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DISCOURSE AND DISOCCULTATION: AN INTERVIEW WITH TIMOTHY REISS

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I

*The Discourse of Modernism*¹ by Timothy Reiss is a groundbreaking theoretical essay. Careless consideration wants to make of Reiss an epigone of Michel Foucault. Reiss' book is a kind of archeology, concerned, as its author puts it, with a central canon composed of "science fictions and utopias from the critical historical moment of the European Renaissance and Neoclassicism."² Yet the superficial resemblance to the Foucauldian archival work disguises a more complex relationship between Reiss and his inspiration.

The Discourse of Modernism, while occupying a position in the so-called post-structuralist movement more or less dominated by Foucault, does not so much continue the Foucauldian analysis in a new context as complement the work characteristic of, say, *Les Mots et les choses*. Foucault concentrates on the particular *épistémè*, and any given Foucauldian *épistémè* will be peculiar in respect of its isolation from and non-communicability with its ante- and post-cedents. An auditor of Hans Robert Jauss' UCLA seminars (1985) quotes him as saying that Foucault's *épistémè* seems to drop out of the sky. Apocryphal or not the remark contains some truth. Foucault has brilliantly documented the determinative force of the *épistémè*;

but under the label of archeology his *oeuvre* remains to some extent misnamed. He only tentatively posits for any of his discursive eras an origin or coming-into-being.

Reiss acknowledges his debt to Foucault: in *The Discourse of Modernism* "the name *discourse* will refer to a rather large and somewhat ill-delimited definitional field taken over, at least partially, from the studies of Michel Foucault."³ Whereas Foucault interests himself in the consolidated discursive era, however, Reiss directs his attention far more to the transition from one such era to another (whence his curiosity about René Thom's "catastrophe theory"). For example, in his magnum opus *Les Mots et les choses*, Foucault addresses more or less tangentially the problem of the discursive *limen*:

Le discontinu—le fait qu'en quelques années parfois une culture cesse de penser comme elle l'avait fait jusque-là, et se met à penser autre chose et autrement—ouvre sans doute sur une érosion du dehors, sur cet espace qui est, pour la pensée, de l'autre côté, mais où pourtant elle n'a cessé de penser dès l'origine.⁴

[Discontinuity—the fact that in the space of a few years a culture sometimes ceases to think as it had been thinking up till then and begins to think in a new way—probably begins with an erosion from the outside, from that space which is, for thought, on the other side, but in which it has never ceased to think from the very beginning.⁵]

But apart from such marginal discussion Foucault eschews the subject of the origin. Reiss, on the other hand, is genuinely concerned with the disintegration and reformation of the discursive era, and one conclusion of great import stemming from this concern is that since the late nineteenth century Western culture has been, in Thom's sense, in a moment of catastrophe. Liminal or aporetic moments constitute the major focus of *The Discourse of Modernism*. A gallery of figures "mark" the transitions which Reiss seeks to illuminate. Thus: "Galileo, Frege, and Freud symbolize the limits *a quo* and *ad quem* of analytico-referential discourse."⁶

Analytico-referential discourse, the discursive practice organizing the epoch which stretches between the mid-sixteenth century and the present day, consists in a certain instauration of the constitutive subject. Upon that subject descends the capacity to produce and validate the truth. Analytico-referential discourse must therefore concern itself directly with the problem of linguistic adequation. The wise man, the man of truth, is he who best is able to adjust his language—and

hence his perceptions—to that order of nature *from which* “proper speech” primordially takes its “propriety.” When Bacon writes that “there is no vice that doth so cover a man with shame as to be found false and perfidious,”⁷ it would seem a moral truism. What Reiss has so convincingly demonstrated is the tyrannical way in which analytico-referential discourse *prescribes* the truth. Wherever analytico-referential discourse establishes itself, it does so with a degree of dissimulation, the effect of which is to confine the human being to a kind of anhedonic ideology profoundly antithetical to the tactile and non-theoretical:

Galileo’s telescope marks the total distancing of the mind from the world and the imposition upon that world of a system which belongs to the realm of discourse. It is as though the system expressed the essential structure of the world by becoming that world . . . ⁸

