The space between: Self-translator Nancy Huston's Limbes/Limbo

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THE SPACE BETWEEN:
SELF-TRANSLATOR
NANCY HUSTON’S *Limbes/Limbo*

by Nicola Danby

Montréal, Québec

Cet article examine un aspect très récent des écrits de Nancy Huston sur le bilinguisme, l’identité culturelle et la pratique de l’autotraduction: l’écriture bilingue simultanée. Il propose une comparaison entre la première édition d’un texte intitulé *Limbes/Limbo*: un hommage à Samuel Beckett et sa version originale bilingue, intitulée *Limbes*. Alors que le second texte passe d’une langue à l’autre, les changements y étant déclenchés tour à tour par la forme et par le sens, le premier garde les deux langues nettement séparées – français et anglais en regard. Soigneusement positionnées, les transpositions de forme et de contenu révèlent les négociations souterraines entre les deux moitiés d’un être intérieurement partagé. Les textes de Huston sont la matérialisation ou, mieux, la transcription du flot de conscience émanant d’un esprit qui n’est totalement investi ni par l’anglais ni par le français.

INTRODUCTION

To quote English-Furlan self-translator Dôre Michelut,

there are areas within each of us that have never met, that don’t speak or listen to each other. If these areas are enclosed in languages, those of us who still have an active mother tongue have an interesting area to cultivate, one that we can experience and reshape through translation.¹

Many bilinguals can not help but struggle with the distinction between their two language-bound selves: and writer Nancy Huston is certainly no exception. In her short and little-known work entitled *Limbes/Limbo*: un hommage à Samuel Beckett, and in its original unpublished version simply entitled *Limbes*,² she explores this

². The text is available on the website http://home.ca.inter.net/~ttsu/issue1houston.htm [sic].
division of her languages and identities, widening it into an independent space between. Huston’s original version of Limbes stretches beyond the parameters of currently defined and examined self-translation. As such it constitutes a particular genre of writing defined here as “simultaneous bilingual writing”, a prism at the axis of her two language-defined identities, honouring Samuel Beckett’s practice and life lived in limbo, or in the space between the two languages.

In this work, both style and content serve to bring out the theme of limbo in bilingual writing and self-translation to the surface. Finding a way for one’s two languages to communicate, to speak to each other, means uniting (even temporarily) the two previously separated portions of one’s life. When this is done through the art of writing, as described above by Dôre Michelut, it cannot help but be a more charged activity than that of unilingual writing. Not only the forms but the subject matter as well have to communicate.

Huston’s 1998 Actes Sud work addresses limbo in several ways: first, as a bilingual creation, it teeters on the edge between bilingual writing and self-translation. This in-between status is reinforced by the fact that Limbes/Limbo is a bilingual first edition – all 18 passages of both English and French versions on facing corresponding pages are published for the first time. Neither text has chronological precedence. The original version is the little-known precedent: and with the help of this text we are able to look deeper into the simultaneous bilingual writing activity behind the subsequent neatly separated English and French versions.

In this paper I will examine some key examples in Huston’s simultaneous writing practices on the cultural, humour, and stylistic levels. These elucidate the complex relationship between the original text and its published version, as well as the relationship between Huston’s languages and cultural selves.

A result of this type of writing is that the translations – or French and English counterparts – create a double reading or a combined meaning which is greater than each of the meanings contained in the texts, if examined individually. “Difference”, as James McGuire says, “makes meaning”. I will discuss some of

the most revelatory differences in style and content, but I will first examine the structural differences between the published version and the original version.

**Original version versus published version: some statistics**

In the published version (which I will refer to hereafter as the PV), the English and French texts combined in the original version (OV) are separated, and self-translated to create two complete versions. The PV is approximately 50 pages in length (making the French and English version 25 pages each, though there are ~270 wpp in the original version (OV), and ~200-225 wpp in the PV). The double presence of the text in the PV accounts for the greater length (2 languages), but there are also several pages (350–600 words) more. The PV is thus 6–12% longer than the OV, depending on the published version (English or French) against which it is gauged (the French being approximately 6% longer than the English.) Huston edited and rewrote portions of the PV, expanding the text while taking it further. This is not surprising considering Huston herself described her self-translation practice as being a helpful editing or “quality control” step. She writes her original (either in English or in French – her first English first-language production was *Plainsong*), and then begins the self-translation. During the self-translation process she revisits and edits the original, and in this way, changes the original when necessary, which was the process she used in recreating *Plainsong* and *Cantique des plaines* equally in French and in English.

