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Nancy Huston's *Danse Noire*

Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour

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Nancy Huston's Danse noire¹

It is a truism that each bilingual is idiosyncratic in terms of language experience, usage, and cortical organization for language processing. One would expect this to be even more acutely true of bilinguals or multilinguals who write in more than one language and who self-translate, since it has long been shown that translation uses quite different cortical pathways than those used for writing in any one of the multilingual's languages.²

Although it may at first seem inconsistent with these facts, and despite their variegated trajectories, fully bilingual writers (those who write in more than one language and then self-translate themselves into the other(s)), in many ways have more in common with each other than they do with monolinguals writing in any one of the languages which they use.

Obviously, the linguistic and psychological situations of writers like Vladimir Nabokov or Ariel Dorfman, who were displaced at crucial moments of their development and in circumstances over which they had no control, are different from those of writers such as Samuel Beckett and Nancy Huston, who chose to leave what they considered the cultural backwaters (Ireland, Anglophone Canada) to follow the call of French and France. Yet these four authors share with other bilingual writers at least one aspect of their artistic trajectories: after periods of self-protectively insisting on keeping their languages separate, writing in one or in the other but not both for some years, and almost obsessively self-translating the works immediately afterwards (Beckett, Huston), or after a longer interval (Dorfman, Nabokov), they arrive at a plateau of relatively easy linguistic alternation and linguistic and psychological comfort. Here, the temptation is to allow the languages to interact in a single text, very much as polyglots behave when they communicate orally with each other: code-switching, profligate generation of neologisms, puns, allusions, parodies etc. Nabokov did this in Ada, with results that have alienated many of the relatively few trilingual

¹ Nancy Huston, Danse noire (Arles/Montreal: Actes Sud/Leméac, 2013). Nancy Huston is particularly appropriate for consideration in a special issue of the L2 Journal on "Literary Translingualism: Multilingual Identity and Creativity". This article will concentrate on her latest and most controversial multilingual work.

² For example, Michel Paradis, "Contributions of Neurolinguistics to the Theory of Bilingualism," Applications of Linguistic Theory in the Human Sciences (East Lansing: Dept. of Linguistics, Michigan State U. , 1980), 1802-11. For a general, partially outdated, but still relevant, discussion of the psycho/physical conditions and consequences of bilingual writing, see the first two chapters of Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour, Alien Tongues: Bilingual Russian Writers of the "First" Emigration (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

readers who might fully appreciate his *podvig* [“exploit” or “dare”].³ More recently, Nancy Huston, who has been working towards polylingualism-in-a-single-text for some time, has written a completely multilingual novel, one that is annoying in a quite different way than Ada. Her *podvig* is even riskier than Nabokov’s⁴ and makes Danse noire an *incontournable* book for anyone curious about the pitfalls and possible triumphs of bilingual authorship.

Born in Calgary, Canada in 1953, Nancy Huston came to Paris⁵ as a 20-year-old student. She wrote a Master’s thesis (about swear words) under the direction of Roland Barthes and rapidly became visible on the French intellectual scene, thanks to her brains, her energy, and, certainly not least, her beauty. Huston is now the author of more than forty books, including fourteen works of fiction, eleven of which she has self-translated. There are also plays, children’s books and numerous essays, including Nord perdu/Lost North⁶ wherein she speaks about her bilingualism. Huston initially wrote and published in French and now frequently also does so in English. She also participates in “interdisciplinary” experiences, for instance: reading aloud to the accompaniment of a trio of musicians. It is further important to note that she is herself a musician, playing the harpsichord during the period when she was writing in French, and, as she began to write more in English, switching back to the piano.

Nancy Huston’s first novel already demonstrates two of the characteristics of many of her later works. It has music embedded in its title, and its structure is influenced by a musical form. Les Variations Goldberg⁷ (self-translated as The Goldberg Variations), a book which is narrated from a variety of points of view, is only the first step in the increasingly complex structural and linguistic organization of Huston’s novels. Although her trajectory is quite complex and not all her novels are as obviously influenced by music or multilingualism, certain

³ The thoroughly polyglot George Steiner found Ada self-indulgent, in spots irremediably overwritten, and labored in its “mixture of English, French, Russian and “private Esperanto.” George(Steiner, “Extraterritorial,” Triquarterly 17 (1970), 119-27m 125). W. W. Rowe has remarked that without knowing Russian one cannot completely understand even the first paragraph of Ada, and the polyglot may also miss a lot if he is not careful. (Nabokov’s Deceptive World, New York: NYU Press, 1971, 31.)

⁴ Remember that Nabokov’s Dar becomes V.V.’s Dare in Look at the Harlequins!

