the moment of its formal structure and laws of construction, but that of its existence and the rules that govern its appearance, if not by dealing with relatively unformalized groups of discourses, in which the statements do not seem necessarily to be built on the rules of pure syntax? How can we be sure of avoiding such divisions as the *œuvre*, or such categories as 'influence', unless, from the very outset, we adopt sufficiently broad fields and scales that are chronologically vast enough? Lastly, how can we be sure that we will not find ourselves in the grip of all those over-hasty unities or syntheses concerning the speaking subject, or the author of the text, in short, all anthropological categories? Unless, perhaps, we consider all the statements out of which these categories are constituted – all the statements that have chosen the subject of discourse (their own subject) as their 'object' and have undertaken to deploy it as their field of knowledge?

This explains the *de facto* privilege that I have accorded to those discourses that, to put it very schematically, define the 'sciences of man'. But it is only a provisional privilege. Two facts must be constantly borne in mind: that the analysis of discursive events is in no way limited to such a field; and that the division of this field itself cannot be regarded either as definitive or as absolutely valid; it is no more than an initial approximation that must allow relations to appear that may erase the limits of this initial outline.

CHAPTER 2

Discursive Formations

I have undertaken, then, to describe the relations between statements. I have been careful to accept as valid none of the unities that would normally present themselves to anyone embarking on such a task. I have decided to ignore no form of discontinuity, break, threshold, or limit. I have decided to describe statements in the field of discourse and the relations of which they are capable. As I see it, two series of problems arise at the outset: the first, which I shall leave to one side for the time being and shall return to later, concerns the indiscriminate use that I have made of the terms statement, event, and discourse; the second concerns the relations that may legitimately be described between the statements that have been left in their provisional, visible grouping.

There are statements, for example, that are quite obviously concerned – and have been from a date that is easy enough to determine – with political economy, or biology, or psychopathology; there are others that equally obviously belong to those age-old continuities known as grammar or medicine. But what are these unities? How can we say that the analysis of headaches carried out by Willis or Charcot belong to the same order of discourse? That Petty's inventions are in continuity with Neumann's econometry? That the analysis of judgement by the Port-Royal grammarians belongs to the same domain as the discovery of vowel gradations in the Indo-European languages? What, in fact, are *medicine*, *grammar*, or *political economy*? Are they merely a retrospective regrouping by which the contemporary sciences deceive themselves as to their own past? Are they forms that have become established once and for all and have gone on developing through time? Do they conceal other unities? And what sort of links can validly be recognized between all these statements that form, in such a familiar and insistent way, such an enigmatic mass?

First hypothesis – and the one that, at first sight, struck me as being the

most likely and the most easily proved: statements different in form, and dispersed in time, form a group if they refer to one and the same object. Thus, statements belonging to psychopathology all seem to refer to an object that emerges in various ways in individual or social experience and which may be called madness. But I soon realized that the unity of the object 'madness' does not enable one to individualize a group of statements, and to establish between them a relation that is both constant and describable. There are two reasons for this. It would certainly be a mistake to try to discover what could have been said of madness at a particular time by interrogating the being of madness itself, its secret content, its silent, self-enclosed truth; mental illness was constituted by all that was said in all the statements that named it, divided it up, described it, explained it, traced its developments, indicated its various correlations, judged it, and possibly gave it speech by articulating, in its name, discourses that were to be taken as its own. Moreover, this group of statements is far from referring to a single object, formed once and for all, and to preserving it indefinitely as its horizon of inexhaustible ideality; the object presented as their correlative by medical statements of the seventeenth or eighteenth century is not identical with the object that emerges in legal sentences or police action; similarly, all the objects of psychopathological discourses were modified from Pinel or Esquirol to Bleuler: it is not the same illnesses that are at issue in each of these cases; we are not dealing with the same madmen.

