

METAPHORICAL EFFECTS IN THE WORKS OF  
ANNIE ERNAUX

By

Regina L. Peszat

M.A., University of Kansas, 2013

Submitted to the graduate degree program in French  
and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

---

Chairperson, Professor John T. Booker

Committee Members

---

Professor Van A. Kelly

---

Professor Caroline A. Jewers

---

Professor E. Bruce Hayes

---

Professor Dorice Williams Elliott

Date Defended: 16 May 2013

Copyright 2013  
Regina L. Peszat

The Dissertation Committee for Regina L. Peszat  
certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

METAPHORICAL EFFECTS IN THE WORKS OF  
ANNIE ERNAUX

---

Chairperson, John T. Booker

Date approved: 21 May 2013

## Abstract

While writing her fourth book, *La Place* (1984), Ernaux abandoned the genre of the novel and adopted a new prose style that was devoid of metaphor, and other hallmarks of literary writing in favor of a “flat” style. In this study, I show that Ernaux’s writing is not as “flat” as it first appears to be, and that the author has been maneuvering around her ambivalence towards metaphor—and its strong association with literary style—for a long time. An attentive reading, as I have illustrated, reveals new dimensions in her writing and opens up her works to fresh interpretations. An appreciation for the evolution of her style, and the artistic effects hidden below her *écriture plate*, requires, however, familiarity with her œuvre as a whole and active reflection on the reader’s part. This dissertation emphasizes Ernaux’s approaches to metaphor throughout a body of work that now spans four decades.

## Acknowledgments

For good reason, it is customary to recognize and thank, in writing, those individuals who have contributed their time, erudition, advice, and encouragement to the completion of major writing projects. Were I recklessly rich, I would hire a skytyper to write “THANK YOU!” in puffs of smoke above Fraser Hall to communicate the enthusiasm of my gratitude. I offer, instead, this modest and more permanent acknowledgment that many individuals helped me complete this endeavor.

To my advisor, Professor John T. Booker and the members of my dissertation committee: Professor Van Kelly, Professor Caroline Jewers, Professor Bruce Hayes, and Professor Dorice Elliott, I am very appreciative of the careful readings and thoughtful feedback that helped me to improve my ideas and writing throughout the many stages of this dissertation.

To my friends, colleagues and classmates, especially to Professor Kim Swanson, Gillian Weatherley, and Jeff Kendrick, thank you for sharing your pedagogical materials and expertise, and for being excellent colleagues.

I would like to thank the Office of Research & Graduate Studies at the University of Kansas and the Modern Language Association for travel grants which helped to defray some of the costs of attending conferences. Thank you also to Kim Glover, Pam Rooks, and Pam LeRow for helping with formatting issues and with the electronic submission of my manuscript.

Last but not least, to Steve and my family.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Table of Contents .....	v
Introduction .....	1
Ernaux’s <i>Place</i> in Literature .....	2
A Writer Ill at Ease With <i>Literature</i> .....	5
Hidden Metaphors: The <i>Iceberg</i> Effect .....	13
Organization and Overview of Chapters .....	18
Chapter 1: Metaphors of Dis-ease.....	23
The (Im)Posture of a Literary Style .....	24
Disfiguring a Metaphor .....	28
More “Entertainment” .....	34
Figures and Dysfunctional Thinking in <i>L’Occupation</i> .....	36
Idiots, Addicts, and Other Unsavory Identifications.....	42
Transfiguration and Transpersonalization .....	49
The Pathetic Fallacy From Another Perspective.....	52
Chapter 2: Culture and Metaphor in <i>Une femme</i> and <i>La Place</i> .....	56
Cultural Differences .....	56
A Couple of Apple Trees .....	60
The Language of Flowers .....	68
A Metaphorical Funeral.....	85
The Key to Dreams: Metaphor in Its Natural, Organic, and Nascent State.....	87
Identifying With Excrement .....	96
Chapter 3: Metaphorical Juxtapositions, Doubles, and Reversals .....	103
Ernaux’s Sensitivity to Visual Images .....	103
Through the Looking Glass .....	106
Lurid Tableaux .....	109
Optical Illusions and Perceptual Games .....	133
Transfiguration of Excrement .....	139

A Portrait of the Artists .....	143
Traumatic Associations .....	150
Symbolic Violence by Way of Comic Stooges.....	154
An Ideal Image of Literature.....	158
Conclusion.....	162
Notes .....	169
Works Cited.....	179

Page left blank on purpose

## Introduction

To anyone who is even casually familiar with Ernaux's works, a research project examining metaphors in her writing might seem like a dubious undertaking. After all, the author herself has claimed to avoid the use of metaphor and other conceits of literary style: "Je ne connaîtrai jamais la jubilation du style, l'enchantement de la métaphore" (*La Honte* 70). Siobhán McIlvanney has noted the "somewhat coercive nature of certain metanarrative remarks" (*The Return to Origins* 14) in Ernaux's writing that seem to serve the purpose of controlling readers' reactions to her texts, but these self-reflexive intrusions might also purposely misdirect readers' interpretations of her work. Ernaux would not be the first writer to make disingenuous claims of authorial intent. Furthermore, one might suspect that as someone who is also *agrégée ès lettres*, she would have some literary aspirations, in spite of her claims to the contrary. And, that her critical audience—trained in appreciating the artistic aspects of texts—might eventually discern these qualities. In this study I will examine the author's attitude towards metaphor, and the evolution of her approach to dealing with metaphor in her œuvre. In the later works, which are written in her signature flat style and therefore contain very little stylistic embellishment, I will show that the author nonetheless artfully arranges words and images that produce sophisticated metaphorical effects. Readers familiar with all of Ernaux's works are well-positioned to perceive the intertextual connections and patterns between them that create a fuller, multi-dimensional body of work. This analysis will also show the attention to detail that the author has taken in creating her own unique, and dare we say it, *literary* style.



## Ernaux's *Place* in Literature

Annie Ernaux holds a somewhat unique position in the world of letters. She began her career with Gallimard in 1974 with the publication of her first novel, *Les Armoires vides*, and has remained “sous la couverture blanche” of the prestigious publishing house since then, but has also published with NiL, Stock, and the relatively new publishing house of éditions des Busclats. Her partnership with what Pascal Quignard has purportedly referred to as “la banque centrale de la littérature” affords her the freedom to write what and how she wishes: “Moi ce que j’apprécie, au-dessus de tout, c’est la liberté, c’est une liberté que je mesure avec du recul que je constate tout le temps, que je compare par rapport à d’autres maisons d’édition” (Interview *Le cercle littéraire de la BnF*, 2 mars 2011). The partnership undoubtedly suits Gallimard as well since, as Simon Kemp points out, she is

an immensely popular writer with the reading public, her books invariably reaching the best-seller lists. *Passion simple* remained there for eight months; *La Place* has sold half a million copies, and has been translated into sixteen languages. For some of these readers, Ernaux’s auto-socio-biographies have a profound emotional importance. (20)

Lyn Thomas has devoted two entire chapters of her book, *Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer and Her Audience*, to the subject of this last point. In one of these chapters, she discusses the numerous letters Ernaux has received from readers thanking her for the “gift” of her writing. In reading these letters, Thomas noticed that readers often adopted the author’s style of expression: “Ernaux’s readers enter her linguistic universe, identifying and reusing key words and phrases” (134). Thomas herself reads (and judges) Ernaux through her own dual perspective of academic and “class immigrant.” In the concluding chapter of her book, Thomas explains that

she had similar experiences of having to navigate between two social universes and how reading Ernaux's works brought about a heightened self-awareness regarding her own transition to a superior social and intellectual position in society:

When my aunts and uncles visited me at Oxford, their accents, clothes and conversation sent me into agonies of embarrassment; my own masquerade was revealed as exactly that by this dreaded meeting of my two worlds. Like Ernaux, I also felt guilty that I saw my family through the (imagined) disdainful eyes of my fellow students, the children of civil servants and diplomats. Perhaps, in writing this book, I am at last able to look back, to return the critical gaze, just as Ernaux can return the stares of the onlookers in « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* ». (174)

Since the publication of Thomas's book in 1997, Ernaux's works have continued to attract critical attention from feminists, sociologists, and literary scholars alike. Fabrice Thumerel reports that scholarly studies on Ernaux have continued to mount: "[...] depuis quelques années, les travaux en langue française consacrés à Annie Ernaux se sont accrus de façon exponentielle [...]" (13).

Critical reactions over the last two decades to Ernaux's works have been somewhat divided between those of academics, who generally find her work to be of significance, and those of another group of critics, mostly from the journalistic press, who, especially since the publication of *Passion simple* (1991), have taken issue with her writing *and* her lifestyle. Thomas, having studied the seventeen dossiers at Gallimard of press cuttings related to reviews of Ernaux's books from 1974 to 1997, found that up to that point there were:

two dominant discourses in the journalistic reception of Ernaux's work [...]. The first is the attempt to disqualify Ernaux from the literary sphere, to argue that

although her writing may be moving, powerful or popular, it is not literature. The second dominant discourse is the tendency to focus on the writer as a person, rather than on the texts themselves. In the first of these discourses it is possible to see the most obvious expression of the gatekeeping role of literary criticism, its function in excluding certain texts and writers from the literary canon. (*Annie Ernaux: An Introduction* 147)

It is not just on the criterion of “style” that Ernaux seems to annoy these—mostly male—critics. Some seem to bristle as well at the frank representation of sexual subject matter from a woman’s perspective. In *Passion simple*, Ernaux reversed the subject-object hierarchy of sexual politics with her account of desire from a woman’s point of view that was narrated in a matter-of-fact tone devoid of sentimentality. Thomas goes on to point out that “[t]he term *impudeur* is strikingly recurrent in Ernaux criticism; this is significant, since it suggests both a fear of the personal and a set of codes of propriety which women, particularly, should adhere to” (150). More than a decade later, some critics continue to *chastise* Ernaux for writing about the “obscene” details of her personal life. Antoine Compagnon recently described *L’Usage de la photo* as a “livre impudique” (52).<sup>1</sup> Other scholars, however, continue to argue that Ernaux’s writing is of literary relevance. Michèle Bacholle-Bošković notes that Ernaux “s’impose comme innovatrice (d’aucuns diraient transgressive) tant dans le fond—la trahison sociale, le sexuel, l’avortement—que dans la forme—repoussant les limites de l’autobiographie [...]. Elle a suscité une effervescence critique aussi importante, fulgurante même, que soutenue” (10). To date, there are eleven monographs and three books of collected articles devoted entirely to Ernaux’s writing, and more than three hundred scholarly articles on her work.

### A Writer Ill at Ease With *Literature*

All of Annie Ernaux's works deal with intimate themes: coping with the devastating effects of fatal diseases, coming to terms with the shame associated with her social origins, making sense of complex family relationships, experiencing sexual desire, and dealing with the dilemma of an unwanted pregnancy and the trauma of the subsequent abortion. Yet, Ernaux herself disagrees with the assessment that her writing is "personal," or a form of exhibitionism. When the reader identifies with the experience that the narrating "je" is relating, she explains, her work ceases to be intimate and in fact creates a kind of public literary meeting place for shared, "shameful" experiences: "La première personne, lorsqu'on l'utilise dans un texte, devient celle du lecteur. [...] le "je" que j'emploie et les références à ma vie sont des matériaux d'analyse ressortissant à l'expérience plus ou moins commune" ("Vivre pour se raconter" 222). While some critics see the highly personal subject matter of her writing as reason to place—or marginalize—Ernaux's works under the rubric of "life writing" and "autofiction," Ernaux categorically rejects these classifications, noting in particular the incongruities of the usage of the term "autofiction," and its implied message that the presence of these intimate, 'feminine' themes in a work excludes it *de rigueur* from being considered as literature:

Je n'ai jamais entendu le mot "autofiction" à propos de Philip Roth, Philippe Sollers, Jean Rouaud, Emmanuel Carrère, Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, etc. [...] Tout se passe très subtilement comme si l'autofiction était principalement un genre féminin, avec un côté sentimentalo-trash, narcissique, façon détournée, inconsciente, d'assigner aux femmes leur domaine, leurs limites en littérature.

(Laurens et Ernaux)

From the beginning, Annie Ernaux's relationship to *Literature*, as one tends to think of it, and indeed as Ernaux thought of it as an adolescent, has been an uneasy one. In *Les Armoires vides* (1974), Denise Lesur, Ernaux's thinly disguised fictional double cum narrator, says that at the age of seventeen, "Je découvre la « vraie » littérature, celle des profs, celle que lisent les plus évoluées des copines, celle que Beaux-Arts<sup>2</sup> me passe. Sagan, Camus, Malraux, Sartre" (155). Her placing of "vraie" in quotation marks signals an ironic distance between the *lycéenne* and the college student, and highlights an evolving awareness of some of the subjectivity involved in assessing what "real" literature might be. This oppositional stance towards *Literature* has remained a constant in her writing in spite of the radical change she made to her prose style during the creative conception of *La Place*. Describing her adolescent self explicitly this time, she uses the same words and punctuation to express the same attitude: "Je lisais la « vraie » littérature, et je recopiais des phrases, des vers, qui, je croyais, exprimaient mon « âme », l'indicible de ma vie, comme « Le bonheur est un dieu qui marche les mains vides »... (Henri de Régnier)" (*La Place* 79-80).

These quotations from Ernaux's fictional and non-fictional selves show that she had started to suspect that there might be problems with "real" literature. Her perception of the divide between two distinct social realities began to sharpen while she herself was a student. Ernaux became increasingly conscious of the disconnect between her own first-hand perspective of the peasant and working classes, and their portrayal in works from the canon in literature courses at the *faculté des lettres* in Rouen, as Denise Lesur explained in *Les Armoires vides*: "Les autres, ceux qui ne sont pas dedans, Bornin à la fac, par exemple, ils en parlent à leur aise, le langage des simples, le merveilleux bon sens des gens du peuple, la naïveté. La vie simple, la sagesse paysanne, la philosophie du petit commerçant..." (117). As this remark shows, Ernaux's

unquestioning acceptance of who and what was *literary* had begun to give way to an innate understanding that most works of literature were biased in their portrayals of *le peuple*.

Historically, the representation of the dominated peasant and working classes in the traditional novel has only served to reinforce their marginalized position in society. In *The Art of Fiction*, David Lodge makes an argument with regard to the English industrial novel that can be applied to the nineteenth-century French novel as well:

One of the difficulties of writing truthfully about working-class life in fiction, especially evident in the well-intentioned industrial novels of the Victorian age, is that the novel itself is an inherently middle-class form, and its narrative voice is apt to betray this bias in every turn of phrase. It is hard for the novel not to seem condescending to the experience it depicts in the contrast between the polite, well-formed, educated discourse of the narrator and the rough colloquial, dialect speech of the characters. (106)

Indeed, a passage from *Madame Bovary* illustrates the divide between the linguistic universes of the lower and upper classes in the contrast between Flaubert's *high*, literary style and the plain, flat conversational style of Charles Bovary. The Flaubertian narrator, describing the dull-witted Charles, entertains and establishes a relationship of complicity with the reader, whom Flaubert could rely upon to feel socially superior to his provincial comic stooge, Charles: "La conversation de Charles était plate comme un trottoir de rue, et les idées de tout le monde y défilaient dans leur costume ordinaire, sans exciter d'émotion, de rire ou de rêverie" (101). Perhaps in reaction to this and other "comical" portrayals of people of her class and region, Ernaux eventually rejected this sort of narrative complicity with an upper-class (or aspiring upper-class) reader. Furthermore, the writer does not use clever arrangements of words to create

original, imaginative, “one-shot” metaphors at the sentence-level like Flaubert’s flourish of words describing Charles. Indeed, Ernaux’s *écriture plate* has more in common with the plain speech of Charles Bovary than it does with Flaubert’s prose. But even if Ernaux eschews traditional *literary* metaphors of the aforementioned sort, she does frequently use similes in particular as a means of creating intriguing and provocative comparisons throughout her œuvre. Furthermore, critics *have* noted the presence of metaphor in several of Ernaux’s works, but these metaphors tend to operate at a level above the structure of sentences, as we shall see in due course.

The clash of two linguistic universes has always been a source of fascination—and humiliation—for Ernaux. In *Les Armoires vides*, Denise Lesur struggles with her desire to transport herself, via the seemingly magical powers of language, to a world that is “plus beau, plus pur, plus riche” (77) than her own. And in *La Place* Ernaux gives a cogent example of how reading Proust would pass through a sort of second filter for someone like herself who could at once laugh at the comic characterization of Proust’s peasant, Françoise, but who also knew from first-hand experience what it was like to speak like her:

Le patois avait été l’unique langue de mes grands-parents. Il se trouve des gens pour apprécier le « pittoresque du patois » et du français populaire. Ainsi Proust relevait avec ravissement les incorrections et les mots anciens de Françoise. Seule l’esthétique lui importe parce que Françoise est sa bonne et non sa mère. Que lui-même n’a jamais senti ces tournures lui venir aux lèvres spontanément. (62)

Like Françoise, Denise Lesur spoke this “funny” French, of which her teachers made her painfully aware by their remarks on report cards: “Expression orale maladroite en dépit de bons

résultats, elles écrivaient, les maîtresses sur le carnet de notes... Je porte en moi deux langages [...]” (*Les Armoires vides* 77).

Because Ernaux effectively grew up as a member of both of these distinctly different social classes, she was, and continues to be, more sensitive to the gap in social realities between the lower and upper middle classes. On the one hand, her parents’ speech and manners were marked by their peasant and factory-worker origins in spite of her mother’s efforts to constantly refine herself and her parents’ modest social advancement to the status of *petits bourgeois*. On the other hand, Ernaux attended a private Catholic school where she spent her time—in and out of school—socializing with classmates who themselves were the daughters of the upper-middle class. She did not work because her parents wanted their only child to devote herself to her studies. Through a slow process of *embourgeoisement*, Ernaux began to identify with and imitate the upper-middle class, which required a rejection, albeit tacit, of her parents’ tastes and values. Having developed socially and intellectually in the liminal space between both worlds, in her formative years, Ernaux had intimate knowledge of both social universes, which endowed her with a dual perspective of the world and its representation in literature.

Ernaux’s divided class identity seems to have made her particularly receptive to the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu who was also from an agrarian background and who rose to prominence in the world of ideas through education. Reading his writings in the seventies, Ernaux found that his scientific, sociological research reawakened and made sense of her and her family’s experiences—many of which were humiliating—of being members of a dominated group. Bourdieu’s findings unveiled the hidden mechanisms of social domination and economic power. The sociologist had an effect on her writing as well. In a posthumous tribute to him in a piece entitled “Chagrin,” published in *Le Monde*, she said this about his use of language: “substituer,



par exemple, à « milieux, gens modestes » et « couches supérieures » les termes de « dominés » et « dominants », c'est changer tout: à la place d'une expression euphémisée et quasi naturelle des hiérarchies, c'est faire apparaître la réalité objective des rapports sociaux" (*Écrire la vie* 913).<sup>3</sup> Ernaux followed Bourdieu's example and used language to her advantage by creating a sort of unliterary style that she first began using with *La Place* (1984), and which is now considered her signature style.<sup>4</sup> As Valérie Baisnée explains:

Writing about their lives, she is aware of speaking from a dominant position about a dominated class. That is why she wishes to steer away from the two discourses commonly used to portray the working-class, that is, the intellectual, because it could lead to an alienating superiority over its object of study, and the pathetic discourse, because it is a purely emotional discourse, aimed at moving the reader rather than understanding its object. (183)

Ernaux has made pointed comments about her uneasy relationship with traditional literature in most, if not all, of her works. In *La Honte* (1997), she addresses specifically her outsider status with regard to the seemingly foreign (from the perspective of her own linguistic heritage) register of language used in literary texts, as opposed to the real, "material" language of her family and social class:

Et tant d'adjectifs dont les romans féminins raffolaient, un air *altier*, un ton *maussade*, *rogue*, *hautain*, *sarcastique*, *acerbe*, dont je ne soupçonnais pas qu'aucune personne réelle, de mon entourage, puisse être qualifiée. Il me semble que je cherche toujours à écrire dans cette langue matérielle d'alors et non avec des mots et une syntaxe qui ne me sont pas venus, qui ne me seraient pas venus

alors. Je ne connaîtrai jamais l'enchantement des métaphores, la jubilation du style. (73-74)<sup>5</sup>

But Ernaux's definitive break with traditional literary modes of writing did not take place until later in her adult life when, through marriage and education, she herself had moved up the social ladder to become a member of the upper middle-class. She had been attempting to write a novel about her father after his death, but had abandoned the project after having written a hundred pages: "[J]'ai commencé un roman dont il était le personnage principal. Sensation de dégoût au milieu du récit. [...] Je rassemblerai les paroles, les gestes, les goûts de mon père, les faits marquants de sa vie, tous les signes objectifs d'une existence que j'ai aussi partagée" (*La Place* 23-24).<sup>6</sup>

The sensation of having written something that disgusted her came from the realization that what she had been trying to create was not an accurate portrayal, but a sort of perversion of the truth. The aborted attempt to write a novel about her father ultimately motivated her to start a writing journal where she could reflect on the difficulties she faced in her writing. This journal ultimately led her to develop her *écriture plate* and new genres, or "forms" as she prefers to call them. This writing journal was published in 2011 under the title, *L'Atelier noir*.

Ernaux was eventually able to articulate for herself the reasons why she had to abandon the novel's stylized aesthetic in order to create new "forms" that would convey more faithfully the reality of peasant and working-class experiences. Her initial efforts to give her father a literary life may have felt like a failure at first, but this false start of a novel, and her eventual rejection of the genre's narrative techniques, motivated her to develop a new prose style that effectively resolved the theoretical problems of trying to write about her parents in the literary mode of the upper-middle class. As Thomas says, "Ernaux does not merely acquire middle-class

culture and language, she becomes an expert in the field, able to create her own particular linguistic and literary register” (*Annie Ernaux: An Introduction* 172). The fault line that already existed between Ernaux and *Literature* in her first novel, *Les Armoires vides*, did not undergo a seismic shift until she discovered this new way of writing her father’s story in *La Place*:

“Aucune poésie du souvenir, pas de dérision jubilante. L’écriture plate me vient naturellement, celle-là même que j’utilisais en écrivant autrefois à mes parents pour leur dire les nouvelles essentielles” (23-24). As Thomas notes, the new prose style that appears in *La Place* can be characterized as “marked by the construction of an autobiographical pact with the reader, by the plainness of the writing, the avoidance of metaphor and by economy of style” (“Annie Ernaux, Class, Gender, and Whiteness” 161). Discovering—or inventing—a narrative register to portray the peasant and working-class realities of her family in *La Place* dealt with the problem of mimesis that Lodge, and others, have noted in the genre of the novel.

First attempts to express her literary voice show some of the qualities of a more traditional prose style. Her first two published works, *Les Armoires vides* and *Ce qu’ils disent ou rien*, contain more frequent attempts to use stylistic embellishment. But the tone of these first novels is also characterized by a frenetic, emotional, angry expression that imbues them with what Jean Pierrot calls “un style torrentiel” (111). Ernaux’s frequent use of and references to vulgarisms further place her first novel outside of a “high” style. Pierrot has pointed out that Ernaux herself uses the word “dérisoire” (*La Place* 24) to refer to the style of her first novel: “[...] en particulier dans le premier livre, une certaine ardeur vengeresse dans l’ironie et la dénonciation, cela même sans doute à quoi fait allusion cette « dérision jubilante » [...]” (110). Ernaux in an interview with Dominique Rabaté again describes her earlier style as an “écriture dérisoire” (98). Ernaux found another approach to writing once she realized that the novel, in its

traditional form and linguistic register, was an inadequate model for accurately representing her father's life and her own cultural heritage. Pierrot's observation, and her own self-assessment, would imply that she was also distancing herself from her own past literary offenses. Indeed, in the paratext to *La Place*, a quote by Jean Genet introduces her new approach to writing as an effort to expiate the unflattering portrayals (complicit with an upper middle-class world-view) of her parents in her first two novels: "Je hasarde une explication : écrire, c'est le dernier recours quand on a trahi."

Ernaux's adoption of a flat, factual tone for *La Place* was not only a means of rejecting the prose style and certain class attitudes expressed in her first novels, it served another purpose as well: it was also a tacit way of expressing her opposition to traditional literary style, a discourse created and tightly maintained by the dominant classes—one of its trademarks being the use of metaphor for the purposes of stylistic embellishment and for creating higher levels of meaning. Bethany Ladimer points out that Ernaux has spent her career "searching for techniques that free her from the codified forms and rituals of high culture which belong in her view to those who have historically had material means of access to them" (56). To this I would add that Ernaux has developed writerly techniques that create a unique code, and aesthetic effects that may not be readily appreciated through conventional ways of reading a text.

### **Hidden Metaphors: The *Iceberg* Effect**

My own critical interest in Ernaux was inspired in part, initially, after reading an article by Warren Motte, "Annie Ernaux's Understatement," in which he notes a passage in *La Place* which at first appears to be strictly denotative, but that also has a connotative meaning that reveals another layer of signification. Motte explains how, in this particular instance, Ernaux means what she says, but also means more than she says:

Ernaux describes the scene of her father's death objectively, with a measured, studied neutrality. Within that description, she carefully emblazons the very rhetorical technique that she will rely on throughout the text: 'There was an air of simplicity about the whole scene, no crying or shouting, just my mother's red eyes and the frozen rictus on her face. Our movements were calm and orderly, accompanied by simple words' (14/4). In addition to the role in the narrative economy of her father's story, the passage demands to be read as a commentary on the manner in which that story is *told*: Ernaux's narration too will unfold very simply, with simple words. This simplicity is at the crux of a broader aesthetic that animates *La Place*, that of minimalism. Like Frank Stella's "Black" paintings and like Arvo Pärt's *St. John Passion*, *La Place* relies on formal simplicity for effect. Like those artists, Ernaux intends to exploit minimalism's apparently paradoxical logic, the idea that extreme poverty of expression can in fact enrich the aesthetic experience. (56)

As I continued to read Ernaux's works, I noticed other instances of passages, besides the one pointed out by Motte, whose meanings transcended their literal expression. I started to discover convincing evidence that Ernaux's *flat* style was not quite so unidimensional as it might appear to be upon one's initial encounter with her works. I began to index passages in which I could show similar instances of multiple meanings arising from her seemingly prosaic narratives.

