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Faithful Rendering

Language negotiates our relation to objects (as Gertrude Stein argued in the first chapter of *Tender Buttons*), but the units of language—written words and letters—are themselves objects, and because of their materiality, language is able to establish relationships between its own constituent parts. Pitched, accordingly, at a second-degree, language forges networks among its own objects as well as among the non-linguistic objects they enmesh. “Et nous glissons ainsi,” as Francis Ponge writes, “des mots aux significations.”¹ For just one example of that slippage, the word *rendre* denotes Ponge’s project of description and expressive representation in *Le Savon*, a book “de l’ordre de la définition-description-oeuvre d’art littéraire,” but it also indicates his text’s stated mode of musical repetition (“ces répétitions, ces reprises *da capo*, ces variations sur un même thème”) and its insistence on a framing scene of translation by a “speaker allemand” for “oreilles allemandes.”² Moreover, rendering is also precisely what soap, as Ponge defines it, does: “il [...] rendre l’âme et rendre le corps.”³ With his depiction, Ponge renders soap, but soap renders itself (and to *render* can connote just such reciprocity).⁴ Soap, furthermore, is the product of rendering—the melting of adipose tissue—so the word prefigures the production of the subject that enacts its own portrayal. To realize and account for such connections is, in French, to *rendre compte*, and realization—to know that one knows, to pursue an epistemology of epistemology—returns us to *le savon* by way of *savoir*: *nous le savons* [we know it]. Ponge’s project, after all, is one of “l’hygiène intellectuelle” and “la toilette intellectuelle,” rendered “d’un paragraphe de raison [...] pure.”⁵

Et nous glissons ainsi: soap, for Ponge, foams out in voluble abundance as it disappears, and in the layered chronology of his book it figures first as the sign of scarcity—an exiguous commodity exemplifying the privations of wartime life—and then as the emblem of the most egregious excesses of the Nazi imagination (disclosed at the Nürnberg trials which perhaps prompted Ponge to return to *Le Savon* in 1946): soap manufactured from human remains. The witnessing and testimony of those trials, as well as their formal judgments and verdicts, would all idiomatically take the verb *rendre*, in French. Social and historical circumstances thus change the meaning of objects, including the meaning of linguistic objects and their enunciation. The risk of language under the occupation (that it might talk, under duress; that it might *se rendre*) transforms into a duty to speak, to tell its story, and to insist on the collective knowledge of atrocity and culpability even when faced with the threat of annihilation and amnesia.⁶ With a slippery set of revisions,

Ponge attributes both linguistic modes to soap itself. In *Le Savon*, liability becomes obligation, shared knowledge (*savons*) counters “le commun de l’oubli,” and Sartre’s existential hell assumes the guise of a collective heaven: “notre *paradis*, en somme, ne serait-ce pas *les autres*?”⁷ Taken together, the networks of objects and people established by language—the collective aggregate of the linguistic ensemble—which “ne dépend plus que de la nature matérielle don’t ces signes et leur support font partie,” delineates the politics of what Philippe Sollers would come to recognize as Ponge’s “matérialisme sémantique.”⁸

1. Francis Ponge, *Le Savon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 24.

2. Francis Ponge, *Œuvres complètes*, tome II (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 518; Ponge, *Savon*, 12; 7; 9. For the definition of “rendre” as “représenter, exprimer”; “répété: le écho rend les sons,” and “traduire; rendre un passage mot à mot” see Emile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, tome IV (Monte-Carlo: Éditions du Cap, 1969), 5423 *et sequitur*.

3. Ponge, *Savon*, 54.

4. As Littré puts it (op. cit.): “rendre la pareille; rendre le réciproque.”

5. Ponge, *Savon*, 36; 27.

6. Cf. Nathalie Rachlin, “Francis Ponge, *Le Savon*, and the Occupation.” *SubStance* 87 (1998), 87 *et passim*.

7. Ponge, *Savon*, 128.

8. Ibidem. Philippe Sollers, *Entretiens de Francis Ponge* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 168.