The original version (OV) dates from Easter 1997, one year before the Actes Sud 1998 publication. The OV differs from the PV in that it maps Huston’s switches between languages, and provides a first-person stream of consciousness testimony of the bilingual writer’s mind, at turns led more by form than content, and at others vice versa.

Under the French title Limbes, the OV consists of a single text of 12 pages, and is approximately 4,650 words in length. The 39 language switches between English and French with no order or structure appear to be sparked off by both form and content, and demonstrate how Huston’s two languages come together and
bounce off each other in a bilingual voice. The back and forth reading across the two versions that the reader does in the PV is viewed in a consolidated and combined format, where we see both languages are part of her voice. She writes out of a place of limbo – the text being a materialization, or transcript, of her neither purely English nor purely French mind.

The OV permits us to see in which language some of the interesting form-led creations and writings originated, and in which direction the self-translations went. The result of my dual study of both (OV and PV) versions shows a mix of many different types of self-translating and bilingual writing practices.

By looking at the multiple versions and practices, we will see that this is a singular form of writing, which draws its greatest strength and character from its mix of marginalities.

These notable differences, or écarts between English and French texts can be sorted into several categories: form-guided translations (rhyme, alliteration, rhythm, morpheme based derivations, syllepses, word building, metatheses, antanaclasis, spoonerisms and derivation) and cultural translation (humour, fairytales, literary references, colloquialisms). I will begin by first analyzing several of the form-guided translations before moving on to the more complex cultural- and meaning-based translations.

FORM-GUIDED TRANSLATIONS:
TRANSPOSITIONS AND CREATIVE EQUIVALENCE

Example I


Here we are introduced to one of Huston’s unique techniques, namely a delicate balance of each unit of content and form


to create an interdependent bilingual complementarity, as in the last two pairs in the example (Clot. Shut=Clos. Caillot) “Clot” and “Caillot” as well as “Clos” and “Shut” share the same meaning. By transposing the meaning of “Clot” to “Caillot” and of “Shut” to “Clos”, Huston has created a nearly identical phonetic effect without losing any stylistic elements or meaning.

Example II

|---------------------------|--------------------------|

In this example, Huston uses punctuation in French to account for a clever word break in English. The corresponding French for “Nothing. No thing” is “Pas. Aucune chose”. No meaning is lost within each sentence fragment, and the breaking up of “Nothing” into “No thing” is rhythmically accounted for in French with the periods cutting the phrase into two lines. Also of note is the third line in this example where the meanings are close. This may not be as attributable to Huston’s talent as to the coincidence of the two languages, but the effect is achieved nonetheless. The meaning is in fact identical in the case of the nearly identical phonetic equivalencies “Blank”=“Blanc”.

On a few occasions the cadence (phonetic similarity or contrast) of the phrase exists in both languages, though the sounds may not be identical.

Example III

|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|

Example IV

|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|

Both the message and style stand on their own in these two examples. The triple rhythm of “Clang bang shut” and “bing bang bong”, sharing the same second word across languages emphasizes the importance of cadence in this passage. This situation is shared with example IV, in which “Closed, dead, mum” finds its equivalent in “Sombre, mort, muet”.

The value in examining these versions side by side, word by word, and sound by sound is not, as I have previously stated, to judge gains and losses, or to measure one version against the other, as that could only be a subjective exercise dependant on each individual reader’s tastes and linguistic competence. But there is another level of creation at play, not only the expression of her frustration in the state of limbo artfully carved out of sounds, but a relation between two Original Versions where strategy, creativity, and awareness abound. How else would we have discovered the creativity of “Nothing. No thing. Blank”="Pas. Aucune chose. Blanc”, unless we had looked and read outside of the page and outside of each specific language?