One might, perhaps one should, conclude from this multiplicity of objects that it is not possible to accept, as a valid unity forming a group of statements, a 'discourse, concerning madness'. Perhaps one should confine one's attention to those groups of statements that have one and the same object: the discourses on melancholia, or neurosis, for example. But one would soon realize that each of these discourses in turn constituted its object and worked it to the point of transforming it altogether. So that the problem arises of knowing whether the unity of a discourse is based not so much on the permanence and uniqueness of an object as on the space in which various objects emerge and are continuously transformed. Would not the typical relation that would enable us to individualize a group of statements concerning madness then be: the rule of simultaneous or successive emergence of the various objects that are named, described, analysed, appreciated, or judged in that relation? The unity of discourses on madness would not be based upon the existence of the object 'madness', or the constitution of a single horizon of objectivity; it would be the interplay

of the rules that make possible the appearance of objects during a given period of time: objects that are shaped by measures of discrimination and repression, objects that are differentiated in daily practice, in law, in religious casuistry, in medical diagnosis, objects that are manifested in pathological descriptions, objects that are circumscribed by medical codes, practices, treatment, and care. Moreover, the unity of the discourses on madness would be the interplay of the rules that define the transformations of these different objects, their non-identity through time, the break produced in them, the internal discontinuity that suspends their permanence. Paradoxically, to define a group of statements in terms of its individuality would be to define the dispersion of these objects, to grasp all the interstices that separate them, to measure the distances that reign between them – in other words, to formulate their law of division.

Second hypothesis to define a group of relations between statements: their form and type of connexion. It seemed to me, for example, that from the nineteenth century medical science was characterized not so much by its objects or concepts as by a certain *style*, a certain constant manner of statement. For the first time, medicine no longer consisted of a group of traditions, observations, and heterogeneous practices, but of a corpus of knowledge that presupposed the same way of looking at things, the same division of the perceptual field, the same analysis of the pathological fact in accordance with the visible space of the body, the same system of transcribing what one perceived in what one said (same vocabulary, same play of metaphor); in short, it seemed to me that medicine was organized as a series of descriptive statements. But, there again, I had to abandon this hypothesis at the outset and recognize that clinical discourse was just as much a group of hypotheses about life and death, of ethical choices, of therapeutic decisions, of institutional regulations, of teaching models, as a group of descriptions; that the descriptions could not, in any case, be abstracted from the hypotheses, and that the descriptive statement was only one of the formulations present in medical discourse. I also had to recognize that this description has constantly been displaced: either because, from Bichat to cell pathology, the scales and guide-lines have been displaced; or because from visual inspection, auscultation and palpation to the use of the microscope and biological tests, the information system has been modified; or, again, because, from simple anatomo-clinical correlation to the delicate analysis of physiopathological processes, the lexicon of signs and their decipherment has been entirely reconstituted; or, finally, because the doctor has gradually ceased to be himself the locus

of the registering and interpretation of information, and because, beside him, outside him, there have appeared masses of documentation, instruments of correlation, and techniques of analysis, which, of course, he makes use of, but which modify his position as an observing subject in relation to the patient.

All these alterations, which may now lead to the threshold of a new medicine, gradually appeared in medical discourse throughout the nineteenth century. If one wished to define this discourse by a codified and normative system of statement, one would have to recognize that this medicine disintegrated as soon as it appeared and that it really found its formulation only in Bichat and Laennec. If there is a unity, its principle is not therefore a determined form of statements; is it not rather the group of rules, which, simultaneously or in turn, have made possible purely perceptual descriptions, together with observations mediated through instruments, the procedures used in laboratory experiments, statistical calculations, epidemiological or demographic observations, institutional regulations, and therapeutic practice? What one must characterize and individualize is the coexistence of these dispersed and heterogeneous statements; the system that governs their division, the degree to which they depend upon one another, the way in which they interlock or exclude one another, the transformation that they undergo, and the play of their location, arrangement, and replacement.

Another direction of research, another hypothesis: might it not be possible to establish groups of statements, by determining the system of permanent and coherent concepts involved? For example, does not the Classical analysis of language and grammatical facts (from Lancelot to the end of the eighteenth century) rest on a definite number of concepts whose content and usage had been established once and for all: the concept of *judgement* defined as the general, normative form of any sentence, the concepts of *subject* and *predicate* regrouped under the more general category of *noun*, the concept of *verb* used as the equivalent of that of *logical copula*, the concept of *word* defined as the sign of a representation, etc.? In this way, one might reconstitute the conceptual architecture of Classical grammar. But there too one would soon come up against limitations: no sooner would one have succeeded in describing with such elements the analyses carried out by the Port-Royal authors than one would no doubt be forced to acknowledge the appearance of new concepts; some of these may be derived from the first, but the others are heterogeneous and a few even incompatible with them. The notion of natural or inverted

