

TICONTRE

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NANCY HUSTON, SELF-TRANSLATION AND A TRANSNATIONAL POETICS

GIORGIA FALCERI – *Università di Trento*

Nancy Huston (Calgary, 1953) is one of the francophone authors who contributed – with an essay entitled *Traduttore non è traditore* – to the theoretical volume *Pour une littérature-monde* (Michel Le Bris and Jean Rouaud, 2007), which inscribes as an important step in the ongoing theoretical definition of world literature. With reference to a selection of Huston's non-fiction publications, I am going to outline her poetics of self-translation and how the latter intimately relates to what she regards as the very task of Literature. Finally, I am going to briefly sketch the content of three of her novels: *L'empreinte de l'ange/The Mark of the Angel* (1998-9), *Lignes de faille/Fault Lines* (2006-7) and *Danse Noire/Black Dance* (2013-14), which epitomize Huston's transnational/translational poetics. The peculiar nature of the experience as a bilingual writer and self-translator opens to new possible prospects on the theorization of world literature, by questioning the boundaries of linguistic and cultural identity and by defining an ethical aspiration for both literature and translation.

Nancy Huston (Calgary, 1953) ha contribuito con il saggio *Traduttore non è traditore* alla raccolta *Pour une littérature-monde* (Michel Le Bris e Jean Rouaud, 2007), volume che costituisce una tappa significativa nella teorizzazione contemporanea sulla letteratura-mondo. Attraverso l'analisi di questa e di altre pubblicazioni, il presente articolo si propone di indagare la poetica di auto-traduzione della Huston, per mostrare come essa sia intimamente connessa a quella che l'autrice ritiene essere la funzione fondamentale della Letteratura. Vengono inoltre presi in considerazione tre dei suoi romanzi – *L'empreinte de l'ange/The Mark of the Angel* (1998-9), *Lignes de faille/Fault Lines* (2006-7) e *Danse Noire/Black Dance* (2013-14) – che incarnano, a livello di contenuti, tale poetica traduttiva e transnazionale. Riflettendo sulla particolarità della sua esperienza di scrittrice bilingue e autotraduttrice, Huston mette in discussione i confini dell'identità linguistica e culturale, fornendo così nuove prospettive al dibattito teorico sulla letteratura-mondo, e invocandone una missione etica.

I *WORLD LITERATURE AND TRANSLATION*

If that of *Weltliteratur* is a notion that goes back to Goethe, nowadays more than ever before, there seems to be a renewed and progressively accentuated awareness that literature, as Franco Moretti asserts, «is unmistakably a planetary system».¹ The rather bleary categories that go under the names of 'comparative literature', 'global literature', and 'world literature', operate on this assumption and broadly define a varied ensemble of perspectives and research frameworks used to compare literatures of different linguistic, cultural or nation groups. Within this far-reaching range of reflections, the studies on the novel and its translation are catching the interest of a number of scholars. Some literary critics have taken into consideration the global process of transmission or recovery of the characteristics of this literary genre in different traditions (e.g., European vs South-American), or have focused on how translation, as an editorial process, has globalized (in terms of economics and numbers) the literary market to an unparalleled level. All the while, with a more circumscribed, personal approach, bilingual writers and self-translators, by virtue of their privileged position of mediators between languages and

¹ FRANCO MORETTI, *Conjectures on World Literature*, in «New Left Review», 1 (2000), pp. 54-68, p. 54.

cultures, provide a first-hand viewpoint on the mechanisms that are implicated in the transmission of texts from a literary tradition to another.

Thus, the global system of literary influences can be illustrated from different perspectives. The paradigm of investigation provided by French literary critic Pascale Casanova, for instance, in her essay *La république mondiale des lettres*,² is a Foucaultian spatialized history of literature, which develops themes that already aroused the interest of Translation Studies scholars such as Itamar Even-Zohar³ and Gideon Toury.⁴ In Casanova's broad geo-historical and political analysis, the global evolution of literature is envisaged as a struggle for recognition by the marginal, emerging, national traditions, with respect to the dominant ones, namely the French and Anglo-Saxon. The latter are described as the core of the global literary tradition, and by virtue of their historically and economically gained autonomy, they are in the position to dictate the canons for literary recognition which are subsequently reinforced by their commercial predominance. In the international space of recognized literature, literary revolutions and rebellions – as Casanova calls them – are engendered by the work authors do with and on their language(s). As pointed out also by polysystem theory, writers of marginal traditions find that, in peculiar geo-political contexts such as those of decolonized countries, the use of dominant languages (English, French, etc.) often deems itself necessary to be acknowledged as an author. The roles of translation and of bilingualism would then be explicitly emphasized. Innumerable writers, in fact, felt necessary to resort to them in order to obtain a literary 'patent of nobility'. In different contexts, S. Beckett, E. Cioran and M. Kundera – to name but few – resorted to the French language, while V. Nabokov, J. Conrad and the Nobel laureates R. Tagore, I. B. Singer, C. Milosz and J. Brodsky chose English as their language for literary production.⁵

