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Motherhood and creation in *Lettres parisiennes* – Nancy Huston's perspective

Ann-Sofie Persson

Introduction

- 1 Born in a Canadian Anglophone context, Nancy Huston has spent most of her adult life in France. Her work, mostly written in French, covers a variety of genres, including novels and essays. In the 1970's and 1980's, she was involved in several feminist projects such as *Histoires d'elles* (a journal published between 1977 and 1980) and *Sorcières* (a literary journal) through which she met the French Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar. In 1983, they initiated a correspondence, although they were both living in Paris at the time, discussing issues of exile, identity, writing, cultural belonging and motherhood. This collection of thirty letters, written between May 11th 1983 and January 7th 1985, primarily focusing on Huston's and Sebbar's shared experience of exile from a feminine and feminist perspective, offers several interesting passages devoted to the relationship between housework, motherhood and creation. Although part of a whole, it is of course possible to distinguish the attitude of each of the two women relative to the ideas of motherhood and creation and the ways in which they are interrelated. In this article, the letters written by Huston will constitute the main focus in order to map out her perspective on the question of motherhood and creation.
- 2 In feminist work, motherhood and creation have traditionally been thought about as irreconcilable. As Christine Lorre points out, "Dans son *Journal de la création*, l'essayiste Nancy Huston montre comment, traditionnellement, pour les femmes, les notions de création et de procréation semblent vouées à s'opposer et à se nuire : écriture et maternité ne font pas bon ménage." (Lorre 75) Published four years after *Lettres parisiennes*, *Journal de la création* establishes a clear link between motherhood and creation

since the writing of this diary of sorts coincides with Huston's second pregnancy (Huston 1990, 11). As Patrice J. Proulx states, Huston's *Journal de la création* is "one of her first works to explicitly trace out the baby versus the book myth" (Proulx 289).¹ However, already in *Lettres parisiennes*, Huston's attention to the problems of combining motherhood and creation comes across as quite articulate. Through the autobiographical lens of the epistolary genre, Huston tells of conflicts between being a mother and a writer occurring in her early days of motherhood, with her first child.

- 3 In the following, the analysis of Huston's letters will unveil the underlying expectations placed upon her, as a mother, by the surrounding society, and how domestic work and maternal responsibilities become obstacles for her creative activity. After looking at this explicit way of dealing with the tension between motherhood and creation, a subtler manner of investigating the interrelation between the two concepts in Huston's letters will receive some attention. Huston's strategy consists in telling *on the level of content* about how housework or maternal duties interfere negatively with writing while at the same time *showing*, by filling pages dealing with this particular point, how creativity is nourished by these very same aspects of life. They provide raw material for her writing and, by their associative force, inspire her to treat topics way beyond this particular theme. Throughout the analysis, Huston's attention to the interrelation between motherhood and creation will be compared to the feminist context she herself provides by making reference to Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir.

Motherhood as opposed to creation

- 4 In her letters, Huston explicitly discusses the expectations placed upon her as a mother by the surrounding society. Stating that she would never accept a partner who didn't take at least half of the responsibilities for the home and the family, she underlines at the same time that when both parents agree on leaving their daughter with the nanny even during their vacation in order to be able to write, the neighbors (female in the French original) are surprised about *her* decision, not *his* (45-46). The nanny's grandmother poses an even more hostile look upon her, the scandalous mother who refuses to take her maternal responsibilities seriously (56). Huston's reflection is that motherhood is "un immense réseau de culpabilisation" (56). Huston shows a clear-cut line between the expectations placed upon her and her partner respectively, by themselves and by others, based on gender. Even within the couple, Huston uncovers a somewhat negative attitude towards her writing during the holidays. When her partner discovers that she is writing a letter to Sebbar, his reaction is described in the following way: "Il m'a accusée d'avoir un comportement typiquement masculin [...] à lui imposer, du coup, à lui, M., un rôle 'féminin', à savoir la garantie de la continuité et de la disponibilité familiales..." (101)² From her male partner's perspective, determining what is masculine and what is feminine seems unquestionable, and writing is understood as belonging to the male sphere. Huston then distinguishes between her partner's and her own attitude towards writing: "il ne ressent pas la menace de la perte d'identité s'il doit délaissier la plume pendant une semaine ou même un mois, alors que plane au-dessus de nos têtes le spectre de la Femme-domestique-et-ménagère, toujours prête à nous happer: 'Voilà, puisque vous n'avez fait que ça aujourd'hui, vous n'êtes plus que ça; c'est prouvé et c'est irréversible.'" (102) Huston seems to claim that, for a woman, domestic work undermines the identity as a writer. According to her, women writers are more at risk of being caught

by the hovering ghost of household chores and of losing their identity as writers when engaging in writing and mothering at the same time. Given the feeling of threat present in the passage quoted above, we may say that Huston has internalized the “baby versus the book myth” mentioned earlier.