In addition to the kinds of passages (first brought to my attention by Motte's article) which allowed for dual interpretations, I had also begun to correlate textual fragments in her works that, in my mind, formed "image pairs." By this I mean that details in certain descriptions from her works shared multiple pictorial similarities. When I read *L'Usage de la photo* and

encountered an instance in which Ernaux herself makes an explicit correlation of images, I felt sure that my earlier hypotheses about connected images had been validated with concrete, textual evidence from the author herself, as I will discuss further in Chapter 3.

This impression with which Ernaux's books left me—of understanding more than what the surface of her sentences denoted—was similar to the impression I had after reading Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. David Lodge—invoking Hemingway's own metaphor of the iceberg—describes that writer's technique in terms that resonated with my own experiences of reading Hemingway—and Ernaux:

[Hemingway] stays scrupulously on the surface, describing behaviour, places, persons in deceptively simple, apparently denotative language, and setting down speech with what seems like colloquial authenticity. In fact this language, in both narrative and dialogue, is full of patterns of repetition, lexical and phonological, through which simple synecdoches and metonymies generate metaphorical associations without ever being overtly metaphorical. The apparently objective representation of the world in this fiction is like the tip of an iceberg, beneath which there is a huge mass of invisible subjective emotion which the reader gradually apprehends. (*Consciousness and the Novel* 70)

The more I read Ernaux's works, especially those published after *La Place*, the more I continued to perceive a Hemingwayesque “iceberg” lurking below the surface of her ostensibly flat prose that warranted exploring and explaining.<sup>7</sup> A deeper level of signification seemed to come, in part, from associations that arose from considering passages that shared certain pictorial similarities and that seemed to constitute a pair of images that could be construed to inform the reading of each passage. Some of these pairings are present within the same work, but many of

these word-images have counterparts in other texts. When discovered and contemplated side by side, as with a comparison or a simile, these image pairs create metaphorical associations in a reader's imagination that bring out deeper meanings. Discerning these inter- and intratextual patterns throughout Ernaux's texts can reveal a sort of hidden watermark of metaphoricity in her œuvre. But in order to perceive the effect of metaphor in Ernaux's writing, the reader must actively participate by correlating and comparing relevant images, scenes, and word-pictures from different texts, which, like pieces of a puzzle, when placed together provide a fuller picture and deeper understanding of the text at hand, as well as the author's larger body of work.

The first of two such images I myself associated as a pairing (which I will treat in detail in Chapter 3) were the scene of violence between her parents described in *La Honte* and that of a description of her father dressing a chicken in *La Place*. This initial association, in my mind, of these two scenes of violence created a sensitivity to other possible pairings whose associations could produce new interpretations of her works, as well as illustrate a unique aspect of Ernaux's writing. It is perhaps ironic that these two passages were the first instances that I noticed because, as I myself concede, the pictorial similarities in this case are less convincingly correlated than other images I connected later, after this initial "discovery." In Chapter 3, I will discuss in detail how Ernaux encourages this sort of interpretation of her work when she herself explicitly links the images of Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* and the "absent photograph" in *L'Usage de la photo*: "Je m'aperçois que [la photo] est, d'une certaine façon, le pendant du tableau de Courbet, *L'Origine du monde*" (*L'Usage de la photo* 15-16).

There is nothing novel about analyzing an author's use of metaphor and simile; it is an approach that many researchers turn to in order to better understand the creative vision and world view of poets and writers alike. I have based my approach to discussing metaphor in Ernaux's

works, in part, on the manner in which art historians and film critics use the term when pointing out connotative meanings created through visual images; I do not mean “images” strictly as pictorial representation, but as any combination of sensory experiences that creates an impression in the mind. Since many of the metaphorical effects discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 come from pictures that a reader can only “see” in the mind’s eye, I will use the terms “metaphor” and “metaphorical” in the general sense as they are often used when discussing these effects in the visual arts. The exception to my use of these terms will be in cases where Ernaux’s word-images lend themselves to and/or can be decoded through the use of more precise technical terms to explain the mechanics of the metaphorical effects. The other basis of my approach comes from I. A. Richards’s contributions to the study of metaphor, paraphrased and quoted here by Mark Johnson: “Metaphor is not a matter of language alone, nor is it a trope at the level of individual words. Instead, it is an omnipresent principle of thought: ‘Thought is metaphoric, and proceeds by comparison [...]’” (18). Johnson goes on to explain that “[b]ecause philosophers, linguists, and rhetoricians have missed these two points, they have taken metaphor as a cosmetic rhetorical device or a stylistic ornament” (18). I do not mean to imply that the instances of metaphorical effects in Ernaux’s writing that I will discuss in Chapters 2 and 3 are due to the inherent metaphoricity of language, but are purposeful manipulations; the author uses techniques of omission and of camouflage to evade immediate detection of the literary quality of her writing. Furthermore, I will show that the relative absence of explicit metaphors at the sentence-level, and a pronounced tendency to reject literary style in general in her later works, does not mean that her prose lacks style, but that it has, instead, its own (sometimes hidden) stylistic effects of literary ornamentation.



That there should be underlying metaphorical effects to be appreciated in Ernaux's writing is not entirely surprising. Ernaux has made it clear that she agonizes for long periods of time to find the right words and the best structure. This avowal might seem paradoxical given the fragmentary, elliptical, and paratactic structure of all of her texts, which can create an impression that they are, with varying degrees, incomplete and haphazardly composed. In spite of having abandoned the artifice of fiction with the publication of *La Place*, after having written three novels, she concedes that she still makes use of the narrative techniques of the novel: "Dans son sens traditionnel d'imagination de faits, de personnages, la fiction effectivement n'a pas de place dans ce que j'écris, mais, dans son autre sens de construction, d'agencement formel, cette place est immense. Mon journal d'écriture, *L'Atelier noir*, en témoigne avec douleur" ("Il s'agit toujours ..." 91).<sup>8</sup> The legerdemain that Ernaux seems to have pulled off, in her later texts most especially, is a creative approach for introducing *effects* of metaphor into her writing, while avoiding conventional aesthetic techniques of literary style. What emerges are metaphors that stem from real events experienced by the author herself, not fabricated in her imagination. Ernauxian metaphors can often be like the unexplained, primal images of dreams, and the visual metaphors found in non-verbal art forms—in spite of the fact that she uses words to create them. In the following chapters, my goal is quite simply to show that Ernaux's writing is not as unimaginative as it first appears to be, and that Ernaux has been maneuvering around her ambivalence to metaphor—and its strong association with literary style—for a long time.

## **Organization and Overview of Chapters**

I have organized my analysis to move from the explicit presence of metaphor and other kinds of figurative language that occur at the sentence-level (Chapter 1) towards a marked tendency to use more implicit metaphorical effects at an intra- and intertextual level in Chapters

2 and 3. One can see a self-conscious effort in Ernaux's first work, *Les Armoires vides* (1974) to imitate a more literary style, but at the same time she expresses a rejection of metaphor and its primarily aesthetic function in literature as a means of transforming *la vie en beau*. From behind the narrative mask of Denise Lesur, she makes it clear that an attempt to turn the "ugly" facts of undergoing a dangerous and illegal abortion into literature by means of lyrical language is impossible. In spite of the relative absence of creative, novel metaphors at the sentence level in the later works of her œuvre, Ernaux does, however, employ similes quite often. Even after her adoption of an *écriture plate* in 1984, Ernaux has continued to use interesting, creative similes, as we shall see. Much has been written in theoretical studies about the differences between metaphor and simile, and there are important critical distinctions to be made between them, but the latter occurs more frequently in her works. The simile is always explicit, and its expression generally causes less of a shock than that of the elliptical comparison of metaphor. One of the major patterns that emerges from the analysis of similes and metaphors in Ernaux's works, as we shall see in this first chapter, is that both of these tropes are almost always a means of expressing mental, physical, and/or emotional pain, thus the title for this chapter, "Metaphors of Dis-ease." The analysis of Ernaux's use of figurative language in Chapter 1 will also serve to make a comparison between her early use of figurative language and that of a different kind of "camouflaged" figuration to be discovered in her later works. Ernaux's adoption of a new prose style also produces a sea change in her use of figuration. For those who know her works well, her new style can produce inter- and intratextual metaphorical effects. The production of metaphorical depth in her later works tends to create positive images and humorous poetic transpositions unlike the metaphors that occurred at the sentence-level in her earlier works.

In Chapter 2, “Culture and Metaphor,” I propose that Ernaux uses techniques in her writing with the intent of producing metaphorical effects that privilege the culture of her origins. The word-illustration of the photograph of her parents on their wedding day in *Une femme* contains several metaphorical (and metonymical) associations that are catalyzed by the couple-like qualities of a pair of apple trees in the background. The theme of horticulture quietly plays throughout the two parent-texts of *La Place* and *Une femme*. Moreover, flowers play a particularly symbolic role in *Une femme* and in fact serve as an organizing structure for the work as a whole. Their presence throughout the tribute creates nothing less than an Ernauxian *language of flowers* with its own secret codes.

On a decidedly less floral note, Ernaux inserts references to excrement in several works for symbolic import. The comparison stems naturally from the living conditions of those in the lower classes and their proximity to human waste due to their social and economic status. As Lyn Thomas points out, “Ernaux is always political, always making connections between material conditions and inequalities and the cultural sphere” (“Annie Ernaux, Class, Gender and Whiteness 161). In *La Place*, Ernaux recalls that because of the inadequate infrastructure of the factory town, *La Vallée*, raw sewage ran directly into the river behind their home. Feces and urine are also frequently mentioned in « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » and *Une femme*. In this chapter, as well as in Chapter 3, then, excrement is often the organic material that Ernaux exploits to create surprising reversals and poetic twists.

Chapter 3, “Metaphorical Juxtapositions,” uncovers the presence of several types of metaphorical pairings which have more in common with metaphor as we think of it in the non-verbal arts. Throughout this chapter I will point out a pattern of paired images within the collected works of Ernaux that are analogous to the game-like effects of gestalt-images and

optical illusions. From this perspective, Ernaux's writing shares some of the characteristics of the "littérature potentielle" of Oulipo. Not only do these passages pose a challenge to readers, albeit unstated, they also impart deeper significations when the reader perceives them. Such "visual" metaphors are not readily apparent to the reading eye because they are conveyed, not through words, but through images that the reader must 'see' in the mind's eye. Just as someone who does not possess the innate or acquired ability to see and appreciate the layered levels of meaning in the visual clues in painting or in film, the "picture metaphors" in Ernaux's writing may also go unnoticed by readers who only perceive the denotative surface of her writing. The discovery of these types of metaphors in Ernaux's texts challenges the notion that her prose style, as she herself claims, lacks artistic qualities, and proves that her writing, through the author's purposeful manipulations, can also be very *imagée*.

In my discussion of *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure*, I will show that an architectural framework girds the two journals together in part by a pair of images, but also through the repetition of the color *red* throughout. Ernaux appropriates several images from the public sphere in the form of graffiti, frescos, and scenes of people interacting. She presents these images like found objects, or ready-mades, and through a pattern of paired associations of images, she ultimately trumps—and tropes—their meanings in order to create new ones.

The chapter section on *L'Usage de la photo* discusses a key to decoding a word-photograph through a comparison with Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*. This controversial, nineteenth-century painting was at first hidden behind one of the painter's own landscapes. At a later date it was concealed behind another landscape, painted by André Masson, that hinted at the image below. This footnote in art history provides a clue to understanding the

relevance of the “absent photo” in *L’Usage de la photo*, as I will discuss in detail in the final chapter.

In all of her works, Ernaux shares the candid details of her life, and the painful experiences of a socially dominated class, in a writing style that, on the surface, is accessible to a non-academic readership. But over the years, with the evolution of her writing, the author has developed a deceptively nuanced approach to the construction of her works that is full of artistic manipulations that create metaphorical effects. In this way, she has created a prose style *à double usage* that might also appeal to a second, literary, readership. Part of the shift in her writing style comes from her own struggle—as the narration of *Les Armoires vides* painfully illustrates—with the problems that metaphor and lyrical language pose to a writer who comes from “an unliterary” social class.

## Chapter 1: Metaphors of Dis-ease

In this first chapter, I will discuss Ernaux's use of metaphorical language in two works: her first published work, *Les Armoires vides* (1974), and *L'Occupation* (2002), published nearly three decades later. The presence of figurative language in these works almost always portrays ugly, negative images, mental anguish, or dysfunctional thinking. In *L'Occupation*, Ernaux provocatively correlates the creative process of writing a novel with the troubled thinking of petty thieves and perverts. Ernaux has made assertions throughout her œuvre with regard to metaphor and other kinds of stylistic embellishment which I will point out in this chapter, as well as in others. The author's tendency to comment self-reflexively on her writing will help to explain why this is a subject that is always connected to feelings of discomfort, discord, and "dis-ease." Metaphor, and its close association with traditional literary style, has always been, and will always be, a problematic issue for Ernaux; her efforts to represent her world view and her life experiences always seem to clash with conventional literary style. While her first three works contain many hallmarks of a writerly style, this was no doubt in imitation of the canon of literature she studied, and admired, as a student of letters. In a recent interview with Karin Schwerdtner, Ernaux said: "J'ai vécu dans les modèles littéraires, dans leur admiration—que ce soit Proust ou, plus tard, Nizan—mais aussi, et en même temps, dans la certitude que j'ai autre chose à dire qu'eux et qu'il me faut prendre le risque de dire autre chose" ("Le 'dur désire d'écrire'" 763). Explicit metaphors, similes, and other figures of style occur in Ernaux's writing more frequently in her first three works, all novels, but even when they occur explicitly, at the sentence-level, they almost always convey painful and/or negative images. This can be true of her later works as well, when she does occasionally use figurative language. Examples of this

tendency are especially noticeable in *Les Armoires vides* where Ernaux writes in a more literary style, and therefore uses rhetorical figures more frequently. In my exposition of Ernaux's treatment of metaphor and figurative language in *Les Armoires vides* and *L'Occupation*, I will show that Ernaux has never been at ease with literary figuration. In *Les Armoires vides* she uses a metaphor that will set the tone for her attitude towards metaphor and literary figuration for the rest of her career. And, while *L'Occupation* is about extreme jealousy, it is also about the author's need for ridding her mind of the the multiple kinds of figures and figurative language that haunt her.

### **The (Im)Posture of a Literary Style**

Ernaux's autobiographical novel, *Les Armoires vides* (1974), tells the story of the childhood of Denise Lesur, the author's fictionalized self. The recounting of Denise's story takes place from within a small university dorm room after undergoing an illegal, and therefore dangerous, abortion. Fearing that she could die as a result of the procedure—"Je ne voudrais pas crever" (182)—she narrates her story nonstop, as if her life is rapidly passing before her eyes. Long sentences composed of multiple clauses characteristic of stream of consciousness writing give the impression that the narrator's childhood memories, and the musings they inspire, are coursing through her psyche at a frenetic pace. All of this creates an effect of narrative speed and gives the impression that her story is an unstoppable outpouring of emotion of which Denise is unburdening herself. This effect is achieved in part through a narration that is not interrupted with chapter divisions. As a point of contrast, the formatting of *Les Armoires vides* is very different from her later works in which Ernaux frequently fragments her prose with "*blancs*" of varying length—or "respirations" as she calls them (*L'Écriture comme un couteau* 128).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, she frequently dispenses with quotation marks that would explicitly identify spoken

speech. Lyn Thomas characterizes the style of Ernaux's writing in this first novel as "colloquial, crude, and rich in sensuous description and metaphor" ("Annie Ernaux, Class, Gender, and Whiteness" 160). But in spite of the sometimes vulgar language, casual writing, and slang that convey Denise Lesur's oral expression, the style of Ernaux's first published work *is* closer to a higher literary style than that of her later books. Interestingly, it is through this hybrid style, mixing high and low, as Thomas goes on to point out, that "[b]oth the working-class culture of origin and the acquired middle-class culture are repudiated" ("Annie Ernaux, Class, Gender, and Whiteness" 160).<sup>10</sup>

One aspect of *Les Armoires vides* that contributes to its quasi literary style comes in part from Ernaux's occasional use of synaesthesia. Its presence in her writing calls to mind the literary conceits of poets and writers such as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Proust, and Ponge. The confusion of senses in authentic synaesthetic associations (which are unique to individuals who experience synaesthesia) make the network of sensory connections difficult, if not impossible, to follow. In an instance of this phenomenon in Ernaux's writing, Denise Lesur correlates the word "school" with the color "orange." One pathway that might explain the association is that the color "orange" is a mixture of primary colors, and the response that the word "school" provokes comes from the combination of two distinct and contradictory emotions: trepidation and anticipation:

Il y a eu l'école libre.<sup>11</sup> L'école, mot orange, ça ressemble à l'église, mon père en parle de la même manière. Assis à califourchon sur une chaise du café, je veux le faire danser *Viens poupoule* parce qu'il ne connaît que ça. Il s'arrête d'un seul coup, très sérieux. « Dis, tu vas bientôt à l'école ! Faudra bien te tenir, bien causer. L'école libre, tu sais ! » Il a peur que je n'apprenne rien, que je ne sache



pas... « Tu te feras punir ! » Je n'ai peur de rien. J'avais tout ce qu'il fallait, un cartable de cuir, c'est les meilleurs [...]. (50)

Whether Ernaux uses synesthesia as a rhetorical figure or as an association stemming from her own personal experiences and memories is less important here than the fact that these types of associations are present in her earlier prose style, but not (with one exception) in that of her later works.

Another instance involving synaesthesia in *Les Armoires vides* occurs when Denise associates color, words, and another associative visual image. The synaesthetic vision takes place while the young Denise Lesur is in church at confession; the priest asks her if she has committed the sin of pride. The question conjures up a string of sensory images that culminates in the hallucinatory perception of the word “pride” that is at once the word itself, floating like a black ribbon, as well as the ribbon-like black tresses of her friend’s hair: “Avez-vous été orgueilleuse ? Combien de fois ?<sup>12</sup> Je vois la cour de l'école, les tilleuls, la boutique fraîche à l'odeur de sel gris, les tresses noires de Monette. Comme un ruban lisse où voltige le mot orgueilleux,<sup>13</sup> plein de soleil” (64). This is an example of how, for some individuals, synaesthesia manifests itself in the mixed associations of words, colors, and physical traits of the human body. It is not clear if Ernaux experiences synaesthesia, she has never been asked about it, nor spoken of it in interviews, but the presence of these mixed sensory associations in *Les Armoires vides* does add literary flourish to this first published work.

While the style of *Les Armoires vides* is, as Thomas states, “rich in sensuous description and metaphor,” the young student of letters recounting this story remarks at the beginning of the narration that she finds herself in a situation for which there are no literary equivalents. Not being able to find a book that she could read in order to better understand how to cope with an

unwanted pregnancy and the subsequent abortion further compounds her anxieties. Similar narratives might help to enlighten her on what to do in such situations. Denise reflects on this point—with ironic flippancy—as she suffers through the final stages of the aborted pregnancy:

Travailler un auteur du programme peut-être, Victor Hugo ou Péguy. Quel écœurement. Il n’y a rien pour moi là-dedans sur ma situation, pas un passage pour décrire ce que je sens maintenant, m’aider à passer mes sales moments. Il y a bien des prières pour toutes les occasions, les naissances, les mariages, l’agonie, on devrait trouver des morceaux choisis sur tout, sur une fille de vingt ans qui est allée chez la faiseuse d’anges, qui en sort, ce qu’elle pense en marchant, en se jetant sur son lit. Je lirais et je relirais. Les bouquins sont muets là-dessus. (12-13)<sup>14</sup>

Nor can she herself seriously imagine telling this story in a literary mode. She mockingly proposes the transformation of the abortionist’s instrument into something beautiful through the magic of language: “Une belle description de sonde, une transfiguration de la sonde...” (13). The rendering of her story in a poetic register has a farfetched ring to it.

Denise, with her knowledge of literature, is quite conscious of the disconnect between the literary register of bourgeois novels, and the crude “distasteful” language that relates the facts of her own story. She points out that she has had to silence herself her entire life with regard to *any* story related to her family and their home. This prescript of self-censorship is a recurring complaint in *Les Armoires vides*. In school, she is unable to faithfully follow her teachers’ composition assignments to recount some delightful, *spirituel* anecdote about her family: “Je ne parle jamais de mes parents, de ma maison. « Faites le récit de votre plus beau jour de vacances, décrivez votre cuisine, un oncle original. » [...] Pas racontable” (100). Through the clash of these two

realities, Denise *learns* that she is from another—inferior and distasteful—social universe, distinct from that of her classmates, and that her teachers would be highly offended by the “scandalous” stories she might relate about the customers and scenes she witnesses in her parents’ café-bar: “des trucs inracontables, à faire s’évanouir les profs” (103). In other works by Ernaux, it is eventually revealed that there were no family vacations, one parent or the other always had to keep the business open. In *La Honte*, Ernaux recounts a bus-trip she took with her father that was filled with a painful series of situations in which they were faced with their inferior position in the hierarchy of French society. As for her family’s kitchen, it was a tiny space situated between the café and grocery store through which customers often trespassed in order to pass quickly between the café and *épicerie*. And in *La Honte*, Ernaux’s “oncle original” is sent to jail after a family argument turns violent. Indeed, these are not stories that one can tell—except, perhaps, in a book.

### **Disfiguring a Metaphor**

After stating the impossibility of beautifully transforming the abortionist’s equipment, and her situation in general, Denise illustrates how a beautiful metaphor goes awry. The technique of her narration is not immediately evident. Although Denise’s remark about “une belle transfiguration de la sonde” seems facetious, just one page after the ironic comment she invokes a picturesque metaphor to describe the abortion, something that one does not see in *literature*. She describes the spasms of the miscarriage taking place as an interior display of fireworks: “Un élancement, le premier zigzague, éclate en points mous. *Un beau feu d’artifice à l’intérieur*, avec des tas de couleurs somptueuses sans doute” (14; italics mine). The abortion is figured in terms of an unorthodox, “inappropriate” juxtaposition of images. The shock effect that this catachresis creates is further intensified by the adjective “sumptuous” to describe the colors

of the miscarriage. The fact that fireworks are generally considered to be beautiful and are associated with celebrations creates a discordant clash of tones. The comparison is not only purposely incongruous, but intentionally provocative as well.

What is more, the metaphor's vehicle ("Un beau feu d'artifice à l'intérieur") seems to be more "appropriately" connected to the description of a scene from Denise's childhood, that comes fifteen pages later, in which she describes eating candy while eavesdropping on her mother who was gossiping with a customer about an "unvirtuous" young woman. Several words in the following passage evoke the explosion of light, color, sound, and pattern which can also be likened to the effects of a fireworks display. It is clearly an extension of Denise's metaphor for the miscarriage, but some readers may not pick up on the associative links and the manner in which the metaphor is itself transfigured to show why and how the beautiful metaphor becomes "disfigured."

Je grappille des morceaux de sucre dans un paquet crevé qui traîne par terre. Le soleil tape en plein dans la devanture, des bouches de gommes vertes, les *spira*les de réglisse Zan, les bâtons à sucer *s'illuminent*, torsades *rouges et jaunes entremêlées, croisées* [...]. Les bribes de l'histoire n'arrivent pas à se coller, je me perds *dans toutes les directions*, détails obscurs qui font souffler [...]. « Quand elle est revenue elle avait des taches sur sa robe, comme de l'amidon, j'en dis pas plus. » Elles lâchent enfin le maître mot. « Vicieuse. » *Tout s'éclaire*, le sucre fond et glisse dans ma bouche fermée. [...] Elles ne vont pas continuer cette histoire chuchotée qui me chatouille le ventre. [...] Puiser à pleines mains dans les bonbons roses, les pastilles de menthe, en croquer cinq ou six à la fois, s'emplit la

gorge de cette liqueur des parfums mêlés, après ces histoires. Sentir la saveur  
*m'imprégner.* (29-31; italics mine)

The passage above with its description of Denise eating candy has a shared lexical field with the light and patterns produced by fireworks and thus strongly evokes the “feu d’artifice à l’intérieur”—which Denise originally used in reference to the life-threatening miscarriage. The “tickling sensation” which came from the commingled, tabou pleasures of candy and racy gossip is linked to the forbidden pleasure of premarital sex that resulted in the unwanted pregnancy. Similarly, the two gossiping women who “lâchent enfin le maître mot” can be likened to the climactic grand finale of a fireworks display. The “beautiful fireworks” in the nostalgic memory-image of eating candy and sharing the pleasures of gossip has undergone a morbid transfiguration. The interior fireworks display no longer “chatouille son ventre,” as it did when she was a child, but instead causes extreme pain in her viscera which may lead to her death. What was at first a pleasurable explosion of sugar into a multitude of colors and shapes in her mouth has come to represent something quite sad, painful, and dangerous. The association of the original “beau feu d’artifice” metaphor to this memory from Denise’s childhood underscores her loss of innocence. The extension of the metaphor (forward in the narration, but chronologically backwards in Denise’s life story) illustrates that while the figuration may have been appropriate at an earlier, innocent period, the circumstances of her life have devolved into an ugly, distasteful image.

The above discussion of the fireworks metaphor reinforces what Lyn Thomas sees in *Les Armoires vides* as the retracing of an inevitable culmination of facts in the narration that bring Denise to this moment in her life. Thomas points out Ernaux’s associative linking of the abortion with the simultaneous expulsion of toxic emotions:

In the first novel, *Les Armoires vides*, the narrator's crisis results from a combination of anger and guilt, from a sense of belonging neither to her culture of origin nor to her acquired culture; this strong sense of cultural alienation is expressed through her sexuality, her gendered body. The narrator (who is unnamed) rejects both cultures, and the expulsion of the foetus comes to symbolise this dual rejection: the pregnancy results from her physical seduction by a representative of the bourgeois culture she aspired to, and yet at a deeper psychic level it is depicted as an inevitability, expressive of the indelible link with her origins. ("Annie Ernaux, Class, Gender, and Whiteness" 163)

Although ending up pregnant and unmarried is the stereotype for young women of her class, Denise's turmoil may come more from her own frustration of finding herself in this situation that she and her parents, especially her mother, had worked so hard to circumvent. They enrolled her in private Catholic school and encouraged her studies throughout her adolescence so that she would be able to get a university education and have a better life than they had. They did not allow her to work so that she could devote herself to passing the baccalaureate exam required for admission to higher education in France. And Denise, as well as Ernaux, did not need her parents to motivate her to succeed in her studies. But Denise's educational experiences continuously remind her that she is inferior because of her family's socio-economic position.

