

## Trauma and the bilingual subject in Nancy Huston's *L'Empreinte de l'ange*

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Psychoanalysis is centrally concerned with the ways in which the mind processes affect, especially traumatic affect. As the “talking cure,” psychoanalysis relies on language to help subjects to retrieve the repressed “real,” by symbolising and verbalising it. However, as Valerie Greenberg and Juliet Mitchell have both pointed out, the emphasis on speech as a therapeutic tool may obscure the ways in which disturbance in language use is itself a symptom.<sup>1</sup> This paper will explore the relationship between trauma and the capacity for growth and development in Nancy Huston's novel *L'Empreinte de l'ange* (1998), focusing on language, especially bilingualism (broadly understood as the capacity to communicate in two languages) as a site where trauma is expressed and mediated. The deployment of psychoanalytical perspectives in the interpretation of a literary text that deals with trauma in a specific historical context will not surprise readers. In the case in hand however, the choice of a psychoanalytical approach rests not only on the synergy between trauma studies, literature and history, but also on the (perhaps ironic) invitation contained in the author's description of her protagonist in the wake of her most painful self-revelation and a cathartic experience of erotic violence at the hands of her lover: “Saffie se sent délestée du poids de son enfance comme par dix ans de psychanalyse” (EA 184).

Damaged to the point of near psychosis<sup>2</sup> by her history of war-related trauma, Huston's protagonist Saffie suffers from a variety of linguistic disturbances (intermittent hysterical aphasia, a phobic relationship to her mother tongue, affectless speech) and struggles to emerge from the crushing weight of her past in a present that is played out between or across French and German. *L'Empreinte de l'ange* is set in Paris between 1957 and 1964, against the violent backdrop of the Algerian struggle for independence. The novel's three central characters have a clearly symbolic status, in that their nationalities (German, French and Jewish-Hungarian) position them very differently in relation to the events of WWII in which each was caught up. As a child, Saffie endured the terror of allied bombardments and the atrocities committed by advancing Russian troops: she and her mother were both raped, and her mother subsequently committed suicide. As an eighteen-year-old, Saffie discovered that the father she had idealised as a child (and who was now sick and dependent on her) had been involved in Nazi war crimes; he died on the day she challenged him about his wartime role. The novel takes up Saffie's story from the time of her arrival in Paris at age twenty and tracks the marriage of convenience (on Saffie's part) that she enters into with the talented French flautist Raphaël, her difficulties with motherhood, and the passionate love affair (initiated when her son Emil is a baby) that she experiences with András, a charismatic Jewish-Hungarian instrument maker who has his own traumatic memories (of the pogroms in war-torn Budapest). Through her love for András, Saffie comes to life, and slowly becomes able to engage with the loss and shame that paralysed her before she met him. Once Saffie's appetite for life is reawakened, she “shamelessly” indulges it, betraying her husband with equanimity and failing to adequately nurture her child. For six years, Saffie

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1 In *Lost in Translation*, Eva Hoffman remarks: “[i]f all therapy is speaking therapy – a talking cure – then perhaps all neurosis is a speech dis-ease” (Hoffman 124).

2 The term psychosis is used in the Winnicottian sense. Winnicott maintains that there is no clear dividing line between health and ill-health, sanity and insanity (Winnicott 1945: 150), and defines psychosis as “an environmental deficiency disease” (Winnicott 1949: 246).

effectively lives a double life, combining the security of a bourgeois marriage with an exhilarating and tumultuous emotional liaison with her lover. Her rediscovered libido brutally encounters the reality principle when Emil dies in a tragic incident brought about by Raphaël's discovery of his wife's infidelity.

The theoretical framework for my analysis will draw on Donald Winnicott's ideas relating to the "primitive agony" and the "fear of breakdown" that are the result of gross environmental failure, and on his belief in the possibility of "unfreezing" a subject who has "ceased to exist" as a result of trauma (this requires return to the point at which development was arrested [Winnicott 1954, 1963]). I shall also refer briefly to the published work of Winnicott's second wife Clare Britton Winnicott, for some of her own applications of the body of theory that was in effect developed collaboratively by the couple.<sup>3</sup> Further theoretical leverage will be provided by occasional references to the theories of Silvan Tomkins in relation to the management of negative affect, with particular attention to the role of pleasure, the need for an ally, and especially the deployment of language in the attempt to minimise affect inhibition. Tomkins's emphasis on language as the primary vehicle for the expression of affect (Tomkins 1962: 440–443) will be aligned with Winnicott's concept of potential space and transitional phenomena, which include language (Winnicott 1971: 1–25).<sup>4</sup> Reading Huston's novel through the thought of these theorists who accord a primary place to affect, I shall explore the relationship between trauma, shame, desire, language (especially bilingualism) and emotional growth in *L'Empreinte de l'ange*.