- 5 Becoming a mother means that Huston cannot, for some time at least while she is breastfeeding, integrate the “room of her own” where she usually performs her professional activity as a writer, namely in her writer’s den. In many ways, Huston expresses strong links to Virginia Woolf and her feminist landmark *A Room of One’s Own* (1928). Even in Paris of the 1980’s, a woman writer can suffer from material disadvantages compared to men. Woolf, as Huston points out, never had any children but compares writing books to giving birth (149). Huston herself puts children and books in the same category when she claims that : “les livres, les enfants, je ne peux les faire que dans une langue non maternelle” (139). The difference is, of course, that Huston doesn’t replace children with books even though she stresses the difficulties in combining both roles, of fitting motherhood into the life of a writer. The experience of trying to combine breastfeeding and writing is described as a difficult crisis, a clash between motherhood and creation : “la dépression *post-partum* a été d’autant plus profonde que je vivais complètement chez M. afin de pouvoir allaiter Léa, et chez M., il m’est impossible d’écrire. Perte d’identité, risible et prévisible : j’avais beau me dire que cette domesticité à outrance était provisoire ; plutôt que de la savourer je m’y suis laissé noyer. Au bout de trois mois je pleurais matin et soir sur mon sort tragique de femme interrompue” (151). The myth of maternal bliss, the traditional idea that motherhood is the triumphant state of womanhood³, is clearly denounced by Huston, who designates motherhood as an unwanted halt in her life.
- 6 As stated earlier, a mother devoting herself partially to writing, leaving her child in the hands of a competent father, puts him in the position of assuming a more nurturing role, traditionally played by the mother. Huston clearly protests against biological arguments that mothers would be genetically more suited for child care or household chores, by insisting on the fact that performing these activities equals playing certain roles. To her, motherhood is not instinctive, but an acquired behavior, echoing Simone de Beauvoir and her social constructivism (Beauvoir 362, 369). Huston’s line of argument on the topic of gender roles also suggests that, in her case, the French language participates in creating a distance between the acting subject and the activity, an impression of seeing yourself as acting, playing a part. Huston claims that as a French writer originally Anglophone she has “l’impression de vivre entre guillemets” (168). When speaking about baking a cake, she comes back to this idea, linking it to domestic work and motherhood. Her daughter is observing her making a pie :

Je me vois en train d’observer ma propre mère en train de faire une pâte feuilletée. Je me dis : oui, mais ma mère le faisait au premier degré, alors que moi je le fais au deuxième. Bien sûr, pour Léa, je le fais au premier degré. Il n’empêche que je suis en fait une intellectuelle qui joue à la ménagère. [...] Donc, je ne fais pas vraiment une pâte feuilletée, je ‘fais une pâte feuilletée’. [...] Dans la mesure où je vis en pays étranger, tout ce que je fais me semble un peu étrange ; mes gestes ne coïncident jamais parfaitement avec l’image que je m’en fais. (171)
- 7 One could say that living in a French environment creates a distance between words and action just as being a feminist installs a critical gap between being female and performing traditionally feminine tasks.

