling into the place that object inhabits; and, needless to say, the first light cannot be identified with the second.

This logical confusion does not, however, vitiate the claim that the window pictured in *Las Meninas* admits a **flood of light** which **bathes** both the pictured studio and the space which the beholder occupies: and it might be worth bringing out why. We should distinguish the pictorial space in a painting — the *picture's own space*, let us call it: the volume we *perceive* there — from any *place* that the painting might be picturing

and it is important to note now that a painting can picture a place even if its own space has little perceived depth.

Now here is one mark of a painting that one would call *illusionist*: it will seem to its beholders that the painting shows them whatever it pictures just as they *would* see that, *were* they standing *just where they are* as they take the painting in. The actual space they occupy may well seem an *extension* of the picture's own space then: and therefore *a part of the place* the painting is picturing

even though the painting will often have a *picture plane* which seems to separate the painting's own space from the actual space its beholders occupy.

So it may actually seem to beholders of *Las Meninas*

— which is an illusionist painting if anything is —

that the light which appears to bathe the persons pictured there is washing over them as well.

There is a phenomenology distinctive to all this seeming. Beholders of an illusionist painting do not merely *assent* to the proposition that they would see just what the painting pictures were they standing just where they are; and they do not simply *think of* the actual spaces they occupy as parts of the place the painting pictures.

Let us go on with the encomium we had interrupted. **As it passes through the room from right to left**, we are told next, **this vast flood of golden light carries both the spectator toward the painter and the model toward the canvas**; and **it is this light too, which, washing over the painter, makes him visible to the spectator and turns into golden lines, in the model's eyes, the frame of that enigmatic canvas on which his image, once transported there, is to be imprisoned**. This extreme, partial, scarcely indicated window frees a whole flow of daylight which serves as the common locus of representation. It balances the invisible canvas on the other side of the picture: just as that canvas, by turning its back to the spectators, folds itself in against the picture representing it, and forms, by the superimposition of its reverse and visible side upon the surface depicting it, the ground, inaccessible to us,

upon which there shimmers the Image par excellence, so does the window, a pure aperture, establish a space as manifest as the other is hidden; as much the common ground of painter, figures, models and spectators, as the other is solitary (for no one is looking at it, not even the painter).

I pause to note that what makes the 'ground' invoked above 'inaccessible' is that the canvas is pictured with its back to the beholder: not any 'superimposition' of its reverse on the surface of the picture. Note also that the parity of function suggested by the construction **just as that canvas ... so does the window ...** is illusory. The surface of the pictured canvas may be 'solitary' because no one is looking at it; but it is no less a 'common ground' thereby; and so this unseen surface need not be 'solitary' even as the 'inaccessible ground' of 'the Image par excellence'. But let us read on.

From the right, there streams in through an invisible window the pure volume of a light that renders all representation visible; to the left extends the surface that conceals, on the other side of its all too visible woven texture, the representation it bears. The light, by flooding the scene — I mean the room as well as the canvas, the room represented on the canvas, and the room in which the canvas stands — envelops the figures and the spectators and carries them with it, under the painter's gaze, toward the place where his brush will represent them. But that place alas, is concealed from us. We are observing ourselves being observed by the painter, and made visible to his eyes by the same light that enables us to see him; and just as we are about to apprehend ourselves, transcribed by his hand as though in a mirror, we find that we can apprehend nothing of that mirror but its lustreless back. The other side of a psyche.

One should step back to take a breath now: and then consider that our imaginary *The Painter Observing A Prospective Sitter* could be lit and placed to the light in such a way that

a4 *beholders imagine themselves observing the painter observe them, made visible to him by the same light that enables them to see him.*

This is all that Foucault can properly say as well; and if we agree that we may be **about to apprehend ourselves** at any moment of our looking at *Las Meninas*, that is only because, dizzied by the swirl of words animating the pictured scene, we do not anymore *see* the picture we are actually looking at. The phrase "apprehend ourselves" cannot be glossed as "see ourselves pictured" even though what precedes it strongly suggests that reading; for even if *Las Meninas* induces us to imagine ourselves moving toward the canvas pictured there, within the room it pictures, we would be strangely forgetful if we thought that we were *about to* see our pictured selves then.