Even allowing for the fact that there is no simple correlation between potentially traumatising events and the occurrence of trauma, the accumulation of adverse circumstances in Saffie's case points to the likelihood that she does indeed suffer "gross environmental failure." The stone-like inertia that characterises Saffie until she is "rescued" by András represents an attempt to bar the gates against further intrusion. Disconcerted by András's black humour when they first meet, "[Saffie] se fige. N'est même pas étonnée. C'est toujours ainsi, c'est toujours au pire qu'il faut s'attendre" (EA 94). Indeed, wooden impassivity is a defensive strategy that is part of Saffie's family inheritance: she has previously seen it in her mother and her father as they confronted their respective calamitous situations (EA 125, 182), and it will be passed down, in an attenuated form, to Emil (EA 71, 128). In Saffie's case then, it seems appropriate to think in terms of repeated catastrophic failures of holding across the spectrum of childhood and adolescent need for the provision of a physical and emotional context (whether at the level of the family or the social framework as a whole) in which growth can take place.<sup>5</sup>

3 For a discussion of the role of Clare Britton Winnicott in the development of the body of work that is known as Winnicottian theory, see Joel Kanter, "The Untold Story of Donald and Clare Winnicott: How Social Work Influenced Modern Psychoanalysis," *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 28 (3), 2000, 245–261.

4 Winnicott identifies the space of creativity and culture (potential space) as a transitional domain which emerges from the fluid psychic relationship between mother and child. He does not foreground language in the way that Freud, Jacques Lacan or Julia Kristeva do, rather "[l]anguage, in Winnicott's developmental theory, merely extends the child's capacity for communication and separateness, but is not in itself considered formative of his identity" (Phillips 1988b: 138–139). At the same time, Winnicott's belief that immersion in the potential space between mother and infant is relayed by participation in the domain of culture invites a consideration of the role of linguistic and literary phenomena in self-other relations and in creative experiencing. For a suggestive discussion of this issue, see Schwab viii and 1–48.

5 The holding environment is initially provided by the primary caretaker, providing that s/he is "good-enough," meaning that the care provided is adequate to meet the infant's needs. Holding is essential to the infant's capacity to develop a sense of self and a feeling of integration, an achievement that Winnicott paradoxically refers to as an "I AM" moment that cannot be expressed in language: "Before integration the individual is unorganized, a mere collection of sensory-motor phenomena, collected by the holding environment. After integration the individual IS, that is to say, the infant human being has achieved unit status, can say I AM (except for not being able to talk).

Not least, she lacks reliable (internal) parent figures who survive her destructive impulses against them, and who support the process of (dis)identification which is fundamental to human development (Winnicott 1968a). In this respect, it is significant that while many of Saffie's traumatic experiences are associated with the intrusion of extra-familial and hostile or exploitative others, and with languages other than German (EA 75–77, 86–88, 124–125, 140, 181–182), it is her native language that she rejects, while the foreign tongues she hears in the Marais, and in András's workshop, do not normally disturb her, and may indeed be a source of pleasure.<sup>6</sup> This is a point to which I shall return.

Saffie's phobic feelings about German become apparent to readers in the first flashback episode, when the brilliant white of Emil's nappies, hanging up to dry in the sunlit bathroom, triggers Saffie's memories of hanging out washing with her mother, "un printemps d'avant la peur" (EA 74). These are memories of a magical moment of pleasure shared by mother and daughter, but the recollection of the song they sang together on that day (featuring a bird that carries in its beak a letter from a mother to her daughter) takes Saffie to the edge of the abyss:

en fin de compte elle n'en a jamais eu, Saffie, des lettres de sa mère, en fin de compte sa mère a inventé une autre façon de se servir des draps – mais comme elles ont ri ce jour-là ! dansant et jouant à cache-cache parmi les draps qui claquaient dans le vent... Mutti ! Quand Emil se mettra à parler, il l'appellera non pas Mutti mais maman. C'est terminé Mutter, et la Muttersprache avec : suspendues, une fois pour toutes... (EA 74)

Does Saffie experience her mother's suicide as an abandonment and a betrayal? Not only the word *Mutti*, but also the word *Vogel* (the main motif in the song that Saffie and her mother sang together) remains taboo, as Saffie (with András's encouragement) eventually learns to risk a few words of German with Emil.

If Saffie's relationship with her mother generates problems in her childhood (problems which persist as unfinished business into Saffie's adult years), her relationship with her father reaches its lowest point when she receives information from her former French teacher that points to her father's involvement in Hitler's "Final Solution." Saffie's anxiety about András's origin, her dismay at Yom Kippur, her reluctance to speak the word "Jew" in French, her euphoria when she realises András loves her in spite of her nationality and history (EA 115–119), as well as the fact that the truth about her father's wartime role is the most difficult confession that she makes to András, all point

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It does not matter if this development happens in a moment or gradually over a long period of time; the fact is that there is a before and an after, and the process deserves a name all to itself.

No doubt the instinctual experiences contribute richly to the integration process, but there is also all the time the good-enough environment, someone holding the infant, and adapting well enough to changing needs. That someone cannot function except through the sort of love that is appropriate at this stage, love that carries a capacity for identification with the infant, and a feeling that adaptation to need is worth while. We say that the mother is devoted to her infant, temporarily but truly. [...]

I suggest that this I AM moment is a raw moment; the new individual feels infinitely exposed. Only if someone has her arms round the infant at this time can the I AM moment be endured, or rather, perhaps, risked" (Winnicott 1955: 148; original emphasis). Psychological and physical holding is most crucial in early infancy, but it retains its importance throughout life, and, in good-enough circumstances, may be provided (for example) by family and friends, intimate relationships, work and creative activity (Winnicott 1956: 310). When environmental deprivations lead to ill-health or breakdown, the professional holding provided by a psychoanalyst may be needed to bring to life someone who has "not started to exist" or who has ceased to exist in an emotional and psychological sense (Winnicott 1960: 142).

