

FROM WEST TO EAST: NANCY HUSTON  
AND THE POETICS OF (AF)FILIAION  
IN *TOMBEAU DE ROMAIN GARY*



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I would begin by briefly acknowledging the rather personal impetus that underlies the following reflections on Nancy Huston's *Tombeau de Romain Gary*. While both Huston and Gary lie somewhat outside my own field of literary specialization, their writings have had a profound effect on me both personally and professionally. As an Anglophone teacher of French literature at a small liberal arts college in northern New England, I have shared with Huston the predicament of the non-native speaker whose interest in French derives in part from the desire to lay claim to a language and a culture other than my own. Like Huston, I have too experienced as comfort the "distance salutaire" ("the salutary distance")<sup>1</sup> that stands between the English—what Huston calls her "langue mère" ("mother tongue")<sup>2</sup>—and the French language and culture, both of which I teach to make a living. My more recent discovery of Gary's work and, specifically, the extraordinary ease with which Momo in *La vie devant soi* (1975) appropriates the words, phrases and gestures of others without abandoning his "étrangéité" or "foreignness" have likewise given me occasion to reflect on the evolving nature of my own relationship to the magnetic force field of French language and culture. As with Huston and Momo, so too with me: speaking French has never been an altogether natural activity, if by "natural" one means, to borrow another phrase from Huston, "avalé avec le lait maternel" ("swallowed along with the mother's milk").<sup>3</sup> With this brief preamble, I now turn to my reading of Huston reading Gary.

Nancy Huston's 1995 book-length essay, *Tombeau de Romain Gary*, (the key arguments of which she reprised one year later in a shorter English version entitled, "Romain Gary: A Foreign Body in French Literature") is a work which proposes, on the most basic level, to re-introduce what Huston perceives to be an unjustly forgotten figure to a late twentieth-century audience. On another level, though, Huston's

<sup>1</sup> Huston N. *Nord perdu*. Arles, Babel, 1999, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39-40.

*Tombeau* allows her to develop a rich array of associations linking her own work as a non-native speaker of French with that of a writer who, like her, had come to French from the periphery. At yet another level, Huston's *Tombeau* celebrates Gary's literary genius as one whose principle motivations, like Huston's own, originate in the evolving, often conflictive relationship between mother and child. In the following I touch briefly on each of these points in turn.

At first glance it may seem surprising that a writer like Nancy Huston, whose intellectual training was carried out under the tutelage of Roland Barthes and whose personal and professional life continues to maintain strong ties to the practice of literary and feminist theory, would take an interest in the work of Romain Gary, much less see him as a source of inspiration for her own life and writing and dedicate herself to the recuperation of his literary legacy as—in her words—“one of the great writers of [the twentieth] century.”<sup>4</sup>

Huston's understanding of Gary's importance has much to do with what she views as the universal humanity that emanates from his writing and his life. In *Tombeau* she often refers to his resolute refusal to accept any kind of pre-ordained fixed identity—whether in terms of geography, language or even his name—interpreting this “nature caméléonesque” (“chameleon-like nature”)<sup>5</sup> not as a sign of rootless alienation but rather as a different, more purposeful and expansive form of rooted-ness which she defines as an “enracinement paradoxal dans le déracinement” (“paradoxical rootedness in unrootedness”).<sup>6</sup> Gary's refusal to be hemmed in by the use of a single, presumably “natural” means of communication—the so-called “mother tongue”—is a case in point, as Huston illustrates by quoting Gary's own words from *Adieu Gary Cooper*: “La barrière du langage, c'est lorsque deux types parlent la même langue. *Plus moyen de se comprendre*” (“The language barrier is when two guys speak the same language. Impossible for them to understand each other”).<sup>7</sup> As though in dialogue with Gary himself, Huston declares with evident admiration: “Nul auteur de ce siècle n'aura tenté et réussi comme toi à sortir de son ‘petit trou,’ à vagabonder dans l'espace et dans le temps, à devenir tout le monde grâce au fait qu'il n'était personne, à embrasser la totalité de l'expérience humaine” (“No author of this century will have tried and succeeded as you did to come out of your ‘little hole’ and wander through space and time, becoming everyone thanks to being no one, to embrace the whole of human experience”).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Huston N. Romain Gary: A Foreign Body in French Literature. *Poetics Today*, Vol. 17, no. 4, Winter 1996, p. 547.