The other possible referent for the noun "ourselves" at this point is **the space which we are**; and we may be encouraged to remember that the pictured canvas is the **sealed-in figure** of this singular 'space' if we do manage to see the back of the pictured canvas as **the lustreless back** of a mirror or **the other side of a psyche**. One should note, though, that "the lustreless back of a mirror" and "the other side of a psyche" would not be

particularly apt descriptions of whatever it is that 'our gaze disappears into' — given whatever Foucault has so far said about this 'space' — unless the locution "our gaze disappears at the moment of looking" does record, to begin with, the circumstance that we are *least present* to ourselves as knowing subjects just when we are *most active* as such.

But there is, in fact, a mirror pictured in the painting; let us next consider how Foucault introduces us to it. **Now, as it happens, exactly opposite the spectators – ourselves – on the wall forming the far end of the room, Velasquez has represented a series of pictures**

— there are, as it happens, pictures shown along the wall to our right as well — **and we see that among all those hanging canvases there is one that shines with particular brightness. Its frame is wider and darker than those of the others; yet there is a fine white line around its inner edge diffusing over its whole surface a light whose source is not easy to determine**

— this light-diffusing line would, one thinks, already make an attentive beholder doubt that he is looking at one among a series of pictured pictures. But noting the circumstance *just now* would make nonsense of what Foucault goes on to say: consider, for instance, how the sentence which this note is interrupting will end —

for it comes from nowhere, unless it be from a space within itself. In that strange light two silhouettes are apparent, while above them, and a little behind them, is a heavy purple curtain. The other pictures reveal little more than a few paler patches buried in a darkness without depth. This particular one, on the other hand, opens onto a perspective of space in which recognizable forms recede from us in a light that belongs only to itself. Among all these elements intended to provide representations, while impeding them, hiding them, concealing them because of their position or their distance from us, this is the only one that fulfils its function in all honesty and enables us to see what it is supposed to show: despite its distance from us, despite the shadows around it.

A picture that is pictured within another is not always meant to **provide a representation** surely: whether or not the picture can at same time impede or conceal that intent. But the reader still dizzy from the animating of the scene that went on just before will probably read on without a murmur.

But then we find, after all this divination, that our seeming picture **isn't a picture** at all: **it is a mirror.**

Now there may well be beholders of *Las Meninas* who suppose that the pictured mirror is a pictured picture long enough to wonder where the light conspicuously diffused there comes from, and so on. But one really has to ask if the pictured mirror will even to such beholders **offer at last the enchantment of the double that until now has been denied** them, **not only by the distant paintings but also by the light in the foreground with its ironic canvas:** for these 'doubles' can only be those images of themselves that Foucault's willing speculators are to

suppose drawn on the pictured canvas with its back to them: and why should they seek the 'enchantment' of these 'doubles' in the other pictured pictures?

Of all the representations represented in *Las Meninas*, Foucault goes on to say then, **this is the only one visible: but no one** pictured there **is looking at it**. Note that the pathos here is entirely forced. *To* the persons pictured in *Las Meninas* its pictured mirror would not be *representing* what it shows, at all, in any way that any of the pictured paintings might be said to represent what they show: and to put things so is only egregious. These pictured persons are next described as **for the most part turned to face what must be taking place in front: toward the bright invisibility bordering the canvas, toward that balcony of light where their eyes can gaze at those who are gazing back at them**. The word "invisibility" here could, again, only name the beholder's body considered as an object not pictured in *Las Meninas*. But even if we are able to see the persons pictured there as looking out at us, we cannot suppose that *they see us as invisibilities* at all: nor as 'bordering the canvas'.

Unless we see each of these persons as *someone aware of being pictured in Las Meninas*. But we can see only Velasquez so, of course: if we can so see anyone pictured there at all. And if we cannot suppose that these pictured persons see us so, then we will not be disposed to regard **the tiny glowing rectangle of the solitary mirror as nothing other than visibility itself, shining so softly behind them without any gaze able to grasp it, to render it actual, and to enjoy the suddenly ripe fruit of the spectacle it offers**.