6 See EA 93, 109 and 144. There are however two occasions when hearing a foreign language disconcerts or upsets Saffie. On one occasion, the English of András's black friend Bill causes her fleetingly to draw back in alarm (EA 107–108); it momentarily resuscitates her terror when confronted by the dying black American pilot who begged her for water, an encounter which led to Saffie's first experience of aphasia (EA 86–88). Later in the story, the Hungarian spoken by András with a visiting female acquaintance fills Saffie with jealous rage at being excluded from the intimate exchange to which she is a witness (EA 146–148).

to the primacy of shame of her father and her nationality in the psychological disturbances to which she is subject. Together with Saffie's sense of the toxicity of the words *Mutti* and *Vogel*, this hypersensitivity to "the Jewish question" suggests that Saffie's rejection of German, as the language that carries her mother's abandonment and her father's guilt, issues from a level of trauma that is more compelling than bombardment and rape. Saffie's feelings about her nationality, and above all about her parents, represent a despoliation that is seemingly more ruinous than all the other wounds that she suffers.

Saffie's affective absence is immediately apparent (and irresistibly fascinating) to Raphaël as he confronts the young woman who has come to offer her services as a maid: "Raphaël n'a jamais vu cela. Cette femme est là, et en même temps elle est absente" (EA 13). It quickly becomes clear (to readers if not to Raphaël, even if he is well aware that Saffie has been grievously damaged by her past) that Saffie has come to France to escape her German past. The adoption of the French language serves to distance Saffie from her German roots, and marriage to Raphaël facilitates the construction of a French identity: the day after the wedding, she acquires a new passport in her married name, and consigns her old passport to the rubbish bin (EA 45). The French that Saffie speaks with Raphaël is unmistakably defensive; she responds minimally to his efforts at communication and resists his efforts to talk about her past (EA 58, 62–64). She allows him to use her body, but she remains uninvolved, seemingly oblivious of sensation and disconnected from affect. Only terror (when the ringing of the alarm clock triggers panic [EA 48]) and horror (when Raphaël points out that she may be pregnant [EA 49]) evoke fully-felt responses. Saffie remains disassociated even (or perhaps especially) as a mother, yet the experience of motherhood carries responsibilities that she cannot entirely ignore. Thus, in the wake of a flashback, her awareness of Emil's vulnerability, and no doubt her lack of "maternal" feelings for him, combine to summon up the hallucination of the SS man, who is simultaneously the baby's executioner, and the baby himself, a German child capable perhaps of growing into a death-dealing fascist (EA 77). If Saffie has to keep the child (and she sees no other option), then she is determined that he will grow up French; she will teach him French words, not German ones, even if she sometimes has to struggle to find the words she needs (EA 157–158).

Here we encounter a paradox: if Saffie wants Emil to be French, why does she always think of him as Emil, using the German form of his name rather than the French Emile, the forename that Raphaël registers on his son's birth certificate (EA 70)? It may be that the German forename expresses her early rejection of her son, who carries forward the inheritance she is seeking to reject, and/or that it signals her fear that he will inherit her father's capacity for complicity in war and genocide. More optimistically – and this is the interpretation that I favour – it may be that Saffie's personal name for her son bears witness to her (perhaps unconscious) understanding that the past cannot be erased, and that it must one day be confronted; perhaps Saffie even desires this at some level.

A related point may be made about the significance of the poodle paw (the last remnant of a toy poodle given to Saffie by her father when she was two) that protected Saffie from nightmares until she discovered the truth about her father, and which even now she keeps "par loyauté" (EA 30). To what does she feel the need to be loyal? I would suggest that it is to herself, to the subject she started to be and who needs to be rediscovered and brought to life. The poodle paw certainly fits the criteria for the first "transitional object" that for Winnicott helps the child to negotiate the early stages of separation from the primary caretaker.<sup>7</sup> Here I shall cite not Donald Winnicott, but his

7 Clare Britton Winnicott glosses the concept of the transitional object as follows; "a child's first-loved possession which becomes the symbol of the mother's breast and the early mothering experiences, if they have been good enough to allow the symbolization" (Clare Britton Winnicott 1980: 354). The fact that the toy

second wife Clare Britton Winnicott (then Clare Britton), a social worker who worked alongside Winnicott with war-damaged children:

The moment of uprooting is *just* when a skilled boarding-out officer is needed to see that what a child clings to in the past is brought with him and accepted in the new environment. Nothing could be more important for the future, but there are many stories, which now, it is hoped, belong to another era, of children clinging to their own clothes and being given an anaesthetic to enable the clothes to be removed; of favourite but filthy teddy bears and other possessions being taken away and burned. True, the children received new clothes, even new teddy-bears, but these did not belong to the past, and something became damaged and lost when the familiar things were taken away. These things stood for everything the child brought with him from the past and he could not afford to lose so much.<sup>8</sup>

From this perspective, Saffie's attachment to the poodle paw might be said to signify that despite her deliberate construction of a French identity and her determination to have done with German and the past it carries, with part of herself she knows that the past must be revisited and integrated if she is to move on. As Adam Phillips comments, glossing Winnicott, the subject whose development has been vitiated by environmental failure needs to go back to the point of failure: "[h]e returns to find where what he hasn't got has come from, to the gaps in himself" (Phillips 1988a: 145).