The discursive practice of analytico-referentiality replaced what Reiss calls the discourse of patterning. Analytico-referential discourse operates on the descriptive-manipulative level; patterning discourse operates on the associative-interactive level. The latter works by resemblance and is, in the estimation of Reiss, a humanly freer avenue for dealing with life-in-the-world, which is to say, life alongside other human beings. To grasp what patterning is, one needs to compare, for instance, Paracelsus or even as late a figure as Pascal with Descartes or Galileo. In the former there is a sense that the individual subject (which according to Reiss does not really quite yet exist) *co-habits* the world, whereas in the latter the (fully constituted) individual subject *inhabits* the world *and commands it*, which means, of course, that certain individuals command other individuals.

The key work in the transition from patterning to analytico-referentiality is Kepler’s *Somnium*, published posthumously in 1634, but written early in Kepler’s career and, more importantly, supplemented throughout his lifetime. “Kepler’s notes [which supplement *Somnium*] are symptomatic of analytical knowing.”⁹ They systematize what originally is patterned by a power of resemblance. In this sense, the notes represent an action which Reiss calls disoccultation. In this process certain elements present but hidden in one discursive practice increasingly dominate that practice, transforming it into something entirely different.

Thus one discursive practice engenders another by exhausting its own limits: analytico-referential discourse establishes itself by occulting its antecedent, and expressing this occultation as a production of truth. However historically necessary this process may be, Reiss evidences what may be read as a kind of nostalgia for the era of medieval discursive practice (patterning). As analyticity consolidated itself, language no longer marked the human being's presence in the world, but signified rationality and proclaimed the human being's dominance of the world. This is, of course, perfectly consistent with Reiss' notion of analyticity as tyrannical and alienating.

Is it wishful thinking that leads Reiss to claim that the period of analytico-referential dominance has been, since the time of Nietzsche and Peirce, in its phase of dissolution? If analytico-referentiality *is*, as it were, passing on, is there any indication of what will replace it? A reading of Freud occupies the final chapter of *The Discourse of Modernism*. As Reiss interprets him, Freud marks one *limen* of analyticity. He regards the psychic life of the human being the way Galileo regarded the celestial objects revealed in his telescope, that is to say as *object*, "the objective," the true, and present for manipulation by a subject. Yet the matter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, precisely because of its inherent patterned organization, forced Freud to open out an originally analytic approach so that it could accommodate the symbolic content of the dream. Reiss insists that this marks a significant rupture of the analytico-referential worldview; but he avoids the too easy inference that it also marks anything that could be considered a return of patterning. Whatever will occult analyticity will in some way be analogous to patterning, but only insofar as it will do to analyticity what analyticity did to patterning. Reiss seems optimistic, however, and suggests that a positive liberation from the (disastrous) constraints of analyticity is possible. "We thus find ourselves in a situation akin to what faced Machiavelli's successors, who . . . felt themselves confronted with a *crisis* in all forms of discursive practice."¹⁰ Such twentieth century events as the altogether desperate (as Reiss sees it) consolidation of the total state, the emergence of Copenhagen physics, and the rise of "post-structuralist" thinking in the academy (to name a few), mark the dissolution of the old in preparation for the new:

I would suggest that we now find ourselves in a moment precisely analogous to that occupied by Bacon, Descartes, Galileo, Milton and Hobbes . . . ¹¹

In other words, Western culture is now in the possibility-rich but evanescent position of being able to instate the revolution predicted but never fully understood by Marx.

II

This interview with Timothy Reiss took place on February 9, 1986 in conjunction with Professor Reiss' participation in the annual Symposium of the French Department, UCLA, which addressed the notion of "Literature as Institution." Reiss' contribution took its material from his research for his forthcoming book; he described and to some extent analyzed the establishment of literature *as such* in the sixteenth century, both in France and in England. In the opinion of Reiss, literature *as such* began under Louis XIV as an instrument of the monarchy. Gradually the political aim of literature was occulted; but the aim remained as an ideology. The operation of a political structure at a level where the typical author is unaware of it is definitionally a *structural* phenomenon. I began the interview by asking Professor Reiss about his understanding of structuralism and "post-structuralism" and his place in it.