⁵ It is probably linguistically important to note that she had been taken as a child on a trip to Germany by her new stepmother who had family there.

⁶ Nancy Huston, Nord Perdu suivi de Douze France (Arles: Actes Sud, 1999. Published in Canada as Losing North (Toronto: McArthur and Co., 2002)

⁷ Nancy Huston Les Variations Goldberg (Arles: Actes Sud, 1981) self-translated as The Goldberg Variations (Montreal: Nuage editions, 1996).

works after Les Variations Goldberg stand out as marking important experiments in the direction of creating a fully multilingual novel.

In Instruments des ténèbres⁸ (*Prix Goncourt des lycéens*), a young woman living in 1966 is writing a novel about two orphan twins living in the period of Louis XIV. The fictional “author” is at the same time writing her own *carnet intime*, which she interrupts frequently to write the historical novel about the servant girl Barbe, raped by her master and accused of sorcery, and of Barbe’s brother Barnabe, who becomes a monk. The “author’s” prospective title for her novel is “Sonate de la Résurrection.” This resonates with the “author’s” own personal text, the “Carnet *Scordatura*,” in which she directly refers to musical instruments and the possibilities of sonorities produced by deliberately mistuning the strings of violins and violas, producing unusual intervals.

Critics tend to adopt a musical vocabulary when they speak of this book. One review likens the narrative process to counterpoint. Another declares:

“Cette partition pour deux instruments qui s’harmonisent dans la révélation finale de la “résurrection”, en est la brillante confirmation.”
Still another says: *“La mise en évidence des procédés d’écriture dévoile le placement de cordes qui constituent le roman. Au lecteur alors de faire vibrer ces cordes en toute liberté, à la recherche peut-être alors de la lecture d’une discordance musicale.”*⁹

The complex structure of the book also integrates folk tales and other elements of French oral tradition. Still more important for our current purpose, however, is the fact that originally Huston wrote the narrative of the American character, who is the “author,” in English, and used French to write the imbedded story of Barbe. Huston then translated each part into the other language, so that there were complete versions in both languages. This effort was an important step on the way to the ultimate (at least for the moment) multilingualism of Danse noire.

Although it is not a novel but rather a short text in homage to Samuel Beckett, presented in French and English on facing pages, one definitely must mention Huston’s Limbes/Limbo¹⁰ in the context of a discussion of

⁸ Nancy Huston, Instruments des ténèbres (Paris: J’ai lu, 1996), self-translated as Instruments of Darkness (Montreal: Little, Brown and Co., 1997).

⁹ <http://la-plume-francophone.over-blog.com/arataicle-129347.html>.

¹⁰ Nancy Huston, Limbes/Limbo: Un hommage à Samuel Beckett. (biligual edition) Arles: Actes Sud, 1998. Montreal: Leméac, 2000.

multilingualism in a single work. Both versions were written, essentially simultaneously, with an irregular movement back and forth between the languages, in what Paul de St. Pierre has called elsewhere "...not a process of translation, but rather one of writing *across* languages,"¹¹ Limbes/Limbo is an immensely clever and good-humored bilingual text, full of puns and consciously used clichés. It is an essential and incontrovertibly successful step on the way to Danse noire.

Lignes de faille [Fault Lines],¹² which earned several awards including the *Prix Femina*, is Huston's most multivoiced novel before Danse noire. It works backwards: narrated, sequentially, in reverse chronological order, by four six-year-olds who are four generations of a family, beginning with an extremely creepy and perverse boy in California in 2004, followed by the voice of his father, Randall at six, whose family has just moved to Israel, followed by the voice of Randall's mother at six in Toronto, followed, finally, by the tale of Kristina (who in the tale of Randall's mother is a grown-up, famous singer), at the age of six in 1945-46 Germany.

Joanna Brisco in The Guardian gives full measure of respect to Huston's success in juggling the times and the voices and the gradual revelation of secrets in Lignes de faille, but she adds:

This is an immaculate novel that, on the surface, can barely be faulted. The problem is that it's cold. Even when inhabiting the psyche of a suffering child, Huston maintains a lightly ironic distance from her characters, and while Fault Lines impresses, it utterly fails to move. Despite acute observations and potentially highly emotive subject matter, it reads as an artificial imitation of real life: a clever-clever, shiny version supported by professional craft and research, but one that is ultimately inauthentic. It's an accomplished novel whose soul is missing.¹³

One cannot really say that there is a missing soul in Danse noire, even though the true state of things in that regard is not revealed to the reader until almost the end. In this, her most recent novel, Huston is working on a tightrope

¹¹ Quoted in Brian Fitch, "The Status of Self Translation," in Texte (special issue: "*Traduction/textualite*: Text, Translatability") 4 (1985), 111-125, 119-120.