- 8 In the passage leading up to the baking scene, Huston compares herself to the nanny taking care of her daughter during the holidays. The point of comparison is their respective relationships with their domestic worlds. According to Huston, the young nanny talks about “my house”, “my green beans” and “my laundry”, expressing in some way the fact that the housework she performs makes these things belong to her. Huston, on the other hand, cannot adopt the same discourse since the house where she spends her holidays belongs to her partner, and any sense of ownership would have to be put within quotation marks. Adopting the housekeeper's discourse is therefore impossible for her. The lack of ownership alone does not account for the whole difference, though. To Huston, the domestic realm is not her world – writing is. It is only through writing about her thoughts about domestic work and maternal duties that Huston can possess them in some way. This is reminiscent of Woolf's writing in her journal, quoted by Huston as the last entry in her diary before her suicide. Huston writes : “Je ne sais pas ce que je ferais si je n'avais pas le recours du *langage*, des mots qui me donnent au moins une distance ironique par rapport aux catastrophes de la vie quotidienne. (Quelques jours avant son suicide, Virginia Woolf disait la même chose, remarque ; voici la dernière entrée dans son journal intime : ‘Et maintenant, avec un certain plaisir, je constate qu'il est 7 heures et que je dois préparer le dîner. Du haddock et de la chair à saucisse. Il me semble vrai qu'on gagne une certaine emprise sur le haddock et la saucisse par le fait de les écrire.’)” (44-45).⁴ The self-reflexive irony employed by Woolf is picked up and adopted by Huston, who in fact adds another ironic twist by juxtaposing the comfort contained in language with the fact that Woolf committed suicide the day after expressing the same thought.⁵
- 9 It is interesting to note that Huston here is answering a letter from Sebbar about female writers and the specificity of their works. Sebbar states that Woolf's books are “domestiques et féminins” (146) and differ from the traditional female novel because they are not sentimental. In her account of Woolf's writing, Sebbar brings up that Woolf writes about small everyday incidents, ordinary family life also during the holidays. According to Sebbar, Woolf uses interminable digressions, shaped as mazes. To her, Woolf is positioned on the limits between a conventional feminine tradition and a revolutionary new literature written by women who are neither mimicking the universal male perspective nor claiming to write outside a gendered context (146). This statement of Sebbar's may prove to have some bearing on the writing of Huston as well, when it comes to content, style and structure. As the following will show, domestic work and motherhood cannot only be seen as obstacles to creation, but also as inspirational.

Motherhood as inspiration for creation

- 10 Despite the fact that Huston, to a certain extent, upholds the dichotomy motherhood-creation, pointing out maternal duties and housework as obstacles to creation, I would like to suggest that they might actually be seen as raw material for the writing of the *Lettres*. Two passages in particular draw our attention to this tension between motherhood and domesticity on the one side and creation on the other. One is related to breastfeeding and writing, the other can be called the incident of the broken bottle.
- 11 This particular episode of the broken bottle is set during the holidays and the telling of it forms the introduction to the letter. Huston explains that the summer house is full of people and that the precious afternoon hours when her daughter is with her nanny are

very short. The sentence in which she describes the incident, on the other hand, is very long : 17 lines, more than half a page. Huston seems to establish a causal link between trying to start writing half an hour early and dropping a full bottle of blackberry syrup. Of course the bottle is smashed into pieces and its content fills the kitchen floor with a sticky fluid mixed with broken glass. Not only does this make her waste valuable time on cleaning instead of writing, but the syrup has also stained her daughter's favorite comfort blanket, which has to be washed, thereby losing its smell and, by the same token, its comforting function (44). The description of a quite insignificant incident establishes a dichotomy between two worlds, everyday life constituting a threat to creation. The fact that she writes the letter in her daughter's room, the only one available while the daughter is at her nanny's, because of the presence of Huston's family, also adds an ironic twist to the idea of a woman writer needing a room of her own in order to create. In this particular case, the mother (Huston) literally needs to remove the child from the room in order to turn it into a creative space. Both the lack of a proper workspace and the extra trouble caused by the broken bottle seem to echo Woolf's ideas, when she is evoking the working conditions of female writers, forced to limit their practice to the sitting room and subject to constant interruptions (Woolf 67). For Huston, being considered a bad mother because she makes time for writing, by leaving her daughter with her nanny, is a condition for her creativity. In the letter, the description of her relatives brings forth the idea that one cannot choose one's family, but only one's friends. This, in turn, triggers the memory of a statement made by Simone de Beauvoir who never wanted children since it would be a relationship she wouldn't have consciously chosen (45). Huston rejects this stand later in the same letter, stating that being able to choose your language is more important than being able to choose your children (47). Thus, Huston does not seem to adhere to a feminism which excludes motherhood completely.