<sup>5</sup> Huston N. *Tombeau de Romain Gary*. Arles, Babel, 1995, p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

The year before completing *Tombeau de Romain Gary*, Huston had published a study entitled *Professeurs de désespoir*, in which she takes issue with some of the most important and, as she argues, most pessimistic intellectual figures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries including, among others, Schopenhauer, Samuel Beckett, Emil Cioran and Milan Kundera. In the final chapter of this book, she pays homage to Romain Gary for having resisted the nihilist sensibility she discerns throughout the works of that group and for having maintained a certain optimism throughout his literary career, as is captured by the chapter's epigraph, a quotation from Gary which reads: "Le néant ne se place au cœur de l'homme que lorsqu'il n'y a pas de cœur" ("Nothingness only resides in the heart of man when he has no heart").<sup>9</sup>

This, too, is an important component of Huston's sense of Gary's universal humanity. In a footnote accompanying the epigraph, she formally acknowledges her own deep indebtedness to Gary, who, she states, "n'a cessé—dans toute la splendeur de ses contradictions—de me donner des forces" ("has never ceased—in all the splendor of his contradictions—to give me strength").<sup>10</sup> In this way, the book culminates ceremonially in an instance of filial homage between literary father and grateful daughter.

My reference to family dynamics here is not incidental. Huston herself often makes use of similar vocabulary. In *Professeurs de désespoir*, for example, she associates the destructive nihilism of the intellectuals whose works she studies with a set of distinct biographical traits including, most importantly, a profoundly unhappy childhood and fear of mothers. In a brief moment of parodic bravura, Huston voices the group's endemic hatred of childhood and family: "À bas les mères! À bas les pères! À bas les enfants et la vie familiale!" ("Down with mothers! Down with fathers! Down with children and family life!").<sup>11</sup> In juxtaposition with such caricaturesque pronouncements of hatred for the family, Huston offers what at times can seem an almost George Sand-like idealism to which, for reasons I hope to bring to light in what follows, she also appends the name of Romain Gary.

Huston's interest in using biography as a significant point of reference in tracing intellectual development is evident throughout *Tombeau de Romain Gary*. In light of her clear effort to create a bridge of affiliation between Gary's work and her own, it likewise serves her purpose well that certain noteworthy points of resemblance exist between her own life experience and his. Although there are obviously limits to the simple overlapping of biographical information, I would like to highlight just a few of these points of coincidence beginning with how the two writers recount their own first discovery of French as a young child.

<sup>9</sup> Huston N. *Professeurs de désespoir*. Arles, Babel, 2004, p. 337.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 337.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 334.

In both cases, this moment is identified as taking place in the isolated context of the primeval forest thus, quite unmistakably, setting up an image of French language and culture as a sort of *vox clamantis in deserto* or “voice crying out in the wilderness” to which both children find themselves irremediably drawn. In her 1986 epistolary novel, *Lettres parisiennes*, co-authored with the French Algerian writer, Leïla Sebbar, Huston traces the origin of her burning desire to see Paris (a desire which would, of course, ultimately transform the direction of her life) to

une prof de français qui, en classe, nous faisait chanter à tue-tête *Le Déserteur* [de Boris Vian] et *La Vie en rose* [d’Edith Piaf]—tout cela dans un lycée de quatre-vingts élèves paumés au milieu de la forêt newhampshiroise.<sup>12</sup>

[a French professor who, in class, had us sing as loud as we could “The Deserter” (by Boris Vian) and “La Vie en rose” (by Edith Piaf)—all this in a school of 80 students out in the middle of the New Hampshire forest]

