BOOK REVIEW

Michel Foucault: This is not a Pipe. Translated and edited by James Harkness. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983. 66 pp., 30 plates.

Reviewed by Marcel Chabot, Windsor

Ten years have passed since the publication of the original edition of Foucault's insightful if somewhat provocative appraisal of Rene Magritte's paintings, which appeared in French under the paradoxical title of Ceci n'est pas une pipe, the very words written by the eminent Belgian surrealist under the obviously naturalistic representation of a pipe. This recent edition in English, which is in fact more than just a translation, constitutes a welcome addition to the Quantum series published by the University of California Press, consisting of succinct studies short enough for an evening's reading and "significant enough to be a book," to quote from that relative rarity, namely an accurate book blurb.

This interesting study of Magritte's variations on the pipe theme has been significantly augmented by elements that were not included in the original version in French. To begin with, the translator has wisely chosen to provide no less than thirty illustrations in black and white, including more than twenty reproductions of paintings by Wassily Kandinsky, as well as two plates containing examples of the calligram, an arrangement of words that form a representation of the subject. It is used in poems by Guillaume Apollinaire, an avant-garde writer much esteemed by the Surrealist painter. These reproductions add a large measure of visual appeal and serve to elucidate the sometimes abstruse wording of certain contexts. The reader can also benefit from the short yet substantive introduction as well as from the succinct notes provided by Mr. Harkness. In his introduction, the editor-translator, to award him his just due in the form of a double title, has succeeded in summarizing the main lines of both Magritte's and Foucault's critical approach to art. Harkness expeditiously underlines the reason for the singular tribute paid to Magritte by Michel Foucault, the philosopher-historian who in his critique of discourse undertaken originally in Les Mots et les Choses (1966) had sought to lay the foundations of an "archeology of the human sciences." According to Foucault, Magritte's paradoxical compositions constitute a "visual critique of language," of the very discourse that underlies representational art. In fact, Magritte himself, in a letter to Foucault translated by Harkness, indicates that he had been most impressed by this book; both thinkers seemingly agree on the fundamental preference for the term of "similitude" over "resemblance." The Belgian painter had long been an avid reader of philosophers such as Hegel, Heidegger and Sartre; he was thus prompt to seize upon Foucault's criti-

-cal distinction between "resemblances" and "similitude" in his approach to the uneasy relation between reality and its artistic representation. Harkness acknowledges fully the importance of Magritte's early experiments with Cubism and Futurism but points out the particular significance of the influence of Giorgio de Chirico, the Italian master credited with the composition of a kind of "visual non sequitur", all of which would lead the Belgian artist to assert the ascendancy of poetry, of poetic intuition, over painting. In Magritte's canvasses the assorted paraphernalia of everyday life would be given a poetic, abstracted form contributing to the "ineffable alienness beneath the surface familiarity of the world." The editor seeks to show quite clearly why Foucault would become fascinated by Magritte's visual critique of language, which is so clearly illustrated by "This is not a pipe."

In his introduction the translator justifiably devotes more space to an analysis of Foucault's original, if at times perplexing, theses than to a discussion of Magritte's artistic evolution. To begin with, Harkness admits that the task of translating Foucault's text entailed a number of difficult choices. The reader may indeed share his reluctance to use the term "similitude," chosen rather than "likeness, similarity" and "a-likeness" mostly because of its use in the translation of Les Mots et les Choses under the title of The Order of Things. The Foucaultian wit, which delights in puns, playful sallies, even wisecracks, causes the translator to struggle with such expressions as "nom d'une pipe", "homme éclatant avec rire", and "corps nu", which when spoken sounds like "cornu" (cuckold). Harkness quite properly decided to leave untranslated the titles, as well as the words painted by Magritte in certain paintings butin each case the meaning of the titles and words is explored in the notes provided at the back of the book. Lastly, it can be stated that the translator has succeeded in avoiding, as he puts it, anything which sounds like a stilted academicism.

The major problem entailed in the comprehension of this intriguing study on Magritte results from the original concepts which Foucault decided to focus on the Surrealist enterprise. Harkness himself raises the question of whether Foucault's personal interpretation of Magritte's art remains faithful to the original conception. He even seems to level against Foucault the charge of intellectual arrogance, of "offhandedness" in the rejection of traditional concepts in favour of very personal notions that certain readers -- art historians in particular -- might find perplexing or infuriating. However, it is most important for us to endeavour to grasp certain fundamental notions which the translator, to his credit, does much to elucidate.