Even in this simple prose-poetry Huston has created more than a simple piece of writing – she has created a double text proving the contact between her French and English versions – and demonstrating that the space between her languages has shrunk to the distance between left and right hands playing a piece of piano music on a keyboard.

GREATER COMBINED MEANING

In the following example, in which the meaning derived from Huston’s translation is stronger and more refined, the whole is greater than the sum of the two parts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>There are periods like this.</th>
<th>Il y a des jours comme ça. Des décennies aussi.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commas, too.</td>
<td>PV</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is a syllepsis in English that is impossible in French. Bringing the two versions together emphasizes Huston’s frustration with life’s limits in language. Though the French is not a

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metaphor in the same way as the English, the resulting effect is much darker. The passage from which this example is drawn (section 12) is a series of colloquialisms and optimistic, encouraging words, heavy with allusion, to continue the struggle to begin work in the face of writer’s block.

In this particular example, however, Nancy Huston is writing in French about life, about extended periods of sadness in life—which, in English the meaning can not be restricted to the writing practice only. We know that the English was the original in this case (thanks to the OV) — so the dark realism of the French is an added emphasis. Huston’s dark playful style suits this hopeless humour. The translation adds to the meaning of the passage. Here, we see Huston using it as a unique form of art and expression.

**MUTUAL TEXT AWARENESS**

There are several instances in the PV where it is clear that Huston’s independent French and English versions are in fact in cross-language communication. By looking at the OV we can trace the roots of this separation into two versions, and see in which language the plays on words began.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Remonter de l’effet à la cause. Sérieux, maintenant. Fini de rire. Si vous riez c’est la rate qu’on va vous arracher. Où se trouve la rate, d’ailleurs? I smell a rat.</th>
<th>... we’ll rip out your spleen. Where exactly is the spleen, anyhow? I smell a rat.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>... c’est la rate que l’on arrachera. Où elle est d’ailleurs, la rate? Il y a un os.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though the parallel texts play off one another in what, and how, they express their message throughout *Limbes/Limbo*, this is a case in which great mutual awareness is evident. “Rate”, the French equivalent for “spleen” finds its way into the English at the end of the passage, using a close English form equivalent to “rate”. Though “rate” exists in English, the phonetics do not

10. Nancy Huston, 1997, *Limbes* (I will continue to refer to this original version as the OV, 5).
match the French, whereas “rat” does perfectly. This mutual textual awareness is an indication of Huston’s skill as a bilingual writer. When a sound speaks to her as much as the meaning of a particular word, she is able to reproduce those elements in both languages. The correspondence then flips back into French with her “Il y a un os”, accounting for the “I smell a rat” play.

This seamless chain of creative dialogue between texts is a perfect example of our notion that bilingual writing is greater than writing and translation combined. This kind of bilingual writing is possible only through self-translation.

With the OV we can see that the English and French of the PV are carefully separated and translated without losing the play on “rate”. The bilingual play in the OV is reproduced in the PV, so that each text can stand on its own, and the original language-crossing writing is not lost.

HUMOUR

Nancy Huston almost seems to play with words in a physical way: as objects, as in the following humourous play on words, in what could be considered as a crossover point for form- and meaning-guided translations:

If only I had my druthers. Where have my druthers gotten to, anyway? I was sure I put them here somewhere. They were just here a minute ago. Hey, Shakespeare – have you seen my druthers, by any chance? Did you borrow them without asking? I’d give anything to get my druthers back.

C’est du moins mon intime conviction, une de celles que je stocke dans mon for intérieur. Au fait – où il est passé, mon for? Je l’ai bien mis là quelque part, il était là à l’instant, j’en suis sûr. Hé, Shakespeare – t’aurais pas vu mon for, par hasard? Tu l’aurais pas emprunté sans me le demander? Je ferais n’importe quoi pour récupérer mon for!12

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In this passage, Huston employs “druthers”, a nineteenth century dialect pronunciation of “would rather”, categorized in the OED as a noun and adverb. She forgets the real meaning of druthers – a result of its derivation – in a play at ignorance about the word. Huston still uses it as a noun, but as a material noun instead of an abstract one in an example of antanaclasis. Druthers, as we well know, are nothing material, but her use of the word as such creates humour.