In Winnicott's view, the mother is necessarily traumatising, because she must accustom her child to the disillusionment of discovering that the fit between his or her desires and what the world offers is far from perfect.<sup>9</sup> While this is a normal and necessary aspect of maternal/parental care, holding that fails to be "good enough" to support the child's early growth carries the risk that the child's spontaneity will give way to a "false self" that is compliant with environmental provision (the infant adapts to what is on offer). The caretaker's (or caretakers') failure to meet the infant's need forces the spontaneous self to go into hiding:

The development of a false self is one of *the most successful defence organizations* [...] and its existence results in the sense of futility. [...]; that which happens in the individual as a reaction to environmental impingement feels unreal, futile (later bad), however sensually satisfactory. (Winnicott 1954: 292; original emphasis)<sup>10</sup>

Winnicott further argues that holding that is seriously deficient may lead to anti-social behaviour, for example stealing and lying. However, anti-social or "delinquent" behaviour represents a sign of hope for Winnicott, since it demonstrates that at some

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poodle was a gift from Saffie's father in no way invalidates this conceptualisation, since in normal circumstances (and at age two, Saffie had not yet been plunged into the terrors of war) the father supports the mother, and together the parents provide the stability the child needs.

8 Clare Britton Winnicott 1950, 173–174 (original emphasis). As Joel Kanter notes, this publication predated Donald Winnicott's presentation of his paper on "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena" to the British Psychoanalytical Society in 1951.

9 Winnicott 1965: 146. Here and elsewhere in my text and notes, the name Winnicott will be used in references to the work or specific works of Donald Winnicott; references to texts published by Clare Britton Winnicott will include both her forename and full surname.

10 The use of the term "false self" clearly implies a contrapuntal "true self." Winnicott does use the term "true self," but insists that it is a theoretical position associated with undefinability and spontaneity, introduced as a conceptual tool that is useful as a way of understanding what is lacking in the "false self": "There is but little point in formulating a True Self idea except for the purpose of trying to understand the False Self, because it does no more than collect together the details of the experience of aliveness" (Winnicott 1960: 148).

point in the past, the subject was “started off” adequately; the “delinquent” behaviour registers a protest at the loss that has been sustained.<sup>11</sup>

As we have seen, Saffie has a strong memory of good times spent with her mother before bombs and enemy soldiers became a part of everyday life. Indeed, throughout the bombing campaign, Saffie’s mother remained a source of comfort for her children (EA 79, 83–85), even if, for the six-year-old Saffie, the holding provided by a mother who had four other children, three of them younger than Saffie herself, could not meet the depth of need she felt (EA 79, 84). When, at age twenty, Saffie leaves the Welcome Hostess School (where she is trained in the arts and graces of feminine hospitality that in happier times she might have learnt from her mother), she steals a handsome black dress and accessories belonging to the school (EA 30), perhaps a symbolic substitute for the white communion gown that her mother described to her to distract her from the bombing, and which she would never own or wear (EA 120). Nor is this the only example of “delinquent” behaviour on Saffie’s part. She marries a man she does not love for her own devious purposes, and she stays with him for the material security he provides for herself and her son. Indeed, Saffie has no qualms in living out her own version of the “mother cuckoo” role that her mother refused (since the older woman preferred death to the shame of asking her husband to accept a rapist’s child). With this in mind, Saffie’s destruction of the cuckoo clock (an unwelcome present from Raphaël) carries considerable symbolic resonance (EA 158–159): unlike her mother, Saffie does not consciously perceive the explosive potential of the violation of marital bonds; at the same time, her jubilant demolition of the clock points to the self-destruction that she courts through her uncompromising pursuit of her own pleasure. She feels free to lead a double life, and habitually deceives Raphaël without any sense of guilt (EA 155–156). Yet, paradoxically, Saffie’s “delinquent” behaviour may also be understood as a sign of hope, because it points to what Clare Britton Winnicott refers to as a “ruthless drive for survival whatever the cost” (Clare Britton Winnicott 1980: 351). Here, “survival” is to be understood as the recovery of aliveness and spontaneity.

I want to suggest that Saffie’s shame in having been a defiled and abandoned child (after the death of Saffie’s mother, Frau Silber used to beat Saffie and keep her away from the other children, as if she might contaminate them [EA 126]), as well as in being her father’s daughter, makes her withdraw into herself and erect barriers against feeling. Thus, in the face of an array of environmental failures, Saffie survives (in the basic sense of maintaining her existence) by developing a defensive false self organisation that masks her vulnerability and puts on hold her potential for creative living. The compliant defensive shell that she maintains in her relationship with Raphaël permits no return to need and prevents Saffie from rediscovering spontaneous aliveness, although I have argued that her relative lack of moral scruples in the pursuit of her own agenda points to the continuing existence of a desiring self that has not been fully renounced. With Raphaël, Saffie remains in a state of suspended animation. Something new is needed to bring her to life; Winnicott might say that she needs to surprise herself (Winnicott 1969: 197; 1970: 53).