One version of this repeated lesson occurs when she lets it slip in class one day that her mother sometimes does not make the bed, because "elle a pas le temps" (59). The teacher takes this opportunity to ridicule her in front of her peers: "« Tu dois habiter une drôle de maison ! » Les autres filles sont retournées, elles chuchotent entre elles. Les rires, le bonheur, et tout à coup *ça tourne comme du vieux lait*, je me vois, je me vois et je ne ressemble pas aux autres [...]. Ça,

l'humiliation" (59; italics mine). The metaphor Ernaux uses to illustrate her abasement is, like the fireworks metaphor, the image of a distasteful transformation. Likewise, when Denise candidly confesses *all* of her sins to the priest in the text, her conception of her own body is transfigured into something dirty and repugnant. Through the priest's disapproving gaze, a metonymy for the purview of the Catholic church, she begins to think of her genitalia as vermin:

Je n'ai vu que ses yeux bleus glacés et les broderies vertes qui se perdaient derrière les grilles. J'ai tout lu, posément, j'ai plié le papier et je l'ai regardé. Un seul péché l'a intéressé, combien de fois, toute seule ?<sup>15</sup> Des garçons ? Je réponds tranquillement mais ses yeux sont méchants. [...] *Une horrible bête grandit* entre mes jambes, plate, rouge *comme une punaise*, « immonde ». (64-65; italics mine)

It gradually becomes increasingly clear to Denise (and Ernaux), through what feels like an interminable barrage of humiliating experiences, that her home, her family, and her life experiences are profane. She and everything connected to her family are not appropriate subjects to be represented in art—at least not without condescension or romanticization. Nor can she or her circumstances undergo a beautiful transfiguration through the alchemy of metaphor, but she can be negatively metaphorized into a bestial insect. What is more, she herself internalizes the shame communicated in the priest's disapproving gaze. She reaches this conception of herself after the mortifying experience of confessing her "sin."

What were minor instances of not always fitting in to her surroundings and a feeling that she and her family were somehow impure, "immonde" (65), now finds its expression articulated in Denise's summation of her life story. She came to understand that she and her family were spiritually tainted by their paycheck-to-paycheck clientele and a thin layer of sticky grime that coated their café-grocery-home:

Coupable, coupable. Confusément lié aux rayons de la boutique [...]. À leur tour, la vierge, les saints, l'Église adorée condamnent jusqu'à mes pensées, mes désirs vagues au milieu des bouteilles de Byrrh et de vin rouge. Je ne peux pas séparer ce que je fais de mal et mon milieu. L'Église rejette tout en bloc [...]. Dieu, Dieu sourit à Jeanne, à Roseline, leur gourmandise, leur paresse ressemblent à de jolies fautes vénielles, des riens amusants, dans leur chambre laquée blanc [...]. Quelque chose de poisseux et d'impur m'entoure définitivement, lié à mes différences, à mon milieu. Toutes les prières de pénitence n'y feront rien. (66-67)

While Denise gradually became conscious of her family's shameful inferiority, the onset of menses was one aspect of Denise's life that she was not ashamed of. She looked forward to the day when she would be like the older girls at her school of whom she was in awe. The language she uses to talk about getting her period has a certain sensual quality to it: "À un moment du temps, m'attendent les flots de sang glissant chaudement le long des cuisses, les linges tachés, suspendus à la ficelle du grenier, les marques rouges et dures laissées sur les jupons. Vision douce, pour moi seule [...]" (74-75). On the big day of her confirmation ceremony in the Catholic church, she was disappointed because the spiritual rite of passage into adulthood represented by the ceremony did not produce the complementary physical response in her body: "Il y a eu le grand jour. [...] J'ai été regarder si ça ne venait pas, les belles taches rouges sur le jupon blanc. Ç'aurait été magnifique [...]" (87-88). And again a little further she repeats the disappointment she felt: "Et même pas mes règles, ce rêve, cet éclatement rouge tant désiré, pour me consoler" (90). In other overtly biographical works, Ernaux herself does not use euphemisms or periphrasis (both of which are a kind of trope) nor does she shy away from referring directly to menstruation. The subject is always dealt with in frank and positive terms. The numerous



circumlocutions that have been invented to refer to this aspect of a woman's functioning body further underscore the norm—that exists in many cultures—against speaking about menstruation, except perhaps in clinical terms. Ernaux's unapologetic representation of menses as something to be proud of, to vaunt, is significant given the general cultural—and literary—prescript against referring to the functions of the lower body.

### **More “Entertainment”**

The fireworks metaphor is not the only image that undergoes a radical and ugly transfiguration from a harmless diversion to a dangerous situation. In another childhood memory, Denise recalls an entertaining spectacle at a carnival she went to with her parents. The show featured a woman whom male performers pretended to eviscerate by running swords through a box they had clamped shut around her:

Des hommes avaient fermé le couvercle et s'étaient mis à crever le carton à coups de sabre, une vraie pelote d'épingles. Je n'arrive pas à me rappeler si on l'a vue sortir. Des couteaux qui s'entrechoquent, droit sur le ventre, de biais dans les reins, toutes les pointes rejointes au-dessus des poils. J'avais peur en revenant rue Clopart, ils me serraient la main. « C'est des blagues tout ça, t'en fais pas... » (49-50)

The memory of this “entertaining diversion” shares some similarities with the time and place from which she is narrating: like the performer in the box, Denise herself is enclosed in the “small box” of her dorm room after having been “transpercée” (*L'événement* 77)<sup>16</sup> by the abortionist's tools. But this time it is even more frightening than the carnival show: her parents are not there to reassure her; there are no books she can read to help her; and she has real cause to worry about surviving the abortion. The fact that she cannot remember the woman in the

carnival act emerging from the box unharmed seems to intensify her anxiety about her present situation.

As we have seen, Ernaux's use of metaphor in this early work does not beautifully portray, nor transform, the ugly facts of Denise Lesur's, and by extension Ernaux's, life story. Denise's ironic tone about "une belle transfiguration de la sonde" and then her subsequent provocative metaphor, "un beau feu d'artifice à l'intérieur," discussed above, suggest that from the very beginning of her writing career, Ernaux, and the autofictionalized protagonist of her first novel, knew first hand about the impossibility of transfiguring pumpkins into carriages and other such miraculous transformations. In spite of the fact that the prose of *Les Armoires vides* shares many stylistic features common to traditional literary fiction, one senses an untenable state of affairs. Denise sums up her social standing in comparison to her classmates, by using the figurative expression "dorer la pillule" to say that there is no way to transfigure something that is distasteful (the facts of her life) into something beautiful: "L'évidence, plus moyen de me dorer la pilule. Ils étaient supérieurs à leur clientèle, mes parents. [...] Mais ils étaient malgré tout des petits débitants, des cafetiers de quartier, des gagne-petit, des minables. [...] Ça suffit d'être une vicieuse, une cachotière, une fille poisseuse et lourde vis-à-vis des copines de classe, légères, libres, pures de leur existence..." (99).

Because details about the abortion are minimal and infrequently placed throughout the narration, the reader gradually becomes aware of the metaphorical linkings. While *Les Armoires vides* contains metaphors at the sentence-level, details linking the process of the miscarriage of the foetus serve as a structural metaphor functioning above the narration. Denise can no longer bear to carry her pent-up feelings of guilt and anger. Her body is expelling (expressing) the foetus while she simultaneously expresses these emotions. The combined effects of metaphor at

various narrative levels in *Les Armoires vides* all serve to convey the malaise of writing about the circumstances of her life. In *L'Occupation*, as we shall see, figurative language finds itself once again in the role of representing dis-ease. One might assume that the creative mind of an author relies upon the use of metaphors and other creative tropes. But in *L'Occupation*, this tendency to conceive of her situation in terms of figurative language (in a variety of forms) is a symptom of the unhealthy frame of mind she found herself in during another emotionally difficult time in her life. Yet again, Ernaux will show that metaphors and figurative language can be problematic features of the account of her life story.

### **Figures and Dysfunctional Thinking in *L'Occupation***

*L'Occupation* (2002) chronicles a period in Ernaux's life during which she admits to being emotionally unstable and troubled by suicidal thoughts. The slim volume, seventy-six pages in all, outlines the trajectory of her descent into, and return from, the brink of a pathological jealous obsession. This emotional breakdown came about when her lover, a man whose identity she protects by referring to him only as "W," decided to move in with another woman. Ernaux found herself unexpectedly overwhelmed by feelings of intense jealousy in spite of her own refusal to enter into a more domestic arrangement with him. Ernaux's troubled mental state during this time was the result of, and was perpetuated by, her reliance on metaphors, commonplaces, clichés, and rhetoric that controlled her thought processes. Of all of Ernaux's works, this is the one book in which the author deals overtly with a variety of figures of style (similes, metaphors, commonplaces, clichés, rhetorical figures, etc.) and the role they played in her disturbed thought processes during the difficult transition out of her long-term relationship with Philippe Vilain (W).

Relatively early in the narration, Ernaux takes up the subject of figurative language. She does this by making an explicit statement about the usefulness of similes and metaphors as a means of describing what she was feeling during this time. In her fragile emotional condition, she discovered that these sorts of metaphors were no longer meaningless, conventional, commonplace, or hyperbolic abstractions to her, but the only means of conveying her feelings—in words—to herself and to others:

Pour la première fois, je percevais avec clarté la nature matérielle des sentiments et des émotions, dont j'éprouvais physiquement la consistance, la forme mais aussi l'indépendance, la parfaite liberté d'action par rapport à ma conscience. Ces états intérieurs avaient leur équivalent dans la nature: déferlement des vagues, effondrements de falaises, gouffres, prolifération d'algues. Je comprenais la nécessité des comparaisons et des métaphores avec l'eau et le feu. Même les plus usées avaient d'abord été *vécues*, un jour, par quelqu'un. (23-24)

Having never before experienced emotions so powerful that they threatened her mental stability, Ernaux found a sort of consolation in resorting to conventional, “dead,” metaphors. For her, such clichés were material proof, like a photograph or a document, that someone else had felt the same way. It was precisely because these “tired” expressions have been overused that they were meaningful to her. They were evidence, given the numerous *lieux communs* that exist that describe what she was feeling, that being emotionally overwrought is a common human experience. These expressions were proof to her that the representation of profound suffering is paved with a well-worn metaphoric code traveled by many others who have also used these words and images to articulate the effect of overpowering emotions. The epigraph to the work itself, a quote by Jean Rhys, points to the importance of understanding the source of one's

feelings for discovering not only ones's own truths, but universal truths as well about the nature of recurring, painful experiences: "Sachant pourtant que si j'avais le courage d'aller jusqu'au bout de ce que je *ressentais*, je finirais par découvrir ma propre vérité, la vérité de l'univers, la vérité de toutes ces choses qui n'en finissent pas de nous surprendre et de nous faire mal" (9; italics mine).

The drama represented in the work began when Ernaux experienced an acute reaction of jealousy after the abrupt *entrée sur scène* of another woman who suddenly replaced her in her relationship with W. Ernaux's pain was amplified by the feeling that not only had she lost her status as primary confidant, and lover, she imagined that she had been reduced to a single body part from W's perspective: "ma fonction d'oreille occasionnelle" (50). While "occasional ear" is a synecdoche (a special form of metonymy), this particular metonymy has metaphorical overtones.<sup>17</sup> It is also allusive, ironic, and periphrastic. Certain clues in the narration point to a continuing physical relationship with W (Philippe Vilain), and so the euphemistic metonymy ironically alludes to another body-part synecdoche. As an individual, she had become indistinguishable from all other women of her type: "Je me constatais interchangeable dans une série" (51). Consistent with so many of Ernaux's other explicit uses of figuration,<sup>18</sup> she illustrates her situation in terms of an unappealing, negative image: "Je n'étais plus libre de mes rêveries. Je n'étais même plus le sujet de mes représentations. J'étais *le squat* d'une femme que je n'avais jamais vue. Ou, comme m'avait dit un jour un Sénégalais à propos de la possession dont il se croyait l'objet de la part d'un ennemi, j'étais « *maraboutée* »" (21; italics mine). Her mind and body were "a squat," an illegally inhabited dwelling, that the other woman *occupied* against Ernaux's will. She felt like she was possessed by an evil spirit that was haunting, or *occupying*, her body.

Her intense jealousy for the other woman was even harder to understand because of her own ambivalent feelings about W at the time: “C’est pourtant moi qui avais quitté W quelques mois auparavant, après une relation de six ans. Autant par lassitude que par incapacité à échanger ma liberté, regagnée après dix-huit ans de mariage, pour une vie commune qu’il désirait ardemment depuis le début” (13). Furthermore, the alterity of the *other woman* is called into question when Ernaux discovered that her replacement was also a professor and therefore was not so much an *other*, but *another* version of herself: “Je me suis aperçue que je détestais toutes les femmes profs—ce que j’avais pourtant été, ce qu’étaient mes meilleures amies [...]” (16).

Ernaux’s jealous response caught her off guard and unprepared to deal with her intense emotions. During the period of her “occupation” Ernaux never went so far as to contact the other woman, but she did spend a lot of time trying to glean personal and factual information about her in an effort to create a mental image of who this woman was: “Il me fallait à toute force connaître son nom et son prénom, son âge, sa profession son adresse. [...] [Ces données] seules allaient me permettre d’extraire de la masse indifférenciée de toutes les femme un type physique et social, de me représenter un corps, un mode de vie, d’élaborer l’image d’un personnage” (15). She admits that her manner of trying to discover the other woman’s identity by trying to create a sort of mental hologram of her might have been at best an approach lacking in intellectual sophistication, and at worst a little crazy. She likens her efforts of trying to create in her mind an image of the other woman’s identity, to “know her,” to the approach of a novelist: “On peut voir dans cette recherche et cet assemblage effréné de signes un exercice dévoyé de l’intelligence. J’y vois plutôt sa fonction poétique, la même qui est à l’œuvre dans la littérature, la religion et la paranoïa” (41). This provocative comparison suggests that confusing reality with a poetic, *literary* interpretation of her circumstances was a symptom of her unhealthy state of mind, that

she is trying to make sense of her reality with the tools that fiction writers use to create imaginary characters.

In the account related in *L'Occupation*, the other woman who was living “Ernaux’s story” with W provoked an emotional upheaval which threatened to derail her usual *self-possession*. The style of language Ernaux uses to convey her anxiety is very different from the usual “ton du constat” of her *écriture plate* which relies primarily on the use of material facts: photographs, transcriptions of phrases spoken by real people, gestures, anything that is documentable for the narration of the other life experiences that she shares with her readers.<sup>19</sup> Instead, she uses a variety of metaphors and similes to describe the torment of relentlessly recurring memories of moments spent with her former lover, W.

In *L'Occupation*, she seeks to understand her situation by using what might be called “mass transit language.” Instead of consciously cultivating innovative, one-shot metaphors and a literary style to narrate her drama, Ernaux uses clichéd language with impunity:

Soudainement apparaissaient dans ma mémoire, sans relâche et à une vitesse vertigineuse, des images de notre histoire, *telles des séquences de cinéma* qui ce chevauchent et s’empilent sans disparaître. Rues, cafés, chambres d’hôtel, trains de nuit et plages tournoyaient et se télescopaient. Une *avalanche* de scènes et de paysages dont la réalité était à ce moment-là, effrayante, « j’y étais ». J’avais l’impression que mon cerveau se libérait à *jets continus* de toutes les images engrangées dans le temps de ma relation avec W sans que je puisse rien faire pour stopper *l’écoulement*. *Comme si le monde* de ces années-là, parce que je n’en avais pas apprécié la saveur unique, *se vengeait et revenait, résolu à m’engloutir*. Parfois, il me semblait devenir folle de douleur. Mais la douleur était le signe

même que je ne l'étais pas, folle. Pour faire cesser ce *carrousel atroce*, je savais que je pouvais me verser un grand verre d'alcool ou avaler un comprimé d'Imovane. (22-23; italics mine)

It is precisely because these trite comparisons, analogies, and clichés *have* been used over and over by others who have had similar experiences that they are meaningful to her. Her rediscovery of the usefulness of common metaphoric associations that have been used time and again may have helped her to see that she was not alone in her personal drama, that she was not the only person ever to endure intensely painful emotions that can engender irrational acts. In other works, Ernaux has shown that she is sensitive to and that she finds meaning in the words and phrases spoken by others, words that she recalls having said herself or that she has heard her family members using. In two earlier works, *Journal du dehors* and *La vie extérieure*, Ernaux gleaned and recorded the words and behaviors of people in public settings as a way of showing certain social truths and inequalities. It is through the connections of repeated words and phrases, a common language, that she is able to reconnect to her origins.

Like the carousel of a slide projector, or a loop of film, she is continuously haunted by scenes that her memory projects onto her mind's eye of their previous life together. It is as if her psyche were a sort of machine gone awry, "un carrousel atroce," functioning beyond her control. Comparisons with natural phenomena help Ernaux to find an equivalent to the sensation produced by her jealousy: an avalanche, a geyser "à jets continus." She also admits to superstitiously anthropomorphizing the universe into a sort of judgmental monster that would take its revenge by swallowing her up as a punishment for not having fully appreciated her years of domestic cohabitation with W. The only way she was able to stop the onslaught of memories



was to self-medicate with drugs and/or alcohol. Similarly, it was only through metaphors that she could describe her feelings of being overwhelmed and tortured by her memories.

During the months that the narration of *L'Occupation* documents, Ernaux tells us that her reasoning processes relied more heavily on the use of other forms of non-literal language: commonplaces, conventional metaphors, clichés, and an involuntary “rhétorique intérieure” (74). In several places throughout the narration, she refers to this interior rhetorical discourse that seemed to function beyond her control and which added to the sensation she had of being “occupied,” or “possessed.” Her disturbed thinking and her tendency to process facts and reality through a *romanesque*, literary filter, which she calls a sort of temporary insanity, were the source—and manifestation—of her troubled emotional state.<sup>20</sup>

### **Idiots, Addicts, and Other Unsavory Identifications**

As previously argued, similes and metaphors are relatively infrequent in Ernaux’s later works, but in *L'Occupation* Ernaux uses a series of similes not only to describe what she is going through, but also to compare herself to a variety of individuals who have weak impulse control. She illustrates her deteriorating mental state by drawing progressively more disturbing parallels between her own conduct and that of a variety of desperate, and sometimes dangerous, antisocial types, the kind of people whose dramas appear in the “faits divers” (37) section of newspapers. She chronicles her descent into dysfunctional thinking with a variety of comparisons that range in tone from comically tragic to quite serious.

In one of these early comparisons, Ernaux confesses that she used to think that anyone who would stick pins into an effigy to metaphorically simulate—or to magically provoke—an enemy’s demise was ridiculous. But this behavior came to seem less idiotic to her than it did before finding herself in the throes of toxic jealousy: “Cette possibilité de faire des figurines en

mie de pain et d’y planter des épingles ne me semblait plus si débile” (36). The shift in her attitude here, however, was no joke. She sensed herself that this was a very unhealthy trend in her thinking processes and compares her sinking to this level of desperation to that of the “attractive” downward spiral of contemplating suicide: “La tentation d’y descendre avait pourtant quelque chose d’attirant et d’effrayant, comme se pencher au-dessus d’un puits et voir trembler son image dans le fond” (36). This is the second image of suicide that Ernaux evokes; she had already made a reference to it twelve pages earlier in the narration, but it is less clear at that early point to the reader that she herself was susceptible to the idea of ending her own life: “Un soir, sur le quai du RER, j’ai pensé à Anna Karénine à l’instant où elle va se jeter sous le train, avec son petit sac rouge” (24). Ernaux does not analyse herself and explain what the relevance of recalling Tolstoy’s tragic heroine is. Perhaps she herself at the time did not consciously realize that suicide was on her mind; she frequently states throughout *L’Occupation* that her thoughts surprise her and often seemed to function beyond her control. Given a second evocation of suicide, one might infer with more certainty that her fragile emotional state may have predisposed her to the image of Anna Karenina “occupying” her consciousness earlier in the *récit*.

The serious topic of suicide is downplayed somewhat by another—humorous—comparison of her inability to give up her search for the other woman’s identity to the lack of self-control of an obese woman on a diet: “C’était une récompense que je m’offrais pour m’être « bien conduite » aussi longtemps, à la manière des obèses qui observent scrupuleusement un régime depuis le matin et s’octroient le soir une plaquette de chocolat” (38). In yet another tragicomic portrait, she compares herself to a purse snatcher when she considered the idea of absconding with W’s attaché case while he was in the bathroom so that she could rifle through it

in hopes of finding some information about the other woman: “Je me voyais m’enfuyant avec au fond du jardin, l’ouvrant et en extirpant une à une les pièces qu’il contenait, les jetant n’importe où, jusqu’à ce que, *comme les voleurs de sacs à la tire*, je trouve mon bonheur” (46; italics mine).

Other less comical comparisons, however, begin to give one pause. It is doubtful that one would laugh at—let alone empathize with—the comparisons that follow. When her behavior threatened to cross the threshold from contemplating a more invasive search tactic to actually pursuing her idea, she knew that she was in dangerous territory. Ernaux as narrator is not trying to create suspense. From the beginning of her account, she makes it clear that violence toward another individual was an “*idée révoltante*” (29). But the next set of comparisons imply that Ernaux, an intelligent, rational, law-abiding citizen, was able to identify emotionally with individuals who have “*pété les plombs*” (37). These are individuals who have allowed the persuasive—but faulty—logic of their “*rhétorique intérieure*” (58, 74) to lead them to harm another person, or themselves, and whose locus of control has become, through their dysfunctional way of thinking, exteriorized. Ernaux recognized this latter process at work in her own mind when she was struggling with the idea of enlisting her son’s girlfriend, “F”, in a scheme to help her find out more information about the other woman. She compares her twisted reasoning to that of a pervert:

À mon insu, les premiers mots d’une entrée en matière auprès de F se formaient dans ma tête. En quelques heures, la stratégie d’un désir impatient de se satisfaire est venue à bout de ma peur de m’exposer : le soir, *dans l’état du pervers* qui finit par se persuader que non seulement il n’y a aucun mal à faire ce qu’il va faire,

mais qu'il y est obligé, j'ai composé avec détermination le numéro de F [...]. (44; italics mine)

Like a psychopath, she felt that her actions were beyond her control: “à mon insu.” But as the *récit* progresses, she does begin to show signs of overcoming her obsession. At a certain point during her ambiguous romantic relationship with W, she stopped making overtures because she felt that her propositions were analogous to those of a prostitute: “Et quand j'avais envie d'échanger avec lui au téléphone des phrases du genre de celles qu'on se murmurait avant [...] j'y renonçais. Ce serait pour lui des obscénités refroidies, [...] puisque, *comme cet homme marié accosté par une pute*, il aurait pu me répondre, « merci bien, j'ai ce qu'il me faut à la maison »” (67-68; italics mine). Near the end of the account, she compares her mental state to that of a recovering drug addict: “J'ai parfois le sentiment d'avoir perdu quelque chose, à peu près comme celui qui s'aperçoit qu'il n'a plus besoin de fumer ou de droguer” (73).

Through this series of comparisons, Ernaux gradually leads the reader to see how someone might lose their intellectual and moral compass. Ernaux shares her own drama of how she found herself close to becoming a sensational story in the newspapers by comparing herself to people who range from unsophisticated simpletons to criminals. Although she, too, had previously found certain behaviors to be ludicrous, she found that she was able to understand others from a new perspective: “D'une manière générale, j'admettais les conduites que je stigmatisais naguère ou qui suscitaient mon hilarité. « Comment peut-on faire ça ! » était devenu « moi aussi je pourrais bien le faire »” (37). Most people do not, or simply cannot, empathize with the individuals with whom Ernaux compares herself. Nor would most people measure their own behavior against any of them, let alone *all* of them. *L'Occupation* may be one of her most daring confessions of all.

But *L'Occupation* did not provoke the same sort of violent reaction from the literary press that works like *Passion simple* did. Literary scholars often refer to *L'Occupation* tangentially when discussing other works by Ernaux, but at present only two articles have been devoted exclusively to it.<sup>21</sup> Lola Bermúdez Medina states that *L'Occupation* has been “malmenée par la critique et délaissée en partie par les lecteurs habituels” (56). It is quite possible that the majority of Ernaux’s readers cannot relate to this text in the same way that they can to other themes in her works that have more in common with their own experiences.

In *Journal du dehors* and *La vie extérieure*, Ernaux assembles a series of portraits that represent the full spectrum of Parisian denizens, and in *L'Occupation* Ernaux relates how she found herself potentially going from one strata of this social continuum to the other. As the narration of *L'Occupation* illustrates, the educated bourgeoisie almost changed into one of the “deplorable characters” of a *fait divers* newspaper story.<sup>22</sup> Ernaux has always sided with dominated groups whose oppression can manifest itself in violence, drug abuse, insanity, teenage pregnancy, and crime. This is not to argue that weak self-control is solely the result of being from a dominated class; anti-social behavior and mental illness are present at all socio-economic levels, but Ernaux would undoubtedly argue that poverty and other environmental stressors multiply the effects of one’s susceptibility to turn to criminal activity, to become addicted to drugs—to make *poor* choices. In *Une femme*, Ernaux reports that in the neighborhood of factory workers (called La Vallée) where she lived with her parents until she was five years old, the signs and symptoms of extreme poverty and social marginalization are still legendary: “Encore aujourd’hui, dire la Vallée d’avant-guerre, c’est tout dire, la plus forte concentration d’alcooliques et de filles mères [...]” (40). Lorraine Day points out that in *Passion simple*, the experience of a strong emotion, not jealousy, but passion, had a direct influence on Ernaux’s

attitude towards others: “She finds herself uncharacteristically spendthrift and generous, she has a new sympathy for the misfits of her society and a new tolerance for unsophisticated tastes and beliefs (popular music, astrology, superstitious practices), as well as an increased awareness of her own potential for extremes of experience” (162-63). Lyn Thomas also points out Ernaux’s empathy for the plight of those on the fringes of society: “Ernaux’s writing aims to be ‘on the side of’ the dominated; a further manifestation of this can be seen in the sustained attention she pays to those who are marginalised by poverty and homelessness” (“Annie Ernaux, Class, Gender, and Whiteness” 166).