syntactical order, that of complement (introduced in the eighteenth century by Beauzée), may still no doubt be integrated into the conceptual system of the Port-Royal grammar. But neither the idea of an originally expressive value of sounds, nor that of a primitive body of knowledge enveloped in words and conveyed in some obscure way by them, nor that of regularity in the mutation of consonants, nor the notion of the verb as a mere name capable of designating an action or operation, is compatible with the group of concepts used by Lancelot or Duclos. Must we admit therefore that grammar only appears to form a coherent figure; and that this group of statements, analyses, descriptions, principles and consequences, deductions that has been perpetrated under this name for over a century is no more than a false unity? But perhaps one might discover a discursive unity if one sought it not in the coherence of concepts, but in their simultaneous or successive emergence, in the distance that separates them and even in their incompatibility. One would no longer seek an architecture of concepts sufficiently general and abstract to embrace all others and to introduce them into the same deductive structure; one would try to analyse the interplay of their appearances and dispersion.

Lastly, a fourth hypothesis to regroup the statements, describe their interconnexion and account for the unitary forms under which they are presented: the identity and persistence of themes. In 'sciences' like economics or biology, which are so controversial in character, so open to philosophical or ethical options, so exposed in certain cases to political manipulation, it is legitimate in the first instance to suppose that a certain thematic is capable of linking, and animating a group of discourses, like an organism with its own needs, its own internal force, and its own capacity for survival. Could one not, for example, constitute as a unity everything that has constituted the evolutionist theme from Buffon to Darwin? A theme that in the first instance was more philosophical, closer to cosmology than to biology; a theme that directed research from afar rather than named, regrouped, and explained results; a theme that always presupposed more than one was aware of, but which, on the basis of this fundamental choice, forcibly transformed into discursive knowledge what had been outlined as a hypothesis or as a necessity. Could one not speak of the Physiocratic theme in the same way? An idea that postulated, beyond all demonstration and prior to all analysis, the natural character of the three ground rents; which consequently presupposed the economic and political primacy of agrarian property; which excluded all analysis of the

mechanisms of industrial production; which implied, on the other hand, the description of the circulation of money within a state, of its distribution between different social categories, and of the channels by which it flowed back into production; which finally led Ricardo to consider those cases in which this triple rent did not appear, the conditions in which it could form, and consequently to denounce the arbitrariness of the Physiocratic theme?

But on the basis of such an attempt, one is led to make two inverse and complementary observations. In one case, the same thematic is articulated on the basis of two sets of concepts, two types of analysis, two perfectly different fields of objects: in its most general formulation, the evolutionist idea is perhaps the same in the work of Benoît de Maillet, Bordeu or Diderot, and in that of Darwin; but, in fact, what makes it possible and coherent is not at all the same thing in either case. In the eighteenth century, the evolutionist idea is defined on the basis of a kinship of species forming a continuum laid down at the outset (interrupted only by natural catastrophes) or gradually built up by the passing of time. In the nineteenth century the evolutionist theme concerns not so much the constitution of a continuous table of species, as the description of discontinuous groups and the analysis of the modes of interaction between an organism whose elements are interdependent and an environment that provides its real conditions of life. A single theme, but based on two types of discourse. In the case of Physiocracy, on the other hand, Quesnay's choice rests exactly on the same system of concepts as the opposite opinion held by those that might be called utilitarists. At this period the analysis of wealth involved a relatively limited set of concepts that was accepted by all (coinage was given the same definition; prices were given the same explanation; and labour costs were calculated in the same way). But, on the basis of this single set of concepts, there were two ways of explaining the formation of value, according to whether it was analysed on the basis of exchange, or on that of remuneration for the day's work. These two possibilities contained within economic theory, and in the rules of its set of concepts, resulted, on the basis of the same elements, in two different options.

It would probably be wrong therefore to seek in the existence of these themes the principles of the individualization of a discourse. Should they not be sought rather in the dispersion of the points of choice that the discourse leaves free? In the different possibilities that it opens of reanimating already existing themes, of arousing opposed strategies, of giving way

to irreconcilable interests, of making it possible, with a particular set of concepts, to play different games? Rather than seeking the permanence of themes, images, and opinions through time, rather than retracing the dialectic of their conflicts in order to individualize groups of statements, could one not rather mark out the dispersion of the points of choice, and define prior to any option, to any thematic preference, a field of strategic possibilities?

