Discursive Initiators: Foucault’s Discourse in Said’s *Orientalism*

Edward Said states in the introduction to *Orientalism* that the Orient is one of Europe’s “deepest and most recurring images of the other”, and that as the other, “the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (1866). According to Said, the Orient was created by the West to fulfill the role of the other and construct what it is to be Western, and that this binary conception relies on its own set of rules and ideas. Said takes the idea of the Orient further when he states that, “the Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles” (1867). Said displays the Orient as a European creation, and that the study of it is a discursive mode of thought, meaning that it follows a certain internal set of rules and codes specific to itself. Through setting up Orientalism as a discourse, Said is placing his theory within the scope of Michel Foucault’s ideas concerning discourse, and is opening up the entire field of Orientalism to a critique that asks “under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow” (Foucault 1489).

In his essay, “What is the Author”, Foucault produces his idea of “initiators of discursive practices” (1485). These initiators, whom Foucault claims are a product of nineteenth century Europe, are not “great” literary authors, or the authors of canonical religious texts, and the founders of sciences”, in which similar forms and elements are borrowed for similar effect. Rather, initiators clear a new critical space through the discovery of opposition and similarity within a specific institution, and the “possibility and the rules of formation of other texts” (1485). For example, Freud did not simply create a genre of psychological writing; he created a way to discuss the formation and functioning of the human mind that allows other authors the chance to borrow, or oppose, aspects of Freud’s process and thoughts, and discard other aspects that are not important to the particular work at hand. This creates a constant, dynamic dialogue between the works of the initiators and the work that precedes them. This continuous play within the discourse supports the introduction of new concepts, thoughts, and hypotheses that grow out of the ideas contained within the initiator’s own works (a description that borrows from the difference and freplay of Derrida’s deconstruction, and is an example within Foucault’s own text of his discursive theory). Further, the texts that expand upon the initiating works of discourse are not merely derivative; they “explore a number of possible applications” that result from a continual return to the original works of the initiator. These applications may be similar or promote differences and oppositions that allow for further growth of the discourse. In this way, “the initiation of a discursive practice…overshadows and is necessarily detached from its later developments and transformations” (1487), but is still attached to the later works that the initiation has prompted.

Using this schematic for discourse, Foucault suggests that one is able to investigate a discourse’s “mode of existence: the modifications and variations, within any
culture, of modes of circulation, valorization, attribution, and appropriation” (1489). When discourse is understood as a historical object, it can be examined from multiple perspectives that seek to understand how a discourse is shaped by and helps to form the society and culture that it resides in. According to Foucault, the modes, norms, and functions that are valued within a discourse can serve as a map of the proliferation of power within a society, and unmask the ways that this power controls it’s subjects.

Moving to Said, one finds an argument that borrows heavily from Foucault’s historical approach, and in which Foucault’s works are cited (1868). Said uses Foucault’s thoughts of cultural analysis in order to examine how the European world was able to “manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period” (1868). Here, Said names the modes of existence within the discourse of Orientalism. He then explains how Orientalism is controlled and circulated through “a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological text…it is a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, to manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different…world” (1875). Said engages with the final questions posed in Foucault’s “What is an Author?” through providing the institutions of the discourse and the ways that they circulate their ideas. Moreover, Said describes the Occident and Orient in the same manner that Foucault describes homosexuality and heterosexuality as a constructed binary that reflects the values of the hegemony more than it describes the real other. Last, Said provides a historical explanation where “the Orient is not an inert fact of nature” and is in fact “man-made” in order to resist the naturalization of the Orient. Through these maneuvers, Said provides a direct link to Foucault’s works.

However, Said and Foucault’s use of the theory of discourses exhibit several differences. In the conclusion of the History of Sexuality, Foucault states, “never have there existed more centers of power; never more attention manifested and verbalized; never more circular contacts and linkages; never more sites where the intensity of pleasures and the persistency of power catch hold, only to spread elsewhere” (899), which suggests a fluid sort of power that is not the result of a single institution or individual. Instead of a pervasive power, Said places authority directly on a single institution: colonialism. Said argues that “Orientalism brings one up directly against that question—that is, to realizing that political imperialism governs an entire field of study, imagination, and scholarly institutions—in such a way as to make its avoidance an intellectual and historical impossibility” (1876). Here, Said works within Foucault’s discursive model, but also opposes the idea that power is separate from the institution. An analogy develops between the initiator of the text and the one using it, but also an opposition that provides an example of the way in which discourse depends on this continual difference to expand and branch out into new intellectual territories. Said and Foucault both believe in the culpability of “power” within discourse, but they differ in the source, which is a significant addition on the part of Said. Foucault’s definition of power results in a lack of agency on the part of the theorist. Sure, power exists, and it can be tracked throughout a discourse’s institutions, but what can be done about it? If one attempts to subvert the hegemonic control of power, then it simply slithers into the hands of those that were originally opposed, so there is no reason to implicate a single institution. In contrast, Said believes that colonialism is the direct culprit and that one
must “illustrate the formidable structure of cultural domination and, specifically for formerly colonized peoples, the dangers and temptations of employing this structure upon themselves or upon others” (1885). He uses his own power as a public intellectual to offer a charged, political plea to colonized peoples. Said demands political attention and steps into a far different role than Foucault, who remains academically remote despite the controversial ideas about sexuality and punitive institutions that his writings suggest.

Another aspect of opposition between Said and Foucault exists in their treatment of the individual. Whereas Foucault only looks at the historical aspects of the entire body of texts within a discourse, Said believes in the value of investigating individuals operating within a discourse, “unlike Michel Foucault, to whose work I am greatly indebted, I do believe in the determining imprint of individual writers upon the otherwise anonymous collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like Orientalism” (1884). Foucault relies on his idea of the “author-function” to account for the individual in his writings. Much like his account of power, in which the individual is left with little agency, Foucault’s “author-function” rises historically out of the legal institution as a result of the copyright system. Further, the individual is a product of his historical epoch and society, so there is not much worth in studying singular works, as they will be another extension of Foucault’s idea of power. Said wants one to examine the individual works of the author because close textual readings “reveal the dialectic between individual text or writer and the complex collective formation to which his work is a contribution” (1884). In order to fully understand the conflict that exists between Colonized and Colonizer, one must closely examine the texts written by those that contribute to the content of the discourse being created. Each writer provides a unique relationship that exposes the oppositional structure that exists between the Occident and the Orient, one that is “a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (1870). This hegemony is voiced through the heteroglossia available within individual’s texts that must be examined to understand the ways that domination function in the “brute reality” of the world. This is similar to Said’s attribution of control and culpability to colonization instead of Foucault’s ambivalence towards ascribing power any progenitor, and indicative of the way that Said is returning to the initiator of discourse by finding truthful bits of theory and applying it to a fine-tuned and honed study of the impact of colonialism on Orientalism.

This return to the initiator of discourse is crucial in the functioning of Foucault’s theory. Through the acquisition of some parts of discourse theory and opposition to other components, Said is both promoting the relevance of the study of discourses and transforming the study with oppositions to Foucault’s thoughts. These oppositions lead to the creation of other opportunities within the field of literary studies, as Said’s Orientalism led to the proliferation of thoughts and ideas in the form of post-colonial studies. In this way, Said has become the initiator of his own discourse through the opening created by his opposition to components like power and the individual within “What is the Author” and The History of Sexuality. Said re-centers Foucault’s argument in a way that opens a vast amount of material to be examined with new tools. As Said and Foucault define and investigate discourses, they themselves become initiators of a new mode of thought that expands into its own massive, interdependent body of ideas and texts.