Also with regard to the positive outcomes of translation, David Damrosch, in his essay *What is World Literature?*,⁶ states that, in a sociolinguistic perspective, 'global' literary works are those privileged narrations that can be easily translated into the highest number of languages, since their degree of cultural specificity is so limited that they may even benefit from the transposition into other linguistic and cultural contexts. Unlike Damrosch, whose more traditional approach is based on close reading, Franco Moretti

2 « L'autonomie, toujours relative, devient donc l'un des principes qui ordonnent l'espace littéraire mondial. Elle permet aux territoires les plus indépendants de l'univers littéraire d'énoncer leur propre loi, d'asseoir les critères et les principes spécifiques de leurs hiérarchies internes, de prononcer les jugements et des évaluations au nom même de leur autonomie, contre l'imposition des divisions politiques ou nationales. L'impératif catégorique de l'autonomie, c'est l'opposition déclarée au principe du nationalisme littéraire, c'est-à-dire la lutte contre l'intrusion politique dans l'univers littéraire. L'internationalisme structurel des contrées les plus littéraires garantit leur autonomie ». PASCALE CASANOVA, *Le république mondiale des lettres*, Paris, Seuil, 1999, p. 125.

3 Cf. for instance, ITAMAR EVEN-ZOHAR, *The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem*, in «Poetics Today», XI (1990), pp. 45-51.

4 Cf. GIDEON TOURY, *Descriptive Translation Studies – and Beyond. Revised Edition*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 2012.

5 These are just a few examples out of a very long list of authors who could avail themselves of the knowledge and practice of more than one language. They were selected among the English- and French-speakers only because these are the two variants used by our case study author, Nancy Huston.

6 DAVID DAMROSCH, *What is World Literature?*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003.

argues for a paradigmatic analysis which he calls ‘distant reading’. In his articles *Conjectures on World Literature* and *More Conjectures*, as well as, to some extent, in *La letteratura vista da lontano*,⁷ Moretti focuses on the asymmetry of inter-related literatures around the globe, by investigating the origins and evolutions of the novel in non-Western traditions through a sort of Comparative Morphology, where the forms under the scrutiny are the literary ones, intended, in a Jamesonian sense,⁸ as abstracts of social relationships. Similarly, Vittorio Coletti in *Romanzo mondo. La letteratura nel villaggio globale*⁹ identifies in the novel the genre that is more apt for analyses on a global scale, since it is not a prerogative of Western literature. Its form, on the contrary, adjusted to different cultures around the world through different eras, so that it became, in Coletti’s words, ‘a global Esperanto’¹⁰ where single linguistic realisations are mere accidental executions of the same core concept.

Despite their different frameworks of analysis, these critics seem to agree that there is a strict relationship between global literary success and the ‘translatability’ of the text. With respect to the novel, in particular, Coletti states that «la traduzione (specie *in lingue che contano*) è uno dei veicoli principali del successo mondiale di un libro (‘traduzione-consacrazione’). La disponibilità del romanzo a essere tradotto è una delle ragioni della sua fortuna nella ‘repubblica mondiale delle lettere’». ¹¹ Translation allegedly elevates the text to a ‘third’ country – which is neither that of the original language, nor that of the translated version – a country where the text has no linguistic personality, possessing more than one soul, and consequently none. It is the country of all translations, whose language is meta-historical and transnational and whose essence resides in the dialectic between local and global, between specific and universal.¹²

The scholars quoted so far certainly provide an incomplete state of the art, but bear witness to how much, in the current theorizations of world literature, reflections on translation are cardinal. Although the literary system may be thought of as a planetary whole, in fact, single texts are written in different languages and the main process through which they can ‘travel’ from one country to another and from a culture to another is, inevitably, translation. By analysing this process in the light of its economic value and sociological weight in the various literary traditions, as do Casanova, Coletti, Damrosch and Moretti amongst others, we may gain a better understanding of the power relations between languages and cultures.

In a more anthropological approach, i.e., by studying the experience of single authors who act as first-person mediators by translating their own works, we choose to consider the chances of linguistic and cultural enrichment that come with the process of

7 FRANCO MORETTI, *Conjectures on World Literature*, cit.; *More Conjectures*, in «New Left Review», xx (2003), pp. 73-81; *La letteratura vista da lontano*, con un saggio di Alberto Piazza, Torino, Einaudi, 2005.

8 Cf. for instance, FREDRIC JAMESON, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham NC, Duke University Press, 1991.

9 VITTORIO COLETTI, *Romanzo mondo. La letteratura nel villaggio globale*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2011.

10 *Ivi*, p. 46.

11 *Ivi*, p. 47 (Emphasis is mine).

12 Coletti seems to focus on the results of a domesticating approach to translation, i.e., a certain homogenization of the literary language, which allows novels to be read and understood everywhere outside the country where they were originally published.

translation in the circulation of literary works. Indeed, through translation, the dialogue between different languages and cultures is an occasion for the encounter with otherness.¹³ Translation being a negotiation between different world-views, translators and authors alike must be ready to accept – in accordance with the very nature of any negotiation – the losses and sacrifices that come with it, along with the innumerable chances of mutual hospitality, accommodation and understanding. As we are constantly reminded, the dialogue between cultures may become conflictual and represent a painful challenge for the parties involved. When the author and the translator of the text are the same person, and the dialogue, the negotiation occurs inside the mind of a single individual as in the case of self-translation, these challenges to one's own cultural and linguistic identity(ies) are experienced to their utmost degree.