Surprise is not the least of the rush of emotions that floods Saffie’s being when she encounters András for the first time. Huston’s moving account of this meeting signals the rebirth of feeling that is essential if Saffie is to grow. Stepping from the sunlit street into the relative darkness of András’s workshop, Saffie is at first preoccupied with her prepared explanation about the fault in Raphaël’s flute, then wary (as András issues a mock “military” challenge), then inexplicably and unexpectedly mirthful, and unable to

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11 In “The Antisocial Tendency” (1956), Winnicott remarks: “[t]he child who steals an object is not looking for the object stolen but seeks the mother over whom he or she has rights” (Winnicott 1956: 311; original emphasis).

prevent a blush rising to her cheeks (EA 95). Even before they have established each other's nationality (perhaps the urgency of this enquiry arises from their shared status as foreigners in France, or perhaps it issues from a joint premonition of what they will be to each other), the body language between them expresses their mutual fascination. Saffie finds herself irresistibly drawn to the disorder and even chaos that she perceives around her:

Le silence entre eux revient, et se fait alors tellement significatif que les bruits de fond ressortent au premier plan. [...] Saffie respire avec difficulté. Elle a oublié son enfant. [...] Les yeux courant çà et là, se réjouissant du désordre, elle explore le lieu où elle se trouve. (EA 97)

Saffie's gaze is most insistently drawn to Andràs, who is anything but indifferent to the powerful current of energy ("une boule de feu" [EA 99]) that issues from her eyes, and that is reinforced by the love that radiates ("telle une aura nucléaire" [EA 100]) from her body. This unexpected and sudden emergence of Saffie's desire (involving curiosity, spontaneity and delight as well as the capacity to take the initiative) suggests regression to a primary level of psychic functioning, one that exists below the order that she has imposed on herself to hold trauma in check, and that is supported by her marriage to Raphaël and by the impeccable organisation she maintains in her home (EA 33, 42, 57, 71–72).

Silvan Tomkins argues that mutual looking between lovers connects with "the peculiar intimacy [...] first experienced with the mother," so that

[I]love at first sight is in fact love at second sight. [...] The experience which commonly initiates romantic love is a derivative of the pre-verbal look-look, and this is why the lovers are literally dumb and inarticulate. They know neither space nor time nor language. (Tomkins 1962: 424)

On first meeting Andràs, Saffie is metaphorically reborn. Extraordinary as their encounter is (Saffie falls to her knees, presses her face against the rough material of Andràs's trousers, and, as his hands touch her head, sinks to the floor in an ecstatic swoon as she experiences the first orgasm of her life), it seems entirely appropriate that the depth of Saffie's need should produce this sudden and dramatic moment of cataclysmic transformation. She has discovered pleasure and an ally, two major elements in the struggle to manage negative affect (Tomkins 1962: 478–479, 483).

Given the focus of this paper on language, it is worth pausing over Tomkins's remark (cited above) that lovers who gaze into each other's eyes "know neither space nor time nor language." The richness of communication between lovers is such that language represents only one of a range of forms of intersubjective exchange: the senses, bodily movements, inarticulate sounds and indeed silence all come into play. Thus, when Andràs and Saffie first meet, few words are exchanged, and silence is full of meaning: "[Andràs] sait que s'il lève les yeux vers la femme allemande avant de parler à nouveau, il est perdu. Il cherche des mots et n'en trouve aucun, dans aucune langue" (EA 99). Language nevertheless fulfils an important role in their relationship. The French Saffie speaks with Raphaël serves to support and maintain a "false self" and acts as a defence. In Saffie's life with Andràs, French has a similar defensive function (it allows the couple to avoid the German that both abhor), but it also acts as an adjunct to the powerful bodily forces that draw them together. Moreover, the French spoken by the pair represents a source of laughter and delight and therefore also a form of play (Andràs's French is very flawed). Andràs is a "free spirit" (in the sense that he resists domestication and routine), and he provides a holding environment for Saffie while imposing few constraints. In Andràs's studio in the Marais, Saffie feels that she has the right just to be herself: "Malgré le landau, malgré le bébé, elle a le droit en venant ici de n'être que "Saffie." Sa

vie allemande n'existe plus, sa vie rive gauche non plus; elle peut dire, faire, être n'importe quoi – elle est libre !” (EA 107). Importantly however, although Saffie still speaks French in order to draw a veil over her native language and nationality (EA 177), French also becomes the medium through which she finds the strength (in her relationship with Andràs) to begin to confront her German inheritance. Thus, while a second language may be used as a defence against past trauma and unpalatable present realities (in this case, the fragility of the “bubble” that Saffie and Andràs construct round themselves and their affair), a new linguistic medium and an empathic relationship provide a breathing space (in Winnicottian terms, a “potential space”) in which Saffie can come alive and discover the psychic space where new ways of being can be explored.

Andràs and the relationship she has with him are irresistible for Saffie; it is an erotic and healing relationship, healing perhaps because it is erotic. Through the partnership, she rediscovers spontaneity and vitality, embarks on the confrontation with her demons and learns to become more aware of suffering outside herself (EA 163–164, 173–174, 190). Yet their story involves far more than pleasure and empathic togetherness. The past they cautiously explore together and their different histories inevitably lead to tension and indeed conflict. Here I shall focus on two moments in their evolving relationship that require the difficult integration of aggression and love.

The events I shall consider both involve an act of physical violence enacted by Andràs against Saffie, and in both cases the violence is linked to the protagonists' past but rooted in their love for each other. The first incident follows Saffie's masked admission of her father's guilt (EA 138–141) and her discovery that Andràs not only has communist sympathies, but is actively involved in the armed struggle against French policy with respect to Algeria. The realisation that Andràs aligns himself with the ideology espoused by the Russian soldiers who raped her, and that he participates in the political violence that she abominates, provokes an hysterical outburst from Saffie: “Tu aides à faire la guerre alors? [...] *Je hais la guerre!* Andràs! *Je vais te denoncer à la police*” (EA 153; original emphasis). To calm her down, Andràs slaps her hard, just once. Their reconciliation is not described, but the narrator comments: “En fait – ils ne se le disent pas mais tous deux le savent – ils ont enfin touché là à l'essence de leur amour, à son noyau secret et sacré. En l'autre, c'est l'ennemi qu'ils aiment” (EA 153).

