

Reading Caroline Rabourdin's Sense in Translation: Essays on the Bilingual Body

Havik, K.M.; Gabrielsson, Catharina; Jobst, Marko ; Frichot, Helene

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Catharina Gabrielsson, Marko Jobst, Klaske Havik and H el ene Frichot read Caroline Rabourdin's *Sense in Translation: Essays on the Bilingual Body* (London: Routledge, 2020).

Understanding language as an embodied and spatial practice, as Caroline Rabourdin does, is to see it as situated in a "world" that depends on "our bodily ability to make sense of each and every encounter with the words in various situations and various locations." (p. 1) Moving from one world to another, then, which is the task of the translator, is not only a matter of mediating between different significations, but encompasses the next-to-impossible struggle of co-existing in different worlds simultaneously, which is what it means to be bilingual. The collection of essays assembled as *Sense in Translation* – each one deriving from a specific setting, a particular cognitive community, one might say, and thus already inscribed into complex processes of mediation and relocation even before ending up here, in the book or on the screen, in those relays in the flows of dissemination by which a text encounters a reader – are introduced in a way that puts emphasis on the notion of translation. Rabourdin points to how *langue*, in Ferdinand de Saussure's original French, carries a "precious ambiguity" (p. 10) that is sacrificed for the sake of precision and clarity. *Langue* does not only signify language-system or code, she notes, but also tongue; the part of the body that along with the lungs – and (to which one might add) hands and the rest of the body – are crucially involved in the production and transmission of meaning. As indicated by the sub-title, *Essays on the Bilingual Body*, clearly the interests pursued in this book expand from the category of translation established in the introduction. But do translation and bilingualism even pose the same problems? Can we think of one without the other, or conversely, would differentiating between them allow for different renderings of the unspoken or hidden aspects of this 'world', the world of language? Precisely in being spatial and embodied, translation and bilingualism are also matters of time, and they involve mechanisms of power. If they share a common horizon, they are perhaps advancing upon it from two different directions.

Words are deceptive on their own. We know, with Rabourdin, that they cannot be understood without taking a much wider system of factors into account. Think, for instance, of how Le Corbusier's original *Vers une architecture* (1923) is translated into *Towards a New Architecture* (1927) – a radical transformation of not only meaning but of the entire thrust of the work itself, going far beyond the question of language. To my mind, it suggests that the physical materiality of the tongue – the *sense* that Rabourdin explores – must be extended to encompass the entire socio-historical context that deems certain words valid and possible, while others are not. In his translator's preface to Jacques Ranciere's *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), Gabriel Rockhill states that translation is a "relational reconfiguration of meaning" (p. viii) that necessarily also involves a mediation between two different cultural situations. What matters is not the choice of a particular word, he says, but understanding the socially-situated process of signification in which these words function – not only with regard to the original, but also the translation as such. Rockhill explains that he has chosen to distance himself

from “the dominant methods of translation” (p. ix) of French philosophy into English based on “the inviolable sacred status of the original text” (p. ix), leading to “a sacred jargon of authenticity that is cunningly appropriated by the high priests of the unknown in order to reconstruct the original syntax behind the translation and unveil the unsaid in the said.” (p. ix) Opting for the mundane meaning of words, at the expense of (perhaps) conveying every aspect of their philosophical ramifications, Rockhill gives priority to the concrete material basis of Rancière’s thinking, heeding the socio-temporal context from which it derives, but also its directionality, its general thrust.

As noted by Rabourdin, concepts in the original French often resonate with meanings that are entirely mundane and concrete. The ambiguity in how these layers are retained and continue to linger is of utmost importance for these concepts, not only as regards to their interpretation but also with respect to how they come to *matter* in everyday life. But the loss of ambiguity that Rabourdin sees as a problem with translation is crucially also a matter of *choice*, of taking sides. It has often been noted that French continental philosophy has reached the English-speaking world via the filters of American universities. In this respect, the “destructive need for disambiguation” (p. 10) that she objects to in translation can also be regarded as a need for abstraction; a forging of an alienating theoretical language that pins down the text’s location and situates it within a community with distinct hierarchical markers. If language is spatial and embodied, translations are imbued with power and ideology. There are social, political and historical forces at play in how translations obliterate the *sense* of thinking in and on the everyday; practices that serve to process the text into a level of abstraction where it becomes dislodged from its material basis – not only the tongue – and securing its interpretation as reserved for the academic clergy. Understanding language as an embodied and spatial practice, language as a “world”, is thus also to see it as a discursive practice.