Bertonneau: I have to admit that my understanding of what post-structuralism might be is pretty naive. Can you help me out, and perhaps in the process give me some idea of where your work stands in relation to post-structuralism?

Reiss: Where post-structuralism is concerned we are really all quite naive. I don't myself quite know what post-structuralism is, besides being a convenient label. It isn't really a movement, as it is sometimes taken to be, but consists more or less in what happened when structuralism itself died away. It is academic structuralism, which I don't mean in any pejorative sense; but it's what happened when structuralism was assimilated by the academy. It covers, obviously, a great deal, both the radical seriousness of Foucault and the carnival of Derrida.

Bertonneau: In your presentation yesterday you suggested that the period of analytico-referential discursive practice was coming to an end, and that an opportunity was becoming available in which it would be possible to institute some desirable counterpractice. Might such an institution be a reinstatement of patterning? And if so, are we not in danger of establishing just one more dictatorial discursive system?

Reiss: I realize that what I presented yesterday was in some ways misleading. To suggest that once one has understood the way in which a discursive practice operates, one can then adjust or replace it by something new, is somewhat naive. What I intended to do was to show how by becoming aware of the operation of a discourse, and especially by becoming aware of how a *particular* discourse [analytico-referentiality] came into being, we acquire the possibility of avoiding the worst case of a project of instituting a new discourse. I was speaking, of course, about literature in particular as one arena of a discursive practice. Perhaps I should reiterate what I spoke of as the three possibilities of literary criticism, and explain their relevance to my project, as it is evident in, say, *The Discourse of Modernism*.

As you remember, I spoke of three courses open to the practitioner of what conventionally we call literary criticism: there is the political or collusionary role (available, however, only at a restricted period in the development of any discursive period); there is the business-as-usual role, which is ideological, and in which knowledge of collusion has disappeared; and there is the critical role (which is that of conscious counter-practice, and currently goes under the name of deconstruction). The ideologue is perhaps the typical critic, bound up in the underlying assumptions that govern discursive practice, or in the particular analysis prescribed by that practice. Now what I mean by discourse should itself be explained.

What I call the optimal society is made up by various discursive types, or classes, which in their various ways produce meaning. I must insist that not all discursive practices are linguistically constituted. One really must take into consideration, for example, painting, architecture, town-planning. All of these are ways of ordering, or better yet, representing reality. So are processes that have as their aim the manufacture of products. In the book I'm currently working on, called *Discourse and Society*, I study the automobile production line to show the ways in which different types of human activity make themselves meaningful in a single larger context. When the departure of any one way of producing meaning from the larger single context is great enough, one obviously sees the possibility of the emergence of a new larger context.

Capitalism is the *economic* form of analytico-referential discourse. The ruling stratum of the capitalist society understands capitalism as a certain way of producing manufactures for profit; but the worker, quite obviously, has a different point of view, hence a differ-

ent understanding, of the process. But the question is, how to get at the various compartments of meaning. The context is the same, but the understanding is different for capitalist and worker, or for manager and worker. One can understand, for example, the concept of alienation not so much as the exclusion of the worker from any kind of genuine participation in the production process but as the production of meaning as a discrepancy within a single process.

Bertonneau: This is the phenomenon you call in *The Discourse of Modernism* disoccultation [a process in which marginal or contingent elements in one discursive practice provide the basis for a subsequent discourse], is it not?

Reiss: Yes, because, on the one hand, the environment imposes on, or tries to impose on, the worker; but, on the other hand, the worker succeeds in affecting the environment. The origin of this model is, of course; Marx, and it is a *kind* of dialectic. What I suggest is that, in a given society, or socio-cultural environment, these differing viewpoints necessarily develop, but that one can generally understand them in terms of a common discursive practice, disocculted at first from a previous practice, then consolidating itself. But I also suggest that there is a beginning and an end to this process. By the way, you misrepresented me a moment ago when you attributed to me the notion that analytico-referential discourse is *ending*; in my opinion it *has ended*. If history is always movement, then there must be points of cross-over; and if there is a cross-over, its moment should be identifiable. I suggest that we are now seeing precisely that moment of transition, of transformation. This suggests, naturally, that at the phase of transformation, certain elements in the discursive practice must be newly emerged, and are themselves becoming available as elements for analyzing human activity (and therefore for a new representation of humanity). Some are drawn from the previous socio-cultural environment, some are quite novel and did not exist before. They become usable as tools of analysis in a subsequent phase.