One has to ask why no gaze, of any person pictured in *Las Meninas*, would be *able* to grasp this **suddenly ripe fruit**: is the interdiction of **h1** being extended to the pictured mirror and to pictured persons other than the painter?

But **it must be admitted**, Foucault next says, that **this indifference** of the pictured persons toward the mirror **is equalled only by the mirror's own**: and we are then to admit as well that **it is reflecting nothing, in fact, of all that there is in the same space as itself: neither the painter with his back to it, nor the figures in the centre of the room**.

We are to regard these persons as *indifferent* to the mirror and, at the same time, *unable* to **enjoy the suddenly ripe fruit** of what it shows; and just how we might do so is too nice a question perhaps.

We had noted above that the space we occupy as beholders seems, to us, a part of the place pictured by *Las Meninas*: the studio or salon which is the 'space' that the mirror is pictured within. Now whatever else the painting may be thought to show, we must grant that *Las Meninas shows Velasquez looking at the persons he is picturing on the canvas shown in the picture: who themselves — or their images on that canvas — are shown in the mirror behind the painter*. So, *if as beholders we do in fact imagine ourselves pictured on that canvas*, we must concede that the space which its actual sitters occupied as they sat to be pictured is also part of the place which

Las Meninas pictures. But then we cannot regard the pictured mirror as **reflecting nothing, in fact, of all that there is in the same space as itself**: we would be inconsistent as beholders if we did so.

Recall what was said about illusionist pictures above: that the actual space a beholder of such a picture occupies may well seem an *extension* of the picture's own space.

But note, all the same, that we *need not* imagine ourselves pictured in *Las Meninas* in order that the space occupied by these sitters be a part of the place pictured there.

One may wonder how unequivocal the verb “show” is in the summary description of *Las Meninas* just offered. After all, the picture does not *show* us Velazquez looking at his sitters in just the way it shows us the body of painter himself: that is something we might more properly be said to gather from what the picture actually shows. So, though using “show” just so seems innocuous, perhaps one should only say, more neutrally, that the picture *represents* Velazquez looking at the persons he is picturing on the canvas that is shown in the picture: who themselves, or their images on that canvas, are shown in the mirror behind the painter.

It is not the visible, Foucault concludes after all this, that the mirror is shown to actually reflect: and we might still agree, provided that the phrase “the visible” now only denotes any pictured object *other than* those shown in the pictured mirror. We might also agree that, because **its position is more or less completely central**, the mirror **ought to be governed by the same lines of perspective**; and then **we might well expect the same studio, the same painter, the same canvas** to be reflected there. But we need not therefore agree that **instead of surrounding visible objects, this mirror now cuts straight through the whole field of representation, ignoring all it might apprehend within that field, and restores visibility to that which resides outside all view**: we need not agree, because the persons shown in the mirror are *are not excluded* from the picture's **field of representation**: and we just saw, in fact, why beholders would be *inconsistent* if they regarded these pictured persons so.

The persons whom the pictured mirror shows — through either their own reflections, or through the reflections of their images — are most naturally taken for those actually sitting for the picture Velasquez is shown painting.

As it happens, Joel Snyder and Ted Cohen are supposed to have demonstrated — by following angles of sight and perspectival lines, and so on — that the mirror in *Las Meninas* could not be reflecting the pictured images of those persons who, one supposes, are being pictured on the canvas pictured there: as Foucault seems to be supposing. But the considerations I advance would retain their force regardless.

So *Las Meninas* may be said to represent Velasquez — **in his represented, objective reality, the reality of the painter at work** — looking out at these putative original sitters; while by picturing them in the mirror the painting may be said to represent them as sitters **looking at the painter in that material reality** as well.

The locution “picturing them in the mirror” seems appropriate here; more so than “picturing their reflections in the mirror” would be, even if what meets our eyes are the images of those reflections; and, at any rate, the latter condition implies the former.