Whereas Huston’s primeval forest was the backwoods of New Hampshire in the northeastern United States, for Gary it was the wilderness of Lithuania. In *La promesse de l’aube* (1960), Gary describes his discovery of French in the following way:

Essayez donc d’écouter, enfant, dans les forêts lituaniennes, les légendes françaises; regardez un pays que vous ne connaissez pas dans les yeux de votre mère, apprenez-le dans son sourire et dans sa voix émerveillée; écoutez, le soir, au coin du feu où chantent les bûches, alors que la neige, dehors, fait le silence autour de vous, écoutez la France qui vous est contée comme *Le Chat botté*; [...] apprenez à lire dans les fables de La Fontaine—et essayez ensuite, à l’âge d’homme, de vous en débarrasser.<sup>13</sup>

[Just try listening as a child, in the Lithuanian forests, to French legends; look at a country you don’t know through the eyes of your mother; learn of it in her smile and in her wondering voice; listen in the evening next to the crackling fire while the snow outside makes silence around you; listen to the France that is told to you like “Puss in Boots”; ...learn to read in the fables of La Fontaine—and try, then, to unburden yourself of this once you’re a man.]

While the forest for both Huston and Gary functions as a peripheral, primitive space infinitely removed from France toward which both authors turn for emotional sustenance, as revealed in the quotation I just mentioned, the awakening of Gary’s francophilia is distinguished from that of Nancy Huston by the clear association of French language and culture with the mother’s voice. Whereas Gary’s early encounters with French are linked to the familiar and to family via the intermediary of his mother, Nina, for Huston it is the utter unfamiliarity of the French words and sounds she encounters in the songs’ lyrics that acts as a powerful source of attraction. What

<sup>12</sup> Huston N. and Sebbar L. *Lettres parisiennes: Histoires d’exil*. Paris, Editions J’ai lu, 1986, p. 88.

<sup>13</sup> Gary R. *La promesse de l’aube*. Paris, Gallimard, 1980, p. 102.

Piaf in “La vie en rose” calls “les mots de tous les jours” (“everyday words”) is, for Huston, something entirely new, and just as the phrase in Vian’s “Le déserteur” urges desertion of the army in favor of setting out “sur les routes de France” (“on the routes of France”), Huston burns with desire to experience this unknown, undertaking her own desertion, not of the army but of English, by abandoning the oppressive familiarity of her mother tongue in exchange for French. If Huston embraced this, as yet unfamiliar Romance language as a non-native speaker, it was at least in part because, as she succinctly states in *Nord perdu*, published in 1998, “La langue française [...] n’était pas ma mère” (“The French language was not my mother”).<sup>14</sup>

Having begun with the forest as the mythic birthplace of their discovery of French, I’d like now to turn briefly to another element of geographically-framed biography of relevance to Huston’s understanding of Gary. As I note in the title of this study, Nancy Huston’s life itinerary has followed a clear West-to-East trajectory beginning in the western province of Alberta, Canada where she was born in 1953, shifting then to the eastern United States, then finally to France. While the impetus for these relocations sharply diverges from Gary’s (Huston’s essentially voluntary; Gary’s often coerced by persecution and war), in spatial terms the rather straightforward geographic vector traced by Huston’s literary biography finds a close inverse counterpart in Gary’s East-to-West movement from Vilnius where he was born, to France and from there to California, on North America’s western perimeter.

These trajectories share several points of resemblance including the fact that both Huston and Gary communicate a strong awareness of the cultural significance of the sites from within which they write. In Nancy Huston’s case, her eastward trajectory seems to have reached a moment of closure, with the author staking out a place for herself and her family in the culturally resonant countryside of the region of Le Berry where she now lives. Huston’s depictions of Le Berry in her writings take ample advantage of the region’s association as an emblem of “la France profonde” and its close ties with French literature, as memorialized in the works of George Sand. In the humorous guise of what she calls “une Canadienne [...] berrichonne” (“a Canadian woman from Le Berry”),<sup>15</sup> Huston declares that, despite their clear ideological differences, George Sand is one of the few women writers with whom she identifies. As a “femme travestie”<sup>16</sup>—a woman known for wearing pants and refusing, at least for a time, to remain submissive—Sand and the region with which her name is associated provide Huston with a site within which to cultivate, both as a mother and as a writer, her own increasingly ambiguous and tempered sense of exile.

