

A FOUCAULDIAN STUDY
OF SPACE AND DISCOURSE
IN GÉRARD BESSETTE'S *LE LIBRAIRE*

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The year 1960, which marks the beginning of the Quiet Revolution in Quebec, is a turning point in the French-speaking Canadian province's history. The province, which had been under the strong influence of the clergy, witnessed the transfer of power from the Church to the State, so to speak. Gérard Bessette's *Le Libraire* (1960) foreshadows the problems that the Quebec society in transition would face.¹ The crisis that Bessette was going through when he wrote the novel is too significant to omit here. Joseph Costisella, who interviewed the author after *Le Libraire* appeared, writes that "the key to the personality of Gérard Bessette is *déchirement: déchirement* between a society which was traditional, Catholic, French-Canadian, and on the other hand a new and modern world dominated by the concept of the absurd—the world of Sartre and Robbe-Grillet" (qtd. in Shortliffe 43).

While the ingenious narrator's ironic discourse in *Le Libraire* has been the subject of many critical studies, the interrelationship between space and discourse in the novel has not been probed. According to Jacques Allard, in the novel we witness a confrontation between the protagonist Hervé Jodoin's "*parole*" and "*la Parole*" (59; emphasis in original), that is, between secular discourse and the authoritarian discourse of the Church. For Józef Kwaterko, "*Le Libraire est un roman subversif au plan discursif*" (119). In this essay, I intend to show that the

ideological fight against censorship and for freedom of speech in *Le Libraire* is effected in places where “le langage s’entrecroise avec l’espace” (Foucault, *Mots et les choses* 9).

A diary novel set in a small town, *Le Libraire* juxtaposes two opposing facets of Quebec society: one rural, still dominated by the Church, its censorship and religious taboos, and the other, urban, represented by Montreal where the reforms would first take effect. Representative of this dichotomy is the fact that Jodoin begins writing his diary in the rural town of Saint-Joachim where most of the story takes place, and records his last journal entry in Montreal, the city where he disposes of the books censored in Saint-Joachim. Pertinently, Jodoin concludes his diary noting that “Montréal n’est pas Saint-Joachim” (60).

In “Of Other Spaces,” Michel Foucault defines utopias as “sites with no real place” (24), and heterotopias as places “that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (24). The epistemology that governs a heterotopia is illustrated by the library which is founded on “the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages” (Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” 26). Describing the heterotopian quality of an incredible classification of animals in a Chinese encyclopedia cited by Borges, Foucault writes: “Ce qui est impossible, ce n’est pas le voisinage des choses, c’est le site lui-même où elles pourraient voisiner” (*Mots et les choses* 9).

In Bessette’s novel, the utopian landscape of Saint-Joachim is marked by its static nature. Upon arrival in the town, Jodoin searches for a room in a weekly newspaper that is three days old, and uses a map published in 1936 (7, 9). The dates are insignificant, for, despite the fact that the number of streets has doubled, very little has changed in Saint-Joachim: “Ce n’est pas une ville à topographie compliquée. Dans une direction nord-sud, parallèlement à la petite rivière verte [...] s’alignent les avenues portant presque toutes des noms de saints et coupées à l’angle droit par les rues” (8). It is a close-knit town where Jodoin is an “exception,” because “Sauf les commis-voyageurs ou les parents des Joachinois, très peu d’étrangers visitaient la ville” (9).

By contrast, the three claustrophobic spaces in Jodoin’s daily itinerary, the *Librairie Léon* where he works, the bar that he frequents, and his bedroom, as well as his diary function as heterotopias.² The bookstore and its secret annex, the *capharnaïm*—which in Jodoin’s words is a “bibliothèque clandestine” (60)—are archives like the library, and an embodiment of the heteroclite.³ The main bookstore consists of four sections: religious objects and books; toys and greetings; stationery; and secular books. According to the narrator: “A vrai dire, ces ‘sec-

tions' ne se différencient que par leur contenu; aucune cloison ne les sépare" (26). And, Jodoin's section of "secular books" is the least organized of all the sections. In fact, the impeccable state of the other sections forces Jodoin to "tenir mon rayon [...] dans une confusion ne dépassant pas certaines limites" (30). The bookstore owner, Mr. Léon Chicoine, concurs with him: "Je ne crois pas que les livres doivent être rangés aussi méticuleusement que des objets de piété" (30). Furthermore, the employees in charge of the four sections do not get along well (27-28), and their uncongenial attitude reflects the incompatibility of the products they sell.⁴