Having conferred upon Magritte and Foucault the honour of being cartographers of "heterotopia," the zone of visual non sequiturs, as well as the line of battle in a radical critique of language, Harkness

effectively relates Foucault's study to the at times acrimonious debate that marked the apogee of structuralism. That the original critical reaction to the book was in general stridently negative resulted from the partisan controversies inflamed by structuralist rhetoric; as the editor claims, "it seems not unreasonable to guess that much of the initial disfavor that befell Ceci n'est pas une pipe was ideological in nature" (p.3). It is ironical that Foucault tried strenuously to dissociate himself from the structuralist camp, as the following quotation from the foreword to the English translation of Les Mots et les Choses amply proves: "in France certain half-witted commentators persist in labelling me a 'structuralist.' I have been unable to get it into their tiny minds that I have used none of their methods, concepts, or key terms that characterize structural analysis"(p.XIV). In the study on Magritte, Foucault's original approach to a critique of discourse remains couched in his own historico-epistemological terms such as "heterotopia" and "similitude."

Rather than attempt to explicate fully the concept of "heterotopia," a project which would take the reader far afield, Harkness opts instead for a lengthy quotation from Foucault's The Order of Things. Accordingly, "heterotopias" disturb the calm and serenity of verbal "utopias", given that they undermine such languages or verbal constructs, shattering common names, destroying syntax, stopping words in their tracks, desiccating speech and (horror of horrors!) dissolving our most cherished myths. The heterotopia practised in a visual way by Magritte in his paintings makes it impossible for us to blithely name this and that; Magritte categorically refuses to allow the viewer to say that a painting of a pipe is the pipe itself, thus dissolving the essentially circumstancial, conventional, historical bond between the word and the object represented (either in linguistic or artistic terms). The paintings of Magritte second Foucault's appeal for a radical divorce between words and things, prompted by the historical confusion of the two that artists such as Magritte and Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine literary "fantaisiste," have valiantly striven to dispel. Foucault traces the history of this fundamentally mystical bond between reality and language, which were long thought to share "essences," from the ancient Greeks right through to the Romantic period in art and literature. Harkness himself sees in the works of Noam Chomsky a "complex, mathematized" variation of the theme of a mystical substantiality of the word. Magritte's role in the debate initiated by Foucault consists in the assault upon the "mystical, Platonic identification of words with the essences of things." Unlike such surrealists as Dali and Tanguy, the Belgian artist sought to evoke the alien character that lies beneath the surface of daily life, rather than to shock or to provoke violent reaction. In many ways Magritte's art is more subversive, in that his images undermine the resemblances they first suggest. According to

Foucault, classical painting entailed by a kind of spoken discourse an identification of scenes or images with certain "models." This affirmative discourse, which Paul Claudel claimed is "heard" by the eye (see his L'Oeil ecoute), introduced a fundamentally linguistic element into visual space. Magritte's most striking contribution consists in the banishment of such referential discourse from visual production. In this antilinguistic programme of modernism are enrolled such artists as Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky. The concept of resemblance had concealed the very language that underlies representational realism. Whereas Kandinsky had recourse to visual abstraction, Magritte tends to use literalism, or detailed naturalistic representation in such a way that it undermines itself. The Foucaultian notion of similitude, as exemplified by Magritte, introduces a series of exclusively lateral relations that are not founded on a model, therefore remaining free of resemblance.

Although, as Harkness points out, Magritte's famous pipe with its subscript appears in an entire series of paintings and drawings, Foucault supposes that this fundamental image appears only in two contexts, the first version entitled: "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" and the second "Aube". The translator provides a third variation entitled "Les deux mysteres". Whatever the number of examples we may cite, Magritte's purpose remains to ally simplicity with intentional ambiguities that continue to multiply. That painting inexorably becomes an endless series of repetitions, of variations set free from a theme, is illustrated by the following passage: "There are two pipes. Or rather must we not say, two drawings of the same pipe, or yet again a pipe and the drawing of that pipe, or yet again two drawings each representing a different pipe? Or two drawings, one representing a pipe and the other not, or two more drawings yet, of which neither the one nor the other are or represent pipes"(p.16). Little wonder that the reader may be tempted to say: "nom d'une pipe!" (name of a pipe), a slang expression Harkness admits to being unable to translate! However abstruse Foucault's reading may seem at first, the reader must persevere in this subversive analysis of discourse.