Bertonneau: This observation is linked, I take it, with your insistence at the symposium yesterday that the cognizing individual subject as the guarantor of linguistic-descriptive adequacy is to some extent an illusion?

Reiss: I think that is correct. Because all this suggests that while human individuals participate in the process of socio-cultural transformation, their responsibility for that transformation is not entire. They have some control, but that control is not total. It is true that

choices affecting the whole are made by certain individuals; but those choices do not determine so much as *mark* a process which is in large part supra-individual. This follows on something which Kant said in a late essay of his on the subject of enlightenment.

Kant uses the idea of maturity to argue about human progress. Enlightenment, he says, is the gradual growth of instrumental techniques. This growth contributes to individual growth insofar as it permits the individual to participate in a more efficient or scientific relationship with the world, and to recognize his own limits. Thus for Kant maturity is social rather than individual growth. It may go from childhood to adulthood in various capacities. But in any given moment *in society* there is a definite limit to the extent of rationality. The individual will not develop further, but society will. I think also of Habermas' notion of the ideal speech situation. In that situation, people exchange ideas rationally with the aim of ameliorating adverse social conditions, and society is able to advance itself. Obviously this cannot happen in ideological criticism, but really only in some kind of rational counterpractice.

To steer back to the subject of literary-critical practice, I suggest that one mark of the failure of analytico-referential discourse is the visible debacle of traditional, aesthetic criticism. This goes along with the breakdown, in the twentieth century, of the classical models of science, with the fragmentation in our picture of physical order, the disintegration of the notion of lawfulness. Take the impulse to create a unified field theory: no sooner is some progress allegedly made in unifying the four forces, when a fifth force is discovered. The very operation of different instruments has the effect of fragmenting the matter in different ways.

Bertonneau: So that the operation of a compartment of the current dominant discourse—in this case particle physics—encounters a limit and, as it were, deconstructs its own assumptions?

Reiss: Something like that. All of these problems suggest not exactly a non-productivity of the old system but a kind of counter-productivity. You can see this in politics, for example, in the American political scene. The response of American leaders to increasingly problematical situations regarding the arms race, or what have you, is to turn their backs on the actual problems and to try to go backwards into some mythical quiet past. I mean, the difficulties in, say, Central American politics cry out for a new approach. But it isn't there, officially in any case.

Bertonneau: And the literary critic is bound up in this—aporia, correct? I believe that at one point, in the sixteenth century, what we now call rather innocently literary criticism was a significant tool in the project of consolidating the epistemological to the political order.

Reiss: Almost. But it's necessary to distinguish the epistemological from the political. Let me talk about critics again. Literary analysis fits into a wide domain; generally, however, in the present context, it can do two things: it can maintain what it regards as an inherited tradition, or it can participate in the transformation of that so-called tradition by becoming aware of the inadequacies which mark its finitude. The point I'm making is that if we're aware of the role which criticism occupies, we necessarily become aware of its interaction with other types of discourse, and by working with such an awareness we help create the possibility of a new general discursive class. We cannot now say what that is, nor create it by fiat.

The notion of the fiat corresponds, in fact, with the notion of the constituting individual subject organizing the social order, which is the essence of what I call analytico-referential discourse. We have to get away from that. To do away with structure is what post-structuralism means. It wants to do away with a certain kind of subject that was invented by the seventeenth century. Doing away with that element does away with one of the essentials in the maintenance of [analytico-referentiality]. It doesn't mean that we can't have a subject; but that we can no longer make do with that particular type of subject.

Bertonneau: I think of the kind of impasse Sartre constantly struggles with in his existentialism.