As for the corresponding French play on “for”, the Petit Robert defines as: “for intérieur (...) LITTÉR: le for intérieur: le tribunal de la conscience […] COUR: En, dans mon [son, etc.] for intérieur: dans la conscience, au fond de soi-même.” It seems that Huston has used the noun in the same way that she used “druthers” in the English by removing it from an expression to treat it as a material noun.

Humour allows Huston to play with language in a joyful manner. Her playfulness demonstrates a detachment allowing urther relations between and within languages. This could be evidence of a strength acquired through her style and bilingualism. My focus now shifts to her bicultura-lism, where I will examine her cultural translations and creations.

LITERARY AND CULTURAL TRANSLATIONS

At various points throughout both the OV and the PV, a thick stream of consciousness is expressed through an intricate chain of colloquialisms. The French and English versions weave in and out of each other, since direct equivalence is at once possible and impossible, created and lost, and ultimately, mutually accounted for. In the OV, the expressions almost always find their root in what Huston seeks to express, and in situation-based colloquialism. The playful, excited and self-deprecating tone undercuts and questions expressions in both languages.

Popeye, Kipling and Moses

An unlikely threesome, biblical, literary, and childhood cartoon figures are combined in the following example:

| I am that I yam, and never the twain shall meet. | Il ne faut pas chercher midi à quatorze heures. Je suis celui qui est, et ça fait deux. |

The first portion of the English is a reference to the children’s sailor cartoon Popeye’s motto – he actually says “I am what I am”, which is followed by a Rudyard Kipling quote, beginning “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet”. It is interesting to note that the first sentence in this section of *Limbes/Limbo* (section 17) begins “East, West, tomb’s best”. Whether Huston purposely used elements from this Kipling quote in the beginning and end of this passage, we cannot be sure. We can be sure of the theme of irreconcilable differences – of the impossibility of two extremes being resolved, or ever meeting. The split Kipling quote falls at the beginning and end of a portion of the OV as well, though there are slightly different paragraph breaks within that section. The French “Je suis celui qui est” is drawn from the Bible (Exodus): God’s response to Moses asking his name. The humorous pairing of God with Popeye, and then a colloquialism combined with a Kipling quote balances out the registers nicely.

This example is significant since the narrator (the “I”/“Je”) is stating that “she is who she is”, which she extrapolates as being two separate and mutually exclusive entities. Looking at this in light of the bilingual Huston, the logical conclusion is that Huston’s identity as a bilingual individual makes her in fact two people, who can not meet, as in Dôre Michelut’s description of communicating across languages, through translation, in the space between.

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There are two aspects of this pair worth examining. The first is the obvious change in cultural references (fairytale, nursery rhyme or childhood story), and subsequently the associated context-related results. It should also be noted that neither of these versions exists in the OV. Second is the choice involved and what it demonstrates about the “original”.

The “Petit Chaperon rouge” could easily have been translated into English, and yet in English an entirely different reference is used (to Miss Muffet and the spider). To my knowledge, there is no French equivalent for Miss Muffet, and so it would stand to reason that Huston chose the “Petit Chaperon rouge” as a translation from the English, making the French the secondary text in this case. Conversely, if the French were the original, it would have been obvious and simple to translate it with “Little Red Riding Hood”; yet, as this is not the case, it is reasonable to deduce that the English was the first, or original, text in this section. However, since this is a bilingual text, in a bilingual first edition, Huston could very well have made matched the two texts before publication. In this special case of Limbes/Limbo, such differences in translation must be looked at in a way other than that used in critical studies of translation, given that publication dates are not factors in changes. In fact, this could well be an ideal opportunity to consider the texts together as complementary, and creating a whole simultaneously. We have no choice but to speculate on the linguistic origins of this passage, since neither the Chaperon nor Miss Muffet actually appear in the OV. We are thus able to view them outside the light of the self-translation practices.