Foucault's concept of interpretation must be kept in mind, for according to the cartographer of "heterotopia," "the very death of interpretation" consists in the belief that there are signs that exist primarily, originally, really as coherent, pertinent and systematic marks. On the contrary, he who would undertake to arrive at a definite interpretation must realize that there is no model; there are only interpretations (in the plural).

To return to Magritte's paintings, we must not look in any direction for a real pipe, for a model; that would only be a "pipe dream" about whose ambiguity Foucault allows himself to be ambiguous. In the second chapter, entitled "The unraveled calligram," Foucault aims less at ambiguity than at a range of interpretations, the variations of interpretations

once the notion of a theme has been discarded. It remains Foucault's contention that classical painting spoke and even persisted in speaking constantly, whereas the major task of the contemporary artist is to undermine, even destroy the narrative or discursive process. In classical art a certain order was imposed by means of "verbal" signs within visual representations; alas, "an order always hierarchizes them, running from the figure to discourse or from discourse to the figure"(p.33). Paul Klee becomes a revolutionary who attacks the principle of hierarchic order based on the "slavish" notion of resemblance to a model; in his painting the tactic of choosing juxtaposition over subordination prevails. In Magritte's art, the calligram, an arrangement of words in such a way as to form a picture of the topic, is unraveled. Certain poems by Apollinaire depicted objects; "Fumees" formed the shape of a pipe and "La colombe poignardee et le jet d'eau" sprayed words about like a fountain. The written text that Magritte affixes to his painting would seem to occasion a contradiction between the image of a pipe and the statement that "This is not a pipe". Foucault insists that no contradiction is possible because contradiction can only occur between two statements or within one and the same statement. He adds, "what misleads us is the inevitability of connecting the text to the drawing (as the demonstrative pronoun, the meaning of the word pipe, and the likeness of the image all invite us to do here) -- and the impossibility of defining a perspective that would let us say that the assertion is true, false, or contradictory (p. 20)". Although the definition of the calligram rests upon its inherent tautology, achieved by augmenting the alphabet, by repeating the same thing and by enclosing itself in a double cipher, Magritte's purpose is to unravel the calligram by splitting the double function of drawing and discourse. Instead of saying the same thing that is depicted, Magritte seeks to break the traditional bonds of language and the image. In "This is not a pipe" the text below the image affirms what Foucault calls its own "autonomy" with respect to what it states, all of which lends itself to several different readings which amount to an entireseries of intersections or attacks between the figure and the text. Foucault observes that there is no longer any "common place" -- thus Harkness translates the pun contained in "lieu commun", signifying "the common ground or shared conceptual site of language or drawing, visual and verbal representation; it also signifies the commonplace, that is, the ordinary. Foucault's point is that by effacing the former, Magritte also undermines the latter, enabling him to use quotidian objects to evoke mystery"(p.61, n.5).

In order to emphasize Magritte's revolutionary approach, Foucault proceeds to posit what he considers to be the two main principles that have held sway in Western painting from the fifteenth to the twentieth century. First of all, there was a separation between plastic representation (which

implied resemblance) and linguistic reference. This principle of resemblance required some measure of subordination: either the text was ruled by the image or the image was ruled by the text. Paul Klee abolished the first principle by "showing the juxtaposition of shapes and the syntax of lines in an uncertain, reversible, floating space"(p.37). However, the second principle posited an equivalence, that of the fact of resemblance and the affirmation of a representative bond. Credit for the abolition of this second principle accrues to Kandinsky, who freed painting simultaneously from resemblance and the representative bond. Foucault admits that, at first blush, Magritte would seem to have very little in common with Klee and Kandinsky, for the very reason that his works appear to be positively wedded to exact resemblances. But the Belgian surrealist is in fact an underminer of resemblances; Magritte's statement serves ultimately to contest the obvious identity of the figure and the name that the spectator may agree to give it.