Ernaux’s identification with those who are less fortunate in society can be traced back to memories from her childhood of how her parents treated others in need. Her mother frequently visited former customers, who were no longer able to leave their homes due to their age and/or health, to deliver gifts of food and assistance. Her mother was not simply being charitable, but was repaying a debt of loyalty to customers who had enabled her to earn a better living. During World War II, her father rode his bicycle to a nearby town in order to procure groceries for the people in their neighborhood: “Il fut considéré dans la Vallée comme le héros du ravitaillement” (*La Place* 49).

One wonders how *L’Occupation* might be read by different audiences. Indeed, who is it written for? It seems that this work would resonate more strongly with someone who had spent time in jail or a mental hospital than it would a literary scholar or a sophisticated reader interested in other *Ernaux* themes. Ernaux has in fact stated that her writing is not for the cultured classes. In *Se perdre*, she expresses hostility in her journal towards a group of urbane women after attending a conference in Sweden: “Hier pour la première fois, envie d’insulter les gens venus là, au Centre culturel, pour m’écouter. Leur dire: « Qu’est-ce que vous attendez ?

Que venez-vous faire ici ? la messe culturelle ? Bande de cons, y a rien à voir et *je n'écris pas pour vous*, vieilles mémés cultivées de Suède. »” (122-23; italics mine). Whoever the intended audience for this work is, Schwerdtner agrees that Ernaux’s writing attempts to have a direct effect on her readers’ understanding of the world: “[...] *L’Occupation* aurait alors pour rôle « d’agir » sur eux ou, du moins, de leur faire mieux comprendre l’être et le monde” (278).

When Ernaux parenthetically muses that her *récit* serves the same function as the *faits divers* section of newspapers—“(Il se peut que ce récit ait, à mon insu, la même fonction d’exemplarité)” (37)—it is not clear what she means by the word “exemplarité.” Does she mean that the shocking facts of her story are meant to be a sort of cautionary tale of how one’s rational thoughts can be usurped by powerful emotions? The word “exemplarité” calls to mind the medieval genre of the exemplum, defined in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* as: “A short tale used as an example to illustrate a moral point, usually in a sermon or other didactic work” (76). Given Ernaux’s sensitivity to oscillating, dual perspectives, it is possible that she means both. Perhaps Ernaux offers *L’Occupation* as a sort of apocryphal fable, the likes of which cannot be found elsewhere in the canon of literature, for those who have no one to help them as they go through, as Denise Lesur in Ernaux’s first novel put it, their “sales moments” (*Les Armoires vides* 12). In fact, most of Ernaux’s works can be placed in the category of stories not found elsewhere in *literature*.<sup>23</sup>

Following through on her impulse to “suppress” the other woman would, she says, have brought about immediate catharsis from her intense jealousy: “Et j’enviais les mœurs primitives, les sociétés brutales où l’on enlève la personne, on l’assassine même, résolvant en trois minutes la situation” (35). But Ernaux chooses instead to *compose* her feelings—and herself—through writing. In this way, the title of the work takes on yet another meaning, but this time the insanity

inducing “occupation” has been transfigured into something positive. Ernaux is able to overcome feeling “occupied” or “possessed” through her *occupation* as a writer.

### **Transfiguration and Transpersonalization**

In *L'événement*, Ernaux says that her life's work has been to render an account of what has happened to her so that her lived experiences might enter into the consciousness and lives of others: “Le véritable but de ma vie est peut-être seulement celui-ci: que mon corps, mes sensations et mes pensées deviennent de l'écriture, c'est-à-dire quelque chose d'intelligible et de général, mon existence complètement dissoute dans la tête et la vie des autres” (112). Ernaux announces a similar possibility of inhabiting the imaginations of her readers in the preface of *L'Usage de la photo*: “Le plus haut degré de la réalité ne sera atteint que si ces photos écrites se changent en d'autres scènes dans la mémoire ou l'imagination des lecteurs” (13). One might see this view of a writer's legacy as a way of “occupying” others, but unlike the corrosive effects of being haunted by jealousy, Ernaux's authorial intent is to inhabit the minds of her readers to improve their mental well-being. All of Ernaux's works can be seen as expressing—and releasing—emotional pain. Readers who have had similar, “untellable,” experiences can potentially benefit vicariously from reading her stories. In a sense, the articulated experience passes from one mind to another in a kind of salvation through the transubstantiation of reading. In *La Honte*, she uses a biblical allusion to Christ's words at the Last Supper to liken her writing to a sort of self-sacrificing gift of salvation: “prenez et lisez car ceci est mon corps et mon sang qui sera versé pour vous” (41). She exposes her private life for all to see so that others might benefit from her sacrifice of anonymity.

Some readers do in fact find Ernaux's works to be a sort of gift from Ernaux wherein they are able to understand their own “untellable” stories. Critics attribute the process of identification



in part to Ernaux's "*je* transpersonnel" that functions as a sort of public "I" that others can temporarily inhabit and learn from. In an interview, Ernaux defines this concept: "Le *je* que j'utilise me semble une forme impersonnelle, à peine sexuée, quelquefois même plus une parole de « l'autre » qu'une parole de « moi »: une forme transpersonnelle, en somme" ("Vers un *je* transpersonnel" 221). Élise Hugueny-Léger points out that the potential for "transpersonal" identification that many individuals experience while reading Ernaux is a phenomenon that occurs not only for readers but for the writer herself in *L'Occupation*, specifically:

En 2002, avec *L'Occupation*, Ernaux évoque sa jalousie et son obsession pour la femme qui l'a remplacée après sa rupture avec Philippe Vilain. Le rôle que joue cette femme est particulièrement intéressant : cette rivale est en effet placée au même niveau que les amants les plus significatifs, dans la mesure où la narratrice déclare l'avoir elle aussi « dans la peau » (LO 74). Le choix de cette expression pour désigner à la fois l'amant et la rivale souligne le fait que chez Ernaux, les possibilités d'interchangeabilité entre soi et les autres dépassent les barrières de sexe. (65)

In writing *L'Occupation*, and by using a series of similes to associate herself with several kinds of "weak-willed" individuals, Ernaux potentially expands the breadth of her audience to include other marginalized groups who might identify with her and thereby benefit from the "*je* transpersonnel" quality of her writing. On more than one level, *L'Occupation* is a book about the transfer of one person's experience to the mind and body of another. "Transfiguration" in the sense of the transfer of one figure, or body, into the mind and body of another, could also apply. The word "figure," and its related variants and meanings, appears regularly throughout the short work. The other woman, without knowing it, lives in the thoughts of Ernaux. The other woman

replaced Ernaux in her relationship with W like a body double (*figurant* in French), which provoked a deep anxiety in the author, causing a disruption to her own sense of identity.<sup>24</sup>

Desperate to know who this other woman was, Ernaux exhausted the appropriate, legal methods of piecing together the facts of her identity so that she could “se représenter” or “se figurer” an image of what this woman looked like. Considering the possibility that the other woman could in reality be completely different from the persona she had mentally constructed, she confesses that if confronted with a woman who did not match the image she had constructed, she would not readily be able to believe that it was actually her: “Il y avait autant de chances que l’autre femme soit timide, blonde et frisée, [...] mais je ne pouvais pas tout simplement le croire, celle-là n’avait jamais existé dans ma tête” (65).

It is through writing *L’Occupation* that Ernaux is able to expell the body/figure that haunts her. At the end she reassures herself, and her reader: “J’ai fini de *dégager les figures* d’un imaginaire livré à la jalousie, dont j’ai été la proie et la spectatrice, de recenser les lieux communs qui proliféraient sans contrôle possible dans ma pensée, de décrire toute cette rhétorique intérieure [...]” (74; italics mine). In writing *L’Occupation*, Ernaux *transfigures* the negative, destructive experience of jealousy and finds composure in the process of seeing her project through to the end. It is plausible that Ernaux means many things by “dégager les figures.” She is no longer haunted by images of women popping in and out of her consciousness. She stopped trying to seduce W and gave up trying to lure him back with “une rhétorique intérieure.” She will also eventually give up her *romanesque* thought processes and figurative associations to explain her situation to herself, and others. While she never succeeds at conjuring up the real figure of the other woman from her imagination through intense concentration, she is finally able to transfigure the thoughts in her head into something real. She describes composing

the letter of rupture to W as turning the imagined words and phrases into a physical substance: written words—weighty as rocks:

Couchée sur le ventre, j'ai commencé d'halluciner sous moi des mots qui avaient la consistance des pierres, des tables de la loi. Les lettres, cependant, dansaient et s'assemblaient, se disloquaient, comme celles qui flottent dans le potage de pâtes appelé « alphabet ». Je devais absolument saisir ces mots, c'étaient ceux qu'il me fallait pour être délivrée, [...] tant qu'ils ne seraient pas écrits, je resterais dans ma folie. [...] J'ai rallumé et je les ai griffonnés [...]. J'avais rédigé ma lettre de rupture.

(71)

By composing the letter in concrete language, she is able to break the spell. In effect, she has demetaphorized, or dis-figured, herself by expelling the intrusive figure of the other woman, and the intrusive *figures* that had taken over her thoughts.

### **The Pathetic Fallacy From Another Perspective**

By the end of the narration of *L'Occupation*, Ernaux has worked her way through, and written her way out of, her jealous obsession. Karin Schwerdtner has noted that there is a correspondence of feeling between Ernaux's own emotional stopping place, and the disused, *disaffected* Venetian buildings mentioned in the last fragment:

N'oublions pas non plus que la narratrice de « l'épilogue » semble aussi désaffectée que les édifices vénitiens (les lieux occupés autrefois avec W) dont elle fait la description. En fin de récit, la narratrice retourne à Venise, et aux lieux, maintenant vides, où elle est passée avec W, ce qui semble pointer quelque chose d'une nostalgie ou d'un regret. On devine, chez elle, un besoin de renouer avec un

passé, de retourner aux origines, et, par là, de confirmer pour elle-même une vague sensation de manque. (279)

This final fragment has several ‘literary’ qualities embedded in it. It is slightly disconnected from the rest of the narration, and seems to be added on as an afterthought—“une sorte d’épilogue” (280) as Schwerdtner refers to it. The other conventional literary aspect, pointed out by Schwerdtner, is the pathetic fallacy evoked by the connection between Ernaux’s emotions and the emotional tone of the landscape. But why would Ernaux use pathetic fallacy at the end of a narrative in which she has spent the whole time dissecting her unhealthy tendency of reading reality through a literary lens, and make *romanesque* associations between details that turn out to have no connection? Ernaux uses the narrative space of *L’Occupation* to illustrate that this sort of metaphorical, novelistic way of thinking is a symptom of her unhealthily jealous frame of mind.<sup>25</sup> I agree with Schwerdtner’s remarks that there is an emotional link with the landscape, but not just one of nostalgia and regret. I would suggest that Ernaux also found an emotional connection with the empty, “unhaunted,” buildings. To read the fragment in only one way, as Schwerdtner suggests, would mean that Ernaux failed, in the end, to completely let go of her past romantic relationship with W, and failed to change her unhealthy thought processes. As further proof of an additional and alternative reading to Schwerdtner’s, Ernaux categorically states her absence of affect with regard to retelling her drama at the time of writing *L’Occupation*, but she makes this pronouncement in the middle of the work, not at the end where one might expect to find the author’s emotional terminus: “je n’éprouve aujourd’hui aucune gêne—pas davantage de défi—à exposer et explorer mon obsession. À vrai dire je n’éprouve absolument rien” (47-48; original italics).

I think the final fragment can be read in two ways, depending on one's perspective. One interpretation would be, as Schwerdtner suggests, to interpret it as an instance of pathetic fallacy wherein the "disaffected" buildings represent Ernaux's persistent feelings of love lost. But I think there is a second reading that comes through in the linking of the "common places" they used to frequent together, and the commonplaces that haunted her thoughts. Ernaux returns to these *common places*, typical of any tourist itinerary: hotels, churches, cafés, and various sites of interest. But these old haunts are now vacant, under construction, closed up, or disused. If Ernaux did completely purge herself of her jealousy, the final fragment can be read as a symbolic representation of her catharsis and therefore as a triumph of the reflective process of writing. The linguistic commonplaces that overwhelmed and distorted her thought processes have finally become inert and empty of their bewitching effects. There is, then, a metaphorical reversal at work in this final fragment. Instead of holding on to negative feelings of having lost W to the other woman, Ernaux actually feels nothing, I would suggest, except relief. Like the empty buildings, Ernaux is no longer occupied, haunted, or preoccupied. She has used her *occupation* as a writer to help her demystify her troubled thoughts and to come to terms with her jealous obsession. Throughout *L'Occupation*, Ernaux draws on old, 'tired' clichés to represent her past 'occupied' experience, but at the end of the work itself, now 'cured,' she is able to relegate them once again to the status of 'dead' figures. This interpretation requires a different perspective and an alternative sort of metaphorical reading than that of pathetic fallacy. One's mental state, and literary perspective, can change how one reads the world. Ernaux alludes to this phenomenon within the narration with regard to how she perceived the meaning of Gloria Gaynor's song before, and then during, "the occupation":

Entendre par hasard *I will survive*, cette chanson sur laquelle [...] je me déchaînais certains soirs en dansant dans l'appartement de W, me pétrifiait. À l'époque où je virevoltais devant lui, seuls comptaient le rythme de la musique et la voix âpre de Gloria Gaynor, que je ressentais comme la victoire de l'amour contre le temps. Dans le supermarché où je l'entendais entre deux annonces publicitaires, le leitmotiv de la chanteuse prenait un sens nouveau, désespéré : moi aussi, il le faudrait, *I will survive*. (26-27)

Ernaux has survived, and she is no longer hopeless or desperate like she was when the lyrics of this song suddenly came to mean the survival of the jilted woman instead of the survival of her love for him. This aspect of one's frame of mind influencing one's perceptions figures prominently in my analysis in the following chapters.

## Chapter 2: Culture and Metaphor in *Une femme* and *La Place*

### Cultural Differences

With the publication of *La Place* in 1984 Annie Ernaux ushered in a markedly different prose style from that of her first three novels (*Les Armoires vides*, 1974; *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*, 1977; *La femme gelée*, 1981). *Une femme* was the second work written in what critics now often consider to be Ernaux's signature style. Both *La Place* and *Une femme* chart the socio-economic rise of her parents from an agrarian-based lifestyle, to factory workers, and ultimately to lower middle-class, *petits bourgeois* who owned their own business, a small *café-épicerie* in Yvetot, France. More so than any of her other works, *Une femme* and *La Place* are about culture. In her effort to combine the details of her parents' lives into coherent stories through the creative process of writing, Ernaux interposes themes of culture, horticulture, social class, and art. Throughout these two works Ernaux makes implicit comparisons between the cultural differences of the upper and lower classes. The association of her parents' "inferior" culture with all things natural and agrarian is a pattern that recurs often in these works. These comparisons call into question the primacy and legitimacy of a cultural elite. Ernaux uses subtle processes that create metaphorical effects which serve to transform her parents' lives into textual corpora that are equally worthy of artistic relevance and their share of cultural capital in French literature.

*Une femme* and *La Place*, like most of Ernaux's works, are rather short, but like all of her books they require a sort of slow reading, one that continues in the mind after all the pages have been read and the book has been put aside. Another factor that enhances the reader's appreciation of these slim volumes is a knowledge of her other works. For the analysis in this chapter of cultural metaphor, Ernaux's published journal « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » is particularly

helpful. Intertextual echoes between these works create a network of relationships between ostensibly meaningless and unrelated details.

On the surface, the new prose style Ernaux now uses seems to lack the stylistic flair common to more self-consciously literary works. At the beginning of *La Place* she explains her reasons for eschewing a more ornamental style: “Aucune poésie du souvenir, pas de dérision jubilante. L’écriture plate me vient naturellement, celle-là même que j’utilisais en écrivant autrefois à mes parents pour leur dire les nouvelles essentielles” (24). To use a more formal style to write home would have seemed affected and insincere to her plainspoken parents. Lorraine Day and Michael Sheringham<sup>26</sup> both point out that Ernaux’s style is a more respectful, and historically objective means of representing her parents’ lives. This is certainly true, but her *écriture plate* is also a feint; it serves a double purpose. One might also think of this “flat” writing style as a sort of literary inheritance from her parents, neither of whom attended the *lycée*. In *Une femme* she claims to adopt an approach to writing that is not quite on the same level with literature. She uses the word “below” to describe her project: “Mon projet est de nature littéraire, puisqu’il s’agit de chercher une vérité sur ma mère qui ne peut être atteinte que par des mots. [...] Mais je souhaite rester, d’une certaine façon au-dessous de la littérature” (*Une femme* 23). Ernaux’s disavowal of any literary aspirations may encourage certain readers (who may already have a bias against Ernaux because of her gender and class origins) into prejudging her books as lacking aesthetic, artistic, i.e. literary value.<sup>27</sup> But in spite of her claims of artlessness, she makes full use of this *écriture plate* to cloak a sophisticated work of art. This denotative mode of expression that accurately depicts her class origins is also a strategic move to subvert traditional modes of literature. The tension created between representations of dominant bourgeois culture, and her parents’ [horti]culture brings forth a new literary representation of her



parents' lives from below the flat plane of her prose. Although Ernaux avoids the conceits of a traditional literary style, she nonetheless creates the effects of such rhetorical figures as metaphor, metonymy, paronomasia, allusion, and chiasmus.

One technique that enables the reader to perceive more nuanced meanings is to carefully consider what appear to be peripheral details in the text. Paying attention to the margins is important, especially with regard to the photographs that Ernaux describes. One photograph in particular will show how shifting one's attention and perspective while reading Ernaux's works can reveal new meanings. Details within a photograph that seem to be insignificant because of their marginality produce metaphorical effects analogous to the types of metaphorical meanings found in painting, photography, architecture, and music. These art forms cannot use words to create metaphor (or other rhetorical figures), but as artists know, metaphor is not dependent on words alone.

In *Une femme* Ernaux produces metaphorical associations through implicit relationships that arise naturally, that might be termed "latent." The potential for associative relationships to form is present within the text, but they require a period of thoughtful reflection. The author does not fabricate rhetorical turns of phrase in her psychic atelier from imaginative combinations of language and ideas with an eye toward producing a more "literary" text.<sup>28</sup> The elements of dormant metaphorical associations, like pieces of a puzzle, are left scattered within the work. In this sense, the metaphorical possibilities of the work might be described as "disjointed." It is up to the reader to discover associations and to connect the two poles to form a metaphor, to see the associative metonymies, and to pick up on the poetic latencies in these works. In a sense, the *reading* continues after the books have been put down. As such, the metaphorical effects produced by this style of writing may not be readily apparent to the passive or casual reader who

takes for granted Ernaux's claims to an *écriture plate*. But with slow and reflective reading, Ernaux's flat prose style reveals a depth and richness that is fascinating to discover. On occasion Ernaux does employ explicit metaphors, and other types of poetic figures in *Une femme* and *La Place*, but these instances are not virtuoso displays of the writer's refined literary style and artistic imagination. In *La Honte* Ernaux comments self-reflexively on the unliterary approach she takes towards her writing: "Il me semble que je cherche toujours à écrire dans cette langue matérielle d'alors et non avec des mots et une syntaxe qui ne me sont pas venus, qui ne me seraient pas venus alors. Je ne connaîtrai jamais l'enchantement des métaphores, la jubilation du style" (*La Honte* 70).

When Ernaux does use an explicit metaphor, it is for specific reasons. And, when she allows herself the occasional foray into a "higher" style of figurative language, it is neither lyrical, nor overwrought, but restrained and nature-based, as in this example describing her childhood and the protective feeling of her parents' love: "Souvenir d'être entre eux, dans *un nid* de voix et de chair, de rires continuels" (*Une femme* 46; italics mine), or in this description of the skin on her ageing mother's arms, "La peau de l'intérieur de ses bras froissée comme le dessous des champignons" (« *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » 29). The scant metaphorical language and the potential for metaphorical effects in *Une femme* might be termed "organic" because they are based on examples from nature, but also because what is expressed *through* metaphor in Ernaux's œuvre arises naturally—sometimes uncannily—from real events in her life.

Initially, the references Ernaux makes to flowers, horticulture, and other organic elements seem simply to provide a descriptive background; they do not appear to be significantly connected to any of the events of her mother's story in *Une femme*, but a reading that focuses on these peripheral details, when discovered, can create associations that add an enhanced meaning

to the work's fragmented collection of episodes. In the following section we will see a striking example of this sort of metaphorical effect by actively visualizing the details that surround the main focus of one of Ernaux's word-photos. Changing one's perspective by attending to details in the margins brings a new appreciation to the photograph, to Ernaux's writing style, and to the work itself.

### **A Couple of Apple Trees**

A pair of apple trees provides a scenic backdrop for a snapshot of Ernaux's parents taken on their wedding day. This photograph is not reproduced in the work; instead, Ernaux describes it in words. This is not the first time Ernaux has described this photo. Ernaux mentions it in *La Place* as well, but the two word-pictures are quite different: "Sur la photo du mariage, on lui voit les genoux. Elle fixe durement l'objectif sous le voile qui lui enserre le front jusqu'au-dessus des yeux. Elle ressemble à Sarah Bernhardt. Mon père se tient debout à côté d'elle, une petite moustache et « le col à manger de la tarte ». Ils ne sourient ni l'un ni l'autre" (*La Place* 37). Michèle Bacholle-Bošković has also pointed out the two distinct "illustrations" of the same wedding photograph: "Contrairement à la photo de mariage figurant dans *La Place*, la description de celle-ci est très détaillée et comprend la description physique et vestimentaire des mariés, leur attitude corporelle et ce qui les entoure. Contrairement à *La Place*, ici il y a contact entre les époux et ce contact est partagé (elle lui tient l'épaule)" (71).

Pierre-Louis Fort's analysis of Ernaux's description emphasizes the manner in which Ernaux carefully orchestrates her choice of words. In particular Fort notes Ernaux's simple repetition of the pronoun "elle" which, like the informal wedding portrait, showcases the centrality and focus on her mother in the work.

Le cliché du mariage de ses parents fait l'objet d'une description détaillée et très structurée, sur le mode d'un zoom arrière. La narratrice commence par décrire sa mère, puis elle élargit le champ en parlant de son père, continue en évoquant leur posture commune et termine en donnant le cadre sur lequel se découpent ses parents, en deux temps (« derrière eux » puis « au fond »). Le paragraphe consacré à cette photographie s'ouvre sur la mère et se termine sur elle, chaque fois au moyen du pronom personnel « elle » [...]. La mère est au cœur du passage consacré à la photographie, tout comme elle est le centre de l'œuvre. (*Une femme* 130)

Not only is the word-picture representative of the work's main focus, her mother's life, it is also rich with metaphorical potential. Especially in the words which evoke her parent's posture: "Il la tient par la taille et elle lui a posé la main sur l'épaule. [...] Derrière eux, *les feuillages de deux pommiers qui se rejoignent leur font un dôme*. Au fond, la façade d'une maison basse" (37; italics mine).<sup>29</sup> The newly married couple is standing side by side, the wife's hand resting on the husband's shoulder, and the husband's arm around the wife's waist. The two apple trees in the background, which have grown closely together and whose branches have intermingled, coincidentally mimic the gestures of her parents posing together. The similarities between the young married couple and the pair of apple trees produce metaphorical effects. *Like* the young couple, the apple trees appear to embrace.<sup>30</sup> The idea of bearing fruit also comes into play—literally for the trees whose close proximity enhances the process of pollination, and figuratively for the couple who will in turn have two daughters. Furthermore, the dome formed over the couple by the branches of the apple trees metonymically—and metaphorically—suggests the protective roof of a home, just as the couple will eventually provide a home for their

future family. The single-story house in the background echoes the theme of “home” in this word-photograph by recalling her mother’s previous home and her modest origins.<sup>31</sup>

Ernaux does not describe the photo of her parents with metaphors at the sentence-level nor does she use the sort of phrasing that might alert the reader that there are similes or explicit metaphorical associations present in the photograph with phrasing such as “this is that,” or “this is like that.” It is only when the reader imagines a visual representation of the photograph in the mind’s eye that relationships of similarity—that can produce metaphorical effects—begin to emerge from the text. Ernaux’s metaphors are visual, like a painter’s or a photographer’s, but there is no actual painting or photograph upon which one’s eyes can gaze. A reader who fails to “see” the picture that the words evoke will miss the metaphorical effects.

Ernaux does not directly state that the couple is like the apple trees, nor does she make any other assertion that implies a direct comparison. The metaphorical effects that can be perceived in the word-photo are implicit ones: the intermingled branches of the apple trees coincidentally mimic the embracing human couple, hinting that the two trees might also be a couple. The “embracing” trees suggest the practical necessity of their proximity—it will improve the likelihood of pollination which will lead to reproduction—and this in turn reminds one that the newly married couple will also reproduce by having children. The two poles brought together (in the mind’s eye of the reader) create a sort of gestalt effect. In other words, if the elements of the word-photo are considered separately, her parents are no more than a newly married couple being photographed in front of some pretty foliage on their wedding day. But the couple-like characteristics of the wild apple trees not only provide a scenic background, they portend the newly married couple’s life together.

Further meaning can be extracted from the relationships of similarity in the description of the wedding photograph by comparing it to the manner in which wild apple trees produce fruit—a comparison that will produce analogous associations with the couple, and their as yet unborn daughter. In nature, apple trees grow quite easily from seed, however the majority of these wild apples are not edible as fruit because they are too tart. Most apple tree varieties are not self-pollinating. A wild apple tree must be pollinated from the pollen of another apple tree in order to develop fruit. That is to say that although the blossoms of apple trees contain both male and female reproductive parts, these blossoms cannot produce fruit from their own pollen. Apple trees must be pollinated by the pollen of another tree. Furthermore, the fruit of a wild apple tree is genetically distinct from its parent trees because it does not inherit the DNA from either of them. This detail of apple reproductivity results in a unique apple variety for each new tree. It is only through the technique of grafting that it is possible to always produce the exact same apple variety. Palatable apple varieties sold for consumption are the result of controlled farming techniques. The production of specific apple varieties requires grafting new trees from old ones because of the way in which apples reproduce. New, edible, apple varieties come from the graft of another tree of the same cultivar, thereby producing an apple that has a consistent look and taste.