From a horizon of power and ideology, the problem of bilingualism is cast in another light. What forces are operative in the making of the bilingual body? What positions of subjugation and privilege are at stake? What comes to mind is the socio-temporal contingency of identity, a relational subjectivity, and processes of subjectification that would seem to be harder, and more violent, as regards to migrant bodies, bodies torn between different worlds, worlds from which there is no going back and no easy passage forward to inclusion or belonging. **CG**

“Today I will read two essays, one in French and the other in English.” (p. 81)

1977, Dubai. I am four years old and placed in an English play school. There are several kids so blond, they look unlike any child I’ve known in Belgrade. It’s my first encounter with the language, after

which it will never feel foreign. I have no memories of learning it; it must have just seeped into my body along with the desert heat.

I recall playing with a friendly, dark-eyed girl, holding a toy truck in my hand, explaining what route the vehicle should take up and down the structure we had built out of toys, its trajectory clear in my mind, my explanation precise and detailed. Halfway through, I raise my head to see the girl staring at me with what looks like deep mistrust, revulsion even, as if she's seeing me for the first time. I'd slipped from English to Serbo-Croatian without noticing.

“Words are *unique* modulations of our being. But although they will not be expressed or exteriorised anymore, I would argue that those words still exist, inside the body, and the modulations remain a possibility.” (p. 65)

A year earlier: Libreville, Gabon. I have no recollection of the equally colonial French. The only memory is of a day when a sudden downpour caught me and my mother as we left the beach, so we had to take shelter inside a nearby building. A man already stood in the darkness of the lobby. My mother took off her skirt to wrap me up, dry my skin. I am looking at the man standing behind her slender figure, sense the vague tension in her bikinied body. Defiance as well. The man lowers his eyes.

“[W]e imagine the sensations of the muscular efforts we need to make in order to reach a particular object in space, at a particular distance from us.” (p. 24)

1998. I arrive in London for postgraduate studies, intent on never leaving again. There are thirty students in my course, none of them British. Only four are English speakers – three Americans and a Canadian. There is a French girl as well, and her first project is a mangled umbrella, its metal frame like contorted limbs.

Everything here appears similar to Paris, she says in her presentation. But everything is also a bit off. My body is not as it desires to be, it's twisted, uncomfortable. Bent out of shape.

I feel the opposite, I tell her later. I can finally straighten my back. Which is an odd way to put it, considering that what gives me freedom are the clubs for bent men. ‘Marcó’, she calls me, the accent falling charmingly on the wrong syllable. But the way she pronounces ‘r’ is the same as I do, since I have a speech impediment in my own tongue, one that disappears with the shift to the English ‘r’. Only the two Italians and the gay Argentinian seem to pronounce my name the way my friends back home would.

The Argentinian and I have sex one night and he whispers a few words in Spanish in my ear. I don't ask him to translate. I recall the taste of fresh water on his tongue the next morning.

“On reading or hearing the word ‘intercourse’ in Saussure’s course, the French speaker is surprised and will most definitely pause to question its relevance to the discussion on the propagation of languages. Did Saussure intend there to be a sexual dimension as well as a discursive one?” (p. 86)

On bonfire night that year, I am alone inside my room on the eleventh floor of a student accommodation tower in Kentish Town. I am watching the fireworks I never knew would accompany my birthday from that point on, in this, my adopted country. I stare at the bursts of colour painting the sky and write my first few fictional lines in English. The sense of freedom is palpable. I have a new voice.

“The lungs, the tongue, the cheeks are all involved in our expressive endeavour, but we do not represent the movements of all those parts of the body when we say something, we just say the words.” (p. 64)

The years between 1977 and 1998: Tolkien on repeat; the shock of Virginia Woolf; Evelyn Waugh, a template for fantasies; Lawrence Durrell, the eye that doesn't even know it's colonial. I am European, after all. Until, that is, I notice that European means non-British in Britain. That continental also means European. And that the term European remains reserved for the economic edifice on the outside of which the almost completely disintegrated country of Yugoslavia remains, and my part of that country, Serbia.