Heterotopias defy order, an assertion substantiated by the presence of the stock of censored books in the *capharnaïm*. The dictionary *Petit Robert* defines *capharnaïm* as a "lieu qui renferme beaucoup d'objets en désordre." In *Le Libraire*, it is a room to which entry is restricted, for it contains books by authors, such as Gide, Voltaire and Zola, listed in the Index, and therefore censored by the Church (45, 47). The *capharnaïm* is impervious to the ravages of time: "De l'extérieur on [le] prendrait [...] pour un caveau avec ses murs de blocs de ciment sans fenêtres ni soupirail et sa vague odeur de moisissure" (44). It is the "other space" governed by the heterotopian principle that "presupposes a system of opening and closing that both isolates [it] and makes [it] penetrable," and to gain entry into it "the individual has to submit to rites and purifications [...] [and] must have a certain permission and make certain gestures" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 26). The source of Mr. Chicoine's clandestine business, the *capharnaïm* "se dérobe derrière une porte apparemment condamnée de l'arrière boutique" (36). Mr. Chicoine decides to give Jodoin exclusive access to "cette chambre noire" (37), and asks him to sell the banned books discretely to "des personnes sérieuses" (48). The visits to the *capharnaïm* are a ritual:

Pour atteindre le satané caveau—car c'en est un, même s'il n'est pas souterrain - il me faut [...] ouvrir la porte d'une arrière-boutique glaciale, déverrouiller le capharnaïm, refermer la porte derrière moi (les ordres du patron sont formels là-dessus) et circuler dans cette pièce poussiéreuse et mal éclaircie à la recherche de quelque bouquin. (64)

Mr. Chicoine divulges the presence of the covert repository to Jodoin at a meeting *in camera* that has the characteristics of an initiation ceremony. A man of few words, Mr. Chicoine generally does not fraternize with his employees, but on this occasion he invites Jodoin to his office for a private conference over drinks (38). During the meeting, weighing the pros and cons of his business, Mr. Chicoine expresses contradictory views. On the one hand he considers the book as a product like any other, and on the other hand, he believes that selling books is different from selling other merchandise because: "Il fallait tenir compte des circonstances sociales, du milieu psychologique où l'on évoluait" (41). His discourse

is heterotopian, for although he affirms his belief in individual freedom, he is apprehensive of the repercussions should his covert business be exposed. To ensure Jodoin's absolute compliance, Mr. Chicoine threatens him with dismissal if he divulges the secret (46). The ever-circumspect Mr. Chicoine gives Jodoin the key to the concealed storehouse, but changes the lock, perhaps to test Jodoin's trustworthiness (61-62). Moreover, Jodoin being the only employee privy to the highly restricted depot, his trips to it "sont censés s'accomplir à *l'insu* des autres clients et mêmes des [autres employés]" (65; emphasis in original).

The *caparnaïm* is a tinderbox of suppressed discourses, that is, in Foucault's words "a place without a place."⁶ In the wake of the sale of Voltaire's *L'Essai sur les mœurs*, a key event in the novel that I will discuss later, Mr. Chicoine fears that he will be the victim of a longstanding rivalry between Father Galarneau, the priest of Saint-Joachin where his bookstore is located, and the priest of Saint-Rock, the neighboring parish where the student who bought the book studies. The bookstore being "sous la surveillance morale de M. le Curé" (135), the sale of the forbidden book could serve as ammunition to the priest of Saint-Rock in his attack against Father Galarneau. Therefore, Mr. Chicoine finds himself in "le *no man's land*" (135), that is, a heterotopia.

The bar *Chez Trefflé*, where Jodoin spends a major portion of the day, is another heterotopian space. Among the three bars in Saint-Joachin, he chooses *Chez Trefflé*, because "cet établissement se trouve [...] dans un quartier excentrique où je ne risque pas de rencontrer mes clients" (12) and because of "la discrétion [de son] personnel" (14). At the bar he is cautious, because although "nulle pression extérieure ne s'exerce sur moi [...], il faut tenir compte des circonstances" (14).