Like the unique fruit produced by the mixing of pollen from two wild apple trees, Ernaux will grow up to be very different from her parents, a new species of fruit, metaphorically speaking. In a quote from *Les Années*, apparently referring to herself in the third-person,<sup>32</sup> Ernaux reflects on the fact that her own lifestyle in no way resembles that of her parents: “[...] rien dans sa manière de vivre et de penser ne ressemble à la leur—elle les ferait « se retourner dans la tombe » [...]” (*Les Années* 236). Unlike her parents, Ernaux will attend university and

achieve the highest degree in French letters; which, for better—or worse—enables her to transcend the status of petit-bourgeois her parents had achieved with great difficulty, crossing over social class boundaries from “dominé” to “dominant,” in Bourdieu’s terminology, to become a member of the “bourgeoisie à diplômés” (*La Place* 96). One might further extend the analogy of apple tree reproduction to Ernaux’s literary project. It too is a new and unique varietal, the result of grafting the plainspoken language of her parents with the literary techniques acquired through her studies in literature.

More associations between the couple and the apple trees can be made given the differences in propagation between apples that grow naturally in the wild, and cultivated apples that are produced through industrial farming techniques. The wild apple trees in the background of the parents’ wedding photo would have produced a very tart wild apple from which cider could be made. Cider was the drink of her parents’ geographic and demographic milieu. Ernaux’s father eventually supplemented the family’s income with the money he made from brewing the cider produced from apples growing in the courtyard of their home in Yvetot: “Tout en servant au café, mon père cultivait son jardin, élevait des poules et des lapins, faisait du cidre qu’on vendait aux clients” (*Une femme* 47-48). The relationships of similarity in the word-photo between the young married couple and the apple trees thus bring about multiple metonymical effects, to wit: procreation, shelter, and the livelihood of the parents who will run a small *café-bar-épicerie-(résidence)*—the family-owned business which was also their home.

Ernaux describes her mother’s childhood this way: “toute une existence au-dehors de petite fille de la campagne, avec les mêmes savoir-faire que les garçons, scier du bois, *locher les pommes* [...]” (*Une femme* 28; italics mine). Apples are associated not only with her mother’s future, but also with her childhood. The pair of apple trees are thus at the heart of the work’s

vision: the author's intent to portray her mother's life and the culture of her mother's social class as well as Ernaux's questioning of the cultural differences between the dominated and dominating classes of French society. The wedding photo is a representation in miniature, a *mise en abyme*, of her mother's life. The metaphorical effects in the word-photograph of the apple trees reinforce what we already know about her parents peasant and working-class origins, which had more to do with [agri]culture than with any elitist idea of culture.

It is likely that Ernaux's oblique creation of metaphor in this word-photo eludes many readers' perception. A factor that complicates the difficulty of perceiving these metaphorical subtleties is that they are culturally biased towards an agrarian sensibility. In this manner, Ernaux exacts a sort of literary revenge on the class of the lettered elite. She has written a straightforward account of her mother's life that a "cultured" person would not necessarily be able to appreciate fully. A reader who is unfamiliar with the horticulture of apple trees would be unable to make these associations and might therefore miss the metaphorical effects in Ernaux's writing. The author uses horticulture to make a point about the cultivated reader. She uses one type of culture against the other. This passage illustrates an effect that is analogous to the experience an "uncultured" person might have while reading any number of canonical literary texts. In order to understand and appreciate such works, one must possess certain types of cultural knowledge. An inability to understand the deeper levels of a work of literature occurs especially among students from foreign cultures and/or underprivileged backgrounds because they lack the cultural knowledge needed to be able to understand literary allusions and to decode the symbolic meanings that enrich these texts.<sup>33</sup> These are the students who routinely perform poorly on standardized tests. Until relatively recently, the assumption had been that such test results were empirical proof of the inferior intellects of these groups of students; statistical facts



that justified the hierarchical separation of students that predestines their educational track in the multi-tiered French educational system. Deborah Reed-Danahay summarizes Bourdieu's explanation of this process:

Children fail in school and internalize those failures as having been caused by their own shortcomings—lack of intelligence and lack of hard work. A child sees that he or she is doomed to fail in school and thereby “chooses” to do poorly or drop out. This is evidence, according to the theory, of the symbolic violence exerted by the educational system. Inculcation at school through the PAu (Pedagogic Authority), which is invested in the teacher but also permeates the entire educational environment, works to exclude the children of the working classes. What is inculcated at school is not so much knowledge that can be useful to the child but the value of the legitimacy of the dominant culture. (49)

Academic failure is just one aspect of how the educational experience can be particularly humiliating to children from working-class origins (or any marginalized group of people). In a conversation with Deborah Reed-Donahay, Bourdieu said “[...] French peasants would much prefer to talk to you about their sex lives than about their educational experiences. And, of course, they are reticent to speak about their sex lives!” (9). Reed-Donahay further emphasizes the value that French culture places on being educated:

The school system in France is central to national identity—both in that it was largely through primary schooling that notions of citizenship and national belonging were constructed, and in that the rigor and reputation of their educational system has long been part of national pride for the French. I can think of few other nations in which national identity is as closely associated with being

a cultivated, educated, schooled person (even though, as Bourdieu himself demonstrated, many are excluded in reality from this category in France due to social class background). (39)

Situations in which the author and her parents find themselves in the uncomfortable position of having been made to feel their cultural inferiority are depicted in both works about her parents. In *La Place*, when Ernaux describes her father's decision not to return to farming after his military service, she emphasizes the fact that his usage of the word "culture" was singular; for him there was no other meaning: "Au retour, il n'a plus voulu retourner dans la culture. Il a toujours appelé ainsi le travail de la terre, l'autre sens de culture, le spirituel, lui était inutile" (*La Place* 34). The manner in which Ernaux has surreptitiously inserted culturally biased metaphorical effects in this passage, and elsewhere in *Une femme*, suggests that she has aimed to produce a work that potentially excludes the educated upper middle-class reader, just as traditional literature tends to elude the uneducated *lower* classes. For an un[horti]cultured reader, certain aspects of the work will indeed be unappreciated.

The metaphorical associations that can be perceived in the wedding photo are illustrative of a pattern that will recur elsewhere in *Une femme*: Ernaux does not embellish her metaphors with elegant prose or other literary techniques of ornamentation; she exploits the events that accidentally, naturally (organically) occur in her own life and presents them, like found objects, for the reader to interpret. This preference for referring to authentic events and the material objects of her everyday life might lead one to conclude that the writer herself is neither aware, nor in control of the metaphorical significance of her work. On the contrary, Ernaux carefully arranges the details of her narrative in an order and fashion which provide the reader with the means to assemble metaphorical associations.

In traditional analysis of metaphor, her parents in the wedding photo could be referred to as the “focus” (or “tenor,” “*cible*” in French) of the metaphor, and the apple trees could be referred to as the “frame” (or “vehicle,” “*source*” in French) of the metaphor. But the metaphorical effect created between the *frame* and the *focus* of this word-photo is more than what is often referred to when discussing the relationship between vehicle and tenor in a metaphor. Instead, it is a type of metaphor that is interactive. The two poles of this “do-it-yourself metaphor” interact with one another, causing us to consider something new about each pole of association that otherwise would not have stood out if each element were portrayed separately. Instead of seeing just a young married couple, or just a couple of trees, a whole web of associations play off of one another by the juxtaposition of the two pairs, thereby expanding the significance of the apple trees as well as the human couple. Wild apples are analogous to Ernaux’s prose style; they require a process of slow distillation before they render their essence. Furthermore, the wild apple trees in the word-photo suggest a preference on Ernaux’s part for citing natural elements and naturally occurring events as a method for writing her mother’s story. Because of the flat style and matter-of-fact tone that Ernaux employs, it might seem to an unsuspecting reader that the elements that create these metaphorical effects arise spontaneously, without thought to their placement or significance. Multiple networks of horticultural references and their interconnectedness to the themes in *Une femme* will show that Ernaux’s *écriture plate* is not so flat after all.

### **The Language of Flowers**

As the narration of *Une femme* unfolds, symbolic meanings created by connections to flowers lie dormant, awaiting the active reader’s perception before emerging. Even for someone

who has studied *Une femme*, the suggestion that there is a floral motif in the work might be surprising. Allusions to flowers in the text arise in a manner that makes them seem inconsequential, like passing remarks whose function is simply to provide some descriptive background. Ernaux downplays the potential symbolic valence of flowers by casually inserting mentions of them among fragments of conversations, habitual gestures, and other mundane facts of daily life. But the underpinnings of their recurring presence, when pointed out, expose a rhizome-like network of associations from which a code emerges: a novel language of flowers that mutely communicates the poignant truths of her mother's life. The task of expressing deep sorrow is particularly challenging in Ernaux's case. Her *éducation sentimentale* lacked the vocabulary for expressing feelings. In the "langue matérielle" (*La Honte* 75) of her childhood, "Il n'y avait presque pas de mots pour exprimer les sentiments. [...]. La langue du sentiment était celle des chansons de Luis Mariano et de Tino Rossi, des romans de Delly, des feuilletons du *Petit Écho de la mode* et de *La Vie en fleurs*" (*La Honte* 74). Because the codified language of flowers in French culture is often at odds with Ernaux's social reality, she seems to have compensated by creating her own "language of flowers" by which she: depicts the naturalness and authenticity of her parents' agrarian culture; points up the materialism and artificiality of the lucrative funeral business; marks the decline of her mother's vitality; highlights the contrived routine and atmosphere in nursing homes; and, exposes the arbitrariness of bourgeois codes of social conduct. Ernaux also uses flowers to make a statement about language itself.

The meanings that Ernaux conveys through flowers, real and artificial, are evident in a telling way in the scene at the beginning of *Une femme* in which Ernaux relates the particulars of arranging her mother's funeral. A display of artificial flowers in the funeral home prefigures the

business-oriented meeting with one of the staff members assisting her with the details of the ceremony:

Mon ex-mari m'a accompagnée aux pompes funèbres. Derrière l'étalage de *fleurs artificielles*, il y avait des fauteuils et une table basse avec des revues. Un employé nous a conduits dans un bureau, posé des questions sur la date du décès, le lieu de l'inhumation, une messe ou non. Il notait tout sur un grand bordereau et tapait de temps en temps sur une calculette. Il nous a emmenés dans une pièce noire, sans fenêtres, qu'il a éclairée. Une dizaine de cercueils étaient debout contre le mur. L'employé a précisé : « Tous les prix sont t.c. ». Trois cercueils étaient ouverts pour qu'on puisse choisir aussi la couleur du capitonnage. *J'ai pris du chêne parce que c'était l'arbre qu'elle préférait* et qu'elle s'inquiétait toujours de savoir devant un meuble neuf s'il était en chêne. Mon ex-mari m'a suggéré du *rose violine* pour le capiton. [...] Ils s'occupaient de tout, *sauf de la fourniture des fleurs naturelles*. (14-15; italics mine)

The funeral home takes care of all of the sundry details—except for the fresh flowers. The flowers in the display are just another manifestation of the unsentimental experience: “pièce noire, sans fenêtres, qu'il a éclairée,” “calculette,” “toutes taxes comprises,” “bordereau” (14-15). These details contrast sharply with Ernaux's own concerns of commemorating her mother by choosing a casket made from the wood of her favorite tree, and by selecting for the silk lining her mother's favorite color—derived from the name of a flower—“rose violine.” When Ernaux later returns to the mortuary with her sons for a viewing, she brings along a few small branches of blooming quince to place next to her body in the casket, and again there is an incongruity between the sentiment she wishes to express, and the environment which surrounds her: “Nous

étions sur des chaises alignées le long du mur, face à des sanitaires, dont la porte était restée ouverte. Je voulais voir encore ma mère et poser sur elle *deux petites branches de cognassier en fleur* que j'avais dans mon sac" (15-16; italics mine). Along with the indignity of being made to wait unceremoniously in a hallway in front of restrooms whose door has been left open, there is a feeling of having to communicate in an artificial environment: "C'était dans une grande salle nue, en béton. Je ne sais pas d'où venait le peu de jour. [...] Il m'a semblé qu'il nous avait amenés devant ma mère pour qu'on constate la bonne qualité des prestations de l'entreprise" (16). What is more, it is the grieving family who feels pressured to reassure the employee who is more concerned about eliciting an emotional response from them for the quality product he is selling than he is in expressing any genuine sympathy for their loss. The cold hard cement architecture and the unidentifiable light source seem to be part and parcel of the unpleasant experience. As such, the presence of artificial flowers in the display of the funeral parlor aptly advertises the experience of dealing with the the unsentimental, and pecuniary details at the funeral home.

Artificial flowers have another more general association with the rites of burial in that they are quite often placed on grave sites by people who—no doubt sincerely—wish to show their respect to their deceased loved ones. It is true that artificial flowers are a more practical, economical choice since they are less expensive, and because they resist the elements longer than real flowers, but Ernaux seems to prefer the latter. In *L'autre fille* (a letter written to her older, deceased sister, Ginette) she explains that she decorates Ginette's and her parents' tombstones with real flowers: "Je repose sur chacune un chrysanthème de couleur différente, quelquefois sur la tienne une bruyère, dont j'enfonce le pot dans le gravier de la jardinière creusée exprès, au pied de la dalle" (10-11).

But in some circumstances real flowers can be problematic as well. This is evident when Ernaux goes to the florist to order flowers for the funeral ceremony: “Je voulais des lis blancs, mais la fleuriste me les a déconseillés, on ne les fait que pour les enfants, les jeunes filles à la rigueur (14-15). Ernaux discovers that her natural inclination to choose lilies is apparently an inappropriate choice. She does not relate any emotion with regard to making this mistake, but one can imagine feeling embarrassed for not knowing the rules of etiquette for choosing the “appropriate” flowers in this solemn social situation—in effect she is illiterate in the bourgeois language of flowers. The verbal exchange between the two women is a scene that subtly illustrates a clash of codes between two different social classes. This moment at the florist is yet another confirmation that she, the grown woman who most of the time feels as if she has succeeded in becoming “vraiment une bourgeoise” (*La Place* 23), will never completely master the secret codes of the upper class. These rules, it seems, will forever elude and haunt her. Ignorance of the proper social code marks one as being uncultivated—a subtle, but humiliating reminder from the world of the cultural elite that she is a class imposter, a sentiment expressed by the narrator in the obliquely autobiographic work, *Les Armoires vides*: “ma culture c’est du toc” (169). Sanda Golopentia also notes the presence of this fear of not being able to pass as bourgeois in the character of Ernaux’s fictional double, Denise Lesur, in *Ce qu’ils disent ou rien* (Ernaux’s first novel which is in large part autobiographical). Golopentia explains that the young Denise must do a delicate balancing act of oscillating between two social realities in order to fit into the world of her working-class parents at home, and to the world of her upper middle-class schoolmates of the private Catholic school she attends:

De huit à douze ans l’héroïne réussit à maintenir l’équilibre entre les deux mondes—celui du café-épicerie et celui de l’école-église. C’est la saison du

jongleur, de la vie double, de l’alternance encore possible entre la vie personnelle et le rôle social. Mais c’est aussi la saison des *humiliations culturelles, de la chasse aux codes secrets qui doivent être arrachés, inférés, car ils représentent des mots de passe, des secrets de caste.* (90; italics mine)

The scene at the florist thus illustrates what Bourdieu terms the “cultural arbitrary” in which “[...] the differential power relations pertaining to [a] culture have no necessary basis, but are rather arbitrarily constructed to reflect the interests of dominant groups” (Webb, Schirato, Danaher x). In this short interaction, the florist is presumably able to deduce that Ernaux is from a lower social class. She silently endures the sting of being corrected for her ignorance of the language of flowers, put in her place as it were. But through writing *Une femme*, she is able to transfigure the embarrassing exchange with the florist to match her own social reality. She does this by using a metaphor to describe the effect that Alzheimer’s had on her mother’s physical and mental state: “Elle était une petite fille qui ne grandirait pas” (101). Although stylistically simple as a metaphor, it is significant in part because it is unusual to find an explicit metaphor of any sort in Ernaux’s writing. This modest turn of phrase makes lilies the metaphorically appropriate choice for her mother—the little girl who will never grow up—thereby making the florist’s remark that lilies are only for young girls unwittingly ironic.

In this manner, Ernaux retaliates against the upper class by creating her own secret codes that she camouflages with her seemingly flat, and therefore artless, prose style. The writer’s revenge is not directed specifically toward the individual florist, but to the powers that be which, through multiple institutions, exert their control of all linguistic exchanges, including a codified language of flowers. Ernaux’s careful positioning of references to flowers throughout *Une femme* exhibits a delicate and nuanced weaving into the narrative of the work to subvert this code and to



produce her very own language of flowers. Furthermore, Ernaux's subtle allusions to flowers are managed in such a way as to avoid overtly drawing attention to her disdain of the dominant class which controls the set of values that decides what is, and is not, culturally valuable. The neutral tone of Ernaux's writing style is in accordance with the caution her parents always took never to draw attention to themselves, always hyperattentive about not provoking any group or individual who might threaten their precarious security. If her parents were critical of anyone, they knew how to hide it: "Règle : déjouer constamment le regard critique des autres, par la politesse, l'absence d'opinion, une attention minutieuse aux humeurs qui risquent de vous atteindre" (*La Place* 61). In a similar manner, Ernaux effectively conceals her opinions through the flat tone of her prose style.

Flowers from a florist are the cause of discomfort in another scene that comes up elsewhere in Ernaux's œuvre in a short piece entitled "Retours," written before *Une femme*. This short narrative describes the last time she visited her mother before the latter was admitted to a nursing home. Ernaux recalls a moment in which offering her mother a bouquet of gladiolas from a florist's shop provokes a similar feeling of social distance between the two of them: "Elle a pris les glaïeuls avec gêne, en me remerciant d'un ton artificiel. J'avais oublié : lui offrir des fleurs du fleuriste lui a toujours paru, venant de ma part, une grimace, un geste de gens qui la froisse. J'avais l'air de la traiter comme une femme étrangère, c'est-à-dire, pas de la famille, avec chichi" (70). This exchange between mother and daughter exhibits another clash of codes. Ernaux, having adopted the manners of the upper middle class, inadvertently offends her mother who no doubt finds the gesture of giving flowers from a florist to be overly formal, a sign of affected manners, and a prodigious waste of money as well.<sup>34</sup>

These experiences with flowers from a florist's shop show how even real flowers can create negative connotations. But artificial flowers in the work always have negative associations. This is evident in the reproduced pattern of floral motifs on her mother's clothing described in Ernaux's recollection of a happy memory of a summer day in 1952 when together they visited the beach at Étretat. Her mother changed out of her mourning attire (worn partly out of respect for her own mother's passing, but also to keep up appearances for the neighbors), and put on a blue dress—with a large floral pattern:

Nous sommes venues en car à Étretat passer la journée. Elle grimpe sur la falaise à travers les herbes, dans *sa robe de crêpe bleu à grandes fleurs*, qu'elle a enfilée derrière les rochers à la place de son tailleur de deuil mis pour partir à cause des gens du quartier. Elle arrive après moi au sommet, à bout de souffle, la figure brillante de sueur par-dessus la poudre. Elle ne voyait plus ses règles depuis deux mois. (59-60; italics mine)

Although the large floral print aptly signifies her mother's joie de vivre, and the spirit of the occasion—a joyful carefree day to be spent at the beach not thinking about death—these are not real flowers. They are linked to other factors in her mother's life. After describing her mother as energetic, Ernaux informs us at the end of the quote that her mother is in menopause. The cessation of her mother's menses seems to mediate the meaning of flowers on her dress. There is something “in between” about the presence of artificial flowers. They hint at an inevitable decline in vitality. What is more, in subsequent observations, the flower patterns on her mother's clothing become smaller as she ages. Ernaux makes note of the floral motif on the blouse her mother wears over the standard-issue hospital gown in the nursing home: “Comme la plupart des autres femmes, pour plus de commodité, on l'habillait d'un sarrau ouvert dans le dos de haut en

bas, avec une blouse à fleurs par-dessus. Elle n'avait plus honte de rien, porter une couche pour l'urine, manger voracement avec ses doigts" (98). And in « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* », the published journal in which Ernaux records her mother's struggles with Alzheimer's, she makes a remark about the small floral print of her mother's hospital gown: "Ma mère porte une robe à petites fleurs, comme j'en ai porté, enfant" (70). This suggests that Ernaux associates the smallness of the flowers on her mother's clothing with her return to a child-like state caused by Alzheimer's. Moreover, in other journal entries of her visits to the nursing home the flowers on her clothing are always small. Their smallness seems to be a sort of declension of the large ones on the dress her mother wore at the beach: the flowers on her clothing, like her mother, are no longer robust.

Flower references are especially concentrated within the context of Ernaux's visits to her mother in the nursing home. During these visits Ernaux senses that time has essentially stopped in this place. In « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » she notes that clocks are present everywhere in the nursing home, but ironically not a single one shows the correct time. The passing of seasons is virtually undiscernable within its walls: "[M]a mère est entrée définitivement dans cet espace sans saisons, la même chaleur douce, odorante, toute l'année, ni temps, juste la répétition bien réglée des fonctions, manger, se coucher, etc." (*Une femme* 97), and the artificial flowers of the floral wallpaper (94) accentuate the atmosphere of stagnation.

Only two real (versus artificial) flowers make an appearance in the description of the nursing home: forsythia, and lily of the valley, both harbingers of spring. Forsythia are the flowers Ernaux offers her mother the day before her passing. Blooming abundantly in gardens and parks at the beginning of spring, they are also the type of flowers that do not have to be purchased at a florist's shop. Giving her mother forsythia suggests that Ernaux has learned how

to make the right gesture, how to offer her mother the right kind of flowers that do not cause a clash of codes, aggravating the social distance between the two of them. These flowers communicate genuine sentiment, unlike the aforementioned gladiolas she had offered her on another occasion.

Ernaux mentions this bouquet of forsythia at the beginning and at the end of *Une femme*. The work begins with an account of the period immediately following her mother's death, at which time Ernaux returns to the nursing home to make the funeral arrangements. Ernaux briefly notices the vase of forsythia branches that she had brought the previous day when she had visited. As narrator, she then proceeds with the chronological telling of her mother's life story which ultimately brings the narration back to the last day Ernaux spent with her, and the grief-stricken weeks following her death. So, this first reference to forsythia occurs at the beginning of the work, but after her mother's death:

[Le crucifix] manquait les deux clous fixant les bras de cuivre sur la croix.

L'infirmier n'était pas sûr d'en trouver. Cela n'avait pas d'importance, je désirais qu'on lui mette quand même son crucifix. *Sur la table roulante, il y avait le bouquet de forsythias que j'avais apporté la veille.* L'infirmier m'a conseillé d'aller tout de suite à l'état civil de l'hôpital. (12; italics mine)

This first mention of these particular flowers seems devoid of any significance. It is as if this sentence is arbitrarily inserted amongst an inventory of memories.

In the final pages of *Une femme*, Ernaux gives an account of the events directly *preceding* her mother's death. What seemed like a passing remark about the forsythia at the beginning of the work comes into clearer focus when the narration provides more details about her memory of giving her mother the flowers:

Elle a passé un autre hiver. Le dimanche après Pâques, je suis venue la voir *avec du forsythia*. Il faisait gris et froid. [...] *Elle m'a souri* quand je me suis approchée d'elle. [...] J'ai roulé son fauteuil jusqu'à sa chambre. J'ai arrangé *les branches de forsythia* dans un vase. Je me suis assise à côté d'elle et je lui ai donné à manger du chocolat. [...] À un moment, *elle a essayé de saisir les branches de forsythia*. [...] Elle est morte le lendemain. (102-03; italics mine)

The memory of this last day spent with her mother and the associations created by the forsythia are not apparent in Ernaux's first reference to them. But seeing the blooming branches of forsythia the day after her mother's passing must have reminded Ernaux of the smile the flowers brought to her face when she arrived, her mother's reaching out to touch the flowers—observable proof through a physical gesture that her mother was still attracted to the beauty and pleasures of life. Her mother also smiled at Ernaux's parting, a moment of recognition and appreciation not to be taken for granted by mother, or daughter—both of whom had been affected by the mother's illness.

Lily of the valley is the other real flower to which Ernaux refers in the context of the nursing home. The offering of these flowers typifies the highly organized and structured schedule of the institution: "Des fêtes sans doute : la distribution de gâteaux tous les jeudis par les femmes bénévoles, une coupe de champagne au jour de l'an, *le muguet du premier mai*. [...] Et cette philosophie régulière des soignantes: « Allez, madame D..., prenez un bonbon, ça fait passer le temps »" (97; italics mine). In France, it is customary to offer a small bunch of lily of the valley to loved ones on May 1<sup>st</sup> to mark the arrival of spring, but these flowers lose their significance in the nursing home's seasonless environment. Furthermore, the common practice of giving lily of the valley comes less from natural feelings of affection, and more from formality

and adherence to codes of social conduct. May 1<sup>st</sup> is also Labor Day in France, but the “fête du travail” was now ironic in the context of the nursing home, and perhaps doubly so in the case of Ernaux’s mother whose life had been a continuous struggle to make ends meet. Ernaux brings this to the reader’s attention in *La Place* where she notes that when her father died, her mother closed the café-épicerie for just one hour so that his body could be transferred to the funeral parlor: “Le corps a dû être enveloppé dans un sac de plastique et traîné, plus que transporté, sur les marches jusqu’au cercueil posé au milieu du café *fermé pour une heure*” (18-19; italics mine). The understated fact at the end of this sentence—“fermé pour une heure”—powerfully communicates, without pathos, a hard truth: her mother could not risk losing business by closing the *café-épicerie* for more than an hour even to deal with this poignant moment in her life.<sup>35</sup> Labor Day was probably not a holiday, albeit a working-class one, that her parents would have observed. Lily of the valley was not a flower that fit into the reality of her mother’s (or father’s) world.

When Ernaux’s mother came to live with her and her family in their home in a newly constructed subdivision near Paris, it was evident that her mother was not at ease in this neighborhood. Interestingly, the streets that Ernaux includes in her account are all named after flowers: “Rue des Roses et des Jonquilles, des Bleuets” (81). These street signs falsely advertised a place devoted to gardens, or perhaps a community that had an appreciation of flowers, but there was nothing natural about this neighborhood.<sup>36</sup> It was lifeless; an atmosphere of materialism and workaday concerns pervaded this suburb of Paris. When the neighbors were not busy at their jobs, they occupied themselves with such banal activities as washing their cars:

Nous habitons un pavillon dans un lotissement neuf, au milieu d’une plaine. Les commerces et les écoles étaient à deux kilomètres. On ne voyait les habitants que

le soir. Pendant le week-end, ils lavaient la voiture et montaient des étagères dans le garage. C'était un endroit vague et sans regard où l'on se sentait flotter, privé de sentiments et de pensée. [...] Quelquefois, [ma mère] poussait jusqu'au centre Leclerc, de l'autre côté de l'autoroute, par des voies défoncées où les voitures en passant l'éclaboussaient. Elle rentrait, le visage fermé. (80-81)

As in the nursing home, there was an atmosphere in this neighborhood of stagnation, sequestration, and disconnectedness. In short, there was nothing edenic about these streets. The street signs with names of flowers were literally dead signs, clichés, devoid of meaning, but perhaps still imbued with enough currency to attract potential home buyers to the newly developed neighborhood in order to make a profit. The street signs did not signify what they connoted; they were at once meaningless signifiers, and signifiers of meaninglessness.