I am presented therefore with four attempts, four failures – and four successive hypotheses. They must now be put to the test. Concerning those large groups of statements with which we are so familiar – and which we call *medicine*, *economics*, or *grammar* – I have asked myself on what their unity could be based. On a full, tightly packed, continuous, geographically well-defined field of objects? What appeared to me were rather series full of gaps, intertwined with one another, interplays of differences, distances, substitutions, transformations. On a definite, normative type of statement? I found formulations of levels that were much too different and functions that were much too heterogeneous to be linked together and arranged in a single figure, and to simulate, from one period to another, beyond individual *œuvres*, a sort of great uninterrupted text. On a well-defined alphabet of notions? One is confronted with concepts that differ in structure and in the rules governing their use, which ignore or exclude one another, and which cannot enter the unity of a logical architecture. On the permanence of a thematic? What one finds are rather various strategic possibilities that permit the activation of incompatible themes, or, again, the establishment of the same theme in different groups of statement. Hence the idea of describing these dispersions themselves; of discovering whether, between these elements, which are certainly not organized as a progressively deductive structure, nor as an enormous book that is being gradually and continuously written, nor as the *œuvre* of a collective subject, one cannot discern a regularity: an order in their successive appearance, correlations in their simultaneity, assignable positions in a common space, a reciprocal functioning, linked and hierarchized transformations. Such an analysis would not try to isolate small islands of coherence in order to describe their internal structure; it would not try to suspect and to reveal latent conflicts; it would study forms of division. Or again: instead of reconstituting *chains of inference* (as one often does in the history of the sciences or of philosophy), instead of drawing up *tables of differences* (as the linguists do), it would describe *systems of dispersion*.

Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a *discursive formation* – thus avoiding words that are already overladen with conditions and consequences, and in any case inadequate to the task of designating such a dispersion, such as 'science', 'ideology', 'theory', or 'domain of objectivity'. The conditions to which the elements of this division (objects, mode of statement, concepts, thematic choices) are subjected we shall call the *rules of formation*. The rules of formation are conditions of existence (but also of coexistence, maintenance, modification, and disappearance) in a given discursive division.

This, then, is the field to be covered; these the notions that we must put to the test and the analyses that we must carry out. I am well aware that the risks are considerable. For an initial probe, I made use of certain fairly loose, but familiar, groups of statement: I have no proof that I shall find them again at the end of the analysis, nor that I shall discover the principle of their delimitation and individualization; I am not sure that the discursive formations that I shall isolate will define medicine in its overall unity, or economics and grammar in the overall curve of their historical destination; they may even introduce unexpected boundaries and divisions. Similarly, I have no proof that such a description will be able to take account of the scientificity (or non-scientificity) of the discursive groups that I have taken as an attack point and which presented themselves at the outset with a certain pretension to scientific rationality; I have no proof that my analysis will not be situated at a quite different level, constituting a description that is irreducible to epistemology or to the history of the sciences. Moreover, at the end of such an enterprise, one may not recover those unities that, out of methodological rigour, one initially held in suspense: one may be compelled to dissociate certain *œuvres*, ignore influences and traditions, abandon definitively the question of origin, allow the commanding presence of authors to fade into the background; and thus everything that was thought to be proper to the history of ideas may disappear from view. The danger, in short, is that instead of providing a basis for what already exists, instead of going over with bold strokes lines that have already been sketched, instead of finding reassurance in this return and final confirmation, instead of completing the blessed circle that announces, after innumerable stratagems and as many

nights, that all is saved, one is forced to advance beyond familiar territory, far from the certainties to which one is accustomed, towards an as yet uncharted land and unforeseeable conclusion. Is there not a danger that everything that has so far protected the historian in his daily journey and accompanied him until nightfall (the destiny of rationality and the teleology of the sciences, the long, continuous labour of thought from period to period, the awakening and the progress of consciousness, its perpetual resumption of itself, the uncompleted, but uninterrupted movement of totalizations, the return to an ever-open source, and finally the historico-transcendental thematic) may disappear, leaving for analysis a blank, indifferent space, lacking in both interiority and promise?