What are we to understand by this assessment of the situation? The narrator has previously remarked that many experiences of *amour fou* come to grief (EA 131), because the partners do not survive the realisation that their love affair has not magically transformed them: they remain the people they were before they met, with the same problems, the same intractable past. After the quarrel evoked above, with its verbal and physical aggression, the narrator comments that for Saffie and Andràs, “le tournant est pris” (EA 153); they have negotiated the difficult moment when partners are confronted by their own insurmountable existential individuality. Perhaps we may take it that this means that they love each other as they are and for what they are, and not despite but because of the historical enmity of their nations and the divergent beliefs they have each come to hold. Both need to work on past terrors that are associated with the legacy of the other, and that cannot be borne, except perhaps through the capacity to share imaginatively and empathically in the pain of the other (and of others).

This crucial thread in their relationship is taken up again, more insistently, following Saffie's revelation to Andràs concerning that aspect of her past that most shames her: her father's implication in Nazi war crimes (EA 180–182). In the wake of Saffie's confession, Andràs is careful not to reject her (he puts his arm round her shoulders), but his vitriolic attempt at “humour” suggests the extent of his difficulty in attempting to integrate what he has heard (EA 182). The next time Saffie and Andràs make love, he is impotent, and the time after that, with Emil safely upstairs in the care of a neighbour, their lovemaking erupts into erotic violence as Andràs repeatedly and with slow

deliberation slaps Saffie's face, satisfying a mutual need to express the weight of the past that inhabits them differently, but equally unbearably (EA 183). This disturbing episode issues from the need for catharsis, but also, paradoxically, from the need for mutual recognition. András carries anger (not least against himself, for his perceived cowardice in Budapest [EA 122, 183, 188]), Saffie carries guilt, and both carry shame. While their shame is undoubtedly purged by the violence, what seems more important is that their love is strong enough to survive hatred and aggression; the narrator remarks that in the aftermath of this incident, "András et Saffie n'ont jamais été aussi proches" (EA 184). This is consistent with Winnicottian perspectives on relational interaction. For Winnicott, early developmental stages involve aggression as well as love, and (unconscious) destruction is an ongoing psychic process throughout life. He draws attention to its presence in adolescence as well as in mature sexual relationships (Winnicott 1968a: 143–145 ; Winnicott 1950–1955, 218), and argues that "[f]or most people, the ultimate compliment is to be found and used" (Winnicott 1968b: 103).

When Raphaël takes Emil on a trip to Bordeaux in order to have time alone with his son so that he can interrogate him about his mother's relationship with András (revealed to him by Saffie's silence about an afternoon that he knows his wife and son spent with the instrument maker), András and Saffie are truly alone together for the first time. They surrender to unconstrained sexual pleasure and relish the opportunity to take all the time they want and to behave with child-like abandon (EA 209–214); looking into each other's eyes, they make a mutual declaration of love for the first recorded time (EA 211). As Saffie walks home after a last lingering kiss, she is described in terms that suggest that she has never been more "alive": "[Saffie] s'éloigne, ouvre son parapluie et marche les yeux ouverts dans la ville. [...] Se dirige vers la Seine en s'émerveillant de se trouver ainsi seule et forte dans la plus belle ville du monde" (EA 214).

The narrative of Chapter 17 juxtaposes this day of exuberant passion between András and Saffie with the tense drama between father and son unfolding on the train: "Tout le corps de Raphaël s'arc-boute sous l'effet de la douleur." / "Le corps de Saffie s'arc-boute dans le plaisir" [EA 210]). The tragic conclusion to Raphaël's attempts to force the truth from Emil underlines the cost of Saffie's sense of renewed vitality as she savours her solitude in the nocturnal streets: the death of a child, and three adult lives in ruins. The *dénouement* of the novel poses many questions: do we have an absolute right to pursue the quest to come alive?; how to weigh our responsibility to ourselves against our responsibility to others?; can betrayal, dishonesty and the dereliction of maternal duty ever be condoned?<sup>12</sup> Saffie ruthlessly creates the environment she needs in order to recover her sense of aliveness, but has yet to fully develop the ruth (a little used term for concern, favoured by Winnicott) that in the course of healthy development becomes part of what Adam Phillips calls "somatic morality" (Phillips 1988a: 134), a concept that involves a form of "benign exploitation" (Phillips 1988a: 133). Michael Eigen explains this difficult aspect of Winnicott's thought by suggesting that "[Winnicott's] account provides a basis for a non-defensive appreciation of otherness which may grow into concern. One might come to guard this otherness in order to protect the richness in living it offers" (Eigen 418). Saffie certainly develops ruth in relation to András, and, in a more limited way, towards Emil and even Raphaël (EA 149). At the same time, she remains in denial in so far as she sets aside all thoughts of what will happen when Emil goes to school (when she will lose the pretext – spending "quality time" with her son in the city – that allows her to see András frequently), and she fails to pay adequate attention to her son's needs as a child: "cet enfant est en porte-à-faux avec la réalité. [...] Il n'a rien, n'est

12 Winnicott remarks that "those who lack moral sense have lacked at the early stages of their development the emotional and physical setting which would have enabled a capacity for guilt-sense to have developed" (Winnicott 1958: 25).

rien. Personne ne s'est soucié de savoir qui il était, ce qui serait bon pour lui" (EA 198). Moreover, and very importantly, the fact that she continues to refuse what she perceives as the deadly appeal of her mother tongue (EA 190) suggests that she still lacks the emotional strength to open herself unreservedly to the experiences of childhood and adolescence that are part of what she is, and that are irrevocably linked to the German language.