2 A TRANSNATIONAL/TRASLATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON LITERATURE

Such is the case of Nancy Huston (1953), a Canadian-born *femme de lettres* who lives in Paris and self-translates from English to French and from French to English.¹⁴ She was among the francophone authors who signed the manifesto *Pour une littérature-monde en français* in 2007, a year in which all the most prestigious French literary awards (i.e., Prix Goncourt, Prix du roman de l'Académie française, Prix Renaudot, Prix Femina, Prix Goncourt des lycéens) were gained by authors born outside France. The shared aspiration subtending this declaration was that of a transnational «littérature-monde en français», where the language, freed from its exclusive covenant with the nation, opens up to the dialogue between cultures, in an effort to overcome all forms of cultural imperialism. In her contribution to the homonymous volume edited by Michel Le Bris and Jean Rouaud, entitled *Traduttore non è traditore* (clearly inspired by the infamous Italian motto *traduttore, traditore*), Huston offers the perspective of a self-translator on world literature.¹⁵

Being born in Anglophone Canada, English and French were acquired in different periods of her life: the former is her mother tongue, while the latter is – in her own words – her *stepmother tongue*. In fact, after having spent her childhood in Calgary, Alberta – a colonial melting pot of numberless European nationalities and local Native Americans – she briefly moved to Germany and subsequently lived for short periods in New Hampshire, British Columbia, Massachusetts and New York. At twenty, she went to France

¹³ Scholars and philosophers who theorized on the relationship translation-otherness are far too many to name here. Schleiermacher, Benjamin, Lévinas, and Lévi-Strauss are probably the most quoted and their works are certainly known to our case study author.

¹⁴ Currently one of the most studied living authors in the branch of Translation Studies that deals with self-translation, Nancy Huston is the author of thirteen novels and fourteen essays, the majority of which are published in two original versions, in French and in English. Her self-translations go either way, according to the language of the first creation, which usually depends on the setting and topic of the text. Her work is the topic of my PhD thesis.

¹⁵ NANCY HUSTON, *Traduttore non è traditore*, in *Pour une littérature-monde*, sous la dir. de Michel LE BRIS et Jean ROUAUD, Paris, Gallimard, 2007, pp. 151–160.

for a study program. She meant to stay for one year only, but forty-one years later, she still lives there. Since she has not learnt French in her early childhood, Nancy Huston describes herself as a 'false' bilingual. The 'dialogue' between the two variants in her brain is minutely analysed in her article entitled, indeed, *False Bilingualism*, where Huston explains that the terms that come to her mind when she needs to designate an object generally depend on the language she is immersed in at the moment. Sometimes, both English and French equivalents appear in quick succession; at other times, instead, the exact translation in either language is temporarily missing. Being an expatriate, and not a native French speaker, the choice of words and expressions that she includes in her everyday use of language are not picked as intuitively and nonchalantly as they are for mother tongue speakers. The choice is made, on the contrary, after «conscious, lengthy, obsessional, not to say paranoid, reflection».¹⁶ This continued confrontation with otherness, to which her peculiar life experiences forced her, (i.e., to name but few: confrontation with a new country, new neighbourhoods, new classmates, new accents, eventually a new language), surely accounts for attentive, reiterated, deep reflections on the meanders of linguistic relativization and its influence in shaping personal identity and literary inspiration. Nancy Huston's *false bilingualism* – she repeatedly declared – had a crucial impact on her literary career and on her vision of literature *tout court*.

3 WRITING IS TRANSLATING

For the first ten years of her career as a writer, Nancy Huston published only novels and essays in French. «The French idiom – she states in an interview – gave me an incredible sense of freedom. I had no bad academic habits in French. I could hear the language more intensely than my own: nothing went without saying, no turns of phrase were taken for granted; also, all emotions were distinctly attenuated».¹⁷ French – but it might have been any other language – represented for her a rebirth, the beginning of a second life, a window on infinite literary possibilities. Freed from the fear of the blank page, she experienced no writer's block despite (or by virtue of) all the sophisticated literary (and not) theories (Jakobson, Genette, Lévi-Strauss, Girard, Freud, Deleuze, Guattari, Lacan, Bataille, Mauss, Saussure, Malinowski) she devoured as a student in the *Haute Ecole des Sciences Sociales*, where she wrote her thesis about the taboos of language under the supervision of Roland Barthes.¹⁸ All the while, English was kept at distance. Being the idiom of her early childhood, the period in which taboos are interiorised, it was a language linked to a traumatising experience, i.e., her parents' divorce and her mother's departure from the family house and Huston felt incapable of relating to it. But once again, life experiences decidedly intervened in her approach to literary creation: first, a neurological illness that momentarily benumbed her legs, and which she decided to interpret

¹⁶ NANCY HUSTON, *Losing North. Musings on Land, Tongue and Self*, Toronto, McArthur & Co., 1999, pp. 40-50.

¹⁷ NANCY HUSTON, *Finding Freedom in a Foreign Idiom. An Interview with Nancy Huston*, in «Victorian Writer», July-August 2007, p. 13.