Foucault characterizes any behavior that is deviant from the normal as heterotopian ("Of Other Spaces" 25). Jodoin leads a life that is far from normal. He spends on an average seven hours a day at the bar drinking beer, although he says "je ne suis nullement alcoolique" (13), and the beverage does not suit him (14-15). At the tavern, true to his asocial character, he prefers the table at the corner despite the foul odor emanating from the adjacent lavatory, and remains mostly uncommunicative (12). In fact, Father Galarneau considers Jodoin as "un anormal" (106).

Founded on Voltaire's heterotopian principle "tout est relatif," Jodoin's thoughts and actions are cynical and paradoxical. As he admits, "Chez mes confrères, on m'a toujours pris pour un excentrique, un cynique. Si bien que je peux leur faire les pires impoliteses sans qu'ils s'en formalisent. Il fut un temps où je prenais plaisir à forcer mon personnage, car il est agréable de pouvoir injurier impunément les gens" (20). At the unemployment office, Jodoin reluctantly accepts his former classmate Martin Nault's help in finding a job, and tells him that he would accept any job "pourvu qu'il n'y eût rien à faire" (22).

Although he accuses Mr. Chicoine of acting in bad faith because the bookstore owner changed the lock to the *capharnaïm* without warning him (62), Jodoin is no less guilty of *mauvaise foi*. He likes to idle at work, and pretends to read when, in fact, he is snoozing (66-67). He declares:

Il est étonnant comme le temps passe vite quand on en fait rien. Pourvu qu'on ne soit pas libre. Je veux dire: pourvu qu'un 'devoir' vous force à rester en place. Autrement, ça ne tient plus. Ainsi moi, si je n'étais pas obligé de travailler à la librairie Léon pour gagner ma vie et qu'on me demandât de passer des heures d'affilée perché sur un tabouret, j'en serais complètement incapable. (35)

Sartre affirms that “nous sommes sur le mode d'être du devoir être ce que nous sommes” (94), and illustrates his point with the example of a waiter who goes about his work like an automaton. He is not a waiter, but plays the role of one. Stating that “le garçon de café joue avec sa condition pour la réaliser” (94; emphasis in original), Sartre goes on to say: “Cette obligation ne diffère pas de celle qui s'impose à tous les commerçants: leur condition est toute de cérémonie, le public réclame d'eux qu'ils la réalisent comme une cérémonie [...]. Un épicier qui rêve est offensant pour l'acheteur, parce qu'il n'est plus tout à fait un épicier” (94). Likewise, a bookseller who sleeps at work is unfit for his job. Furthermore, as a salesman, Jodoin works against the interests of his employer and his own, for instead of promoting the business, he undermines it by selling to customers “les livres que je crois le moins susceptibles de les intéresser” (32). This results in a decline in the clientele, a trend that Jodoin hopes will continue. As for his clients, he says that “Pourvu qu'ils soient absents, c'est le principal” (34).⁵

Foucault observes that, at the discursive level, unlike utopias which are “dans le droit fil du langage [...] Les hétérotopies inquiètent [...] parce qu'elles minent secrètement le langage, parce qu'elles empêchent de nommer ceci et cela, parce qu'elles brisent les noms communs ou les enchevêtrent, parce qu'elles ruinent d'avance 'la syntaxe'” (*Mots et les choses* 9). Controlled by the Church, the dominant discourse in Saint-Joachim is innocuous, and therefore, utopian. As opposed to the “official discourse,” Jodoin's is heterotopian. An agent designated to sell the censored works stored in the *capharnaïm*, Jodoin challenges the predominant discourse and destabilizes the utopian landscape of Saint-Joachim.

The sale of Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs*, a banned book, to a schoolboy causes quite a stir in the town: “Les conséquences en ont bouleversé la librairie Léon de Saint-Joachim” (65). Significantly, the schoolboy who purchased the book first lies to the school authorities that he found it in the school courtyard (129), a heterotopia, for it is neither completely inside nor outside the school premises. The student's subsequent confession earns him the reputation of being perverse, “un liseur dangereux, doublé d'un anticlérical en herbe” (130).