In order to show how radical Magritte's insidious process becomes, Foucault devotes an entire chapter to the analysis of "burrowing words"; Harkness chose this title to translate "le travail sourd des mots," which has the connotation of weakening or subversion through undercutting. If on the one hand Klee had sought to construct a space without name or geometry, Magritte sought to mine a space that at first he seemed to maintain in the traditional arrangement. So often in Magritte's space there is no obvious relation -- Harkness uses the term "non-relation" --between a painting and the title chosen. According to Foucault, we can no longer be readers and viewers at the same time; Magritte states further that "the titles are chosen in such a way as to keep anyone from assigning my paintings to the familiar region that habitual thought appeals to in order to escape perplexity"(p.37). In what appears to be a realistic perspective, the ineffable alienness which characterizes Magritte's paintings undermines the superficial familiarity of the world seemingly depicted. Klee can claim to have invented a new space, while Magritte allows the old space of representation to subsist, but only at the surface. Foucault was particularly attentive to Magritte's own writings on the subject of words and the peculiar relation between them and objects. The Belgian painter himself posited the lack of common ground to establish a stable relation between the word and its presumed object; the seemingly inextricable tangle of words and images with substitutions and even, in Foucault's mind, transubstantiations. As a case in point, Foucault chooses "Personnage marchant vers l'horizon"; the words: "fusil, fauteuil, cheval, nuage, horizon" are not bound directly to other pictorial elements. Because these shapes remain so vague as to be unnamable, Magritte succeeds in creating what Foucault calls the very converse of a "rebus" -- i.e. that chain of shapes so easily recognizable that it becomes immediately identifiable.

The traditional concept of pictorial space yields to a "non-place" where we might at first see a "common place."

In quick order, we pass from a chapter entitled "seven seals of affirmation" to a concluding section dealing with what is called "non-affirmative painting". Magritte proceeds to dissociate resemblance and affirmation by "disrupting their bonds, establishing their inequality, bringing one into play without the other, maintaining that which stems from painting, and excluding what which is closest to discourse - pursuing as closely as possible the indefinite continuation of the similar, but exising from it any affirmation that would attempt to say what is resembled" (p.43). A clear example of such a series of similitudes occurs in a painting entitled "Representation," which consists of an exact representation within the same canvas of a scene below; we thus have two similar images which are linked laterally by a relation of similitude. Foucault seems to have beenparticularly impressed by "Décalcomanie", a title Harkness chose not to translate, although he does indicate that the notion involves "transference, transferring, decal and even a species of madness bound up with the idea of shifting identities." In this painting we see on the left the body of a man wearing a bowler hat who is looking at a landscape composed of sand, sky and sea; on the right there is a curtain from which a shape similar to that of the man has been cut out, revealing the part of the landscape hidden by the human form. Foucault perceives in this painting a process of transference, leading to a series, perhaps endless, of questions as to what we are to make of it. There being no single answer, no reference to a possible model, Magritte has effected an exchange or displacement of similar elements, but not a mimetic reproduction. This series of affirmations or different interpretations with no reference to an original model constitutes the very triumph of similitude -- "restored to itself -- unfolding from itself and folding back upon itself. It is no longer the finger pointing out from the canvas in order to refer to something else. It inaugurates a play of transferences that run, proliferate, propagate, and correspond within the layout of the painting, affirming and representing nothing"(p.49). What non-affirmative painting rests on remains the realisation that, to quote the original title of the final chapter, "Peindre n'est pas affirmer." As Claudel had declared, classical painting set in a discursive space spoke -- and spoke constantly; Magritte's contribution to modern art consists in the joining of verbal signs and plastic elements together, but without a reference to a prior isotopism.

In his introduction to the text, Harkness suggests that Foucault's sweeping generalizations are just the kind that might enrage art historians; the editor seems almost annoyed by the author's offhandedness with which traditional concepts are sloughed off. Despite the pitfalls of

Foucault's own style of discourse, we must admit that the ideas expressed in this study on Magritte seldom fail to provoke thought and often please by the witty and pithy way they are advanced. There is even a prophetic note in Foucault's attribution of indefinite extension wherein Andy Warhol's series of soup cans might eventually lose the identifying label of "Campbell, Campbell, Campbell, Campbell," for this phenomenon itself serves clearly to remind us of the influence of Magritte, which Foucault's book does much to elucidate.