As the examples to this point suggest, whether natural or artificial, all the references to flowers in *Une femme* are connected to Ernaux's mother. These associations are intertwined with the latter's life-long desire to elevate herself through reading, imitating the speech of the upper class, adopting their rules of social etiquette, and learning the names of flowers: "Elle désirait apprendre : les règles du savoir-vivre [...] les noms des grands écrivains, les films sortant sur les écrans (mais elle n'allait pas au cinéma, faute de temps), *les noms des fleurs dans les jardins*. [...] S'élever, pour elle, c'était d'abord apprendre (elle disait, « il faut meubler son esprit ») et rien n'était plus beau que le savoir" (57; italics mine). Knowing the names of flowers, among other things, is proof of being socially cultured.

Ernaux implicitly shows us that her mother's desire to *cultivate* herself took a literal form in her manic habit of tending to her flower beds: "[...] en été elle sarclait les plates-bandes de rosiers, avant l'ouverture" (54), and when she came to stay with Ernaux and her family after they

moved from the subdivision to another older neighborhood, unlike the vacuous suburban neighborhood they lived in before, Ernaux reminds us that her mother continued this iterative behavior: “Nous avons quitté le lotissement et nous étions installés dans le vieux village accolé à la ville nouvelle. À peine arrivée, elle sarclait les plates-bandes de fleurs” (84).

Her father’s incessant hoeing is mentioned as well in a fragment in *La Place*, but instead of mimicking a desire to cultivate himself, this reference calls attention to the differences between Ernaux’s own cultural occupations at the university versus the “cultural occupations” of her father: “Je pensais qu’il ne pouvait plus rien pour moi. Ses mots et ses idées n’avaient pas cours dans les salles de français ou de philo, les séjours à canapé de velours rouge des amies de classe. L’été par la fenêtre ouverte de ma chambre, *j’entendais le bruit de sa bêche aplatissant régulièrement la terre retournée*” (*La Place* 83; italics mine). Her father’s hoeing is portrayed in diametrical opposition to being cultivated, in the metaphorical sense, but her mother’s constant gardening was a physical manifestation, a tic, of her continuous effort to be cultured; it is as if this impulse pervaded every fiber of her body.

At this point it can be shown that the forsythia, as well as all of the other references to flowers, form an integral connection between the last time Ernaux saw her mother alive and the following day when her mother had passed away. Ernaux gradually builds layers of meaning with flowers with regard to her mother’s life, and through these associations she is able to create a coherent story. This is evident in the final fragments of *Une femme* in which Ernaux returns her attention to making sense of the day before and the day of her mother’s death: “Dans la semaine qui a suivi, je revoyais ce dimanche, où elle était vivante, les chaussettes brunes, *le forsythia*, ses gestes, son sourire quand je lui avais dit au revoir, puis le lundi, où elle était morte, couchée dans son lit. *Je n’arrivais pas à joindre les deux jours*” (103; italics mine). It is as if her mother’s



passing had created a breach in her personal reality, permanently blocking her ability to make sense of her mother's life, and death. Immediately following this assertion is the very short, but significant fragment: "Maintenant, tout est lié" (103). The phrase is somewhat enigmatic.<sup>37</sup> It isn't immediately clear what "tout" refers to, but an entry from « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » in the days immediately following the mother's death makes it more clear: "La vie, la mort demeurent de chaque côté de quelque chose, disjoints. Je suis dans la disjonction. Un jour, ce sera fini peut-être, *tout sera lié comme une histoire*. Pour écrire, il faudrait que j'attende que ces deux jours soient fondus dans le reste de ma vie" (106-07; italics mine). It is not until she has reached the end of the writing process of *Une femme* that she feels as if she has saved her mother's life story from disappearing into oblivion. It is only through the act of writing that Ernaux finds a way to link the two days together, and to find the connections that enable her to make sense of her mother's life and death—the forsythia are the single recurring element in three significantly linked passages; the one describing the day of her mother's death, the one describing the day before her mother's death when Ernaux visited her; and the passage directly preceding the "maintenant tout est lié" (103) fragment.

This fragment stating that "maintenant tout est lié" immediately follows the description of their last moments spent together, implying that Ernaux felt she had made sense of her mother's life by writing her story, an endeavor that seemed hopeless at the beginning of the work: "C'est une entreprise difficile. Pour moi, ma mère n'a pas d'histoire" (22). But by the end of the writing process, Ernaux has transformed the essence of her mother's life into a story. "Il fallait que ma mère, née dans un milieu dominé, dont elle a voulu sortir, devienne histoire, pour que je me sente moins seule et factice dans le monde dominant des mots et des idées où selon son désir, je suis passée" (106). The mention of forsythia early on in *Une femme*, and twice again

at the end, in itself helps to tie her mother's story together. Like a golden arch, the forsythia create a supporting architecture that frames the beginning and end of the work.

But a fact about her mother's life that Ernaux discovers after her death calls into doubt her assertion "Maintenant tout est lié" (103) and therefore the coherence of the work. This doubt arises when one of Ernaux's aunts divulges a detail about her mother that Ernaux is troubled by: "Il y a quelques semaines, l'une de mes tantes m'a dit que ma mère et mon père, au début où ils se fréquentaient, avaient rendez-vous dans les cabinets, à l'usine. Maintenant que ma mère est morte, je voudrais n'apprendre rien de plus sur elle que ce que j'ai su pendant qu'elle vivait" (105). This anecdote about her parents' premarital love life hints at a crack in the unity of the work, and therefore threatens Ernaux's conviction that her narrative is the hermetic truth she strived for. Her aunt's remark inconveniently points out that Ernaux's mother was not always the no-nonsense, serious-minded Catholic girl Ernaux had said she was: "[...] jamais elle ne s'était laissé toucher dans les toilettes" (*La Place* 36), and "Ma mère s'est efforcée de se conformer au jugement le plus favorable porté sur les filles travaillant en usine : 'ouvrière, *mais* sérieuse' pratiquant la messe et les sacrements, [...] n'allant jamais au bois seule avec un garçon" (*Une femme* 33). Her aunt's remark contradicts Ernaux's portrayal of her mother. This event later causes her to address more directly the difficulty of telling a coherent story in the preface to « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* »<sup>38</sup> (written nine years after the publication of *Une femme*):

Longtemps, j'ai pensé que je ne le publierais jamais [ce journal]. Peut-être désirais-je laisser de ma mère et de ma relation avec elle, une seule image, une seule vérité, celle que j'ai tenté d'approcher dans *Une femme*. Je crois maintenant que l'unicité, la cohérence auxquelles aboutit une œuvre—quelle que soit par

ailleurs la volonté de prendre en compte les données les plus contradictoires—  
doivent être mises en danger toutes les fois que c'est possible. (12-13)

As Lyn Thomas explains, “There is a clear intention to disrupt the finality of the published work” (Annie Ernaux, *Class Gender and Whiteness* 163). If a definitive and authoritative story of her mother’s life (or anyone’s life for that matter) is not possible, and if indeed it must be challenged as Ernaux proclaims above, perhaps it was sufficient that the process of writing helped her achieve a temporary peace that attenuated the grief she felt over the loss of her mother.<sup>39</sup>

In « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* », Ernaux recalls a song that always moved her to tears about a child who gives his working-class mother white roses when he visits her on Sundays: “Penser à la chanson *Les roses blanches*,<sup>40</sup> qui me faisait pleurer enfant. Je pleure à nouveau, à cela, cette chanson” (« *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » 109). The floral motif in *Une femme* is like a metaphorical bouquet in honor of her mother. But one might speculate that the flowers are for the writer as well, that they console her in her grief because this manner of writing enables her to bring depth of meaning to her mother’s story.

It is evident that there is a close association in Ernaux’s mind between flowers and her mother. There is nothing especially surprising about this, but Ernaux makes a telling connection in *Les Années* (2008) between flowers and non-literal language. Ernaux links her own failing memory for recalling the technical terms for figures of speech with her mother’s inability to recall the names of flowers: “Faute d’emploi, le langage savant acquis pour expliquer les textes s’est effacé en elle<sup>41</sup>—obligée, quand elle cherche sans la retrouver la dénomination d’une figure de style, de convenir comme sa mère le faisait à propos d’une fleur dont le nom lui échappait, « je l’ai su » (*Les Années* 234). If Ernaux has forgotten some of the technical jargon for figures

of speech, she has nonetheless found a clever—and artful—means of expressing her ideas in a nonliteral, metaphoric, manner. The preceding analysis has endeavored to encourage readers to question the author’s claims to write in the “most neutral manner possible,”<sup>42</sup> and to look beyond the seeming simplicity of Ernaux’s *écriture plate*, lest they miss the symbolic ornaments that grace this work.

### **A Metaphorical Funeral**

Flower references are present in *La Place* as well. Returning home shortly after her father’s passing, Ernaux likens the smell of death in the house to that of flowers that have begun to decay: “L’odeur est arrivée le lundi. Je ne l’avais pas imaginée. Relent doux puis terrible de fleurs oubliées dans un vase d’eau croupie” (17; italics mine). However, the few mentions of flowers in *La Place* do not form an over-arching symbolic system as they do in *Une femme*. But in the fragments surrounding the account of her father’s death, Ernaux uses a process of back-and-forth linking between her father’s funeral and details about her husband and their relationship, details which when considered together will suggest the death of their marriage, and a metaphorical burial of her husband’s class. The first indication of a connection between her father’s death and her own marriage is in reference to the suit her father was buried in: “Ma mère a pensé qu’on pourrait le revêtir du costume qu’il avait étrenné pour mon mariage trois ans avant” (*La Place* 14). This suit he wore for the first time at her wedding, and then wore for the last time at his own funeral, is a connecting point for both events. It is probable that this suit was only worn on these two occasions, given the fact that it was specifically purchased for her wedding. Ernaux also notes that her father usually wore his workman’s “bleus” even while helping out in the café, and that he never attended church.

A second explicit linking occurs with the timing of the arrival and departure of her husband. He arrived just before the funeral, and left directly afterwards, so his presence paralleled the funerary ceremonies: “Mon mari est arrivé le soir, bronzé, gêné par un deuil qui n’était pas le sien. Plus que jamais, il a paru déplacé ici.” (19). The word “deuil”, bereavement, is transferred from the father to the husband whom she portrays as somewhat annoyed that he is not the center of attention. Ernaux links the funeral and her marriage a third time in noting that her mother’s audible sobs during the lowering of the casket at the cemetery remind her of her wedding day: “Au cimetière, quand le cercueil est descendu en oscillant entre les cordes, ma mère a éclaté en sanglots, comme le jour de mon mariage, à la messe” (20-21). There is also a spatial parallel that inextricably links these two events: both the funeral and the wedding took place in the same church.

Ernaux further extends the pall of death and its association with their marriage in relating this intimate detail: “On a dormi dans le seul lit à deux places, celui où mon père était mort” (19). Her parents’ *café-épicerie* was also their home and the family slept above their business in the one bedroom. Her parents’ bed was the only bed in the house large enough for Ernaux and her husband. This bed is strongly associated with death because her father had died there. His body remained there until the day after he passed away when the undertakers came to transport it to the funeral home.

This repeated linking of her husband, her marriage, and her father’s funeral leads one to surmise that with the same pen, the same words, Ernaux is metaphorically giving life to her father by leaving a permanent record of his existence while at the same time signaling the death of her marriage. The husband, who functions as a synecdoche for his entire class, is given a metaphorical burial. The funeral becomes a chiasmus-like transposition in which the father is

given eternal life through the book that is ultimately published. Near the end of *La Place* Ernaux makes it clear that the work in progress has been an effort to recover her heritage, the culture of her father that she once knew, but had to abandon in order to gain entry into the upper class: “J’ai fini de mettre au jour l’héritage que j’ai dû déposer au seuil du monde bourgeois et cultivé quand j’y suis entrée” (111). Just as Ernaux’s father’s life is saved from oblivion by the publication of *La Place*, so too is her mother’s story with the publication of *Une femme* in 1987, but this time the metaphor is one of giving birth.

### **The Key to Dreams: Metaphor in Its Natural, Organic, and Nascent State**

As many critics have noted, and as Ernaux herself asserts, *Une femme* metaphorically represents a pregnancy. Ernaux alerts us to this metaphor early on in her characteristic self-reflexive manner of commenting within the text on the work that she is writing: “Il me semble maintenant que j’écris sur ma mère pour, à mon tour, la mettre au monde” (43). She does not use a poetic metaphor, but evokes the association in a simple declarative tone with words that suggest the “this is like” comparison with the phrase “Il me semble” that announces the analogy. She considers this writing process to be a way of giving birth to her mother, not a literal birth, but a metaphorical rebirth by bringing her into the literary world. Another indication that this writing process is a metaphorical pregnancy comes at the end of the work; Ernaux indicates that the period of writing about her mother dates from April, 1986 to February, 1987, a little over 10 months, very nearly the equivalent gestation period of a real pregnancy.

But this metaphorical pregnancy is a complicated one. The period following her mother’s death is, of course, an emotionally difficult time, and so the work’s gestation period is concurrent with Ernaux’s process of mourning. As Pierre-Louis Fort’s analysis demonstrates, *Une femme* focuses on the relationship between the author’s two processes of writing and mourning. In a

fragile emotional state, Ernaux feels at risk of becoming overwhelmed by the powerful emotions of grief, anger, and powerlessness, as can be appreciated in this remark: “Envie d’injurier ceux qui me demandent en souriant, « c’est pour quand votre prochain livre ? »” (69). The innocent question about when her next book will be coming out inadvertently mimics the question frequently asked of pregnant women: “So when is the baby due?”, but instead of being able to reply with maternal pride and enthusiasm, the author is overcome with anger and sadness. Viewed from one perspective, she envisions a book about her mother as being a sort of long obituary. “Giving birth” to this book would represent a miscarriage, and would be the equivalent of a second death, for which Ernaux would be responsible: “Dans ces conditions, « sortir » un livre n’a pas de signification, sinon celle de la mort définitive de ma mère” (69).

One of the final fragments of the work suggests that Ernaux has found a way to come to terms with this personal catastrophe. Ernaux, the “pregnant writer-mother,” finds a way to save her “child-mother” from being stillborn. A solution to her dilemma comes in the account of an enigmatic, but compelling, dream that Ernaux had at some point during the process of writing. In this dream, Ernaux and her mother are simultaneously one person, lying in a stream between two waters with plants streaming from the womb of their body. Loraine Day and Siobhán McIlvanney have examined this dream from a Freudian perspective. Their analyses have yielded rich and interesting interpretations, but other meanings can be gleaned from it by a close textual comparison to other elements within *Une femme*. A non-Freudian approach can yield new interpretations of the dream’s meaning. Furthermore, this alternate analysis provides a conduit to connect the dream image to the overarching themes of nature, horticulture, culture, and metaphor in *Une femme*, bringing together a multitude of ostensibly disparate elements. Considering the

dream from a different, non-Freudian, perspective shows how a complex web of associations in the work is crystallized into a single image rich with metaphorical interpretations.

This particular dream is especially significant for two reasons: first of all, it was one of the few dreams, of the many that Ernaux had after her mother's death, that she was able to remember. In the week following her mother's funeral, Ernaux found that although she often dreamt of her, she could not recall any specific details: "En me réveillant, je savais que ma mère était morte. Je sortais de rêves lourds dont je ne me rappelais rien, sauf qu'elle y était, et morte" (20). Secondly, Ernaux chooses to describe this dream to the reader only at the end of the process of writing *Une femme*. Ernaux's placement of the description of the dream at the end of the work gives the impression that the dream is somehow connected to the metaphorical gestation period, and therefore appears to be the result of the creative process of writing about her mother for the span of ten months:

Pendant les dix mois où j'ai écrit, je rêvais d'elle presque toutes les nuits. Une fois, j'étais couchée au milieu d'une rivière, entre deux eaux. De mon ventre, de mon sexe à nouveau lisse comme celui d'une petite fille partaient des plantes en filaments, qui flottaient, molles. Ce n'était pas seulement mon sexe, c'était aussi celui de ma mère. (104)

The dream did not have any sort of a narrative, and Ernaux's description of it is reminiscent of surrealist art. With the exception of the flowing water, there is no movement, but the body is alive in the dream, thus allaying Ernaux's fears of her mother's "mort définitive," and thereby reversing the *fait accompli* of her death. Moreover, the dream image is like the baby an expectant mother has planned for, nurtured, and who is now fully formed, but this pregnancy was brought to term through a process of protracted reflection and writing.



Many elements of the dream can be correlated to previous details in the book. For example, in the dream, the mother and daughter are one and the same; they have become the body of a prepubescent girl. At an earlier point in the work Ernaux describes her mother in her prime: “La femme de ces années-là était belle [...]. Rien de son corps ne m’a échappé. Je croyais qu’en grandissant je serais elle” (45-46). The dream allows both women to become one woman in a youthful body. So the youthful body in the dream metaphorically represents her mother transformed into a healthy prepubescent girl, but not a child in the metaphorical sense that Alzheimer’s had brought about. The effects that the progressive disease had on her mother made her increasingly dependent on others for the care of her most basic needs, and “like a little girl.” In the weeks before Ernaux made the decision to admit her to a facility that could care for her, Ernaux felt increasingly helpless and disturbed: “Je ne voulais pas qu’elle redevienne une petite fille, elle n’en avait pas le « droit »” (93). The dream de-metaphorizes and then re-metaphorizes the girl-like qualities of her mother’s body. In the dream there is no disease. The prepubescent body is a youthful and healthy one no longer afflicted by the child-like attributes brought on by the effects of Alzheimer’s.

But the dream is not necessarily just about the mother’s body and her illness. Both women had at different periods in each others’ lives been troubled by the other’s body: Ernaux by her mother’s body which is progressively infantilized by Alzheimer’s, and her mother in a converse manner by the development of her daughter’s body, and more precisely by her sexual maturation. Ernaux relates this concern earlier in the work:

Elle n’a pas aimé me voir grandir. Lorsqu’elle me voyait déshabillée, mon corps semblait la dégoûter. Sans doute, avoir de la poitrine, des hanches signifiait une menace, celle que je coure après les garçons et ne m’intéresse plus aux études.

Elle essayait de me conserver enfant, disant que j'avais treize ans à une semaine de mes quatorze ans [...]. (61)

The dream is a safe, albeit unchanging, image for both women. Ernaux's dream of the prepubescent girl is an image that could have effectively put her mother at ease by satisfying her protective instincts to keep her daughter, Ernaux, in a permanent state of prepubescence, and thereby avoid succumbing to the dangers associated with entering puberty—discovering boys and becoming distracted from her studies.

The dream image could mediate the fears of both women by representing the female body in stasis at a pivotal point of physical development between childhood and becoming a woman. In the dream, the body is neither child, nor woman, and as such, the mother is no longer a helpless child. The daughter has not yet reached puberty, and is in no danger of becoming pregnant, thereby destroying all of her mother's efforts of raising a daughter who will attend university and achieve a higher social position. The woman-child in this dream image is the nexus at which mother and daughter can co-exist. Neither Ernaux, nor her mother, is threatened by the flow of events: by the degrading process of the mother's disease, or the potentially degrading sexual development of the daughter.

Another aspect of this dream that is significant are the filaments of plants which flow from the unified mother-daughter body. The plant filaments bring to mind a collection of umbilical cords evoking the birth of several children: her sister Ginette, her own birth, the birth of her own mother through Ernaux's body, a body of writing, and perhaps, like a female version of the Tree of Jesse, an entire genealogy of women that came before her.<sup>43</sup> Pierre-Louis Fort views them as a metaphor for Ernaux's process of writing *Une femme*:

Ne serait-il pas possible de voir dans les plantes une métaphore de l'œuvre ? Dans *Une femme déjà*, Annie Ernaux écrivait : « Il me semble maintenant que j'écris sur ma mère pour, à mon tour, la mettre au monde » (43). Ici, un même processus d'engendrement est perceptible. « Les plantes en filaments » sortant de ce sexe à l'identité floue, pourraient être l'image de ce texte en cours de création dont l'instabilité, le caractère fluctuant (on le voit dans les réflexions métatextuelles omniprésentes où la narratrice s'interroge sur sa capacité à accomplir son projet et à y répondre) est à l'image de la mollesse des plantes. (*Ma mère, la morte* 90-91)

The image of these filaments “qui flottaient, molles” brings to mind not only this work, as Fort points out so well, but the distinctive quality of Ernaux’s prose style more generally, beginning with *La Place* in which fragments “float” on the page, disconnected from one another by varying amounts of space and stripped of all the transitional phrasing that might otherwise connect a fragment, a sentence, or one idea to the next.

What is more, these filaments of plants point to the literal meaning of culture, as in “horticulture.” Her father’s use of the word “culture,” as previously quoted, emphasized the difference in meaning that “culture” held for him (as well as for anyone of her parent’s agricultural background) versus the meaning it would denote to anyone from a higher social class: “Au retour [de son service militaire], il n’a plus voulu retourner dans la culture. Il a toujours appelé ainsi le travail de la terre, l’autre sens de culture, le spirituel, lui était inutile” (*La Place* 34).

The filaments of plants as a metaphor for culture seem to be a re-appropriation of the primary meaning of the word “culture.” In their book entitled *Introducing Metaphor*, Murray Knowles and Rosamund Moon cite “culture” as an example of a word that is interesting with

regard to the study of metaphor. Usually the first definition given for a word in the dictionary is its literal meaning. So if the definition of “culture” were to follow the normal pattern, the primary meaning of culture, the first meaning listed in its definition, should be “the cultivation of plants.” But the primary meaning of culture has evolved to be associated with its metaphorical meaning, that is: “the tastes in art and manners that are favored by a social group.” In *Une femme* Ernaux eschews a “cultivated” literary style. In effect she has stripped her prose of literary metaphors. By highlighting her parents’ connections to an agrarian life, she has emphasized the literal meaning of “culture.” And yet, at the same time, Ernaux’s book has become a part of culture in its metaphorical sense.

The provocative image of filaments of plants springing from the womb of the mother-daughter body suggests another metaphor as well, that of cultivating one’s self to be educated, and sophisticated. The mother cultivated herself through reading, through the imitation of bourgeois speech and values, and through her daughter: “Elle a poursuivi son désir d’apprendre à travers moi” (58). Ernaux, who has become a writer, is the result of her self-sacrificing mother’s ambition to raise a daughter who will transcend her lower-class origins to become a member of the educated elite. “En allant avec moi au musée, peut-être éprouvait-elle moins la satisfaction de regarder des vases égyptiens que la fierté de me pousser vers des connaissances et des goûts qu’elle savait être ceux des gens *cultivés*” (58; italics mine). As discussed earlier, Ernaux observed that her mother had the incessant habit of raking and hoeing flower beds. The description of the dream metaphorizes this activity. The cultivation of the mother is portrayed in the dream image by plants flowing forth from her womb. But the mother has cultivated herself in another way, by giving birth to a daughter who will achieve the mother’s ambition of being *cultivated*.<sup>44</sup>

There is also a connection between the notion of “filaments” and the word “lien,” meaning: tie, bond, or connection. Referring to her mother’s death Ernaux states: “J’ai perdu le dernier lien avec le monde dont je suis issue” (106). Through the writing of *Une femme*, however, Ernaux has reconnected with her mother. The image of the unified bodies suggests that Ernaux is now permanently connected, “liée,” with her mother through a literary act of procreation—writing a book as a way of extending her mother’s existence beyond death.

The image in the dream of the prepubescent girl lying down in a river surrounded by two streams of water (“deux eaux”) with plants flowing from her uterus can also bring to mind the term “enfant naturel.” But the “enfant naturel” in the dream does not connote the nightmare of her mother’s generation of an unplanned and unwanted pregnancy. The prospect of giving birth to an “enfant naturel” was a source of terror for any young woman, but especially for the women of Ernaux’s and her mother’s class. Shame and unemployment were certain to follow an unsanctioned, and unplanned pregnancy. Ernaux learned this lesson from an early age through the generations of women who passed it on from mother to daughter: “Veuve, ma grand-mère est devenue encore plus raide, toujours sur le qui-vive. (Deux images de terreur, la prison pour les garçons, *l’enfant naturel pour les filles.*)” (27; italics mine). The dream reproduces a literal representation of an “enfant naturel” through the association of plants and the element of water thereby de-metaphorizing the term from the figurative meaning of “love child” into the literal to create an “enfant naturel” with positive connotations. Through the subconscious processes of dreaming, Ernaux has in effect rescinded the primary and figurative meaning of “enfant naturel,” and reclaimed its literal meaning.

The pattern of binary meanings evoked by the pairing of the words “enfant naturel” in the dream is also present in the word-pair of “fille mère.” In the dream, the body is simultaneously

daughter and mother, literally representing the expression “*filles mères*,” but in the social context of her family’s history, a “*filles mères*” (like an “*enfant naturel*”) was yet another form of shame associated with the poverty of their social class—a stigma whose legacy lingers: “Encore aujourd’hui, dire la Vallée d’avant-guerre, c’est tout dire, la plus forte concentration d’alcooliques et de *filles mères*, l’humidité ruisselant des murs et les nourrissons morts de diarrhée verte en deux heures” (40; italics mine). The mother-daughter body in the dream simultaneously represents the “*filles mères*” and the “*enfant naturel*,” but in a new way that transfigures the terrifying images that connote the vulnerabilities of women of her mother’s generation and class. Ernaux describes La Vallée (a workers’ ghetto built around a textile factory) in starkly realistic terms: the walls streaming with humidity, and the green color of the diarrhea caused by dysentery. But this morbid description bears a curious resemblance to the image of fertility evoked by the water and plants (which are presumably green) in the dream. In the description of La Vallée, the water dripping down the walls and the diarrhea are signs of poverty and insalubrious living conditions, but in the dream, the water seems to be part of the nourishment that gives life to the plants and buoys the girl-mother’s body, like the embryonic fluid that surrounds a baby; instead of mortal green diarrhea flowing from the child’s body, new life comes from the body in the form of plants. The idiomatic meaning of “*enfant naturel*” is transformed into its literal meaning. The dream thus produces a multivalent image whose new associations transform the previously negative ones of shame and poverty into a healthy, positive, and literal image of an “*enfant naturel*.”