Commenting on Winnicott's celebrated remark that "[t]here is no such thing as a baby.' [...] if you show me a baby you certainly show me also someone caring for the baby" (Winnicott 1952: 99; original emphasis), Juliet Mitchell remarks: "we can extend this to childhood. In a nuclear family situation, the problem is how to be a child without a parent. If a parent dies or disappears, who or what is the left-behind baby or child? It is a question not of identity but of positioning" (Mitchell 1998: 131). Saffie's "abandonment" by her parents (who are doubly lost to her through their "betrayal" and through their death) leaves her without significant others who might grant her recognition and allow her to take up a relational position from which she could speak meaningfully. Language is a bodily and relational phenomenon, and disturbances in language use in the case of bilingual or multilingual subjects will inevitably be linked to "the relational context in which the different languages come onto the psychic scene."<sup>13</sup> Saffie's difficulties occur in childhood and adolescence, at a time when her mother tongue is more or less established (imperfectly mastered in childhood and more thoroughly internalised in adolescence); the successive breaches in her "protective covering" (Mitchell 121) dislocate the German through which she routinely communicates, destroying the link between affect and words, between soma and psyche. The young Saffie finds herself bereft of holding and recognition, defenceless in the face of the affective cataclysms that befall her. Her capacity for spontaneous, affective reaching out (initiated in infancy) beats a defensive retreat, and goes into hiding behind a false self that manifests itself as woodenness of manner and affectless speech, and is later buttressed (in her relationship with Raphaël) by the use of a second language that distances her from the traumas of her childhood but also from the reality of her present existence.

I have argued that the sensorial and multi-dimensional nature of Saffie's rapport with András (they communicate verbally, through moments of quietness, through laughter and play, and through the bodily expression of instinctual needs) allows her to reconnect with primary levels of psychic functioning. Indeed, it seems significant in this context that the "polyglot ferment" of András's studio is a source of delight and security for Saffie (EA 144). She feels unconditionally accepted and thoroughly content in this environment where a rich variety of sounds and languages (many of them inaccessible to her) surrounds her. It does not seem unreasonable to align this "sonorous matrix" (to appropriate an expression used by Angela Connolly in a different context [Connolly 376]) with Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic *chora* in which bodily drives and affective needs find expression in the rhythms and pre-verbal sounds that constitute the infant's earliest communications with the mother, and which persists as drives that manifest themselves in the bodily need to communicate (Kristeva 1974).

Reflecting on her own experience of what she calls "le faux bilinguisme" (bilingualism that is acquired in later childhood, adolescence or maturity, rather than developed in infancy in a bilingual environment) in the autobiographical essay *Nord perdu* (written in 1998, also the year in which *L'Empreinte de l'ange* was published), Huston acknowledges that a second language routinely contains an element of playacting, in the sense that it lacks the affective resonance of the words and expressions of the language in which the subject first learnt to speak, and which continues to carry, however

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13 Connolly 2002: 371. Connolly here reports the findings of Amati-Mehler, Argentieri and Canestri.

ambivalently, the indelible traces of early experience.<sup>14</sup> These views also inform *L'Empreinte de l'ange*, where Saffie is untroubled by her betrayal of Raphaël because, the narrator surmises, her marriage to him was conducted in French, and “parler une langue étrangère c’est toujours, un peu, faire du théâtre” (EA 156), and where Saffie’s belief that in Andràs’s studio, she can ditch her past and freely reinvent herself (EA 107) is proven to be false.

I have argued that recognition between Andràs and Saffie is instantaneous and strong enough to withstand difference and aggression on both sides. It brings Saffie alive and allows her to begin the process of “owning” her past, but a combination of circumstance and wilful blindness to the realities of the present, on the part of both Saffie and Andràs, precludes further development, at least in the relational context depicted in the novel. If Saffie’s story does chart a legitimate reclaiming of personal space and aliveness, it nevertheless also issues – perhaps predictably – in a devastating new trauma that forces her both to give up her material security with Raphaël and to renounce the man who saved her from herself, and who (as the narrator points out when Saffie and Andràs are in the early stages of their relationship) she will love forever (EA 109). The rebooting of the cycle of trauma on an individual level is mirrored in the text by the cyclical upheavals that chart the course of history. As the horrors of the conflict between France and Algeria grow ever more reminiscent of the atrocities of WWII, it becomes clear that history repeats itself: hatred, suffering and conflict return to afflict each new generation. In this pessimistic scenario, what can literature achieve?