- 12 At the very end of the letter, Huston writes that the afternoon has come to an end and that Sebban must blame "le sirop de cassis si cette lettre ne contient pas de récit sur Urbino" (47-48). This could be interpreted in two ways : she wasted time cleaning up rather than writing about what she had planned or writing about the broken bottle used up the space available in the letter, excluding from it the originally foreseen content. Either way, household tasks related to motherhood are designated as interfering negatively with the writing process. At the same time, one notes how the content of the letters to a large extent actually is related to motherhood, which provides the subject matter of the letters.
- 13 The passage related to breastfeeding and writing was already mentioned above when talking about how Huston was hit by depression after giving birth to her daughter and while refraining from isolating herself in her writer's den because she wanted to nurse her baby. Huston links the depression to the absence of feminist activism in her life and explains that she decides to wean her three month old baby when going to a conference devoted to women, feminism and research. Nothing is said about the conference, but Huston depicts herself on the dance floor in a gay nightclub in which, Huston says : "je me suis trahie en tant qu' 'hétéro' : m'étant exagérément démenée sur la piste de danse, j'avais tout le devant du chemisier trempé de lait !" (151). Breastfeeding, one of the most debated aspects of motherhood, definitely carries negative connotations in this passage. It interrupts the creative process and it is only by freeing oneself from the prison of breastfeeding that one can participate in feminist work. Without going as far as Beauvoir, who describes the relationship between certain mothers and their child breastfeeding in

the following manner : “il apparaît comme un tyran ; ils regardent avec hostilité ce petit individu étranger qui menace leur chair, leur liberté, leur moi tout entier.” (366), Huston does affirm that refraining from nursing is a liberating, feminist action. At the same time, the paragraph following the one analyzed above uses the last word of the previous paragraph, “chemisier trempé de lait”, as a starting point for a digression going simultaneously in several different directions, just as the suggestive image of the maze evoked by Sebbar when talking about Woolf. The final and initial word is “lait” (milk), followed in the second paragraph by “Léa”, the name of Huston's daughter : “chemisier trempé de lait ! // Lait, Léa...” (151) Apart from the obvious stylistic effect of the alliteration, it also carries an explanation of the association of ideas between milk and the daughter.

- 14 The remaining four pages of this letter are divided as follows: half a page in parenthesis devoted to the myth of King Midas and his power to turn everything he touched into gold; half a page to explain how she came to choose the Jewish name Léa for her daughter; almost two pages on the Jewish people, and finally about one page on her own writing (151-155). Looking at this passage in detail, one is struck by the intricate weave created by Huston. The meaning of the name Léa functions as a catalyst for self-reflexive passages concerning writing, intertwined with memories of former Jewish lovers in New York as well as reflections on the victimization of the Jewish Diaspora, leading into a discussion on her own exile and that of Sebbar, and their expression in writing. The paragraph where Huston exposes her reasons for choosing this name for her child contains quite amusing details. After explaining that she was petrified (“médusée”) when she heard this name in a Jewish play, she also mentions that Princess Leia from *Star Wars* has nothing to do with her choice. This paragraph ends with the remark : “Pour moi c'est un nom qui parle de lait ; du reste, en hébreu, il désignerait la vache.” (152) The following paragraph then evokes with nostalgia Jewish neighbourhoods in New York and their inhabitants. Next, Huston explains her fascination for the Jewish Diaspora and links it to her own exile. Finally, the last page or so is a reflection on how exile influences writing in its relation to borders, limits and genres. This links back to the initial parenthesis with the reference to King Midas, where Huston compares his turning everything into gold with the act of writing : “à force de tout métamorphoser en écriture, nous serions coupées de la réalité” (152). Next to this thought comes a question : “Nos enfants ne nous en voudront-ils pas, un jour, d'avoir parfois préféré écrire sur eux plutôt que d'être avec eux ?” (152) This question is then immediately blamed on the “sempiternelle culpabilité des mères” (152).
- 15 Motherhood provides the author not only with material for writing stories involving aspects of maternity, but the existence of her daughter, and specifically her name, allows Huston to fill her letter with reflections going way beyond the trivial details of being a mother. As Lorre suggests in her reading of the main character of *La Virevolte*, “[l]a maternité nourrit et abreuve l'inspiration artistique” (77). Even though the mother of the novel takes a different path than Huston when leaving her family to travel around the world as a professional dancer and choreographer, they both draw from their experiences as mothers when creating. Proulx points out when analyzing *La Virevolte* that “while maternity is valorized, it is not made sacred” (299). In the same way, it can be said about *Lettres parisiennes* that Huston desacralizes maternity in a straightforward fashion without rejecting its creative potential.