True to his heterotopian character, Jodoin's words and actions with respect to the sale of Voltaire's tome are equivocal. Although he is fully aware of the consequence of his action, he sells the book to the schoolboy: "Quand le collégien m'a demandé *L'Essai*, mon premier mouvement a été de refuser, de dire que nous ne l'avions pas. Car le lui vendre, n'est-ce pas, ça pouvait causer des emmerdements. Puis je me suis ravisé" (67).

Father Galarneau's inquiry into the incident, the pivotal event in the novel, reveals the incompatibility between the "official" and the "unofficial" or forbidden discourses. When the priest inquires if the bookstore carries a stock of "certains livres dangereux," Jodoin first asks him to clarify the meaning of the expression, and then feigns ignorance as to the existence of such books in the store (70). Although Jodoin is fully aware of the meaning of "[des] livres à ne pas mettre entre toutes les mains" (40), and that they are, in his own words, "officiellement tabous [à Saint-Joachin]" (41), he obdurately refuses to understand the priest, and denies that the copy of the *Essai* in question was sold by the *Librairie Léon* (70-72).

Mr. Chicoine's inquiry into the incident further shows the difference between Jodoin's being and appearance (marked by his intelligent stupidity), and betrays his heterotopian character. After much prevarication, he admits to Mr. Chicoine that he sold *L'Essai* to the schoolboy (104). He argues that, when Mr. Chicoine authorized him to sell the censored books, he knew that he had to exercise "une certaine circonspection," but "il n'avait pas été fait mention de classes sociales ni de professions [...]. Par conséquent, il n'avait pas été question d'étudiants ou de collégiens: seulement de 'lecteurs sérieux'" (104).

Mr. Chicoine conducts his inquiry at a secret location, for any discourse that infringes the Church's code in Saint-Joachin, even if it is not against the law, cannot take place in a public space. He lies to the priest that he has to go to Saint-Jules for business, whereas, in fact, he goes into hiding in his country house in a remote suburb, and asks Jodoin to join him "sans dire un mot au personnel" (123). It is only in the privacy of his country house, unhampered by the Church, that Mr. Chicoine can plan an exit strategy "qui mystifierait l'adversaire" (140). Noting the gravity of the situation, the troubled Mr. Chicoine asks Jodoin: "Vous ne trouvez peut-être pas que les circonstances qui nous forcent à mener ici un entretien secret pour une action qui n'est en rien contraire à la loi du pays soient [...] normales?" (140) In a veiled allusion to the Duplessis regime, Jodoin remarks that he, like Mr. Chicoine, has become so used to the restraints on his freedom that he no longer finds them oppressive. However, indifferent to the consequences, he says: "Je ne [vois] aucune nécessité de nous terroriser ainsi au fond d'une maison de campagne plutôt que de discuter la question au grand jour, chez *Trefflé*, par exemple, ou à la librairie" (140).

The bar and the bookstore are heterotopias, but they are no longer safe for engaging in any type of discourse that counters the Church. At the bar, as at the bookstore, Jodoin has earned the notoriety of selling banned books. In fact, a server at the bar offers to act as an intermediary to sell them to his clients. Jodoin notes that “même le titre du volume que j’avais vendu à l’étudiant courait les rues. Le mot *mœurs* avait suffi à lancer les bons Joachinois dans de petits rêves érotiques” (110; emphasis in original). Sensing that the situation is about to get out of control, Jodoin sternly refuses to be involved in shady deals at the bar, and asks the server to send his clients elsewhere. Mr. Manseau, a regular customer at the bar and a fatherly figure, who has got wind of Jodoin’s confrontation with the priest, warns him: “c’est pas bon pour la santé icitte de contrer les curés. Les ficelles, c’est eux autres qui les ont” (111).