“Being a European citizen is no longer sufficient. A right acquired from birth has been removed and I am now subjected to the conditional rights described by Derrida. By the same account, I have been depleted of a sense of legitimacy.” (p. 85)

There are also Camus and Yourcenar, Duras and De Beauvoir in those years before London. And Tsvetaeva, Akhmatova, Dostoyevski, Pasternak. The hallucinations of Tarkovsky, subtitled as much as *Blade Runner* was. Because none of the many references are in my mother tongue. The canon is already translated.

“[T]hey both fail to mention that *langue* is also part of the body in the French language, a body part: tongue.” (p. 13)

In Serbian: *језик/jezik* (for that language can be written in the Latin script as well as its primary Cyrillic). *Матерњи језик/maternji jezik*: mother tongue, in two scripts. My mother tended to use the

former, my father the latter. It had nothing to do with his German surname, which I would drag with me to Britain, for its sound to mutate into the English 'j', as opposed to the German as well as Serbian sound that would have otherwise been marked with 'y' in English. To spare the interlocutors the confusion, I pronounce my name incorrectly.

In her fifties, my mother would start learning Greek, her grandfather's tongue, the tongue of her surname, however mangled (Efthimiades having mutated into Jeftimijades in the nineteenth century, that same 'j' proliferating). Greek was the tongue she chose as the one she belonged to, ignoring her grandmother's German, which her father, born in Belgrade to a Greco-German couple who had themselves already been born there to Greek refugee parents and German migrants, would have spoken at home. She grew up with German as the language adults slipped into when they wanted to exclude the children from the conversation. She resented it, never forgave them. The tongue of exclusion.

She used to sneak into the pantry as a child and scrape, with her teeth, the sour cherry filling from between the two layers of pastry that held it, leaving two flapping tongues to be discovered by her enraged mother only once the guests had already been served.

“When I say the word ‘umbrella’, I see a small black collapsible object, smuggled in most of Londoners’ bags before they go to work every morning. When I say the word ‘*parapluie*’ however, I see the walking stick umbrella my grandfather used to prop himself with when strolling in the sun. As a bilingual speaker I also associate the word with the French word ‘*ombrelle*,’ which protects from the sun.” (p. 28)

Amrel, my Greek-German grandfather used to say to my mother's amusement, not *kišobran*. He had a whole collection of terms no one else used, not even the people of his generation. *No daughter of mine will become a baletkinja*, he proclaimed, a mangled version of the word *balerina*. She became a fencer; hardly more respectable.

“*Sens*, here, is not simply meaning. What we reactivate is not the meaning, but sensations in tandem with meaning in order to *make sense* of the word.” (p. 34)

I am reading Deleuze in London in the early noughts, occasionally grasping for the original French, which I never learned. The logic of sense, the logic of sensation. I take *sense* and revert it to Serbian, *smisao*, *značenje*, even though it also means *čulo* (*dodira* – of touch); sensation as *osećaj*, *senzacija*, where *osećaj* evokes feeling first, sensation second. Only then do I go back to the text, having drained the English *sense* of its sensational connotations, which linger in my mind nonetheless. My favourite of Deleuze's volumes, on cinema, seems to represent less of a challenge, but every time I read *frame*,

I have to pass through *kadar* in my mind, the distinction between the still frame and the shot confused by such a move. The word is not even of Slav origin; who knows what French or German etymologies it would help me understand. All of language, only ever temporarily stable.

“Both languages become available to the bilingual body at any given moment and are available as possible modulations of the same body, of the same speaking subject.” (p. 89)

You were allowed to write about Deleuze even though you don't speak French, an acquaintance from Belgrade emails from an Ivy League institution. *They don't allow it here*. Then we lose touch. Fifteen years later I discover she's published a book on Russian architecture, the Slav connection stratified and assigned its acceptable place.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened had I moved to Berlin in 1998. This surname would have arrived home after a century and a half, and my decade of studying the language would have found its use. Nietzsche *ohne* Deleuze, is what might have happened. Or philosophy that ignores French theory.