In Gary’s writing, a comparable evocation of geographical closure can be found

<sup>14</sup> Huston N. *Nord perdu*, p. 64.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> Huston N. and Sebbar, L. *Lettres parisiennes*, p. 75.

in his lyrical descriptions of the wild and relatively desolate expanse of Big Sur in California where he undertakes to piece together the moving autobiographical narrative that will become *La promesse de l'aube*. As the opening lines attest, Gary enjoys a profoundly sympathetic relationship with the natural world he has chosen as it solicits his attention and summons him to speak:

La plage de Big Sur est vide, et je demeure couché sur le sable, à l'endroit même où je suis tombé. [...] Tout à l'heure, un phoque s'est laissé porter par les vagues jusqu'à mes pieds. Il est resté là, un long moment, à me regarder, dressé sur ses nageoires, et puis il est retourné à l'Océan.<sup>17</sup>

[The beach at Big Sur is empty, and I lie on the sand just where I fell... Suddenly a seal lets himself be carried by the waves to my feet. He stays there a long while, watching me, propped up on his flippers, and then returns to the Ocean.]

As the novel comes to a close, Gary returns again to the continental periphery of Big Sur, in this case, to speak of his mother. Once more the natural world engulfs both author and reader in an almost too perfect union between man and cosmos:

Il me semble que c'est ici, sur les rochers de la plage de Big Sur que je suis tombé et que voilà une éternité que j'écoute et essaye de comprendre le murmure de l'Océan... Les phoques se sont tus, sur les rochers, et je reste là, les yeux fermés, en souriant...<sup>18</sup>

[It seems to me that it is here, on the rocks of Big Sur, that I fell and that I've been listening and trying to understand the murmur of the Ocean for eternity... The seals have become silent, on the rocks, and I remain here, eyes closed, and smiling...]

What better way for Gary to substantiate the accuracy of his mother's prophecy that her son "étais[t] Victor Hugo"<sup>19</sup> than to use such a grandiloquent, even rapturous style in opening and closing *La promesse de l'aube*? Unlike Huston, whose initial discovery of French in the backwoods of the New World leads her to take up residence in France where she freely and intentionally violates the norms of proper French usage, Gary manages, on the western-most edge of America's Far West, to reiterate and thus, once again, dutifully heed the mother's call to French-hood with an inflection worthy of Hugo.

Though this sense of geographically-framed biography does in some ways establish a strong commonality between Huston and Gary, her current embrace of life in Le Berry would seem to mark a clear difference in trajectory, in that her life in France appears to have acquired a geographically localized kind of rootedness that runs counter to the "rootedness in rootlessness" ("enracinement dans le déracinement") epitomized

<sup>17</sup> Gary R. *La promesse de l'aube*, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.

<sup>19</sup> Huston N. *Tombeau de Romain Gary*, p. 23.

for her by Gary. Huston herself, though, works to weaken this distinction by zealously guarding her own space of difference within French society. Making boldly categorical pronouncements such as “Je n’ai pas de lieu” (“I have no place”)<sup>20</sup> and “les livres, les enfants, je ne peux les faire que dans une langue non maternelle” (“books, children, I can only produce them in a non-mother tongue”),<sup>21</sup> she resists equating physical residence with formal assimilation, privileging instead her own irrevocable source of difference with respect to French language and culture, that is: the fact that French is not and never can be her “mother tongue.”