*L'Empreinte de l'ange* verges on melodrama, and its overtly intrusive and playful narrator maintains an ironic (if compassionate) distance from her tale of human suffering, cruelty, folly and selfishness. The epigraphs that Huston chooses for the novel<sup>15</sup> point to

14 Although one section of *Nord perdu* is entitled “Le faux bilinguisme” (*Nord perdu* 53–65), the themes mentioned interweave throughout this short text (published in 1999), and further page references will not be given. It is worth noting that similar reflections pepper Huston’s contributions to the earlier *Lettres parisiennes*, co-authored with Leïla Sebbar and published in 1986. Both these texts offer fascinating insights into the autobiographical and affective dimensions of Huston’s relationship to English and to French (for a useful discussion of this subject, see Kinginger). Huston was born in 1953 in Calgary, Canada, and spoke only “college” French until she went to France as a student in 1973. She chose to stay on in France and made her debut as a writer in French in 1979. It was not until the early 1990s that she felt ready (in part because she sensed that she had “gained sufficient distance from [her] childhood by living so long in a foreign country” [Huston 2007]) to write a novel conceived and elaborated in English: this was *Plainsong* (published in 1993), a text which rather ironically achieved more success in its French version (*Cantique des plaines* [1993]), receiving the (Canadian) Governor General’s Award for Fiction in French in the year of its publication. For an interesting account of the place of English and French in Huston’s writing practice, and of the composition and reception of *Plainsong* and *Cantique des plaines*, and the lessons Huston drew from her experience at this time, see the interview Huston gave to *Victorian Writer* (a newsletter produced by the Victorian Writer’s Centre in Melbourne Australia) in 2007. Here, Huston explains that her difficulties in placing *Plainsong* and *Cantique des plaines*, and their eventual publication in two languages in the same year, led to a significant change in her writing practice: “I learned that translation could actually be a precious “quality check” and help me revise the manuscript. [...] self-translation gives you the chance to eliminate repetitions, sloppy syntax, unclear images.... [...] I’ve been alternating for the past fifteen years or so between French and English (my guideline being to write in the language spoken by my characters), and translating myself in both directions, not giving either publisher a manuscript until both versions are fully completed” (Huston 2007: 13). I am grateful to Nancy Huston for sending me a copy of this interview, and to the Victorian Writers’ Centre, for permission to quote from it. The website for the Victorian Writers’ Centre is [www.writers-centre.org](http://www.writers-centre.org); readers wishing to obtain a personal copy of the interview should send a request to [info@writers-centre.org](mailto:info@writers-centre.org)

15 There are two epigraphs, which I reproduce here:  
 “Comment comparer les souffrances?  
 La souffrance de chacun est la plus grande.  
 Mais qu’est-ce qui nous permet de continuer?  
 C’est le son, qui va et vient  
 comme l’eau parmi les pierres” (Göran Tunström).

the consoling power of art (specifically music) in the struggle to bear suffering and survive. Yet the character who articulates this view in the novel (Raphaël, in connection with his musical vocation [EA 192]) is arguably the least sympathetically drawn of Huston's three major players. No doubt this allows Huston to draw attention to the inadequacy of art in the face of suffering, even as she signals the necessity of transmitting what we know of human fallibility and the endless return of historical catastrophe.

Faibles nous sommes, et craintifs, et surtout las, las.  
Aveugles et muets nous sommes, les yeux bandés par nos propres mains, la gorge obstruée par nos cris.  
Nous ne savons guérir notre douleur, seulement la transmettre, la donner en héritage. Tiens chéri. (EA 196)

Here, the emphasis on the transmission of negative affect seems to leave little space for a positive interpretation of the narrator's words. Yet the novel is a moving testimony to the human capacity to survive in the face of cataclysm and defeat. For Silvan Tomkins, the expression of affect in words is crucial not only to our well-being, but to our humanity, which depends on our capacity for communication and exchange. Charles Spezzano, who argues that affect is the basic building block of psychoanalysis, also emphasises the relationship between affect and its expression in words. Spezzano argues that:

Affect is the original expression of human mind, and mind is always seeking to become a more elaborate expression than affect alone, seeking to keep itself from falling completely into the body in the form of a somatic symptom, and seeking to keep moving toward full psychological form. *The trajectory that affect follows toward this full psychological form is feeling elaborated first into a tendency toward presymbolic enactment, next into ideation (symbol, representation, wish, fantasy), then into verbal communication, and finally into an intersubjective relationship with other minds.* (Spezzano 66; original emphasis)

Central to this corpus of work is the understanding that language is intermediary between the unconscious and the body on the one hand and the conscious mind on the other, as well as the conviction that our most meaningful contact with others rests on the expression of affect. This is consistent with the perspective adopted by evolutionary scientists, who link human sociality and the development of language (allowing effective communication and the transmission of the lessons of experience) to the human potential to survive and develop.<sup>16</sup> It seems self-evident that if the legacy we transmit is to support the aspiration to full humanity, it must bear witness not only to the achievements and hopes of men and women, but also to what is least humane in humankind: the potential for violence and our persisting inhumanity to each other. As Winnicott argues, art relays the function of dreams, in so far as it permits the integration of difficult material that might otherwise be split off and denied: "Artistic creation gradually takes the place of dreams or supplements them, and is vitally important for the welfare of the individual and therefore for mankind" (Winnicott 1945: 152).

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"Allez, ne pleure pas, comme dit la musique" (Ingeborg Bachmann).

16 These points were well made by Steve Leonard, in the fifth programme in a BBC television series entitled *Journey of Life*. The fifth and final programme was entitled "Human Life," and was broadcast on BBC1 on 19 May 2005.

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