“Poincaré describes geometry as the study of *movements*, which is what interests us here.” (p. 24)

I would have taken a direct flight from Belgrade to London in that autumn of 1998, landing at Heathrow, or Gatwick perhaps. I would have boarded a train to central London, then taken a black cab for Camden. That train journey, a translation from A to B through the sprawl of the metropolis: my first intimation of the sea of brick that unfolds interminably. *No, Yugoslavia is not Eastern Europe exactly, it's the Balkans. No, it wasn't behind the iron curtain, it was Non-Aligned*. And in 1999: ‘Europe in Flames’, the *Metro* headline screams over a photograph of Belgrade in red and yellow. It looks so abstract.

“I arrived in the UK in the year 2000. I was not forced by political or economic reasons, but arrived with curiosity born from the desire to discover and understand a language that was not my own.” (p. 84)

You are funny, my first London boyfriend says. *It's not pronounced oh-nion, it's ah-nion. Oh, and how about your Scottish accent*, I retort. *It's moon, long 'oo'. And it doesn't have an umlaut*.

What is oom-lah-oot, he asks.

You were lucky to get an education, his mother says to me in a restaurant in Finsbury Park. She is a teacher from Aberdeen who relocated to London with her son after the divorce. I smile, but I haven't

a clue what she is trying to tell me. I am wearing a minimalist Serbian designer suit and pay for the dinner with the money my parents are finding increasingly difficult to make, let alone transfer across borders. They will sell a painting the following month, something by a famous Yugoslav artist I vaguely remember hanging on the wall of our flat in central Belgrade.

There is nothing lucky about being from Yugoslavia, I want to say to this kind Scottish woman, but stop myself. The girl sitting opposite me works in a video store. She doesn't even know who Tarkovsky is, I realise, baffled.

“Yet the French language itself, my mother tongue, evaded me while I was writing this paper, it resisted almost as much as the English language when I first started writing in English. Every act of writing is as much an act of resistance as an act of *naissance* [birth].” (p. 88)

My French friend has a child the following year, decides to stay in London, raises her daughter bilingual. *What an asset*, I say to her when we next meet and she looks at me as if I were mad.

“The movement towards one or the other language might become for some a compulsory step in the application process to (re)gain the right of free movement.” (p. 90)

You are still European, a Scottish-Ghanaian friend says in 2001. *You arrived with an infrastructure of aspiration*.

But the moment I open my mouth it's clear I am foreign, while you're a native speaker, I respond. *I don't even look English*.

She stares at me searchingly, most likely trying to assess just how little I understand of the way race works.

“The terminology itself, ‘Leave to Remain,’ leads to confusion. Is this deliberate? [...] The foreign body may no longer move freely and must comply with new sedentary rules. Will the *Settled Status* mark the end of the nomadic subject?” (p. 85)

You've only read Woolf in translation, an American friend exclaims, aghast.

What language do you think I read international literature in, I ask him, and he backtracks, embarrassed. He has just returned from a research stint in Kolkata where he's been poring over colonial archives. His surname is Italian and he is from Brooklyn, but the Ivy League education knocked that accent out of him. One of his legs is shorter. A few years later he'll die of cancer, and I'll regret never having responded to his tentative overtures. He'd returned from Bengal with a hilarious lilt in his native tongue.

“Lecercler calls for the study of ‘language that speaks us’ as well as ‘language that we speak.’” (p. 56)

It takes more than a decade for my low-pitched, husky tone in Serbian to level up with the high, demonstrative pitch of my English. My academic lingo has no equivalent in my mother tongue, it was fully forged in one language only. My parents find it hilarious that I grasp for English idioms and my Serbian is occasionally structured in a distinctly non-Slav way.

It was called Serbo-Croatian, this mother tongue. It’s two languages now.

“*Parole*, which loosely translates as *speech*, draws us closer to the corporeity of language that Merleau-Ponty insists on.” (p. 58)

Dalida, Alain Delon. A song playing involuntarily in my mind every time I read the word. *Paroles, paroles, paroles*...Belgrade in the seventies, the eighties. My parents, time before time.

“First, let us start from the hypothesis that [...] one can only inhabit one language at a time and that words take their meaning from the language in which they are uttered.” (p. 60)

How long is time?