¹⁸ NANCY HUSTON, *Dire et interdire, éléments de jurologie*, Paris, Payot, 1980.

as a metaphor of her decision to «freeze her roots».¹⁹ Shortly afterwards, she became a mother for the first time and this event reminded her of her own infancy. Also, more simply, as time elapsed and attenuated the shocks of her childhood, Huston realized that if she kept on neglecting her mother tongue and her origins, she would never be able to write something profound. In her own words, «si on met une croix sur l'enfance, on peut pas faire des bons romans. On peut probablement faire des essais très intelligents, même des romans très intelligents, mais le roman exige qu'on soit un tout».²⁰ Therefore, after a long period of voluntary detachment from a language that was perceived as overcharged with emotions and meaning, she resolved to go back to it and wrote the novel *Plainsong* in English. Two years later, though, no editor had yet agreed to publish it. Huston «heaved a sigh»²¹ and decided to translate it into French. Ever since, self-translation has been an ineluctable part of her poetics.²²

As Huston remarks in numerous essays, languages, for any author who knows more than one, are no indifferent, dispassionate tools.²³ Each corresponds to a particular filter through which the Self interacts with reality: « [L]e problème, voyez-vous, c'est que les langues ne sont pas seulement des langues ; ce sont aussi des world-views, c'est-à-dire des façons de voir et de comprendre le monde. Il y a de l'intraduisible là-dedans. Et si vous avez plus d'une world view...vous n'en avez, d'une certaine façon, aucune ».²⁴ The belief that each language corresponds to a world-view, a particular filter for describing and interpreting reality, is a long-standing one and still a much debated issue in Translation Studies. Huston's position in this regard echoes that of Humboldt, Herder, Hjelmslev and Lotman, rather than Sapir and Whorf. Her considerations are based on first-hand experience: in particular, the sense of bewilderment when, in translating one of her novels from the first language to the other, she realizes that she would never have written such a thing in a language different from the original. While rereading and interpreting her own thoughts for translation, the identity of the author is, then, inevitably questioned: « Qui sommes nous alors ? Si nous n'avons pas les même pensées, fantasmes, attitudes existentielles, voire opinions, dans une langue et dans une autre ? ».²⁵ Self-translation, either from French to English or from English to French, is a research for balance, for the *mot juste*, for the same musicality of the sentence, for the ideal equivalence of meaning and of impression. Inevitably, though – here lies the challenge to the self-translator's identity – the two directions are not symmetrical:

19 With regard to the use of this metaphor, cf. the interview, MI-KYUNG YI, *Épreuves de l'étranger. Entretien avec Nancy Huston*, in «Horizons philosophiques», XII (2001), pp. 1-16.

20 N. Huston interviewed by Catherine Lalonde, 2nd October 2012, airelibre.tv, available on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_SCpdSg6XAw

21 HUSTON, *Finding Freedom in a Foreign Idiom*, cit., p. 13.

22 For an introduction to the issue cf. ALESSANDRO SERPIERI and ELAM KEIR, *Preface: Towards a Poetics of Translation*, in «Textus», XV (2002), pp. 3-10.

23 Huston reflects of her bilingualism in *Nord Perdu*. Suivi de *Douze France*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2002 and its English translation *Losing North*, cit., as well as in the third part of *Désirs et réalités. Textes choisis 1978-1994*, Montréal, Leméac, 1995, entitled *Exil, langue, identité*, pp.199-269.

24 HUSTON, *Nord Perdu*, cit., p. 51.

25 *Ibidem*.

Chaque faux bilingue doit avoir sa carte spécifique de l'asymétrie lexicale ; pour ce qui me concerne, c'est en français que je me sens à l'aise dans une conversation intellectuelle, une interview, un colloque, toute situation linguistique faisant appel aux concepts et aux catégories apprises à l'âge adulte. En revanche, si j'ai envie de délirer, me défouler, jurer, chanter, gueuler, me laisser aller au pur plaisir de la parole, c'est en anglais que je le fais. Tout mon français, en d'autres termes, doit se trouver dans l'hémisphère gauche de mon cerveau, la partie hyper-rationnelle et structurante... » – whereas the right part – « la droite, plus holistique, artistique et émotive est donc entièrement anglophone.²⁶

Huston calls self-translation a «long, laborious and sometimes infuriating process»,²⁷ as well as a frustrating predicament: «c'est une expérience fastidieuse et frustrante, d'irritation contre les dictionnaires, contre mon propre cerveau, contre les langues elles-mêmes, d'être si rétives à coopérer et à se ressembler, de refuser obstinément de communiquer entre elles, de se fondre l'une dans l'autre, de se mêler et de se marier l'une à l'autre ».²⁸ Being a bilingual and self-translating writer has often been described as a two-faced experience. Salman Rushdie, for instance, expresses this peculiar feeling with a metaphor: «Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools».²⁹ The metaphors used by self-translators such as Nabokov – «sorting through one's own innards and then trying them on for size like a pair of gloves»³⁰ – and Beckett – «the wastes and wilds of self-translation»³¹ – are never too far from the lexical field of pain.