In *Le Libraire*, the heterotopian relationship between space and the individual who occupies it extends to Jodoin’s bedroom. Overlooking an abandoned courtyard full of debris, the poorly furnished bedroom resembles a room in a brothel.⁶ Jodoin notes: “mon garni ne paie pas d’apparence. La peinture vieux rose des murs s’écaille par endroits et le lambrissage verdâtre du plafond présente des lézardes inquiétantes. Le reps du vieux fauteuil s’élime” (53). The tenant enters the room through a separate door, so the room is a part of the house, yet excluded from it. Jodoin enters into a sexual relationship with his landlady, Mme Bouthiller, who acts like a prostitute. Significantly, he pays her the rent on a weekly basis “quand elle se présente dans ma chambre” (81). In Jodoin’s bedroom, to use Foucault’s words, “illicit sex is [...] absolutely sheltered and absolutely hidden” (“Of Other Spaces” 27). The relationship between Jodoin and Mme Bouthiller is brief and devoid of any sentiment. In fact, sex, which is the very basis of their relationship, is also the cause of their break-up. Jodoin evinces no interest in Mme Bouthiller’s personal life, past or present, and provides her very little information about his. Exasperated by her frequent unsolicited visits at odd hours, he seeks shelter at the train station where he resumes his diary after a two-week interruption (87).⁷ Although he patches up with her, he remains quite indifferent toward her, and leaves the town without informing her: “Je ne voulais pas revoir Rose, lui annoncer mon départ” (143).

In Saint-Jochin, pervert behavior is condemned, yet tolerated as long as it is concealed from public view,⁸ and the individual concerned has a good rapport with the church. To put an end to the slander in the wake of her separation from her husband, Mme Bouthiller had to seek Father Galarneau’s support (121). And in return, “Elle ne manquait jamais depuis lors les exercices religieux. C’était là un gage de tranquillité relative” (121-22). Mme Bouthiller’s position on pervert conduct is ambiguous. She accuses her employer of sexual harassment, but says that he is “un patron chic dont elle n’[a] pas à se plaindre” (60). As for Mr. Chicoine, according to Mme Bouthiller, “[il] manigançait ses cochonneries en

cache, faisait d'astucieuses avances aux femmes (mais jamais devant témoins) [et il] était membre de plusieurs associations pieuses ou civiques, très influent par conséquent, au point que M. le Curé lui-même, qui pourtant ne l'aimait pas, hésitait à l'attaquer de front" (121). Therefore, in order to quell the rumors accusing Jodoin of spoiling the youth, Mme Bouthiller urges him to talk to Father Galarneau. Jodoin's refusal to submit to the Church's authority leads to his expulsion from Saint-Joachim.

Significantly, Jodoin, dispossessed, leaves Saint-Joachim on the sly in the middle of the night, in a truck loaded with the contents of the *capharnaïm*. Jodoin and the books in the storehouse being undesirable elements, they must leave the town stealthily. The heterotopian quality of the forbidden books is maintained, because they function as floating signifiers. Their ultimate location as well as their value remain indefinite. Mr. Chicoine gives Jodoin five hundred dollars to transport them to Sainte-Cécile, but unbeknownst to the owner, Jodoin diverts the books to Montreal where he sells them for a profit. Underscoring the unstable status of the books, Jodoin tells the new bookstore owner that "l'urgence [...] concernait uniquement l'évacuation des bouquins, nullement la nécessité d'en disposer illico. On pouvait, le cas échéant, les mettre en entrepôt" (151). Further, he tells the buyer that the books are worth two thousand dollars, but given the pressing circumstances, he would accept one thousand five hundred dollars. He eventually strikes a deal for seven hundred and eighty dollars. Jodoin has fraudulently turned the forbidden discourses into livelihood "qui me permettrait de vivre sans souci peut-être une année" (151).

After disposing of the censored books, Jodoin ends his diary, and says "Je pourrais, naturellement, en commencer un autre. Mais à quoi bon? [...] Il y a moyen de s'y distraire [à Montréal] d'une autre façon, même le dimanche" (153). In Saint-Joachim, his diary would have been subjected to the censorship imposed on the books in the *capharnaïm*, for it belongs to the category of books "à ne pas mettre entre toutes les mains." The diary which contains a mixture of vulgar and pedantic language represents a heterotopian space. Where else could one find such divergent discourses co-existing in Saint-Joachim? It is interesting to note that the diary replaces the bar, for Jodoin begins writing to kill time on Sundays when the bars are closed (13, 54). Finally, the fact that the dimensions of Jodoin's room and the pages of his diary mirror each other (the room is 8 ½ x 11 feet and the pages are 8 ½ x 11 inches) shows that in *Le Libraire* space and discourse are inextricably related.