Reiss: Precisely. In *L'Être et le néant*, for example, Sartre gets into trouble over his substantial notion of the subject. The *néant* is the place of the subject. How then do you *move* from subject to subject? Existentialism depends heavily on a notion of subject, even if its idea of the subject is of a particular kind. When you try to adjust existentialism to Marxism, this is exactly the kind of problem you (or he) must deal with. The *Critique de la raison dialectique*, to cite another work, is an attempt at one level to make a subject that is not originary but a product of the collectivity. But Sartre, in my opinion, never really overcame this difficulty.

Bertonneau: You acknowledge the importance of Marx in the unravelling of analytico-referential discursive practice. But doesn't Marx suffer from the same or worse inadequacy as Sartre? Doesn't

Marx also issue a fiat as arbitrary as that issuing from the instauration of analyticity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries?

Reiss: Very clearly; but that is hardly a new observation. Marx constantly had this problem, because he was deeply enmeshed in bourgeois thinking. That's inevitable, and Marxian commentary has noted this. Yes, there's an enormous amount, in Marx, of the tendency toward centrally organized systems, a science that is organized in some way. There is, in fact, I think, a tension in Marx between a kind of utopian notion of a science in which an individual can have a proper role and the empirical tendency of the individual in the analytico-referential system to organize around himself rather than for the benefit of the collectivity. But Marx does realize, I believe, that individuals must play some role in the transition from capitalist to collectivist society. Marx is actually very much in the Hobbesian tradition. He is inconceivable without Hegel, just as Hegel is inconceivable without Hobbes. The real question is whether there are elements in Marx which can lead us to something new. I suspect that that is what is now happening. The failures of Soviet style Marxism, I would say, are due to turning marxism into a particular kind of authoritarian liberalism—which, indeed, is present in Marx. But it is the problem precisely of the relation between the individual and the collectivity which lies at the root of the failure of the so-called Western Marxisms.

Bertonneau: I would like to ask a couple of clarificatory questions. The first is: can you distinguish with a bit more detail the critical functions which you designate as political and ideological?

Reiss: The political type of—let's call it—criticism has to do with a certain moment at the outset of the analytico-referential period when literature as such was quite consciously instituted by certain persons connected with the French monarchy as a political tool. By that I mean that [Louis XIV and Colbert] used what they instituted as proper literature, the canon, to help achieve the setting-in-place of a particular political system. When Richelieu, as I said yesterday, was given the task of forming the French Academy he was charged with two fundamental objectives. One was to create or take responsibility for a pure French language which would be capable of absolute clarity of expression, whose transparency of mediation would be assumed as objective; and to publish a dictionary that would prescribe that language. The other was to direct that language into a propagandistic course, to bolster internal and external policy.

Works in this vein would represent French culture, and inculcate values desirable to Louis. When Colbert established his list of writers, their licensing obligated them to write laudatory verses about the king. The same thing happens, though not so immediately, in England. Now this is political. When the mission, so to speak, has been forgotten, but the manner remains—*that* is the ideological.

Bertonneau: Would it be fair to say, using your terminology, that the origin of a certain manner becomes occulted, and as it is occulted, the individual responsibility for it ceases, to be assumed by the collectivity of, in this case, authors?

Reiss: That would be fair, yes. Then, gradually, through the eighteenth century, literature loses its connection with the polity—I am speaking especially about England now—but it still retains the—what to call it?—aura of being the oracle of beauty, truth, order, and so on, because those are the terms for the sake of which it was originally put into play. Since, however, literature functions in a peculiar way, it can continue the aims of polity long after the connection between the two becomes occulted. It is precisely at that point, the point of the occultation of the link, that literature ceases being political and becomes ideological. It then constitutes not exactly a false consciousness—that is one Marxian term which I won't use—but it becomes a form of consciousness that conforms to the dominant socio-cultural practice, to the way in which the socio-cultural environment is organized.