Despite the valiant efforts self-translation requires, though, several authors also seem to agree on its irreplaceable contribution to their poetics. As Huston declares, «[...] la question c'est pourquoi le faites-vous alors, si vous n'aimez pas ça, si c'est tellement fastidieux et harassant, pourquoi ne laissez-vous pas quelqu'un d'autre traduire vos livres à votre place, du français en anglais et de l'anglais en français? Et la réponse à cette question-là est la suivante: parce que quand c'est fini, quand c'est vraiment terminé, quand, après tout ce dur labeur, le livre prend enfin forme et réussit à exister dans l'autre langue, eh bien, là je me sens mieux, là je me sens guérie, parce que c'est le même livre, il raconte les mêmes histoires, suscite les mêmes émotions, fait entendre la même musique».³² For Huston, self-translation is not only a transnational and translanguistic stance on literature *per se*; it is also an existential challenge. «Traduire, c'est ça qu'il faut : *traduttore non è traditore*, c'est même la seule façon de ne pas trahir, il n'y a que ça de vrai. Traduire, éternellement traduire ».³³ The process itself is a research for growth and for the dialogue

26 *Ivi*, pp. 61-62.

27 HUSTON, *Finding Freedom in a Foreign Idiom*, cit., p. 13.

28 HUSTON, *Traduttore non è traditore*, cit., p. 158.

29 SALMAN RUSHDIE, *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, London, Granta Books, 1991, p. 15.

30 ELIZABETH KOSTLY BEAUJOUR, *Alien Tongues. Bilingual Russian Writers of the 'First' Emigration*, Ithaca-London, Cornell University Press, 1989, p. 90.

31 Quoted in ms. 5100 of the Reading University Library, Beckett International Foundation, p. 617 (*Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Ruby Cohn*).

32 HUSTON, *Traduttore non è traditore*, cit., p. 159.

33 *Ivi*, p. 158.

between one's multiple selves, each of them being the expression of different ages of life and speaking a different language. When the process is over and the two books are completed, says Huston, «[I] realize that it truly is the same book, that its deep meanings are the same, that the emotions manage to come through and that therefore, despite the incredible patchwork of my identities, there must be some sort of coherency of unity to my deepest self».³⁴ From being an intimate battle between one's dual linguistic personality, self-translation turns into a negotiation that begets reconciliation. And it ultimately becomes a source of literary creation.³⁵

4 THE PURPOSE OF THE NOVEL

Huston's poetics of self-translation is one of the crucial factors that determines her perspective on world literature. Indeed, her peculiar status of author and translator not only stimulates her reflections on linguistic and cultural identity, but sheds also a peculiar light on her considerations on the function of literature. In this regard, her essay *The Tale-Tellers, A Short Study of Humankind* shows how such issues as cultural identity and the role of literature are intimately interwoven. Huston wrote it in an effort to answer to a question asked by a prisoner who attended her lecture at the reading club in the female penitentiary of Fleury-Mérogis: «What's the point of making up stories when reality is already so incredible?»³⁶ In other words, does literature play a role in contemporary society? If so, what need does it serve?

In order to offer a credible answer, the author starts by trying to define human reality: «There is no record of a human tribe ever having been content to live in 'reality', to register it and comment on it without telling stories about it».³⁷ What differentiates human beings from all other animal species, in fact, is that we know we were born and that we will die; we know we are bound to last a certain amount of Time. We respond to this awareness by denominating things and endowing our lifetime with Meaning. By virtue of this combination of factors – a Meaning that unfolds through Time, with a beginning, a series of adventures, and an ending – we see our existence as a *narration*. Indeed, humans simply do not live without it, «without religion, taboo, ritual, genealogy, fairy-tales, magic, stories – i.e., without recourse to the imagination, without con-fabulation».³⁸ Narration is intrinsic to our nature to such extent, Huston maintains, that our given names, our family names, our date and place of birth, our religion, our racial and ethnic makeup, in short, all denominations that allow our interaction with our conspecifics, are all the result of arbitrary fabrications. If everyone adheres to them with abiding faith, it is because they are necessary for the construction of our identity, without which our daily life would be a rather nightmarish experience. The simple fact that humankind has more than one language, that every 'tribe' has different words to

34 HUSTON, *Finding Freedom in a Foreign Idiom*, cit., p. 13.

35 On the equivalence of writing and translating, cf. also JOHN E. JACKSON, *Le même et l'autre. L'écriture comme traduction*, in «Revue de littérature comparée», CCLXXIII (1995), pp. 13-18.

36 NANCY HUSTON, *The Tale-Tellers. A Short Study of Humankind*, Toronto, McArthur & Co., 2008, p. II.

37 *Ivi*, p. 139.