These are states of affairs the picture lets us gather from what it shows. The pictured sitters are, of course, not visible to us *in just the way* the other persons and objects pictured in *Las Meninas* are: but the ‘invisibility’ that the pictured mirror ‘overcomes’ *consists only in* these sitters *being pictured in a mirror even while the others are directly pictured*

— the putative sitters are ‘invisible’ only in that they stand at either one or two removes more from **material reality** than the other persons and objects pictured in the painting — while *our* ‘invisibility’ as beholders consisted, recall, in our *not being pictured* there at all.

The description “persons the painter is looking at” specifies these original sitters as *observed* individuals, of course, while the description “persons looking at the painter” specifies them as *observing* individuals. Foucault talks, confusingly, of the sitters constituting **two groups of figures** when there is only *one group* given under *two descriptions*: and neither any **effect of composition peculiar to the painting** nor any **law that presides over the very existence of all pictures in general** makes these sitters **equally inaccessible** to our eyes under these descriptions. We may grant such **effects of composition** readily, and even such president **laws**: but we cannot therefore agree — just because the sitters for the pictured canvas themselves, or their images on the pictured canvas, are shown reflected in the mirror — that in *Las Meninas*

h7 the action of representation consists in bringing one of two forms of invisibility into the place of the other.

We cannot so agree because there is only *one* ‘form of invisibility’ masking the sitters: if they can properly be thought invisible at all. So it is simply not the case that **the mirror provides a metathesis of visibility** by letting us see there, **at the centre of the canvas, what in the painting is of necessity doubly invisible.**

The word “metathesis” seems as well glossed by “abrupt change of state” here, as by “change of place”: which is its immediate sense: and what **h7** underwrites. Now *had there been no mirror* pictured in *Las Meninas*, the putative sitters for the painting pictured there *would have been* ‘invisible observers’ of the persons who are pictured there

— provided we still took these latter to be looking out at these sitters — and the sitters themselves — or the ‘observed images’ of them the pictured canvas may be supposed to bear — would have been ‘invisible’ to beholders of *Las Meninas*. The first ‘form of invisibility’ would have consisted now in *the sitters themselves not being pictured in Las Meninas*: while the second such ‘form’ would have consisted in *their images on the pictured canvas not being shown* there. The pictured mirror does, to be sure, picture what *Las Meninas* would not have pictured had it not been there. Notice, however, that there would be *two* ‘invisibilia’ now — not *one* datum that is *doubly* invisible — and so the claim in **h7** cannot even thus be sustained. More importantly, once the sitters are

pictured in the pictured mirror, they do not retain the 'invisibility' they *would have had* without the mirror; and a property possessed *counterfactually* is not, needless to say, actually possessed.

The reader who hasn't tired yet may equip with a mirror the picture he has in his head of *The Painter Observing A Prospective Sitter*, disposed so as to reflect either the hidden surface of the painter's canvas there, or as much of the prospective sitter as he cares to see

and ladle over his confection as much as he wants of the very rich sauce that has been so liberally served him.

I have no more use for our imaginary picture: except to note, apropos of certain technical objections to Foucault's account of what *Las Meninas* actually pictures — which have been adverted to in the inset text — that one can quite easily imagine such changes to the painting as will meet those difficulties, sufficiently, without materially affecting his large claims

and it should not surprise us to find that his admirers have treated such objections as cavils merely.

The considerations I have advanced do not, on the other hand, contest the sorts of thing Foucault takes himself to see in the painting: they do not dispute such *reference* as he assigns its individual images. They deny, rather, the singular *sense* he attempts to endow their assembly with.

Foucault has not quite done, with the **metathesis of visibility** just advertised, his talking-up of *Las Meninas*; and we have laboured over the first, only, of the two equal parts making up the essay. But I take myself to have displayed how logically carious its author's divagations are: and shall ignore what remains. The theses regarding *Las Meninas* which had been labelled and set off in the previous section, together with the like assertions recorded in this one, were meant, presumably, as stations for those processions across the painting's surface we rehearsed above: though how we are to find them is far from clear. We have seen that these large theses cannot be maintained; and Foucault's goings would not be less egregious, I cannot but think, even if they could be. Such discursive debility is surprising; all the more so in a supposed theorist; and astonishing, actually, when one considers that our 'archaeologist of the human sciences' came to be — in the anglophone academy particularly, and may yet remain there — a high priest of Theory.