Maybe the term ideology is not quite an adequate one, but it is perhaps useful. What I suggest is, that [ideology] *organizes* both writer and reader and causes them quite unconsciously perhaps to be in collusion with the regime. I admit that the connotations of that term, collusion, are not the happiest—it suggests that there is something wrong with it, a moral judgment which I'm not making. A peculiar kind of elite ordering occurs, because an elite segment of society is in the beginning responsible for it. Anyone working with literature, as a professor in the schools or as a critic, which in America is usually the same thing, is absorbed into the dominant pattern. Again, that is the ideological.

Bertonneau: Would there be any profit in substituting for political and ideological the terms constructive and conservative?

Reiss: Provided that the partisan connotations were kept at bay, I'd say that that might be, really, a rather useful substitution. One has to keep in mind, though, that maintaining a dominant practice

is not the same thing as maintaining it as some status quo. It's not a static thing; it is indeed a *process* which implies that sooner or later it must run its course. There are always all sorts of underlying contradictions and these must ultimately be disocculted.

Bertonneau: What are some of the things that are *now* being disocculted?

Reiss: I suspect, for instance, that the so-called responsibility of the individual subject for the production of discourse is one of the things which has been disocculted over a period of time since Marx. The objectivity of discourse in the analytico-referential system is supposed to exclude the subject, but, especially I would say since Freud, this assertion has not been tenable. This is precisely one of those moments when a certain discursive practice reaches one of its limits.

One of the things we have become aware of is that the subject appears *in* discourse as the producer of it, and that, of course, poses tremendous difficulties for the notion of scientificity. When something like this problem becomes noticeable—there you have one of these moments when a particular discourse begins to grind to a halt. That is to say that it doesn't exactly "grind to a halt," but it makes necessary the abandonment of assumptions generated in the period before the aporia was apparent. That is what I mean by the catastrophic moment.

Bertonneau: In *The Discourse of Modernism* you use Kepler as (the term is yours) the *mark* of a certain moment of transformation. Perhaps, then, he represents the catastrophic moment. He seems—if I may rehearse what is, after all, your argument—he seems on the one hand to conserve the practice of patterning and on the other hand to supplement it with this new, analytico-referential discursive type. Does that stand as a fair reading of your thesis?

Reiss: I would say that that's a fair understanding of it. The work to which I refer quite a bit in my discussion of Kepler is *Kepler: astronome astrologue* by Gérard Simon.¹² In that book Simon points out that Kepler considered himself to be an astrologer—and that was his main job at the court of the emperor. He was also a mathematician, but for him mathematics was a tool that served astrology, and his task was to read the horoscope as it concerned various courtiers and so forth. Simon points out that Kepler's original purpose was establishing astrology on a firmer basis, so that he could get more accurate readings of the relative positions of the planets. His aim certainly was not to undermine astrology. Yet, as Simon points out,

that was the result of his undertaking: to weaken astrology and, as it were, to invent astronomy in the process. In this case you have, I think, a good example of what I mean by a catastrophic moment.

Take the book [by Kepler] that I analyze: the *Somnium*. There the co-presence of astrology and astronomy is the most striking feature, and in addition the way the latter destroys the former. The very extensiveness of the notes is demonstrative of the change which is taking place. Something is being done away with, and what I want to stress, as I do in my book, is the processive nature of this phenomenon. Remember that the *Somnium* [published posthumously] occupied Kepler through almost the whole of his life: he started it when he was a student and he was still working on it when he died. The notes accrue constantly from the early teens of the [seventeenth] century onwards.

He himself, therefore, "is" not but *marks* the catastrophic transformation. When—I won't say, "when it *occurred*," because I'm trying *not* to put it in those terms—but *during* Kepler's life and reflected in his work there was a shift from one discursive type to another. What the chapter on More [which precedes the chapter on Kepler] is intended to do is to show how that transformation became necessary. The previous dominance no longer functions. Now I won't claim that this is a self-conscious movement, because the notion of self-consciousness belongs to a period which was not yet in place during Kepler's time, but *Utopia* certainly represents a certain aporia leading towards Kepler's gesture.

Bertonneau: I have a question about vocabulary. You speak of the aporia or logical contradiction in a work such as More's *Utopia*. You speak also of the "catastrophic moment." Foucault, to whom you acknowledge your debt in *The Discourse of Modernism*, speaks of the "end of man" as we now understand that term. Is there not in what we call, *faute de mieux*, the post-structuralist movement, a tendency toward the apocalyptic?

