Words and Things

Rentré en possession de ton nom, l’alphabet t’appartient; mais bientôt, tu seras l’esclave de tes richesses.
— Jabès, *Le livre des questions*

“Lesen Sie,” sagte der Offizier.
“Ich kann nicht,” sagte der Reisende.
— Kafka, *In der Strafkolonie*

Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses* (1966) appeared fifty years ago and became an immediate if unlikely bestseller. The archaeological method advanced in this book turned away from human subjects as makers of meaning toward the impersonal frameworks or epistemes that allowed thought to be thought, knowledge to be known. “Man” emerged as a kind of *homo factum* in Foucault’s text, a figure of discursive logic, as impermanent as a “face drawn in sand.”

This course will begin by examining the distinctive linguistic turn in *Les mots et les choses* and then consider forms of subjectivity as they relate to language in Benjamin and Wittgenstein. For all three the autonomy of discursive language raises difficult questions for translation. Can we make choices in one framework that echo those made in another? Can we recognize if we have? Do words represent things, or are they wholly in themselves, pointing as it were to the nonexistence of things? A selection of translated writings will help us to probe these questions.

Readings

Foucault


Wittgenstein


**Benjamin**


**Translation**