This dream of the mother-daughter situated between two currents of water with plants flowing from the [pro]creative space of the body thus resonates with multiple meanings and unifies many seemingly disconnected details from *Une femme*, as well as from « *Je ne suis pas*

*sortie de ma nuit* », and *La Place*. All of the figurative associations that the dream encapsulates arise from the subconscious, in other words an “artless,” process of dreaming. The dream is the epitome of metaphor in its natural, organic, and nascent state. It is *born* in the subconscious from the natural processes of reflection, writing, mourning, and the author’s search for a meaning to her mother’s life story. Ernaux does not explain the dream to us, but all the pieces for constructing the metaphor are laid out for us to assemble on our own. Although the dream is a subconscious, involuntary event, unlike the purposeful crafting of a literary metaphor, Ernaux has purposely placed it at the end of the work *as if* it were a result, the baby as it were, of the writing process. The construction of *Une femme* has an appearance of artlessness, but it is an effect that Ernaux has worked hard to craft.

### **Identifying With Excrement**

A detail from the journal « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » holds additional possibilities for the interpretation of the dream. Not long after her mother’s death, Ernaux noticed, for the first time, the printed words “eaux vannes” on a utility bill: “Me souvenir ce matin, à partir d’un mot lu dans une facture, “les eaux vannes”, que je l’appelais Vanné, quand j’avais six, sept ans. Les larmes me viennent, c’est à cause du temps” (110). The words on the water bill remind her of her mother, she says, because of the homophonic similarity between “vannes,” and “Vanné,” a pet name she used to call her mother. Ernaux does not say it, but there is something else: the word “*eaux*” is similar to the last syllable of her last name, *Ernaux*. The word “*vannes*” also echoes her first name, *Annie*. By transposing the two words and slightly altering the letters, “eaux vannes” becomes uncannily similar to “Annie Ernaux;” it is in fact, coincidentally, an anagram. Moreover, just as the two women have become one woman in the dream, the words

“*eaux vannes*” simultaneously combine elements of both women’s names: her mother’s nickname and Ernaux’s first and last names.

In addition to the similarity of “*eaux vannes*” to Ernaux’s own name and the long forgotten nickname of her mother, the meaning of “*eaux vannes*” (sewage) must have also struck Ernaux’s consciousness for its evocation of urine and feces. It is the meaning of “*eaux vannes*” that makes the similarity of the two women’s names an even more provocative happenstance. The smell of urine and feces is omnipresent in the nursing home, a fact about which Ernaux often comments in her journal following her visits to her mother: “[...] une insupportable odeur de merde m’a suffoquée” (« *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » 44), and again a few pages later: “Le sol des toilettes colle, urine séchée. Tout est urine, l’odeur douce ne part jamais” (« *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » 56). But not only does Ernaux associate the smell of urine and feces with her mother’s nursing home, it is also strongly connected in Ernaux’s mind to her family’s social position. The effluent from the bathroom of their café-épicerie in La Vallée ran directly into the river: “[...] avec un cabinet qui se déversait directement dans la rivière” (*La Place* 40). A photo taken of her father with the family outhouse in the background reminds Ernaux of her family’s peasant-class origins: “Une photo prise dans la courette au bord de la rivière. [...] les cabinets et la buanderie qu’un œil petit bourgeois n’aurait pas choisis comme fond pour la photo” (*La Place* 47). Urine and feces, it would seem, are connected to Ernaux’s life experiences and intimately tied to her sense of social identity.

Ernaux’s inability to change her mother’s soiled undergarments is one of the many ways in which the seemingly constant presence of urine and feces haunts her. She expresses her frustration about this when she visits the nursing home. “Je ne peux pas la changer. Je l’asperge d’eau de Cologne” (« *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » 87); “Je ne peux pas la changer et je



n’ose pas déranger les infirmières et les soignantes qui discutent dans le bureau” (« *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » 89). Her mother’s need to have her undergarments changed and Ernaux’s own inability to help her caused her anxiety. Seeing her mother existing in this state of constant degradation intensifies the reality of her mother’s decline. It becomes increasingly apparent to Ernaux that her mother’s mental condition is irreversible, and that she can do nothing to change it. Ernaux’s frustration at her inability to “change” her mother manifests itself in the events of a nightmare she has during the period when she is still trying to care for her failing mother who is living with Ernaux and her two grandsons at the time. In this troubling dream, Ernaux recalls angrily screaming at her, “Arrête d’être folle!” (« *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » 11).

The presence of urine and feces in the nursing home must have made Ernaux feel that she and her family would never escape living in proximity to excrement. Another reminder of this unpleasant sign came to Ernaux’s attention at the funeral home when she and her sons returned for the final viewing. Upon arriving in the reception area, a preoccupied employee signaled to them to sit in the hallway which happened to be across from the restroom whose door had been left open: “Un employé en blouse blanche qui téléphonait nous a fait signe de nous asseoir dans un couloir. Nous étions sur des chaises alignées le long du mur, face à des sanitaires, dont la porte était restée ouverte” (15-16). As discussed previously, the comment about the open restroom door underscores the overall unpleasant interactions that Ernaux endured at the funeral home, but the associations produced subsequently by the words “eaux vannes,” magnify the significance of this remark and illuminate Ernaux’s acute awareness of the association of her family and her social class with excrement.

Being constantly surrounded by excrement is not only humiliating, but potentially harmful to one’s health. Environmental racism and its effects are connected to one of Ernaux’s

earliest memories. The nearby river (in which the community's waste was dumped) played a role in her family's decision to move away from the workers' ghetto of La Vallée. Ernaux, five years old at the time, had developed a chronic cough: "J'étais souvent malade, le médecin voulait m'envoyer en aérium. Ils ont vendu le fonds pour retourner à Y... dont le climat venteux, l'absence de toute rivière ou ruisseau leur paraissaient bons pour la santé" (*La Place* 50).<sup>45</sup> Simply distancing themselves from the miasmas of the infected river was the solution to curing Ernaux's health. Similarly, the nearby presence of effluent seems to have been the source of diphtheria which was the cause of a high rate of infant mortality, and was also the cause of her sister's death.<sup>46</sup> It must have seemed to Ernaux, sitting in front of the open restroom in the funeral home, that their family, as well as their social class, always had been, and always would be, faced with excrement.

It is possible that effluent is one of the two currents ("deux eaux") in the dream that surrounds the mother-daughter body. When Ernaux is struck by the similarity in her and her mother's names to "eaux vannes" perhaps she sees her work as a writer as controlling the flow, like a sluiceway. If the "eaux vannes" is one of the two waters in the dream, perhaps the second current/water is the "eaux vannes" transformed into a purified water that the *cathartic* process of writing has cleansed? But there is yet another explanation for the metaphorical associations of the two waters. Given the work's most explicit metaphor—giving birth to the mother—the two waters could also be likened to the two fluids of a mother's womb, the embryonic fluid that nourishes and supports the growing fetus, and the fluid that flows through the umbilical cord transporting nourishment and waste ("eaux vannes"). This metaphor seems particularly suited to the horticultural themes of this work; excrement is both an organic fertilizer and a source of fuel in agrarian settings.

While Ernaux explains in various places throughout her œuvre her reasons for choosing an unliterary style, perhaps anticipating criticism, certain members of the literary press have nonetheless criticized her works specifically on the grounds that her writing is not literary. In a study of the changing critical reactions to Ernaux's writing over the years, Isabelle Charpentier makes this point:

Si la presse littéraire spécialisée, autorité de consécration (ou de relégation) par excellence, suit assez régulièrement les parutions d'Annie Ernaux depuis le premier récit publié en 1974, *Les Armoires vides*, et surtout depuis *La Place*, elle se montre souvent distanciée et affiche d'emblée une certaine réticence face à l'objet « populaire »—parfois considéré comme « trivial » et « laid »—à la crudité de son traitement, mais aussi au « style parlé », « violent » et « provocant » adopté par l'écrivain, toutes caractéristiques qui semblent heurter le sens du « beau » recherché par les lettrés. (*Anamorphoses*, 227)

The sophisticated reader of literary texts expects an aesthetic experience from the arrangement of words in a book. Ernaux (*agrégée* herself) is of course quite conscience of the critical tools that will be used to judge her texts. In an interview with Isabelle Charpentier, she discusses the profound effect Bourdieu's sociological theories have had on her writing.<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, Ernaux and Charpentier both refer to her writing as “literature” throughout the interview: “Mes lecteurs ne sont pas forcément des lecteurs habituels de sociologie, ils s'attendent à trouver de la littérature, je leur fais un coup (sourire) !” (“La littérature est un arme de combat” 170). In French, the expression “faire un coup” has the double meaning of “to play a trick,” and to “strike a blow.” To appreciate the literary quality of Ernaux's writing and to perceive the subtle handling of implicit rhetorical figures requires a heightened sensitivity and a

novel way of reading her works. All of the horticultural elements in *Une femme* provide the details from which a pattern of associations creates metaphorical effects. These effects spring organically, naturally from the mundane and realistic facts of Ernaux's quotidian existence, and are integrally associated with nature: "nid de voix," "locher les pommes," "forsythia," "fleurs naturelles," "plantes en filaments," etc. It is true that Ernaux's writing can be categorized as realistic given her emphasis on observable, material facts: photos, gestures, phrases spoken, anecdotal events, stains. But it is in the repetition of these material facts that an active reader will sense patterns, and the metaphoric potential of her writing. In this respect, Ernaux's metaphorical meanings could be described as nascent, awaiting the catalyst of the attentive reader's perception where they might further be developed to their full potential.

Requiring the reader's active participation to find meaning in the work is congruent with literary and artistic trends of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* springs to mind—the narrative is not ready-made, but requires the viewer's active participation in constructing and reconstructing events in order to make sense of the collection of snapshots. The risk that Ernaux takes with this style of writing is that her works might not be fully appreciated if the deeper layers of her writing go unnoticed by unsuspecting readers unused to the potentiality of her brand of minimalist prose. But then again, perhaps this is exactly the type of gambit Ernaux wagers with the discerning critical eye of the literary elite. By adopting this apparently *low* style, a style "below" literature, to portray her parents' lives, the author creates a work of art whose subtle complexities challenge the insightfulness of many a *cultivated* reader. Ernaux has purposely hidden certain literary qualities of her work in *Une femme* and *La Place* from those who are used to recognizing the stylemarks of "literature" in its codified usage. In effect, Ernaux's plain prose style is, ironically, its own kind of exclusive literature and

is her way of exacting revenge on the dominant culture that has humiliated her and her class. The theme of revenge against the dominant class comes up in *Une femme*. Ernaux reveals a harsh truth about the depth of her mother's disregard for one of the manager's—her class superior—in the margarine factory where her mother worked: “Un jour, le contremaître a laissé son cache-nez se prendre dans la courroie d'une machine. Personne ne l'a secouru et il a dû se dégager seul. Ma mère était à côté de lui. Comment admettre cela, sauf à avoir subi un poids égal d'aliénation ?” (30). The mother's only recourse of retaliation in her class struggle is through passive aggression. Similarly, Ernaux uses writing as a means of silently striking a blow against the arbiters who confer the honorary label of “literature” on texts.

In the next chapter, *Metaphorical Juxtapositions*, I will also analyse the dream image in the context of its relation to another passage with which it shares several pictorial similarities. This analysis will illustrate how several pairs of word-images can create meaningful associations when compared side by side. These pairings are of interest not only for the metaphorical associations that they create, but also for the game-like effects they add to the experience of reading Ernaux's works.

## Chapter 3: Metaphorical Juxtapositions, Doubles, and Reversals

### Ernaux's Sensitivity to Visual Images

Frequent references to and descriptions of photographs are one of the distinctive attributes of Annie Ernaux's writing, as we have seen.<sup>48</sup> The writer is also hyper sensitive to a variety of pictorial images that haunt her memory, such as dreams, paintings, advertisements, scenes from films, as well as scenes from her own life. Because she does not actually reproduce any of these images in her works, describing them in words only, they might be referred to more precisely as word-pictures transcribed from the author's memory.<sup>49</sup> In the previous chapter we saw how Ernaux's word-picture of the photograph of her parents on their wedding day can give rise to several figurative interpretations. The passage describing the newlyweds posing in front of a pair of apple trees typifies the sort of pictorial metaphors that are to be found throughout Ernaux's works. This chapter will explore a variety of similar kinds of images in her oeuvre that convey effects of metaphor, and many of its taxonomical relatives. The word-image figures in Ernaux's writing have more in common with the kind of figuration found in visual media (advertising, architecture, painting, cinematography) than with an explicit, lexical, metaphoric phase of language. Ernaux creates artistically constructed writing not through sentence-level tropes, but through graphic descriptions that produce analogous metaphorical effects. We will examine a variety of such effects produced by mirrors, photographs, visual memories, paintings, optical illusions, scenes from movies, and word-illustrations. Together, these "snap-shots" of Ernaux's technique will form a composite view of how the author creates a unique literary vision.

It is not surprising that Ernaux's style is so full of remembered images, given the fact that she herself has frequently commented, in her books and in interviews, on her susceptibility to

visual images and to the effect they tend to have on her psyche. Upon learning that she had received the *Prix François Mauriac*, she described the emotional impact of the good news to an interviewer in this way: “Je ne m’y attendais pas du tout et d’un seul coup une foule de souvenirs, d’images m’a envahie. J’ai revu la couverture pourpre de *Nœud de vipères* [...]” (Entretien avec Catherine Lefort 269). The words “je ne m’y attendais pas,” and “envahie,” indicate an involuntary act of remembering. But she also actively seeks to recall images, as described in *Passion simple*, when she takes advantage of a quiet moment to reflect on a scene with her lover, a Russian diplomat: “À la seconde juste où je tombais dans cet état, il se produisait dans ma tête un spasme de bonheur. J’avais l’impression de m’abandonner à un plaisir physique, comme si le cerveau, sous l’afflux répété des mêmes images, des mêmes souvenirs, pouvait jouir, qu’il soit un organe sexuel pareil aux autres” (41-42). In another context, Ernaux explains that the visual memory of a violent dispute between her parents was a powerful, but unarticulated scene that required a lengthy narrative (*La Honte*) in order to come to terms with it: “Peut-être que le récit, tout récit, rend normal n’importe quel acte, y compris le plus dramatique. Mais parce que j’ai toujours eu cette scène en moi comme une image sans mots ni phrases en dehors de celle que j’ai dite à des amants, les mots que j’ai employés pour la décrire me paraissent étrangers, presque incongrus” (*La Honte* 17). The incipit of *Les Années*, “Toutes les images disparaîtront” (11), suggests the impossibility of holding on to one’s existence, but nonetheless the work introduces an attempt to document these images and thus leave a record of the residue of her consciousness as a means of extending her existence after her death. Ernaux uses a cinematic metaphor for a memory after describing the birth of one of her sons in *La femme gelée* saying: “Souvent après, je me suis repassé le film, j’ai cherché le sens de ce moment” (141; italics mine). Whether pleasurable or poignant, visual images have a profound effect on Ernaux’s

imagination, and subsequently on her works. Writing fulfills a double function of articulating and illustrating (with words) the images that haunt her.

In addition to the relevance of single images, a complex system of metaphor production in Ernaux's œuvre can be appreciated when word-images that share similar visual characteristics are compared side by side. These complementary word-image pairs are at times found within the same work, even the same passage, but others are intertextual, either alluding to works by Ernaux or to books, always literary, by other authors. In such cases, certain similarities in Ernaux's word-images act like pictorial allusions. These types of visual figures are of interest not only for the efflorescence of metaphorical associations they create, but also for the game-like effects that challenge and entertain the reader. The revelation of Ernaux's novel processes of deeper, metaphorical signification calls into question critical assessments, asserted by Ernaux herself, that her prose style is strictly denotative and hyperrealistic,<sup>50</sup> and proves that it can also be very "*imagé*." In Chapter 1 I showed that Ernaux extended the metaphor of the "beau feu d'artifice à l'intérieur" to link it to a childhood memory of eating candy. Because the image is only evoked a second time, one might think of this extended metaphor as a pair of images, rather than a repeated telescoping of associations that extended metaphors are often used to create. In her later works, Ernaux seems to have continued this sort of limited extended metaphor to create word-images that share several similarities that link them together without explicitly alerting readers to their presence.

In some cases, a side-by-side comparison of similar word-images (although the similarities between the two images may not at first be evident) can create an effect similar to the experience of perceiving an optical illusion. The discovery of pictorial metaphors and the presence of effects analogous to games of visual perception in these works reveal heretofore



unperceived meanings. These discoveries nourish new interpretations of Ernaux's œuvre, thereby potentially broadening critical appreciation of her "*écriture plate*" and the anti-mannerist approach she adopts to achieve such effects. Moreover, these effects of visual games are not just a gimmick, but metaphors in and of themselves, part of the framework of a mega- or metatrophe, as defined by Elżbieta Chrzanowska-Kluczevska.<sup>51</sup>

Metaphorical associations between images in Ernaux's works are not easy to perceive because the author's signature flat style exploits an economy of language which can be likened to the impression created by camouflage: purposely unremarkable, utilitarian, and therefore devoid of the type of refined embellishment traditionally associated with a literary work of art. To extend the analogy, the purpose of camouflage is to evade detection; the camouflage of Ernaux's prose conceals its depth. When the reader becomes sensitive to the effects of optical illusion that Ernaux has masterfully couched behind her deceptively plain prose, metaphorical riches can be discovered. While Ernaux has referred to explicit instances of having encountered optical illusions she has experienced in everyday life, she does not always alert the reader when she herself has inserted analogous effects of optical games in her writing. By definition, optical illusions are conveyed through images, not words, which is why some of these effects are not readily apparent to the reading eye. For this reason, it is necessary to actively visualize Ernaux's word-images in order to "see" these effects. To capture the full meaning of her œuvre, and join the *happy few*, the reader will need to ignore the writer's feints of artlessness, and adopt a more active role in reading.

### **Through the Looking Glass**

A childhood memory recounted in *La Honte* (1997), and again in *Se perdre* (2001), points to an early sensitivity on Ernaux's part to the symbolic meanings of images, and how one

memory in particular made her acutely aware of her family's social position. This consciousness-raising experience took place during a summer holiday bus trip with her father. While dining in a fashionable restaurant in Tours, Ernaux catches a reflection of herself and her father in a mirror. Through the mirror's projection she and her father appear to be elsewhere in the restaurant as if they were just some other people dining there. The young Ernaux sees herself as other, objectified by the image that the mirror throws back, providing her with the visual vantage point to simultaneously compare the image of her and her father with that of another father-daughter couple:

À une petite table près de nous, il y avait une fille de quatorze ou quinze ans, en robe décolletée, bronzée, avec un homme assez âgé, qui semblait être son père. Ils parlaient et riaient, avec aisance et liberté, sans se soucier des autres. [...] Je me suis vue dans la glace en face, pâle, l'air triste avec mes lunettes, silencieuse à côté de mon père, qui regardait dans le vague. Je voyais tout ce qui me séparait de cette fille mais je ne savais pas comment j'aurais pu faire pour lui ressembler. (*La Honte* 133)

It is as if the mirror has provided a reversed image, not in the literal sense of switching right to left, but in a figurative one; she sees herself and her father as the unfashionable poor version in relation to the other couple, the tony father and daughter carrying on a spirited conversation at a nearby table. The acute contrast between the two father-daughter couples is disconcerting to Ernaux, the self-conscious adolescent. Although this scene illustrates a growing awareness of her and her family's place in society, she experiences this awakening through an intuitive sense of shame of her and her father's social inferiority. At the time there were insufficient words to articulate the experience. It is evident that the humbling incident had a

lasting emotional impact on her. Remembering the experience as an adult, she came to realize the meaning of the image she was seeing in the mirror: “Je découvrais la différence, la réalité des deux mondes” (*Se perdre* 141).

In *La Place* Ernaux describes how she did gradually learn to resemble the other girl in the restaurant, the reverse image of her reflection in the mirror. Through a slow process of social emigration away from her parents, to the upper-class milieu of her classmates with whom she attended the private Catholic school, she gradually acquired bourgeois tastes, attitudes, and manners: “J’émigre doucement vers le monde petit-bourgeois, admise dans ces surbourns dont la seule condition d’accès, mais si difficile, consiste à ne pas être *cucul*. [...] L’univers pour moi *s’est retourné*” (*La Place* 79, latter italics mine).

If learning to pass as bourgeois was a mysterious and elusive process, a photograph taken while on the same bus trip with her father, along the seaside in front of a wall covered by flowers in Biarritz, provided a sort of transfigured image that made it possible to believe that she might be able to resemble the image of people with a higher social status. Theoretically the camera would have captured the same sort of realistic, objective image of their socio-economic status that the mirror in the restaurant reflected, but this photograph portrays the father and daughter in a flattering manner. The photograph is not reproduced in *La Honte*; Ernaux “illustrates” it in words only. She says she probably kept this photograph in particular because of what she and her father appeared to be in it, but were not: “des gens chics, des villégiaturistes” (*La Honte* 25). It is as if the portrait of the father and daughter reflected a different version of themselves. In the photograph the outward signs of their provincialism and lack of cultivation are not apparent. This seems to be in part from a coincidence of the camera’s fickle objective eye when capturing their image, but also because the young Ernaux had learned to keep her mouth closed when posing for

a picture to hide her poor dentition, an outward sign of her class origins: “Sur aucune des deux photos je n’ouvre la bouche pour sourire, à cause de mes dents mal plantées et abîmées” (25).

Ernaux’s careful pose for the camera calls to mind Roland Barthe’s own self-conscious awareness of the camera’s power to create either a positive or negative image of the self:

Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of “posing,” I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. [...] No doubt it is metaphorically that I derive my existence from the photographer. [...] I experience it with the anguish of an uncertain filiation: an image—my image—will be generated: will I be born from an antipathetic individual or from a “good sort”?  
(10-11)

In Ernaux’s case, the flattering photograph provided a transfigurative image of herself. A metaphor of what she, and her father, could be. An image that she wanted to project, that she could believe in because, after all, it was actually her in the photograph. Other analyses of images in her works will show a recurring preoccupation with similar types of inverse representations. The discernment of dual social realities is a theme that comes up again in *Journal du dehors* and *La vie extérieure*. While there are no reversed mirror images or artful descriptions of photographs that cleverly reveal separate social worlds in these journals, many of the entries record instances of encountering strangers in public settings who seem to Ernaux to be living reflections, “body doubles” of herself and her family.

## **Lurid Tableaux**

*Journal du dehors* and *La vie extérieure* are, on one level, exactly what they appear to be: a collection of chronological entries which leave a permanent document of events seen and heard

over a certain period of the author's lifetime. Journals are a rich source of information for historians, ethnographers, and sociologists, but there are far fewer journals whose form has been accepted as *literary*, as there is generally no underframe or creative design that enhances the reading experience and that could encourage a reader to look for higher signification in the grouped collection of entries. The question "Is this art?" is not usually considered when reading the factual stream of events recorded in a journal. Many of the entries in *Journal du dehors* and *La vie extérieure* document sensationalistic subject matter such as flashers and subway bombings, but many others capture less shocking, even banal, details as when Ernaux records that someone yelled out of an apartment window, or notices that the graffiti expressing love for a woman on a city wall has begun to fade, or hypothesizes about the personal problems of people waiting in line at the grocery store. The tawdry details of the entries in these two works do form a rubric under which all of them might be classified. In short, whether shocking on a large or small scale, each of the entries might be described as a "lurid tableau" (or a "tableau livide") in which the attention-grabbing, vulgar detail stands out against the pallid backdrop of quotidian existence.

Published seven years apart as separate journals with distinct titles, *Journal du dehors* (1993) and *La vie extérieure* (2000) comprise a collection of entries which span a continuous fourteen-year period from 1985 to 1999. Each journal entry is separated typographically by equal amounts of space, unlike some of Ernaux's other works in which the amount of space between fragments varies. The entries in *Journal du dehors* are not dated, but they do appear to be in chronological order given the headings for each year. *La vie extérieure* does have chronologically dated entries, although some entries only have a month for a date.

These two journals have been referred to by some critics as “journaux extimes,” a term coopted from a later work (*Journal extime*, 2002) by Michel Tournier. It is true that both Ernaux and Tournier contemplate the significance of events in the outside world rather than practicing the soul-searching reflective activity of a *journal intime*. Robin Tierney suggests that applying Tournier’s neologism misrepresents Ernaux’s intent. Tierney summarizes her argument by saying that “[s]ome critics, such as Laurence Mall in “L’Ethnotexte de la Banlieue,” argue that despite the focus on people that she does not personally know, *Journal du Dehors* is not truly a *journal extime* because ultimately it is Ernaux who is revealed here (Mall 134)” (Tierney 128). Indeed, the quote by Rousseau in the paratext, “Notre *vrai* moi n’est pas tout entier en nous” (9), implies from the outset that Ernaux will be looking for herself by contemplating the words and actions of others. At one point she questions—and answers—her own motives for recording these scenes and impressions: “Pourquoi je raconte, décris cette scène, comme d’autres qui figurent dans ces pages. [...] Peut-être que je cherche quelque chose sur moi à travers eux, leurs façons de se tenir, leurs conversations” (*Journal du dehors* 36-37). These two works might instead be described as collective journals in which the author records a mixture of other people’s conversations, gestures, and interactions that she gathers from public settings, not as a form of sensationalistic voyeurism, but because of what she learns from them, and for what the reader might in turn learn by engaging with the journal in a reflective manner.

Ernaux recognizes herself, her family, and the telltale signs of separate social realities in the gestures and words of others. In scenes observed in a variety of communal spaces (grocery stores, public transportation, parks), Ernaux finds intimate connections with the facts and memories of her own experiences as a member of a dominated class. While there are few explicit, self-reflexive asides where she points out circumstances similar to her own life, readers

familiar with Ernaux's body of work will detect echoes from other texts. When she transcribes the words of a mother talking to her son in the subway—"Partir, partir, tu n'es pas bien où tu es" (*Journal du dehors* 12)—the reader may recall a similar passage in *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* in which her mother's response to Ernaux's desire to travel is nearly identical. And in *Journal du dehors* the words exchanged between a couple bickering in the subway—"Tu verras quand je serai mort" (69)—remind her of her mother's frequent general threat to both Ernaux and her father: "vous verrez quand je serai plus là" (*L'autre fille* 38). The recognition of familiar utterances in the conversations of strangers blurs the boundaries between personal and collective memory, between public and private lives.