The combination of the wolf and the spider, of Miss Muffet and little Red Riding Hood, lessens the severity of the wolf’s character, but heightens the spider’s effect on Miss Muffet. The balance between the two enemies or antagonists can be applied to the context of the passage, that of Huston’s “feeling” close to

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Samuel Beckett the way Miss Muffet or “Petit Chaperon rouge” feel close to their enemies. The irony of feeling close to something that frightens or threatens in this passage is aptly described through the use of a familiar fairytale. This familiar antagonism, in its multiple forms, is a rich example of the complexities of bilingual writing and a bilingual reading. As previously discussed in Huston’s self-translation practices, particularly in relation to Cantique des plaines and Plainsong, Huston must have been aware of the other version when writing, as she revised them both at once in her self-translation process.

**WORD CREATION**

| Oh! To be released from the obligation to live in any tongue! To relinquish language, once and for all! To vanquish lanquish. That’s a good one. Well, so-so. | Ah! ne plus être dans aucune langue. Ne plus languir. N’être. La bonne blague. Enfin, coucicouça. 19 PV |

N’être: a signature Huston creation. Could this be a French version of Shakespeare’s “To be or not to be” (Julius Caesar)? There is no English equivalent for this French creation, but the groundwork for her creation is laid in the first sentence “ne plus être dans aucune langue” – “ne”+“être”.

To be born, and yet to not exist at all. In the language context (“To be released from the obligation to live in any tongue! / ne plus être dans aucune langue”) of this passage, again we meet the same dichotomy drawn between life and language. All dramatic possibilities for escape from language are mentioned: to not be is idealized. As Huston outlines in her analysis of her own linguistic behaviour:

Do I take the same liberties with the French language as I do English? No idea. Don’t want to know. Want out of this dead end. (…) Yes, to tell the truth I’m going through a sort of crisis just now. The theme song is “I can’t go on like this”. Writing two versions of each book. Dying of boredom. Translating sen-

tence after sentence after sentence, who else has endured this tedium? Beckett, but his books were usually shorter. (...) God, how I long to say Okay, folks, enough of all this schtick. From now on, I’m gonna write all my books in... and choose one of the languages. But which one? Handicapped in both, not happy, not satisfied, because if you’ve got two languages, you haven’t really “got” any language at all.20

Her life bound by languages, the choice of either one is impossible. To be reborn without language is her fondest wish: or to be reborn in her own tongue, one she creates over and over again in wordplay such as “n’être”. She expresses this wish with her manipulation of form and demonstrates her intricate relationship with meaning. Much of the book is focused on the struggle with language, but there are a few instances dealing specifically with the issues of bilingualism, language, and writing, as well as of the pull between two linguistic identities.

CONCLUSION

Huston’s strong aesthetic predilection is clear in her penchant for form-guided writing, filled with cultural references and play with colloquialism and word category. This writing process especially demonstrates her appreciation of language itself as an almost material object and its power when she allows it to lead her through her stream of consciousness monologue. It is clear that she expresses her message in the manner best befitting it, in the original moment of her creative impulse, and later creates the French or English counterpart to fan out the unified bilingual text into separate texts in the PV. A result of this type of writing is that the translations – or French and English counterparts – create a double reading or a combined meaning which is greater than each of the meanings contained in the texts, if examined individually. After all, as cited earlier, “Difference”, as James McGuire says, “makes meaning”.21

_Limbes/Limbo_ is the prism at the axis of her two languages: it is the place in which her languages are not neatly divided. It is the space between.

20. Nancy Huston, at a talk on February 24, 2003 at the University of Toronto, Victoria College.
Christine Klein-Lataud sees simultaneous bilingual writing as a way in which to deal with the dual identity. In her 1996 article on Huston’s unique form of creation, she aptly states:

L’autotraduction ou la création parallèle peuvent alors apparaître comme une façon de transcender le clivage, de réconcilier les deux moitiés de l’être intérieurement déchiré en faisant cohabiter harmonieusement les deux langues.22

Huston’s practice in bridging this space between, in accepting her limbo as a rich source of inspiration and creativity, provides us with a bird’s eye view of an unmapped country, a transcript of the conversation between her English and French selves, by breaking down the language barriers with her testimonial simultaneous bilingual writing. She is not limited by the division, but explores it and describes it in her own singular, inimitable fashion.