“[I]n the transit between languages, parts of the body are lost, just as some of the words are dropped or truncated in the unfolding of her poem.” (p. 62)

MJ

“By what miracle,” writes Elaine Scarry in *Dreaming by the Book*, “is a writer able to incite us to bring forth mental images that resemble in their quality not our own daydreaming but our own (and much more freely practiced) perceptual arts?” (p. 7) Scarry reveals some of the techniques used by literary writers to make things move in the minds of readers. Using a number of literary examples, she shows how descriptions of materiality, movement, vagueness of images (a moving veil, ice, smoke), or the juxtaposition of layers are used to evoke sensory experiences, and invite readers to image movement, perspective or depth.

The third essay in Rabourdin’s *Sense in Translation* goes one step further, in discussing not only how objects and characters might come to move in the mind of the reader, but how as readers, we are invited to imagine moving ourselves. Taking Michel Butor’s novel *La Modification* (1957) as a case, she explores how the literary text, which speaks of a train journey between Paris and Rome, evokes the sensation of physical movement on different levels.

Rabourdin explains how this is achieved using a number of techniques, which coincide partly with those described by Scarry. Depth is suggested by superimposing layers, moving screens, half-darkness, instances of vagueness, and reflections. Rabourdin notes how Butor makes use of techniques from artistic practices such as painting and cinema, by framing scenes, suggesting movement, and even by working with a split screen: the protagonist, sitting in a moving train, sees a car driving, appearing and disappearing in the landscape the train is passing through. In Scarry's book, this literary act of making things appear and disappear, of addition and subtraction, is indeed one of the techniques to suggest the movement of things. But how does the text move *us*, the readers?

According to Rabourdin, whether the author succeeds in making the reader experience the embodied sensation of movement depends of what she calls the "effort of projection" (p. 45): the text invites the reader to make the effort to *reach* the scenes the protagonists see through the frame of the train window, in other words to project ourselves both physically and mentally into the described situation. We all recognise the experience of movement when sitting in a train: the awkward sensation of moving backward when another train passes at a faster speed; or the sensation that as a passenger, you are running along the train, moving through the landscape, jumping the fences and ditches outside the train window. In Butor's novel, the suggestion of movement moves from the author's body to the body of the character, to the moving train in which the character is situated, to the body of the reader. If literature indeed has the effect that the reader gains a sensation of being in that scene, as an almost embodied experience, we could say that the author has achieved a spatial displacement of the reader, the author has not only made a thing move, but made us move, too. **KH**

Caroline Rabourdin lives at least two linguistic worlds disjunctively, French-English, and knows that translation is something that takes place in the body as much as it does on the page. Moving between languages is a muscular effort, she explains (p. 3).

I've been warned by Rabourdin in the introduction that each chapter is composed as an 'essay', that is to say, playing on the French word *essayer* (to make an attempt, to try something), a test site. Test sites can be dangerous, things can go off in your face without warning, limbs might be lost, an eye poked out. But there is no warning concerning the brevity of the chapters that I have been allocated to read in this multi-voiced review of *Sense in Translation: Essays on the Bilingual Body*. I am introduced to the poetry of Caroline Bergvall – sometimes nonsensical, often political – who writes in, or rather in a mix of, English, Norwegian, French, and suddenly the chapter is over. I encounter the

'schizo' Louis Wolfman, but then our meeting comes abruptly to an end. Only to say, I did feel hungry for more.

Chapter 4 commences with Hélène Cixous's ladder of writing, evident in the one rung made available upon the letter H as we climb up, or else descend. On one level, the aerial compositions of words breathed out, or caught in one's throat, on the other, the corporeal mixtures of bodies, sighing. The rung upon which we tentatively step is at the limit, the limit of sense and sensation. This limit can prove unbearable. A silent H launches Cixous's first name, the sound of which was lost at some historical juncture causing no end of confusion for those who have scant knowledge of the French language. I imagine it got shot off somewhere on a Napoleonic battlefield, perhaps during a disastrous retreat. I know. I share the same name, but I have only ever briefly lived in a place where its silence was taken for granted and passed over with no further ado. Because meaning, what makes sense, what we hear, do not hear, choose not to hear, is contextual as well as embodied. *Sens*, means both sense and direction, in French, which immediately requires a sense of one's bodily orientation. Plummeting head-first, head over heels and away.