A recent review titled "Foucault's *Las Meninas* and art-historical methods" attempts "to focus on the ways in which Foucault's *Las Meninas* has been represented and critiqued in art-historical texts, and endeavours to gauge its significance to the discipline, in particular to the New Art History of the 1970s and 1980s." This appears in *The Journal of Literary Studies*; its author is Yvette Gresle. Foucault's "unprecedented reading of the painting" and "meticulous, astute description of the visual world before him" are duly

praised there; and the reviewer concludes that his “elucidation of *Las Meninas* self-reflexive meditation on the nature of representation was groundbreaking.”

3 I have probed the introductory essay of *The Order of Things* as though some exercise in *inference* were being conducted there
— of some ‘probable’ or even ‘abductive’ sort
— an exercise employing the word “represent” in a daily way, and proceeding upon what is *plainly* to be seen in *Las Meninas*. Taken thus the essay is incoherent: and to gain anything at all from what Foucault is saying about *Las Meninas* one must be willing, now, to receive his traversals of its surface as attempts to comprehend some unusual encounter with the painting.

Foucault had most prized what he called *limit experiences*: which were sought in ways most of his readers would shrink from. To rehearse the scandal of his wilful pleasures, and their dark end, would serve no purpose. But the impulse toward such epiphanic estrangements of body and mind was his contrary *conatus*, I shall nonetheless assume: and I shall now take Foucault’s goings across *Las Meninas* for efforts to compass some liminal experience of the painting — an experience which, I shall suppose without further ado, had disclosed *representation freeing itself of the relation that had been impeding it*.

I am going to suppose now that Foucault understands representation in as *generic* a way as any analytic philosopher would understand *reference*; and takes it for a general process within, or coordinate with, any *episteme* or *mode of knowing*. But while the analytic philosopher takes reference for some sempiternal thing, Foucault seems to allow representation a *natural history* almost; and, as a general process coordinate with the novel episteme of Classical Thought that the *Regulae* of Descartes inaugurates, representation is supposed to display a character radically other to what it had hitherto shown.

Following his essay on *Las Meninas* Foucault adumbrates, in *The Prose of the World*, the centrality of resemblance to the antique episteme that the *Regulae* had sought to displace. He goes on to consider representing itself largely then; and one is told now that **the Cartesian critique of resemblance will display Classical thought excluding resemblance as the fundamental experience and primary form of knowledge, denouncing it as a confused mixture that must be analysed in terms of identity, difference, measurement and order**

— whereas resemblance is supposed to have **played a constructive role in the knowledge of Western culture up to the end of the sixteenth century**: by grounding a **system of signs** whose **interpretation** was what had **opened up the field of concrete knowledge**.

But the activity of *comparison*, which must proceed upon resemblance, is supposed to *come into its own* thereby: **though Descartes rejects resemblance, he**

does so not by excluding the act of comparison from rational thought, nor even by seeking to limit it, but on the contrary by universalizing it and thereby giving it its purest form, Foucault insists

going on to note that **it is by means of comparison that we discover 'form, extent, movement and other such things' – that is to say, simple natures – in all subjects** (or *intentional objects*, rather) **in which they may be present**. The words marked out by quotes here are from the *Regulae*: and the three 'material simple natures' they first list are those *primary intentional aspects of corporeal nature*, one might say, which are supposed to secure to us "the truth of what is perceived by the senses" without our having to posit "the slightest similarity between the idea perceived and the corresponding thing."

These last phrasings, and the claim regarding the epistemology of Descartes they together articulate, are taken from Jean Marion's *Cartesian metaphysics and the role of simple natures*.