38 *Ivi*, p. 28.

cut up the universe, bears witness of the arbitrary – and, in this sense, fictional – nature of language. The term ‘fictional’ is not used by Huston as a synonym for silly and false. Since there is no ‘true’, no ‘natural’ correspondence between names and things, fictions are «human, i.e., constructed realities».³⁹ Given this premise, when Huston ponders on the function of literature in nowadays society, she compares ‘bad’ fictions to ‘good’ fictions. A bad fiction is, in Huston’s opinion, potentially dangerous: believing that one’s country, one’s political opinion, one’s religion, one’s god are the only ‘true’ ones on Earth, leads to murderous consequences. Discourse is not just discourse: it has real effects on the lives of real people. What are good fictions, then, in Huston’s view? Those that present themselves as ‘fictions’. Those that fully acknowledge, expose, make blatant their fictional nature, showing themselves as ‘stories’, each depicting a possible portion of truth among many others: novels. Unlike other literary genres, the novel is a form of narration that can be experienced individually. Also, «the characteristic of the novel – the way in which it explores the tension between individual and society, between freedom and determinism, and encourages us to identify with people unlike ourselves – make it capable of playing a role in ethics».⁴⁰ Thus, its form and content make the novel a profoundly ethical tool in the sense that it allows humans to empathize and sympathize with others, all the while gaining a better understanding of their own relative vision of the world. In Huston’s words, «la littérature nous autorise à repousser ces limites, aussi imaginaires que nécessaires, qui dessinent et définissent notre moi. En lisant, nous laissons d’autres êtres pénétrer en nous, nous leur faisons de la place sans difficulté – car nous les connaissons déjà. Le roman, c’est ce qui célèbre cette reconnaissance des autres en soi, et de soi dans les autres. C’est le genre humain par excellence».⁴¹

As she reiterates in *Traduttore non è traditore*, Huston’s perspective on literature is profoundly anti-Manichean. Far from finding homogenizing criteria, the role of the author is to praise the *difference* – all sorts of difference – in literature, where *difference* is intended not as a value judgement, placing the literary products on a hierarchical structure, but as the most distinctive, valuable and *vulnerable* trait of global literature: «J’aime la littérature. J’aime sa vastitude, sa diversité, j’aime qu’elle soit justement impossible à réduire, à définir, à prévoir. Tout bon roman est un miracle. J’aime pouvoir choisir entre un petit, un moyen et un grand miracle, entre un miracle qui dit la spécificité et un autre qui dit l’universalité».⁴² Easily and inexpensively, novels provide readers with the chance to meet otherness and, through it, to interpret themselves. So, in order to fulfil its ethical drive, global literature should be as little homogenised as possible, both linguistically and culturally. By providing new, foreign, different perspectives on reality, novels help us relativize the portion of reality that surrounds us, and consequently be more open-minded toward other cultures. Moreover, readers who stock their imagination with good fictions, are able to recognize bad ones more easily. Otherwise, as Huston summarizes, «[t]he more people think of themselves as realistic, the more they tend to dismiss the novel as being superfluous, silly or a waste of time, the more liable they are to slide toward the Ur-text – that is, towards vehemence, violence, criminality».⁴³

39 *Ivi*, p. 27.

40 *Ivi*, p. 162.

41 HUSTON, *Nord Perdu*, cit., p. 107.

42 HUSTON, *Traduttore non è traditore*, cit., p. 152.

43 HUSTON, *The Tale-Tellers*, cit., pp. 159-160.

5 TRANSNATIONAL NOVELS

As Huston states in *Traduttore non è traditore*, « la lâcheté de mes attaches originales, à laquelle est venu s'ajouter mon exil choisi, me permet de me glisser dans la peau de tout le monde et de n'importe qui. J'aime qu'il y ait des écrivains enracinés, et d'autres divisés, et d'autres encore, multiples ». ⁴⁴ For the extent and variety of her fictional and non-fictional literary production, Nancy Huston certainly signs up to the last category.

Multiplicity and hybridity are, indeed, the distinctive trait with respect to the sources nourishing her literary inspiration, making her production an ideal case study to approach the presently fluid, flexible theorizations of world literature. As I have tried to sketch in the present paper, the self-representation of the author in her essays shows that, on the one hand, specific biographical events – the chosen exile, the false bilingualism, the double nationality – have had a fundamental influence on Huston's approach to literature and on the shaping of her personal poetics. On the other hand, Huston states that it is from her novels that she extrapolates new material for questions and issues, which are then masterly explored in essays. In fact, in an interview released for *airelibre.tv* in 2012, Huston explains, « mes deux derniers essais sont sortis, vraiment, de mes deux derniers romans. ⁴⁵ Et mon fils me dit que – mon fils qui est un intello français beaucoup plus que je ne l'ai jamais été – il m'a dit que c'était bien que la poétique sorte de la poésie et non l'inverse. C'est-à-dire, si j'écrivais des romans pour illustrer mes idées, ce seraient vraiment des mauvais romans. Alors que, si ce sont les romans qui m'obligent à soulever des nouvelles questions... ». ⁴⁶ The parallel reading of essays and novels, therefore, is a way – an arbitrary one, but partially justified by the author's own claims of kinship of the two forms – that allows to retrace the complementary depictions of Huston's literary poetics.