Conclusion

- 16 *Lettres parisiennes* has proven to be an interesting source in studying Huston's perspective on motherhood and creation, a fundamental question within Huston's *œuvre* as well as in feminist work in general. Telling her reader about the difficulties of combining motherhood and household tasks with the creative activity of writing, insisting on the social construction of normative roles imposed on mothers, Huston makes a feminist statement, easily linked back to both Woolf and Beauvoir. As Woolf, she claims a room of her own and as Beauvoir she refuses to accept restrictions motivated by traditional views on women. Unlike Beauvoir, however, Huston rejects a situation where children and books are mutually exclusive, embracing simultaneously motherhood and creation. It could be argued that Huston is walking a tightrope, because she is telling one thing while at the same time showing another. The sheer amount of text devoted to activities and thoughts surrounding motherhood contradicts the idea of it being an obstacle to creation. The experience of being a mother literally pours into the letters. At the same time, motherhood does not only feed creation on the surface level of content. Close reading of certain passages shows that motherhood also constitutes a springing point for creativity. The associative force of the name Léa leads Huston into areas of reflection quite remote from motherhood. In fact, the comment made by Sebbar about Woolf's writing can be fruitfully applied to Huston's letters. This can be observed in the passage on the name Léa, where digressions, sometimes within parenthesis, are a prominent trait of Huston's poetics, perhaps linked to the genre of the letter, perhaps to be seen as a way to place herself in the tradition of female writers stemming from Virginia Woolf. It seems clear that the tension between motherhood and creation depicted in *Lettres parisiennes* is productive rather than reductive. Maternal duties and housework fill the letters with content, placing Huston in the writing tradition of Virginia Woolf, but also function as catalysts for reflections on exile, identity and creation.

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NOTES

1. Proulx quotes Alice Jardine writing that Simone de Beauvoir is behind "the feminist myth: the baby versus the book", but also that this "mutual exclusivity", implying that women have to choose between procreation and creation, has been called into question (Jardine 90, quoted in Proulx 289). Proulx's study is a thorough analysis of creation and procreation in relation to the body/mind divide in Huston's *Journal de la création*, *La Virevolte* and *Instruments des ténèbres*.
2. "M" is the way Huston refers to her partner and the father of her daughter in *Lettres parisiennes*.
3. Simone de Beauvoir speaks eloquently of this myth in *Le deuxième sexe* (341).
4. Christine Lorre writes about Lin, the main character of Huston's novel *La Virevolte* (1994), a dancer who decides to abandon her children for her career, that by integrating for example illness and ageing in her choreography and dancing, she takes control over them, thus adopting the attitude here associated with the writing method of both Woolf and Huston in *Lettres parisiennes*.
5. Elsewhere, I have argued that Huston's use of parenthesis opens up for a dialogical construction of the self. Persson, Ann-Sofie. "L'interstice, le dialogue et la migration : Pratiques épistolaires (auto)biographiques dans *Lettres parisiennes*. Autopsie de l'exil de Nancy Huston et Leïla Sebbar." *Nouvelles Études Francophones* 27.1 (Printemps 2012). Dossier spécial Littérature de la migration. 51-65. In this particular example, the dialogical pattern is quite complexe, engaging both Sebbar and Woolf.

RÉSUMÉS

Lettres parisiennes, correspondance entre Nancy Huston et Leïla Sebbar publiée en 1986, est avant tout consacrée à la question de l'exil et de l'identité, mais la tension souvent discutée entre la maternité et la création est également mise en relief. Le présent article a pour but d'analyser la perspective de Nancy Huston sur la question. Alors qu'elle rapporte au lecteur toutes les difficultés à combiner maternité et création, Huston montre comment la maternité fonctionne comme une source d'inspiration pour son travail d'écrivain, comme matière de ses lettres et comme point de départ pour des réflexions sur d'autres thèmes. Les références fréquentes aux précurseurs féministes telles Virginia Woolf et Simone de Beauvoir seront analysées tout au long de l'article dans une tentative de positionner Huston au sein de ce contexte féministe.

Lettres parisiennes, a correspondence between Nancy Huston and Leïla Sebbar published in 1986, is mainly devoted to questions of exile and identity, but the much-debated tension between

motherhood and creation also receives some attention. The present article aims at analysing the perspective of Nancy Huston regarding this question. While telling the reader of her difficulties of combining motherhood and creation, Huston is at the same time showing how motherhood also functions as an inspiration for her writing, as content of her letters and as a point of departure for reflections on other themes. The frequent references made to feminist predecessors such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir will be analysed throughout the article in an attempt to place Huston within this feminist context.

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