The generic operation of representation within Classical Thought seems to require resemblance only at the **humblest and basest** level of knowledge

— and not for the grounding of a hermeneutics —

for resemblance remains now at that **suture of body and soul** where our imaginal powers rule: which are *base* presumably because **the power of imagination is only the inverse, the other side of its defect**. The principals of Classical Thought

— Descartes, Malebranche and Spinoza — are the ones Foucault lists —

deem our imaginal powers compromised because the **unrefined forms of the Same** that are their primary produce **prevent us from perceiving directly the identities and differences of things**. But knowledge of any sort depends, all the same, on the **vague murmur of similitudes** that lowly imagination amplifies: and the **rudimentary relation of similitude continues, indefinitely, to reside below knowledge in the manner of a mute and ineffaceable necessity**

because **no equality or relation of order can be established between two things unless their resemblance has at least occasioned their comparison**.

The 'murmur of similitude' that knowledge builds upon is, however, **the disorder of nature due to its own history, to its catastrophes, or perhaps merely to its jumbled plurality, which is no longer capable of providing representation with anything but things that resemble one another**: or so Foucault now insists: and that is why **representation, perpetually bound to contents so very close to one another, repeats itself, recalls itself, duplicates itself quite naturally, causes almost identical impressions to arise again and again, and engenders imagination**.

To remark adversely our archaeologist's incantatory animation, of generic process as some chthonic power, will not serve me anymore. And my object in thus assembling *disjecta membra* from his goings down to the **suture of body and soul** is to posit, now, that the operation of representation in its **purest form consists in** such repetition and recall and duplication: in the continual reprising of **almost identical impressions that engenders imagination**.

The **purest form** of representation must be understood just so in order to receive *Las Meninas* as Foucault seems to: and, in fact, representation must be understood to represent itself *precisely through* such active gainings again to its purest form. The continual and 'pure' reprise of **almost identical impressions constitutes**, moreover, a **nature that is multiple, obscurely and irrationally recreated**, and which **prior to all order resembles itself**: which is **human nature** actually. **Human nature resides**, Foucault maintains, **in that narrow overlap of representation which permits it to represent itself to itself**

— while Nature herself is **nothing but the impalpable confusion within representation that makes the resemblance there perceptible before the order of identities is yet invisible** — and human nature would have to be understood just so, as well, before we can see *Las Meninas* as Foucault would have us.

Let me try now to recoup, in some way or other, the astonishing claim we had begun with. The *knowing subject* would be just as proximal to 'soul' as *human nature* is proximal to 'body'

— in the 'sutured' body-and-soul that constitutes the human person: for Descartes certainly: who locates the join of body and soul, even, at the pineal gland — and that may be why **eliding the subject** is what representation must do to in order to regain its purest form, and so represent itself

— to Classical Thought at least — for such *thinking substance* as every knowing subject instances is *radically not* the *extended substance* that our entirely natural bodies instance

and pure representation would go on in the realm of extension, surely, given that Classical Thought divides 'what there is' between these two sorts of substance.

But the elision of the subject and the regaining to purity of representation would not stand to each other as cause to effect or effort to result: they would be mutually obverse and concomitant *facta* rather, one thinks: and one might even hazard saying — somewhat as Spinoza might have had he allowed himself such licence — that such *elision* as substance registers in the mode of Thought would itself constitute a *gaining again to purity* in the mode of Extension.

We might now gather, as well, why pure representation is *impeded* by the generic relation of subject to intended object: for that relation is *constitutive* of knowing

— for Classical Thought again: and for Foucault as well, apparently — and knowing is the arresting stasis of *clear and distinct perception* supervening on the roiling reprise of resemblance

in which, to note it yet once more, representation regains its purest form.

But understanding how representation *could* so represent itself would not by itself deliver the understood *factum*, so to put it, of representation representing itself in *Las Meninas* through the elision of the subject

— the exercises we conducted with our imaginary *The Painter Observing a Prospective Sitter* have shown that, surely —

and, indeed, any grasp of its fact could only follow upon some or other experience of the painting *taken afterwards* for such doing. Foucault's traversals of its surface

— taking them now to more *search* than *find* —

must be intended, then, to induce its readers to *endure* the painting as he must have: to endure there some actual *elision of the subject by representation*: and “endure” does seem the apt word, for its own elision could not really be *known* by any knowing subject. Such elision would be, if anything were, liminal experience: and would have to be, to note it again, such experience as could in retrospect disclose to the knowing subject representation regaining purity *just so*.