Reiss: You have to remember that these words are metaphors: elements of discourse, or tools, to help understand what happened at particular moments. "Aporia" merely suggests that some element of a system no longer functions in the manner in which it is intended. History will gradually replace it by something else. Catastrophe is a bit more difficult. When I use it here or in *The Discourse of Modernism* I am employing it purely in the technical sense, not as anything millennial or apocalyptic. What [René] Thom means by catastrophe

is . . . Well, how much do you know about Thom?

Bertonneau: Only what I've read about in the writings of Martin Gardner.¹³

Reiss: Well, what Thom argues is that in a given topology or topological system what one has is a homomorphism. Now a homomorphism is a structure that moves or develops. Take the expansion of a balloon. A balloon is a homomorphic surface: you can blow it up and then let the air out and it returns to its original shape. Or take the blade of a knife: you can bend it and it will snap back. You can study what happens to the molecules in these systems when they are stressed. What Thom examines is the moment in this process when it is no longer reversible, when the balloon bursts or the knife shatters. One can trace the instant when this happens. I think Thom pursues the phenomenon up to four dimensions. My thesis is that this theory can be applied to sociocultural environments, although not with the same accuracy, of course, as when Thom studies a balloon. In a sociocultural environment the variables are simply too many. Nevertheless, *as a metaphor*, the catastrophic moment, Thom's model, helps us to understand something such as the transitional phase marked by Kepler. Society is always in process, and there comes a moment when certain social structures no longer function as they were intended. Then, something else has to take their place. But there's no sense of revelation or anything like that to what I mean.

Bertonneau: I wonder how much your own work marks, or goes along with, the transition which has been going on since, as you argue it, the nineteenth century? It occurs to me, for example, that the notion of successive, more or less non-communicating *épistémès* is something that turns up in Spengler, or that Heidegger, for example, not to mention Derrida, has spoken about the end of philosophy. Is it possible that you share a view with thinkers such as these, whom we must regard in other respects as being quite unlike you?

Reiss: Mind you, I've never read Spengler, nor am I a Heidegger expert. But insofar as I belong to—let's say—the post-modern period, I suppose that I might share features with these authors. It might be possible to trace the discursive type to which my thinking belongs back to nineteenth century thinkers such as Nietzsche and Peirce, who certainly stress the conventional character of knowledge, discontinuity, and so on.

Bertonneau: I've been trying to come to terms with Peirce over the last few weeks.

Reiss: Then you know how difficult he is—and how different he is from the earlier American philosophical thinkers, Emerson, for example. So too with Nietzsche. Even though he derives at first to some extent from Schopenhauer, he's really something new. I think that we all follow, to one degree or another, the style set by people like Peirce and Nietzsche.

Bertonneau: Regrettably our time has come to an end. I thank you for submitting to so many questions.

Reiss: It has been a pleasure.

Bertonneau: A mutual pleasure. Thank you again.

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Notes

1. Timothy Reiss, *The Discourse of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).
2. Reiss, p. 9.
3. Reiss, p. 27.
4. Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 64.
5. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, English translation of *Les Mots et les choses* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 50.
6. Reiss, p. 26.
7. Francis Bacon, *The Essays*, ed. by John Pitcher (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1985), pp. 62–63.
8. Reiss, p. 140.
9. Reiss, p. 161.
10. Reiss, p. 385.
11. Reiss, p. 385.
12. Gérard Simon, *Kepler: astronome astrologue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979).
13. "René Thom's fundamental discovery was that under certain precisely defined conditions there are just seven types of elementary catastrophes. Each involves no more than four variables and can be modeled in what physicists call a 'phase space' (in [Catastrophe Theory] it is a 'behavioral space') of two through six dimensions. In these abstract spaces the change of a system is diagrammed by a single point that moves over a smooth 'behavior surface.' The catastrophe occurs when the point is forced by the structure to jump from one sheet of the surface to the other." Martin Gardner, *Science, Good, Bad and Bogus* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1981), p. 366.

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Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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