¹² Nancy Huston, Lignes de faille (Arles: Actes Sud, 2006), Self-translated as Fault Lines (Montreal: Leméac, 2006).

¹³ Joanna Briscoe, The Guardian, Friday 14 March, 2008.

without a net. She knows it too. “*C’est le livre le plus pervers linguistiquement que j’ai jamais fait et je ne recommencerai pas! Mais il fallait faire ça une fois dans ma vie.*”¹⁴

One must, however, distinguish between the author’s needs and those of his/her readers. Many of Huston’s readers are not so sure about the success of what she has done in Danse noire. The novel has an immensely complicated narrative structure. To begin with, the title refers to the Afro-Brasilian combat-dance: the “capoeira,” whose movements provide the titles of the book’s ten chapters (I am incapable of saying whether there is any further parallel between the chapter titles, the dance movement that is briefly explained on each chapter’s title page, and the content of the chapter. I leave that to an ambitious graduate student.) Each of the chapters recounts events in the lives of three major characters: Milo, (who is dying in the first page), his grandfather (an exile from the Irish Rebellion washed up in French-speaking Canada), and Milo’s mother (an illiterate and drug-addicted Cree prostitute). Every chapter goes in the same order: first Milo, then Neil, and then Awinita, but whereas Neil’s parts cover years and continents, Milo’s start in the present and then flash back in chronological order from his early childhood to his deathbed, and Awinita’s time span goes only from March 1951 to March 1952.

Huston explains her structure, as might be expected, with a musical comparison:

Comme dans un prélude de Bach, où la main gauche peut jouer un rythme binaire alors que la main droite joue un rythme tertiaire, je me suis dit que se serait bien de ne pas faire avancer son histoire [de Milo] au même rythme que celles de Neil ou d’Awinita. On a ainsi trois avancées chronologiques qui se déroulent tantôt sur quelques mois, tantôt sur plusieurs années.¹⁵

If this were not already complicated enough, the whole novel is narrated as though it were a project for a long film, proposed by Milo’s lover, film director Paul Schwarz¹⁶ at Milo’s bedside, just before Milo dies of Aids. The whole novel is rhythmized by the cinematic “*On coupe*”[Cut!], as the two lovers are supposedly

¹⁴ <http://www.lapresse.ca/le-solwil/arts-et-spectacles/livres/2013/10/05/01-4696945-danse-noir....2/24/14>.

¹⁵ Interview with Karine Vilder. <http://www.journal-demontreal.com/2013/09/28/un-nancy-huston-aussi-dense-que-noir>.

¹⁶ Milo’s *nom de famille*, in so far as he has one, is that of his grandfather, “Noirlac. “ It is a little over the top that he should be “black lake” and his lover “Schwarz”, and the title of the novel: “Danse noire.” But this is just a small element of the almost Nabokovian overkill of Danse noire.

preparing a scenario based on Milo's life. There is lots of filmmaking talk: camera angles, voice offs voiceovers, etc.

And as if this were still not complicated enough, there is also the novel's immensely complex linguistic structure. Huston's characters speak a variety of languages and dialects. She immediately translates from whichever language the character would have been speaking or writing (various levels of French, British English, Canadian English, diverse forms of *Joal*, Cree- accented, illiterate English, etc.) while trying to maintain the same level of language or dialect in the translations. These translations appear *en bas de page*. One is tempted to quote Nabokov's comments about his multiple-staged self-translations of Speak Memory!: "...a diabolical task, but some consolation was given me by the thought that such multiple metamorphoses, familiar to butterflies had not been tried by any human before."¹⁷

In fact, Nancy Huston's *podvig* is even more startling than Nabokov's, because the translations are multivoiced, fragmented and simultaneous. These translations *en bas de page* are extremely annoying for readers who know both English and French and who can therefore muddle through the dialects and the accents without the help of subtitles. (In fact, if the passages were not so long and did not take up so much of the page, one might assume that here too Huston is using a cinematic reference.) These translations are even, or perhaps even especially, annoying to readers who do not have both English and French and who cannot avoid looking at the translations.¹⁸ Most readers seem to resent the obligation to look to the bottom of the page and then go back up. It spoils the fun of an easy read. Many readers do seem to prefer just skipping what they do not understand, but here they have no excuse, since a translation is immediately provided. Whether this discomfort is the result of embarrassment on the part of the more or less monolingual reader, or is caused by something else, the resulting displeasure has engendered many unfavorable comments on the book, although there are also a few dithyrambic fans, and Actes Sud has no hesitation in declaring on the book's back cover "*Film ou roman, roman d'un film, Danse noire est l'oeuvre totale, libre et accomplie d'une romanciere au sommet de son art.*"

Why does this novel, despite its emotionally engaged (perhaps too engaged) narrator, strike readers as intellectually arbitrary? Why is it so annoying,

¹⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, Speak Memory! New York: Vintage (1989), 13.