This is not a negligible demand: not every eliding of the subject need be the obverse of representation regaining its purest form.

The locution “what representation must do in order to regain its purest form” may be recast so as to remove the imputation of agency there: but I have given myself over to the shaman in Foucault. I began by supposing him to be trying to *compass* some liminal experience of *Las Meninas*: it seems to me more apt to say “call up” or “educe” than “compass” now. With the monstrosity of ‘representation undertaking to represent itself’ understood so

— as the *obverse*, to note it yet again, of a concomitant elision of the subject —

Foucault's conjuring of pure representation would be best performed in the presence of the painting itself: or with a very good and suitably scaled reproduction to hand: but even so only upon those who had brought themselves to understand human nature and representation — and so *knowing* as well — in the singular ways Foucault does.

The anglophone historians who responded particularly to our essay would have looked *Las Meninas* over very closely; but they seem to have paid no attention at all to the essay on representing that came after; and in this connexion I must look briefly at a celebrated consideration of our essay by Svetlana Alpers, contained in a paper titled “Interpretation without Representation, or, The Viewing of *Las Meninas*”. Foucault begins his concluding paragraph there by venturing that **perhaps there exists in this painting by Velasquez the representation, as it were, of Classical representation**

and the definition of the space it opens up to us.

But the tentativeness of that “perhaps” is immediately retracted: **and, indeed, representation undertakes to represent itself here**, his next sentence asserts, in all its elements, with its images, the eyes to which it is offered, the faces it makes visible, the gestures that call it into being.

I have taken the second as the principal claim; and I shall in a moment say why the first may be taken for a corollary of the second.

At first blush these may indeed be taken for claims *confined* to pictorial representation; but no one who has read the following two chapters of *The Order Of Things* may take them so narrowly; and Alpers seizes on the first as just such a narrow claim. Foucault begins with “a determinate and determining notion of classical representation” she avers, having taken him to be detailing the *representation of that notion* as he traverses the surface of *Las Meninas*; and takes herself to have refuted him

— though she began with praise for our essay as “the most serious and sustained piece of writing on this work in our time” —

by asserting that the painting “is produced not out of a single, classical notion of representation as Foucault suggests, but rather out of specific pictorial traditions of representation”

— out of two pictorial traditions, as it happens.

Now Foucault does not, to be sure, perform the chapbook exercise of ‘comparing and contrasting’ *Las Meninas* to some likely other painting as he conjures the purest form of representation there; but he surely did not think that the picture had brought itself forth — like Athena from Zeus’ brow — out of some *notion* of representation loose in its maker’s head

and working there unconstrained by pictorial praxis.

Far more importantly, Foucault’s processions across the surface of *Las Meninas* are properly seen as *being led*, really, by the *autonomous power* that is representation *representing itself* there: he surely did not take himself to be tracing out how a mere notion came to be represented

and his commentators generally ignore how *active* Foucault takes representation to be.

Las Meninas “confounds a stable reading” Alpers goes on to declare: but “not because of the absence of the viewer-subject” that Foucault, so she supposes, has posited. She has mistaken for *absence*, we must suppose, the *elision* of the subject he so insistently asserts

which is disclosed by — but would not consist in, we might now say — how **subject and object reverse themselves to infinity**.

It remains to say how the proposition that **there exists in this painting by Velasquez the representation, as it were, of Classical representation** is corollary to the succeeding claim

— however obliquely inferred: or educed darkling from liminal experience —

that **representation undertakes to represent itself** there. But that should be immediate now from what had got said as Foucault’s singular understandings of human nature and representation and knowing were gestured at above: all one need do is take the definition and balance *Las Meninas* affords the eye for a pictorial analogue of the *stasis* that clear and distinct perception is, supervening on the roil of representation regaining itself.