In *Le Libraire*, Gérard Bessette revisits rural Quebec, which the regional novel had portrayed as idyllic, and unravels the utopian landscape. In this sense, Bessette leads the way that many writers, notably Marie-Claire Blais, would follow. Published five years after the Quiet Revolution, Blais's *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* (1965) portrays a rural Quebec where heterotopia has gained

ground. In that novel, while the radical writings of the young and precocious Jean Le Maigre represent heterotopia discursively, the school, the *noviciat*, and the brothel disguised as a guest house where the virtuous and unsuspecting Héloïse is sent for work constitute heterotopian space. The pious and authoritarian Grand-Mère Antoinnette's secret admiration of Jean Le Maigre's irreverent writings⁹ as well as the moral decay embodied by the pervert Brother Théodule and the notary, Mr. Laruche, point to the pervasiveness of heterotopia in rural Quebec.

NOTES:

¹ Gilles Marcotte describes the protagonist of *Le Libraire* as "l'homme de la Révolution Tranquille" (qtd. in Kwaterko 385).

² Saying that "l'aspect du monde extérieur ne m'a jamais impressionné" (53), Jodoin spends very little time outside of the bookstore, the bar and the bedroom (68). Significantly, for Jodoin, selling (censored) books is as much an expression of individual freedom as drinking at the bar (47). The expressions "la liberté individuelle" and "la liberté de pensée/penser" are used in reference to the bookstore (42, 139), the bar (47), and the brothel (77). As I point out later in the essay, Jodoin's bedroom resembles a brothel. And, needless to say, his diary and the bedroom where he writes most of it are spaces where he exercises his total freedom.

³ It is interesting to note that one of the incidents that Bessette had in mind while writing *Le Libraire* was the Ottawa city library's refusal to let him borrow works by Stendhal and Maeterlinck (*Mes romans et moi* 80). Also noteworthy is that, in Bessette's *L'Incubation*, the idea of classification recurs in the library, the hospital and the "capharnaüm de l'Intelligence Service." In that novel, the librarian Ripcord's remarks illustrate the library as a heterotopia. Struggling to find a space for the abundance of books donated by Americans, he says: "When will they stop by God (quand bon dieu vont-ils arrêter)" (84; emphasis in original).

⁴ Jodoin designates his coworkers by the products they sell: Mlle Galarneau ("piété"), Mlle Placide ("jouets"), and Mlle Morin ("papeterie"). While Mlle Morin "est [...] d'une taciturnité remarquable," the other two women "sont 'en froid' [...] et ne s'adressent jamais la parole 'qu'à titre officiel' ou en présence du sieur Léon Chicoine" (27).

⁵ Jodoin's bad faith is further exemplified at the end of the novel when he avers his intention to claim unemployment benefits, and says: "Le seul danger, c'est qu'on me trouve du travail. Mais il y a toujours moyen de faire refuser en jouant les butors ou idiots. Les idiots de préférence" (152).

⁶ The etymological meaning of *brothel* is a wretched, abandoned, good-for-nothing fellow, epithets that aptly describe Jodoin. Pertinently, when Jodoin inquires if there is a brothel in Saint-Joachim, Mr. Chicoine tells him that there used to be one, but it had to be closed. And, when the bookstore owner offers to take him to the one in a nearby town, Jodoin declines the offer, and says: "Je trouverais peut-être [...] ce qu'il me fallait sur place en cherchant un peu" (78).

⁷ Jodoin describes the atmosphere at the train station as "à la fois intime et impersonnel" (94). An ambiguous space, the train station is a heterotopia. As Marcel Proust writes, train stations are "utterly peculiar places [...] which, so to speak, are not part of the town and yet contain the essence of its personality as clearly as they bear its name on their signs" (qtd. in Adorno 178).

⁸ When Jodoin invites Mme Bouthiller to go out to see a movie, she first declines, because “dans une petite ville, ça ferait jaser les gens” (82). They, then, decide to go separately, pretend to meet at the cinema by chance, and return separately.

⁹ She describes him in heterotopian terms as “intelligent à vous faire peur [...] si intelligent qu’il me faisait rougir avec ses questions” (137).

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