While Huston in *Tombeau* affiliates her non-native experience of French with Gary’s own masterful use of his “adopted mother tongue”, Huston’s primary motivation in learning French was not, as in the case of Gary, to adopt a language that her mother had given her but, rather, to sever all ties with a mother who, as Huston reiterates in various works, had abandoned her when she was six years old. In *Nord perdu*, for example, Huston’s belated discovery of French is experienced as an emancipatory event thanks to which all ties between mother and daughter are severed and the daughter born anew: “À l’étranger, on est enfant à nouveau” (“Abroad, you’re once again a child”).<sup>22</sup>

In sharp contrast with such an unequivocally liberating notion of exile, Huston sees in Gary’s work an almost unbearably restrictive maternal presence, declaring her sympathy in *Tombeau* for his need to make his way in the world under the weight of what she calls “cette scandaleuse mainmise maternelle sur ton existence” (“this scandalous maternal seizing of your existence”).<sup>23</sup> Small wonder, then, that among Gary’s many literary achievements, she reserves particular praise for *La vie devant soi*, a novel whose preeminence as, what she considers, Gary’s greatest single contribution to French letters she ascribes precisely to the fact that it is here, in her view, that he finally manages to achieve a clear break with his mother.

In *Tombeau* Huston presents this gesture of emancipation primarily via the example of Gary’s decision to publish the novel under the pseudonym Émile Ajar, as though such a move amounted to nothing less than a birth, a definitive separation of authorial self from an origin distinctly maternal in nature. As she writes toward the end of *Tombeau*, “la *persona* Ajar libère ce que le personnage Gary avait toujours tenu prisonnier, et tu inventes une langue” (“the *persona* Ajar liberates what the character Gary had always kept locked up, and you invent a language”).<sup>24</sup>

Though she does not, then, go on to carry this interpretation forward to consider its

<sup>20</sup> Huston N. and Sebban L. *Lettres parisiennes*, p. 26.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>22</sup> Huston N. *Nord perdu*, p. 78.

<sup>23</sup> Huston N. *Tombeau de Romain Gary*, p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

relevance to other elements within the novel, if we accept as a point of departure Huston's notion that *La vie devant soi* is a work in which Gary's use of his adopted mother tongue, French, is freed from a restrictive linkage to the bonds of motherhood, it is surprising how many components within the novel work in harmony with this view.

Thus, for example, the startling degree of freedom Momo enjoys in *La vie devant soi* derives, albeit implicitly, from his not knowing anything about his mother. As Momo observes, "la seule chose que j'étais sûr, c'est que ma mère était une femme, on ne peut pas autrement" ("the only thing that I was sure of was that my mother was a woman; that goes without saying").<sup>25</sup> The inverse of this is, of course, Madame Rosa, who is able to offer a source of limitless maternal love in her relationship with Momo, despite not being his biological mother and possessing none of the physical attributes associated elsewhere in the novel with women. Her femininity is described as no more than a vestige of her past and, as such, a mere reminiscence—"elle a été une femme" ("she once was a woman"),<sup>26</sup> Momo states. Her body remains unmarked by what otherwise might suggest the presence of a feminine subjectivity: "Elle n'avait pas de taille et les fesses chez elle allaient directement aux épaules, sans s'arrêter" ("She had no waist, and her buttocks went all the way to her shoulders without stopping").<sup>27</sup> Her body, now corpulent and bald, evokes more of an expansive unsexed human presence than the features normally associated with a mother.

As Gary makes clear in *La vie devant soi*, both Madame Rosa's womanliness and, by extension, her ability to serve, at least provisionally, as Momo's adoptive mother figure are *not* the visible signs of some purely physical manifestation but, rather, they are products of Momo's own prodigious imagination and gift for empathy. Momo's trajectory of creative emancipation thus parallels what Huston sees in Gary's own achievement in *La vie devant soi*, freeing himself from his debt toward Nina while creating a novel that Huston calls "un monstre frankensteinien sans mère" ("a Frankenstein monster without a mother").<sup>28</sup> On the far side of the door, now ajar, leading to Gary's release from the threat of, what Huston terms, Nina's "maternal cannibalism"<sup>29</sup> lies another, less threatening mother figure, whom Momo calls "une vieille Juive au sixième étage sans ascenseur qui a déjà trop souffert dans le passé pour qu'on s'intéresse encore à elle" ("an old Jewish woman on the sixth floor with no elevator, who has already suffered too much in the past for anyone to be interested in her anymore").<sup>30</sup> *La vie devant soi* may indeed be, as Huston argues, "a symbolic