That the painting should become a sign in just the way it seems to — that its liminal doings ride as they do upon *convenientia* and *aemulatio* and *analogy*, and upon the play of *sympathy*: the genera of that pervading resemblance which Classical Thought disenfranchises — would have been a satisfying irony, surely, to the *haruspicator* Foucault seems most to have been.

epilogue

I have not attempted the exercise of abandoning myself, with *Las Meninas* properly near, to the conjuring I have imputed to our essay. I could not do so anymore, I think; and must leave to the vigour of enthusiasts such an elision of the subject as Foucault must have endured in its presence. The evidentiary protocols of a Linnean historiography will not, of course, admit any liminal experience of painting

— being equipped to *discriminate by style* only, as Danto puts it in *Animals as Art Historians*, as he notes ‘fascinating indications that pigeons are easily up to the task.’

And such experiences will themselves admit only very uneasily any *question of truth, emerging in the experience of art*, such as the hermeneutics of Gadamer had sought to articulate and answer: because their discursive registry may embarrass *the tact which functions in the human sciences*

— and functions there *not simply as feeling and unconscious*, Gadamer maintains, but as *a mode of knowing and a mode of being*. Foucault would not have cared, though, for the humanism *Truth and Method* so vigorously defends: however he might have applauded the abjuring of any narrowly empirical objectivity in the human sciences.

I take myself to have sufficiently demonstrated that, considered as an inferential exercise employing words in their daily senses, and proceeding upon what is plainly to be seen, Foucault’s essay on *Las Meninas* is incoherent.

One is tempted now to speculate on how such discursive anomaly as the essay displays, when its theses are taken for inferences, might have propagated itself among the peculiarly *abliterate* discursive creatures anglophone producers and consumers of Theory seemed to become through the closing decades of the last century. The exponents of ‘visual theory’ who flourished in those years must be accounted such certainly: whose textual doings finally subsided in an accident of *lexis* as complete as the *aesthetic entropy* — so Danto puts it in *After the End of Art* — within which visual art had by the term of the 20th century come to be produced.

But understood otherwise, as registering some liminal experience

— which subtends singular understandings, to note it once more, of human nature and representation and knowing: and *however* understood thus —

any institutional reception of our essay would always be discountenanced, one thinks, by methodological demands. Only in some mode of interpreting painting that was at once adventurous and conscientious, then, going obscurely on

— below the glittering surface of the artworld, surely, in ephemeral journals —
 somewhere toward the end of the last century
 — some way into the revival of painting's fortunes in the Eighties perhaps —
 might one might expect to find any intimation that Foucault's processions
 across the surface of *Las Meninas* were followed as conjurings of pure
 representation, at all, rather than as spectacle
 — as they must be, I shall hazard saying now, if they are to be rescued from their
 quotidian incoherence.

Such writing would have found casual notice only; and as its remains are
 unlikely to have been resurrected for the Web
 — where there may be searched without undue effort —
 to exhume them from an oblivion therefore already upon them would be
 exhausting. So I must leave my fancies to the reader's mercy.

Hans Varghese Mathews is an editor of Phalanx

texts used or mentioned

Aijaz, Ahmad	<i>In Theory</i>
Alpers, Svetlana	Interpretation Without Representation, or, The Viewing of Las Meninas, <i>Representations</i> 1 (1983)
Danto, Arthur	Deep Interpretation, in <i>The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art</i> Animals as Art Historians, in <i>Beyond the Brillo Box</i> <i>After the End of Art</i>
Gadamer, Hans Georg	<i>Truth and Method</i> (2 nd edition, translated by Weinsheimer and Marshall)
Granger, Gaston	<i>Formal Thought and The Sciences of Man</i>
Gresle, Yvette	Foucault's <i>Las Meninas</i> and art-historical methods, <i>Journal of Literary Studies</i> , December 2006
Marion, Jean	Cartesian metaphysics and the role of simple natures, in <i>The Cambridge Companion to Descartes</i>
Steinberg, Leo	Velazquez's <i>Las Meninas</i> , October 19 (1981)
Joel Snyder & Ted Cohen	<i>Las Meninas</i> and the Paradoxes of Visual Representation, <i>Critical Inquiry</i> , Winter 1980