The themes of linguistic and cultural identity, of otherness and of the difficulty of dialogue between human beings who belong to different cultures and speak different languages is, to say the least, central to Huston's fictional writing. Three novels in particular, seem to epitomize the questions which she repeatedly analysed in her essays and which I have tried to briefly outline so far. *L'empreinte de l'ange/The Mark of the Angel* ⁴⁷ is set in Paris during the late Fifties. It tells the story of Raphaël Lepage, a world-famous French flutist who grows up in a privileged bourgeois milieu; he falls in love with Saffie, a younger German girl who shows up at his door to respond to an advertisement for a house cleaner. Despite the fact that Saffie is almost completely unresponsive to his sentiments, she accepts his marriage proposal and has a son from him. The novel focuses on their inability to communicate, which has little to do with the fact that Raphael does not speak German and Saffie's French is rather poor. Linguistic barriers are easily overcome

⁴⁴ HUSTON, *Traduttore non è traditore*, cit., p. 153.

⁴⁵ Huston is talking about *L'espèce fabulatrice/The Tale-tellers: A Short Study of humankind*, inspired by the novel *Lignes de faille/Fault lines* and *Reflets dans un oeil d'homme*, the essay inspired by the novel *Infrarouge/Infrared*.

⁴⁶ N. Huston interviewed by Catherine Lalonde, cit.

⁴⁷ NANCY HUSTON, *L'empreinte de l'ange*, Arles, Actes Sud, 1998; *The Mark of the Angel*, Toronto, McArthur & Co., 1999.

when there is the willpower to do so. Indeed, Saffie will meet András, an exiled Hungarian Jew who repairs instruments for a living. Despite the fact that he may seem as little compatible to Saffie as Raphaël is, unlike the latter, he is able to open a dialogue with Saffie and empathise with her experience of the war. As the author described it, «c'est un peu un livre sur Babel, et sur la différence des langues comme un symbole de notre difficulté à nous comprendre et à nous mettre à la place les uns des autres, et à être ensemble».⁴⁸ Communication with and identification to the foreign, despite all linguistic and cultural obstacles, is the core theme of this novel: «[c'est] la question que j'explore dans *L'empreinte de l'ange*, – Huston points out – où je montre un Paris étranger rempli d'étrangers, qui tous perçoivent la ville à leur manière. Et je sollicite l'identification des lecteurs à des choses qui ne leur ressemblent pas. Enfin je pose la question, plutôt continuellement : est-ce qu'on peut s'identifier à ce qui ne vous ressemble pas ? ».⁴⁹ The question of the building of a cultural identity in a challenging historical background is also central in *Lignes de faille/Fault Lines*.⁵⁰ It is the story of a family recounted in the first person by four generations of six-year-old children. The narration is opened by the great grandchild Sol, a precocious, spoiled child who grows up in nowadays California; the second part is told by Randall (Sol's father) growing up in Haifa shortly before the Lebanon war of 1982; the third sequence is told by Randall's mother Sadie, who grew up in New York. The last part is narrated by Erra, an Ukrainian-born child who had been kidnapped and raised by a German family in the context of the Nazi 'Lebensborn' program,⁵¹ until, at the end of the war, she was sent to a foster family in Toronto. The horrors of the Second World War, which mark Erra's childhood indelibly, are passed on as a non-material, long-lasting legacy to the three generations of her descendants. «[L]e fait d'écrire dans la tête de quatre personnages enfants,» says Huston, «à quatre époques de l'histoire, dans quatre lieux géographiques différents, m'a obligée de poser la question de comment se construit une identité».⁵² As the sources of all the family's traumas and dysfunctionality are progressively revealed by the narrations of the four characters, the reader is able to understand how the different linguistic and cultural reference points of the different family members ultimately inhibit the character's ability to communicate with each other and understand each other's fears, thus irreparably compromising each parent-child relationship. The third novel which significantly illustrates Huston's love for comparing and contrasting human's abilities to communicate despite their different linguistic and cultural references is *Danse Noire/Black Dance*,⁵³ also a story of an internationally split family. Written as a screenplay by the partner of the protagonist, the

48 NANCY HUSTON, *Déracinement du savoir*, in *Au cœur des textes. L'écriture et le souci de la langue. Écrivains, linguistes : témoignages et traces manuscrites*, sous la dir. d'Irène FENOGLIO, Louvain la Neuve, Academia-Bruylant, 2005, p. 50.

49 *Ivi*, p. 46.

50 NANCY HUSTON, *Lignes de faille*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2006; NANCY HUSTON, *Fault Lines*, Toronto, McArthur & Co., 2007.

51 *Lebensborn* means literally "fount of life". It was an association founded in December 1935 and directly overseen by Himmler, whose aim was "the selection and adoption of qualified children", i.e., in the Nazi's mindset, Aryan children.

52 N. Huston interviewed by Catherine Lalonde, cit.

53 NANCY HUSTON, *Danse noire*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2013; *Black Dance*, Toronto, Penguin Canada, 2014.

narration alternates the biographies of three main characters. Little by little, in alternating chapters, the narrator (Paul Schwarz) reconstructs the reckless life of his partner, the scriptwriter Milo Noirlac (1952-2010); the pregnancy of Milo's mother, Awinita, a young Redskin prostitute which he never met; and the life of his grandparent Neil Kerrigan, an Irish university student with literary ambitions, who was forced, after the failing of 1916 Easter Rising, to flee to Canada and change his surname into 'Noirlac'.