<sup>25</sup> Gary R. *La vie devant soi*. Paris, Mercure de France, 1975, p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>28</sup> Huston N. *Tombeau de Romain Gary*, p. 87.

<sup>29</sup> Huston N. Romain Gary: A Foreign Body in French Literature, p. 551.

<sup>30</sup> Gary R. *La vie devant soi*, p. 219.

revenge against his mother”,<sup>31</sup> but it is also a work in which the mother’s memory is once again revived, redeployed in the service of a greater good.

At the most basic level, Nancy Huston’s interest in Romain Gary derives from the fact that both of them, in her view, problematize the notion of the “mother tongue” while also remaining not entirely at home in their adoptive language and culture. For Huston, despite having made the decision to move to France and write in the French language, both of these circumstances remain, for her, an ongoing exercise in “étrangéité,” or “foreignness.” While Gary, as seen by Huston, is much more fully at home in his adopted language and culture of France, the element of discomfort arises from an ongoing struggle to extricate his experience from the controlling presence of his mother.

In Huston’s view, then, speaking both of her own work and that of Gary, the practice of writing and giving voice to words in French is ultimately cast as an emancipatory act originating in the desire to get beyond the imposed tyranny of what is often accepted as “natural” identity, whether this be defined in terms of one’s “native culture” or one’s “mother tongue.” In Huston’s case, this trajectory led her from West-to-East. In *Tombeau de Romain Gary*, she identifies a similar dynamic in Gary’s own East-to-West journey, uncovering a primary source of his literary achievement in his ability to remain always “irréductible, inclassable, inassimilable” (“irreducible, unclassifiable, unassimilable”)<sup>32</sup> with respect to those who might otherwise claim him.

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IŠ VAKARŲ Į RYTUS: NANCY HUSTON IR (A)FILIACIJOS POETIKA ESĖ *ROMAINO GARY KAPAS*

Santrauka

1995 m. parašytoje esė, aukštinačioje Romaino Gary literatūrinį palikimą, Nancy Huston aptaria jo raštus remdamasi giminiškais potyriais, kylančiais iš jų išėiviškos praeities. Būdamą anglakalbė kanadietė, šiuo metu dirbanti Paryžiuje, ji savąjį literatūrinį balsą suranda erdvėje, atsivėrusioje dėl jos pačios savanoriškos geografinės ir lingvistinės slinkties iš Vakarų į Rytus ir iš to plaukiančio pojūčio, kad ji priklauso – bet ne visai – iškart dviem kultūroms. Panašią kaitą ji identifikuoja esė *Romaino Gary kapas (Tombeau de Romain Gary)* aptardama Gary kelionę iš Rytų į Vakarų: čia autorė atskleidžia jo literatūros pasiekimo, parodančio prancūzų visuomenės sudėtingumą ir jo gebėjimą likti „neredukuojamu, neklasifikuojamu, neasimiliuojamu“ (p. 39) norinčiųjų jį savintis atžvilgiu, pirmųkštį šaltinį. Nagrinėdamas Huston pateiktą Gary kūrybos reinterpretaciją išėivijos patirties požiūriu, tikiuosi atidengti dar vieną esminį žymiausio pokario Prancūzijos išėinių literatūrinio palikimo aspektą.

<sup>31</sup> Huston N. Romain Gary: A Foreign Body in French Literature, p. 564.

<sup>32</sup> Huston N. *Tombeau de Romain Gary*, p. 39.

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