¹⁸ Even in a cursory internet check of reactions to the book, I ran across at least two dozen unhappy comments about the awkwardness of having to consult the translations.

even to the target audience of bilingual readers? Is the loving, if sometimes brusque, sentimentalism of the narrator off-putting? Is some of the objection to the book on the part of some essentially monolingual readers due to the fact that this is a homosexual love story? Does that say something about monolingualism and sexual narrow-mindedness, or contrariwise, does it say something about bilingualism and tolerance of alternative sexualities? That would be an interesting question, but it is a topic on which I will not speculate further here.

It is important, however, to consider whether the audience for Danse noire is essentially limited to a select group like that of Ada's trilingual readers? It should not be so limited, since Huston has generously provided the whole apparatus of translation, off-putting as it may be to some. Possibly the problem is not so much with the fact of the translations *en bas de page* as it is with the level of the language that is being translated. Translating literate speech is one thing. Trying to find an equivalent for substandard speech is something quite different. And while the basic text of Danse noire is in French, there is a great deal of substandard English of various kinds in the novel. Here are two small examples, chosen absolutely at random, from Danse noire. "Your dad's de one who got money': dit-elle enfin." Translated *en bas de page* as "C'est ton père à toé qu'y a des sous." (p.92) Or, on the preceding page: "So what ya doin in de city?" Which becomes "T'es venu viv' en ville pourquoi?" Personally, I find this kind of "English" (Awinita's in this case) really annoying, whereas the French "equivalent" doesn't bother me much. Perhaps it would if I had to read a lot of it. But as a bilingual reader, I don't bother with the translations and it is the substandard English in the text that sounds inauthentic to me. Yet Huston actually grew up in the Canadian West, and her ear (which is generally a very good one) may be more accurate than mine. Still, despite my admiration for much of Huston's work and my grudging respect for the challenges she has set herself here, I, like many other readers, am (and this is the last time I will use this word) annoyed.

Nancy Huston has said that she wrote Danse noire because such a book needed to be done, but that you will not catch her doing something like it again. That is probably wise on her part. But it leaves unanswered a more general question: Is it possible to create an artistically *successful* truly bilingual or multilingual novel? And who gets to judge? Obviously one can create a work that involves code switching and more or less mimics actual speech patterns. See, for example Anzaldúa's ¹⁹ Borderlands/La Frontera or Susana Chavez-Silverman's

¹⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa. Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1999), bilingual Spanish/English (Spanglish?) and Susana Chavez-Silverman. Killer Crónicas: Bilingual Memories. Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin, 2004. (Definitely Spanglish or Latinidad).

Spanglish²⁰ (sometimes called “Latinidad”) Killer Crónicas: Bilingual Memories. There have also been attempts at creating bilingual novels, such as Ray Federman’s The Voice in the Closet/La Voix dans le cabinet de débarras²¹, or Giannina Braschi’s Yo-Yo Boing!.²² In these books the authors happily address select audiences. That translation of these works would be problematic is not uppermost in Chavez-Silverman’s mind and would certainly not have bothered Federman.

What Huston has done in Danse noire may seem to be to write a novel and to translate it on the fly at the same time. But that is not really so. If you read Danse noire, you might consider as you go the problems that writing the basic narration in English would pose.²³ How would you keep the linguistic contrasts? Because after all, they are, perhaps, [пожалуй] the main thing the novel is about.²⁴ Nancy Huston is right that she should not do anything like Danse noire again. She has written it at a period in her career trajectory similar to the one in his when Nabokov plunged into Ada.²⁵ As he then moved on to more Transparent Things, so should Huston. Now for something completely different.

Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour , Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center

²⁰ For more on Spanglish, see Ilan Stavans, Spanglish: the Making of a New American Language (New York: Harper Collins/Rayo, 2003).

²¹ Raymond Federman, The Voice in the Closet/La Voix dans le cabinet de débarras (Buffalo; Starcherone Press, 1979).

²² Giannina Braschi, Yo-Yo Boing! (Pittsburg: Latin American Literary Review Press, 1998).

²³ “Black Danse “ is currently scheduled to be published by Black Cat in September 2014, and then we will have the answers.

²⁴ Hesitation in the style of the nameless narrator of Dostoevsky’s Братья Карамазовы.

²⁵ Bilingual pun intended.