The three novels certainly share some formal features. In *Lignes de faille/Fault Lines* and *Danse Noire/Black Dance*, for instance, an intricately designed mosaic structure invites the readers to put together all the tiles disseminated in the narration, in order to make sense of the whole picture. They also show Huston's postmodern taste for meta-narrative comments and polyphonic plots which mirror the multiplicity inherent to self-translation. What is more meaningful to the purpose of this brief analysis, though, is the recurrent pattern which posits otherness at the heart of their narrative structures. All three novels display, on the background of real and dramatic historical events, a set of characters whose selves have been shaped by different linguistic and cultural contexts and who, nevertheless, find themselves part of the same family, of the same story. The positive or negative outcome of their adventures is entrusted to their ability to overcome their specific world-view and empathise with the perspective of the foreign. In this sense, they epitomize the reflections on linguistic and cultural identity, which Nancy Huston delineates in the examined essays and in *Traduttore non è traditore*, in particular. In novels and essays alike, her stance on world literature is a plea for multiplicity and anti-homogenization, in the name of a constant effort for dialogue and negotiation. This transnational/translational poetics is a mirroring of her work of self-translation. Like Benjamin's notion of translation claimed in the first place, also the struggle of self-translation results in growth and renovation; as Huston says – her words are maybe worth repeating – the translated book equals, in its deepest essence, the original: «c'est le même livre, il raconte les mêmes histoires, suscite les mêmes émotions, fait entendre la même musique».

Huston's self-translations are made in two languages of dominant, hegemonic literary traditions as English and French, but I believe that her reflections on the process have a universal appeal, inasmuch as they could – and maybe should – be applied to any other relationship between translating languages. Who better than a self-translator, in fact, can offer insights into the hospitality inherent in each language, into the responsibility of the dialogue among cultures? Antonio Prete, in his essay on the poetics of translation, *All'ombra dell'altra lingua*, masterly summarizes the ethical drive of translation:

Ogni lingua sembra attendere il transito in una nuova lingua per potersi rinnovare. Solo in una società che dà valore al multilinguismo, che promuove e protegge la presenza e la pratica di diverse lingue, la traduzione può estendere la sua funzione: perché la diffusa conoscenza delle altre culture trova nella traduzione uno strumento prezioso per attraversare quello che è diverso e interrogarlo e conoscerlo. La traduzione è un ponte che mette in rapporto le differenze: passaggio, dialogo, incontro. Antitetica, in questo, alla guerra. Sua negazione o suo esorcismo, sua sospensione?⁵⁴

54 ANTONIO PRETE, *All'ombra dell'altra lingua. Per una poetica della traduzione*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2011, pp. 12-13.

In the contemporary world where we are constantly overwhelmed by market dynamics and its tendency to homologation, the theorization of *world literature* – there lies its great challenge and opportunity –, may be thought of as an instrument apt to preserve and enhance the richness and differentiation of the various literary traditions, one that favours the dialogue and interchanges between different languages and cultures. Consequently, one that promotes, above all, translation and the recognition of its value. As a writer, Huston flees from categorizations, labels and literary schools liable to limit her freedom of identification. She states it strongly and unmistakably in *Traduttore non è traditore*: «Il est essentiel que les écrivains [...] expliquent de façon patiente et répétée qu'il ne sont ni des footballeurs ni des beauty queens ni des partis politiques ni des armées, qu'ils ne 'jouent' pas pour tel pays (ou telle langue), contre tel (ou telle) autre, qu'ils ne font pas la course, et que exécrant toute forme de compétition – linguistique, nationale, régionale –, ils se réjouissent au contraire de rencontrer aussi forts qu'eux, et plus forts qu'eux, leur contemporains ou non, leur compatriotes ou non».⁵⁵ As a self-translator, the writer decides to assume a transnational and translinguistic attitude toward literature which is ultimately also an ethical calling: «Traduire, – writes Huston – non seulement ce n'est pas trahir, c'est un espoir pour l'humanité».⁵⁶ The concept of linguistic and cultural identity is accordingly emptied of its limiting aspects and may turn into a universal poetic agenda. In what do human beings recognize themselves? Translation opens up to values – open-mindedness, hospitality, friendliness – that overcome the loyalty to one geographic country, to religious or ethnic membership. As readers, eventually, we are invited to let the foreign approach us, to widen and reshape our own vision and experience of the world. In this sense, being 'global' means a tension to overcome one-sidedness and individuality, in the interest of the defence of literary biodiversity.

⁵⁵ HUSTON, *Traduttore non è traditore*, cit., p. 152.

⁵⁶ *Ivi*, p. 160.

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PAROLE CHIAVE

Nancy Huston, self-translation, world literature, transnational novel.

NOTIZIE DELL'AUTRICE

Giorgia Falceri graduated with Honours in Letterature euroamericane, traduzione e critica letteraria, with a thesis presenting the first Italian translation of *The Antipodes* (1638), a comedy by Richard Brome. She is currently a PhD student in the Doctoral Programme in Linguistic and Literary Studies at the University of Trento, Italy. Her dissertation will discuss the notions of language, identity and self-translation in Nancy Huston's literary work. Since 2010, she has been working as a translator and reviser of scientific articles, mainly in the field of biology and evolutionary genetics.

giorgia.falceri@unitn.it


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