The multi-lingual poet Bergvall offers: "In French to clear one's throat is to have a cat in the throat, avoir un chat dans la gorge..." (quoted in Rabourdin p. 57) *Un crachat* is the word for spittle, we are told. I can feel it, can't you? I say the word chariot and a chariot passes between my lips. Or a furball. Rabourdin explains "three languages talk to each other. Inside her" (p. 66), doing battle with each other. And "in the transit between languages, parts of the body are lost." (p. 62) There is always the risk that these language games, the crossing over of sense and sensation on the ladder of writing (and reading), become mere entertainment, parlour games for an intellectual elite. Make no mistake, these games exit the parlour soon enough, for language proves to be dangerously infectious. There is Bergvall's work *Say Parsley* to be considered, which seems to demand the imperative gesture of an exclamation mark. The poem, both performance and installation, "takes its title from a brutal massacre in the Dominican Republic in 1937 during which Creole Haitians were murdered for not pronouncing 'parsley' (*perejil*) in the appropriate Spanish pronunciation by rolling the 'R.'" (p. 59) There are tragic implications where spoken language comes to be used as the justification for murder.

I like to imagine we can take the ladder Cixous has made available from the opening of Chapter 4 into Chapter 5 and straight into the fabulously fully formed universe of linguistic value of Louis Wolfman. Mr Wolfman gobbles up food and words, spits them out again. Both threaten to impose their violence upon him. He manages by constructing a set of rules to be exactly followed. His aim is to eradicate the mother tongue and obliterate the maternal relation. The mother tongue is something troublesome for the poet Bergvall too.

Launching into Chapter 5, Raboutin explains simply: “Louis Wolfson is an American who writes in French, but an odd and peculiar kind of French, where the struggle of language can be heard.” (p. 68) The special case of Wolfman is also addressed in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s tenth ‘plateau’, “1730 Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming Imperceptible” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. For Wolfman, they explain, food and words share intimate proximities, both are taken in and spat out, both risk the breakdown of the inorganic body and the scuttling of a body’s capacity to make sense. Mr Wolfman must construct and attend to rules of the strictest order as a matter of survival. These are his “inhuman connivances.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 274) It is because Wolfson’s mother is the source of immense pain for the writer, and therefore the mother’s tongue too. English. He must be rid of her, and her tongue, *langue*.

Yet the account of Wolfson and his wrestling match with language in Raboutin is finished before it has barely begun. I learn on Wikipedia that he relocates to Puerto Rico where he wins the lottery. I cannot help but wonder whether he has used one of his linguistic weapons and applied it to the game of chance that is lottery, a combinatorial of numbers, of cries of joy and groans of disappointment. Perhaps he mobilised some fantastic non-sensical method to achieve his win. His are extreme methods, translation as strangulation. It makes me want to write my own piece on extreme methods, simply, how to achieve a desired end (for instance, the murder of the English language) by using the most complicated means imaginable.

I am left with a lingering discomfit, fidgeting in my reading seat, well, to tell the truth, writing in bed. What are the implications of returning Wolfson’s words to the English language, a place from which he so desperately wanted to escape? Given Wolfson’s concerted and highly inventive linguistic evasions – transferring every word he hears, and every word he reads into French, or else into chunks of German, or Russian – could it be that a violence has been inflicted on him? He, who, having successfully escaped the English language, now finds himself returned to that place which fills him with horror, a return of the repressed, returned via translation to the English language. Raboutin’s essay, Chapter 5, might then be reread as an act of corporeal violence inflicted on the writer, Wolfson.

Language, especially in translation, is a physical and bodily experience. This is the message of these chapters, as it is of the entire book. A message we too easily forget in our habitual underestimation of words and what they do to us, and what they make us say, and what it means to find oneself a foreigner struggling in another language, marked by your ineptitude, assumed stupid, even. Don’t kid yourself that you are in control. Don’t underestimate the “eccentric potentiality” that “lies at the heart of human language.” (p. 58) This is what Jean-Jacques Lecercle, cited by Raboutin, draws attention to. Language pushed to its limits, made to break open, turning us all into crack-ups. Take care of the sense, lest the sense take care of you. Nonsensical texts, we further hear, “by denying meaning, in

fact, betray our fascination and need for meaning.” (p. 60) Hold your tongue! Beware, “creative critical theory” (p. 56) is a dangerous exercise. **HF**

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Unless otherwise indicated, in text page number references refer to Rabourdin’s book.

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