Long known as a writer who transgresses the unwritten code of what a woman can and cannot write about regarding the intimate details of her personal life, Ernaux, too, might be deemed by some to be a perverse exhibitionist, but her self-exposure is a calculated choice. For the perpetually destitute whose lives she documents in *Journal du dehors* and *La vie extérieure* there is no alternative *but* to live their private lives in public; they are in fact consigned to exhibitionism.<sup>52</sup> The repeated theme of exhibitionism throughout these journals produces associations that support Ernaux's assertion that the need to exhibit one's self is not always a form of antisocial behavior (as is the case with the flashers she mentions here and in other works), but can be correlated to financial need and one's inferior place in the hierarchy of society. Furthermore, Ernaux illustrates many scenes of average people who purposely and publicly exhibit some aspect of their private lives. Conversely, she states that for those who occupy the top echelons of society, there is no need to be seen and heard; money and power conceal themselves: "On nous montre les ouvriers licenciés, jamais les actionnaires, invisibles comme l'argent" (*La vie extérieure* 80). Ernaux points out this phenomenon of the *exposed* poor,

and the *protected* rich in her own small hometown of Yvetot when she describes the demographic differences of two streets that run parallel to one another, and between which her parents café-grocery is situated:

Tout les oppose. La rue de la République, large, goudronnée, bordée de trottoirs [...]. La rue du Clos-des-Parts est étroite, irrégulière, sans trottoirs, avec des descentes brusques et des tournants marqués, animée d'un faible trafic, surtout des ouvriers à vélo [...]. De la rue de la République au sentier du Champ-de-Courses, en moins de trois cents mètres, on passe de l'opulence à la pauvreté [...]. Des gens protégés, dont on ignore tout, à ceux dont on sait ce qu'ils touchent comme allocations, ce qu'ils mangent et boivent, à quelle heure ils se couchent.  
(*La Honte* 49-51)

It is evident that Ernaux sympathizes and identifies with those at the bottom of the social ladder—in spite of her own hard-earned, privileged, and secure place in French society as a popular and critically successful writer. In *Une femme* she makes an avowal after describing an encounter in the street one day with her aunt who was an alcoholic, a scene that might just as easily have been recorded in one of these journals: “Elle m’a embrassée sans pouvoir rien dire, oscillant sur place. Je crois que je ne pourrai jamais écrire comme si je n’avais pas rencontré ma tante, ce jour-là” (35). Conscious of her dual class identification, and of the sensation of mental vertigo that it sometimes has on her perception of the world, Ernaux finds herself in a unique position to be able to decode both worlds. This is in contrast to people who can only see themselves as belonging to one distinct social reality, like the well-known medievalist academic, Jacques Le Goff who, as Ernaux points out, is quoted in *Libération* as saying: “Le métro me dépayse” (*Journal du dehors* 47). His remark suggests that he equates taking the subway with the



culture shock of traveling in a foreign country. One might suppose from this remark that it is the prevalence of lower social classes and darker skin tones in the public transportation system that make him feel “out of place” in his “own” country. The historian’s observation, no doubt unconsciously, shines a light on the social distance that continues to persist between *les citoyens* who are still *others* instead of *brothers* to one another. Another entry seems to further indict academia’s blindness to the social and political relevance of the populist space of the subway system. Ernaux suggests that it would be interesting to “[r]elever un jour toutes les affiches collées sur les murs de plusieurs stations de métro, avec leurs slogans. Pour fixer exactement la réalité imaginaire, peurs et désirs du moment. Les signes de l’histoire présente que la mémoire ne retient pas—ou juge indignes d’être retenus” (*La vie extérieure* 45). Ernaux’s sly use of “la mémoire” is a synecdoche for an officially sanctioned “memory.” The word also evokes “le mémoire,” a scholarly form of writing. The verb “juge” further personifies the exclusivity of exactly whose “memory” is validated.

If the cultural elite does not see the public domain as a sort of laboratory full of relevant social phenomena to document, Ernaux does.<sup>53</sup> In one particular entry she perspicaciously decodes for herself—and the reader—the “odd” behavior of a homeless man in the Paris subway:

À Charles de Gaulle Étoile, un type d’une trentaine d’années monte. [...] Plus tard, il se met debout, s’appuie contre la paroi, il entrouvre son veston, lève son tee-shirt. Il examine son ventre longuement, puis rabaisse son tee-shirt. Visiblement, aucune provocation dans ces gestes, simplement l’expression extrême de la solitude—la vraie—au milieu de la foule. À côté de lui, il y a un sac de plastique, caractéristique des s.d.f. À partir de quand, lorsqu’on n’a plus de domicile, ni de travail, le regard des autres ne nous empêche plus de faire des

choses naturelles mais déplacées au-dehors dans notre culture. (*Journal du dehors* 99-100)

This entry might be compared with other entries in which Ernaux describes, but *does not* decode, her own “odd” behavior. This absence of a self-reflective explanation for her behavior is evident in two separate incidents. In each instance she has encountered a young man panhandling in the subway who reminds her of one of her sons. In one case it is the man’s first name, Éric (*La vie extérieure* 58), the same as that of one of her sons, that causes her to feel a personal connection to the homeless man selling the sort of newspaper written by the homeless trying to employ themselves. Ernaux does not say whether or not she gives “Éric” any money. In another similar situation, she momentarily thinks that she has come across one of her sons begging for money in the subway—a circumstance that would cause any parent anxiety:

À Cluny, [...] un grand garçon blond, K-way rouge, pantalon beige, propres. Il a un sac à dos à côté de lui, une pancarte devant. Je ne l’ai pas lue. Tout le temps que j’avançais vers le quai, je voulais revenir en arrière pour la lire et donner de l’argent. À un moment, il a été impossible de faire demi-tour. Il me semblait que je venais de voir l’un de mes fils en train de mendier. (*Journal du dehors* 80-81)

Ernaux identified with these two young men in part because they reminded her of her sons, but also from a keen sense, based on her and her family’s experiences, of what it means to occupy a low place in society. But she was also conflicted as to what to do. In the end she did not give in to the nagging impulse to go back and read the young man’s cardboard sign and give him money, although—by her own admission—up to a certain point of her travel through the subway system she could have returned. Her failure to act is paradoxical given her stated feelings. The resemblance of the mendicants to her sons moves her mind and heart, but fails, for one reason or

another, to move her feet and hands to give assistance. In this particular situation Ernaux herself manifests the same behavior that she notices in others who so often look away as they pass by the poor and homeless in the streets.

Ernaux exhibits a capacity for touching sensitivity and acute skills of observation in her prose by explaining the mysterious behaviors and emotions of the homeless man in the subway lifting his shirt to stare at his stomach, but ironically she herself does not use the contemplative space of the journal to engage in a figurative act of omphaloskepsis, staring at her own navel, to understand her own “abnormal” behavior. The absence of an explanation as to why she did not offer charity to the young men in need who resembled her sons might lead one to criticize her for failing to act on maternal instinct. While it is true that Ernaux is attempting to learn about herself by transcribing the speech and gestures of others, she is also subtly inviting the reader into this process of reflection. It is tempting to criticize her seeming absence of maternal instinct, but in doing so, perhaps we are led to question our own apathy and passivity in similar situations.

As someone who has “emigrated” to a higher social class, but still feels connected to her peasant class origins,<sup>54</sup> Ernaux often deals with the peculiar sensation of always being in between. She feels as if she permanently straddles two worlds, mentally inhabiting both and neither at the same time. The examples of between-ness in her experiences are numerous. Ernaux points out that her parents’ business was situated between the “rich” street of rue de la République, and the “poor” street of Clos-des-Parts. She describes her father as transporting her from home to school on his bicycle: “Il me conduisait de la maison à l’école sur son vélo. Passeur entre deux rives, sous la pluie et le soleil” (*La Place* 112). Although her parents were business owners, and Ernaux’s mother aspired to middle-class “respectability” and refinement,

they never completely “escaped” their peasant and factory-worker milieu. After all, none of their clients nor their family members were middle-class.

This sense of oscillating between social identities, being at once peasant and bourgeois, seems to have been at play in the scenes involving the young men who resembled her sons. Nonetheless, it is hard to accept that the omission of an explanation for her refraining from giving money to her filial doppelgängers is an oversight. Her muteness on this point makes the attentive reader wonder about her behavior. It is unclear why she does not react outwardly to the sight of “her sons.” Perhaps it was emotionally too difficult to acknowledge the young homeless men as potentially being her own sons, preferring instead to distance herself from what may have seemed like a bad omen. One possible explanation for her behavior can be found in this insight from Lyn Thomas about how Ernaux is haunted by the fear of poverty: “[...] Ernaux’s writing reveals that she has inherited her parents’ sense of material insecurity, which despite her success still seems to prevail, and to impinge on her representations of social reality” (*An Introduction to the Writer* 164. Ernaux’s parents, Thomas adds, were always “anxious, uncertain that their material progress could be maintained, with one foot still firmly in the ‘things don’t change’ and ‘we’re alright as we are’ camp” (165). Whatever the unarticulated thought processes were, Ernaux’s *mise en scène* of this bit of life’s daily drama seems to highlight the presence of parallel realities and potentially stimulates readers to ask such questions in an attempt to understand. Readers quite often react negatively when an author moralizes. The journal format is particularly well-suited to a Hemingwayesque “show, don’t tell” approach.

If Ernaux’s failure to help “her sons” is bothersome, perhaps it is her technique for drawing attention to the fact that we all tend to pretend to not see what we witness in the streets, markets, and public transportation system. She mentions several times in these journals the

tendency people have to look away from the shocking images they are confronted with. She makes this point in particular when describing a tragicomic dialogue she overhears on the subway between two intoxicated homeless men, an exchange that is reminiscent of a scene from the theatre of the absurd:

—Tellement je voulais sortir, qu'on a fait une césarienne à ma mère. —Les césariennes, à l'époque, ça se faisait à la tronçonneuse. —Elle a souffert. C'est pour ça qu'elle ne m'a jamais reconnu. —Moi non plus. » [Leurs] voix se donnent la réplique avec ostentation, mêlant le ton de la plainte à celui de la violence, à l'usage de la vingtaine de voyageurs du wagon. À la différence du théâtre, les spectateurs de cette scène évitent de regarder les acteurs, font comme s'ils n'entendaient rien. Gênés par la vie qui se donne en spectacle, et non l'inverse.

(*Journal du dehors* 105)

By linking the theme of artistic representation to the conversation between these two “actor-exhibitionists,” Ernaux seems to be suggesting that in the socially and financially secure world where artistic performances are appreciated, it is not this scene, and others like it being played out in public spaces, that should cause us to feel uneasy, but rather art, sociology, and history that fail to represent real life. Ernaux’s intent seems to be to illustrate that in the nexus of public and private lives lies an opportunity to better understand social and economic hierarchies. Through these “vulgar” tableaux of public life, Ernaux bears witness to social injustices—“Écrire cela et tout ce que j’écris ici, comme *preuve*” (*La vie extérieure* 33)—but perhaps she also intends to inscribe these lurid scenes into a work of art. In this way the journals not only reveal Ernaux herself, as Tierney and Mall assert, but also lead the reader to reflect on the artistic representation of distinct social realities.

The more one studies these two journals, then, the less they appear to be a haphazard collection of scenes recorded by an author who apparently has an ill-mannered tendency to stare and eavesdrop on other people's lives. Furthermore, the titles themselves, *Journal du dehors* and *La vie extérieure*, point to a self-conscious and playful approach to the traditional form of the *journal intime*. Gradually one suspects the presence of a subversive artist emerging from behind the mask of "the journalist." Reading both works together as a single continuous whole, moreover, not as they were presented (separate works with a seven-year gap in publication), can heighten a reader's sense that the artist has influenced the design. This analysis goes against what has been previously assumed by critics, and ostensibly confirmed by Ernaux herself. As Isabelle Charpentier writes:

Ces scènes fugaces de la vie ordinaire et autres bribes de paroles d'anonymes traditionnellement occultés dans la littérature contemporaine ont été transcrites de façon intermittente sous forme de séries d'entrées brèves et éparses juxtaposées dans des carnets, sans architecture logique apparente autre que chronologique et, précise l'écrivaine, « sans projet particulier au départ, et sans la moindre idée de publication ». Spécifiques par leurs choix thématiques affichant nettement une dimension sociale et politique, ces fragments sont énoncés dans un style minimaliste, volontairement dépouillé d'effets littéraires, caractéristique depuis *La Place* (1984) de l'expression singulière de l'écrivaine. ("Annie Ernaux ou l'art littéraire" 57-58)

Perhaps the key word in Ernaux's statement is "au départ." If the author did not conceive of the journal as a literary project in the beginning, it would appear that at some point she

developed her ideas of how the collection of entries might be configured to form an artistic whole.

One indication that a narrative design does indeed govern the two volumes can be appreciated in the presence of an inconspicuous framing effect created by sister images that can be found in the first entry of the first journal, and the final entry of the second journal. Ernaux constructed a similar structural feature to organize the narrative in *Une femme* (discussed in Chapter 2) by using references to forsythia. The forsythia reconnect the beginning of that work to the end, and signal the significance of references to flowers throughout. While each of these journals can be read and appreciated on its own merit, a comparison of these two entries from *Journal du dehors* and *La vie extérieure* will reveal a word-image diptych. The similarities between these first and final entries, and the ultimate transformation of these similarities, gird these journals, and their recurring themes, together into a cohesive whole.

The first entry of *Journal du dehors* and the final entry of *La vie extérieure* each involve graffiti and bleeding women. While the mention of the graffiti in the first entry is not part of the description of the woman who is bleeding, in the final entry these ostensibly disparate elements of women, hidden blood, and graffiti of the first entry ultimately come together in a meaningful way. In the inaugural entry, Ernaux describes a middle-aged woman who is bleeding from some lower part of her body and who is being transported to a hospital. She has apparently suffered some trauma, but her dignity has been maintained through the concealment of her crisis. The *bas corporel*, as Bakhtin would call it, has been appropriately covered by a blanket that hides the fact that she is bleeding:

Sur le mur du parking couvert de la gare R.E.R. il y a écrit : DÉMENCE.  
Plus loin, sur le même mur, JE T’AIME ELSA et IF YOUR CHILDREN ARE  
HAPPY THEY ARE COMMUNISTS.

Ce soir, dans le quartier des Linandes, une femme est passée sur une civière tenue par deux pompiers. Elle était en position surélevée, presque assise, tranquille, les cheveux gris, entre cinquante et soixante ans. Une couverture cachait ses jambes et la moitié du corps. Une petite fille a dit à une autre, « il y avait du sang sur son drap ». Mais il n’y avait pas de drap sur la femme. Elle a ainsi traversé la place piétonne des Linandes comme une reine au milieu des gens qui allaient faire leurs courses à Franprix [...]. (*Journal du dehors* 11)

Although the details are sketchy there is the hint of something sensationalistic in the overheard words of one little girl who must have been privy to the drama in the woman’s apartment: “Une petite fille a dit à une autre, « il y avait du sang sur son drap ». Mais il n’y avait pas de drap sur la femme” (11). The bloodied bedclothes are not part of the scene described by Ernaux; by the time Ernaux records what she witnessed, the woman’s hemorrhaging body has been discreetly covered with a blanket. This first entry sets the scene for contrasting the modest propriety of the socially secure with the exhibitionism of the less fortunate, a theme that recurs throughout these two works.

As noted in the discussion above, Ernaux has stated explicitly that members of the dominant class does not need to exhibit themselves. She describes the bleeding woman passing by in the street carried on a stretcher using the subtle simile “comme une reine” (11) to suggest that the woman enjoys a superior social status. This first fragment links the theme of concealment, versus exhibitionism, with social power. The “aristocratic” woman is able to



maintain her dignity by keeping her personal trauma private. Ernaux in fact makes an even stronger statement in the second journal about social power with regard to exhibitionism in an entry contrasting the behaviors of two mothers of distinct social classes, saying that concealment is a means that the dominant use to wield their power, that they in fact derive their power from their ability to conceal themselves:

À une caisse lente d'Auchan, une jeune mère avec sa petite fille. Elle commente à voix haute les actes de l'enfant, « te traîne pas, tu essuies tout le sol avec ta robe ! », la gronde, « reste ici ! », lui décrit l'avenir immédiat, « on va faire chauffer de l'eau pour la vaisselle en rentrant. Tu sais qu'il n'y avait pas d'eau chaude ce matin, maman a dû prendre une douche froide » sans conviction, comme si elle savait que sa mère parle ici pour la galerie.

Derrière elles, un groupe d'une mère et d'adolescents posés, rires retenus, gestes mesurés. Impossible d'entendre ce qu'ils se disent. Les courses sont regroupées avec ordre sur le plateau : beaux cahiers, objets scolaires estampillés *Chevignon*, produits de base—lait UHT, yaourts, Nutella, pâtes—ni légumes ni viande, sans doute achetés dans les commerces spécialisés. Une famille bourgeoise, qui n'a pas besoin de se faire « remarquer » et qui tire sa puissance de son invisibilité même. (*La vie extérieure* 23-24)

The final entry of the second journal recalls and reverses the elements of the first entry. Again there is a woman who is bleeding; she is not a real woman in this case, but an artistic representation in an advertisement. While the mention of graffiti in the first entry was unrelated to the middle-aged bleeding woman, in the final entry the elements of blood, graffiti, and woman morph and create a kind of reversed image. The spectacle of blood that was hinted at, but

nowhere to be seen in the first entry, is front and center in the concluding tableau. Ernaux in fact says that the paint *is* blood, suggesting a (metaphorical) transfiguration of the paint into blood:

Sur un mur de la gare de Cergy, on voit les jambes à demi repliées d'un homme en pantalon de velours côtelé bleu, entre lesquelles se pressent celles d'une femme habillée en robe à petits carreaux blancs et verts. La femme est vue de face, les derniers boutons de sa robe sont ouverts sur ses jambes nues. C'est une fresque baba cool, datant de la fin des années soixante-dix, qui sera bientôt effacée dans la rénovation de la gare.

Sur la robe, à l'endroit supposé du sexe, quelqu'un a lancé de la peinture rouge qui forme une éclaboussure de sang. (*La vie extérieure* 131).

In this final entry a subversive graffiti “artist” has splattered red paint on the mural. The graffito can be interpreted in several ways. One might at first understand it to be a gynophobic gesture. Most graffiti artists are male; the intent of the vandalized fresco could be seen as a way of portraying a woman in a humiliating situation. Whatever the initial artist’s intention was, Ernaux appropriates the image, and changes its meaning by using it as a concluding entry to the two journals. That is to say that the final graffito should not be interpreted by itself. If we consider it in comparison with the initial image of the first journal of the woman passing by on a litter whose blood is concealed, and with other images within the journals, new meanings come forth. The second image could also be interpreted as a woman who is unabashedly “advertising” the fact that she is menstruating. It all depends on the perspective of the viewer. As I argued in Chapter 1, menstrual blood is never portrayed negatively in Ernaux’s œuvre. The author always writes about menstruation in positive terms as in this previously quoted reference to Denise Lesur’s anticipation of having her first period on the day of her Communion: “J’ai été regarder si

ça ne venait pas, *les belles taches rouges sur le jupon blanc*. Ç'aurait été magnifique..." (*Les armoires vides* 88; italics mine). The single graffito brings together the associations of many repeated images of the color red. The shocking effect that the transgressive splatter of the red paint in this entry has on one's attention might be likened to the effect of the lurid vignettes that make up these two journals. Furthermore, the final graffito suggests a revolutionary reversal of the image in the first entry. Instead of a socially superior woman passing by in the street whose bleeding, dysfunctional body is concealed, a non-aristocratic, folksy type confronts all *who pass by her* and the exposed healthy functioning of her female body. The connective link between the first and final entries of these two journals is yet another instance of the intertextual nature of Ernaux's œuvre.

Fiona Handyside has noted the recurring presence of a red stain symbolising blood throughout the journals. She theorizes that the repeating image of red is linked to menstrual blood and the flourishing heterogenous culture found in the newly constructed suburb of Cergy-Pontoise.<sup>55</sup> Although she does not use the term "extended metaphor," it seems that she is pointing out a recurring image that creates meaningful associations. According to her analysis,

[t]he New Town allows a seepage between the self and the other that is not available elsewhere but comes about through its yoking together of differing, disparate elements: crowd and individual, city and country. This notion of 'seepage' finds differing expression in the texts [...]. Ernaux's seepage infects her texts with the threatened shame of revealed bodily liquids, symbolised by a red stain. This stain provides a thread of continuity through Ernaux's disparate diary entries as she variously describes a woman's body being simultaneously revealed and concealed in stained sheets (JDD 11); a painting of the Ardèche displayed in

the art gallery, with a red stain in the middle dominating its ochre surface (JDD 22); and thick red graffiti the color of blood on the station walls (JDD 85). The image of menstrual blood gains more significance in the final entry of *La Vie extérieure*, where Ernaux describes a large poster (sic) [fresco] that is about to be torn down to make way for a renovation. (53)

I agree with Handyside's assertion that the recurrence of the color red saturates the two journals and does indeed "provide a thread of continuity through Ernaux's disparate diary entries." The color red and/or the mention of blood occurs explicitly in no less than seventeen entries, and has many associations, but its only association with catamenia is in the final entry. It is improbable that the cause of the woman who is bleeding in the first entry is due to menstruation given her age, "entre cinquante et soixante ans" (*Journal du dehors* 11). She is most likely suffering from some sort of medical crisis. In my opinion it is not menstrual blood that links the first and final entries of these two journals, but the repeated themes of the protected, unexposed upper class versus the exposed, unprotected lower classes.

References to the color red and/or blood do seem to be a detail which often shows up in these entries. The color red comes up in several entries unrelated to blood of any sort, such as the previously mentioned red K-way jacket worn by the young man begging in the subway that catches Ernaux's attention, causing her momentarily to fear that she is seeing her son (*Journal du dehors* 80). Ernaux remarks on the color of a young man's shirt—"rouge vif"—in one entry for no apparent reason, other than it seems to be eye-catching, (*La vie extérieure* 29), which is probably also why she notices a teacher's comment on a student's paper in the R.E.R. because it was most likely written in red ink—as teachers and professors are wont to do. The teacher's remark, "« La vérité est liée à la réalité. »" (*Journal du dehors* 31), seems to give voice

metatextually to the impetus of Ernaux's literary project. The symbol of the Front populaire, the French socialist party (*La vie extérieure* 111) is a red rose. The color is linked to passionate expressions of love in the graffiti "Elsa, je t'aime" and "Algérie, je t'aime" (*La vie extérieure* 66) which both contain red in their inscriptions, and with graffiti more generally as a frequent choice of color no doubt for its power to attract attention (*Journal du dehors* 30). Hairstylists described in one entry had dyed their hair red ("rouges," not roux), and their bangs an equally garish blue (*Journal du dehors* 33) to create a sensation, theatrically exaggerating their appearance:

"Coiffeurs et coiffeuses appartiennent à un monde en couleurs, théâtral, tous vêtus à la pointe de la mode, excentriques hors du salon" (33). The eye-catching potential of the color red is even more powerful when it describes blood because of its association with a trauma of one kind or another, as in the bloody excisions of the genitalia of young African women's bodies (*Journal du dehors* 44); and the blood-splattered walls of victims of a terrorist bombing in the Saint-Michel subway station (*La vie extérieure* 60). A hippy in a red sweater is mysteriously absent in the second installment of a two-page advertisement without mention of what happened to him, but it is implied that his attitude and his clothing are not acceptable in the business world. He is in effect "disappeared" like a political dissident of a repressive regime who mysteriously vanishes from society (*La vie extérieure* 90-91). All references to red seem to be associated with things that are either flashy, tawdry, sensationalistic, politically undersirable, or inappropriate for view in polite society. Ernaux seems to put a sort of "exclamation point" on her use of the color red in these journals by closing with the graffiti of the menstruating woman. In doing so, she turns, or tropes, the graffiti artist's gesture into an image that asserts the vision of these two journals. She has in effect done what she said would be interesting to do, as quoted earlier: "Relever un jour toutes les affiches collées sur les murs de plusieurs stations de métro, avec leurs slogans. Pour

fixer exactement la réalité imaginaire, peurs et désirs du moment. Les signes de l'histoire présente que la mémoire ne retient pas—ou juge indignes d'être retenus" (*La vie extérieure* 45). But in addition to the images on the walls of subway stations she has also exhibited a collection of scenes from daily, public life.

I also agree with Tierney's assertion that the color red is significantly associated with the painting "Ardèche, la tache rouge," but I would like to extend her analysis and explain the connection as a metaphor. Ernaux describes this painting in part through an overheard conversation between a customer browsing in the art gallery and its director. Ernaux's portrayal of the potential buyer's reaction to the painting is ambiguous. The narrative voice does not make a pronouncement as to whether the painting is a relevant work of art, but seems rather to oscillate between calling it a *chef d'œuvre* and hokum. Furthermore, it is not clear if the woman she describes was demoralized by her inability to appreciate the painting's qualities, or whether she had a profound aesthetic experience in reaction to the work:

Le directeur de la galerie de peinture, rue Mazarine, dit à une visiteuse, d'une voix mesurée, devant un tableau : « Une toile d'une telle sensualité. » La femme soupire profondément, comme plongée dans le désespoir par cette constatation, ou incapable de supporter une sensation aussi puissante. Maintenant ils parlent à voix basse. L'homme, plus distinctement : « Et regardez la tache rouge au milieu, c'est extraordinaire... On ne met pas une tache rouge en plein milieu... » Le tableau est fait d'une surface ocre, craquelée, peut-être représente-t-il des roches au soleil. Le titre indiqué sur le catalogue : « Ardèche, la tache rouge ». Je cherche à associer la sensualité telle que je la sens à ce paysage désertique qu'il me semble voir. Il y a là une opération de l'esprit, ou de la sensibilité que je n'arrive pas à effectuer.

Impression qu'il me manque l'initiation à un savoir. Mais il ne s'agit pas de savoir puisque—en y réfléchissant—à la place « d'une telle sensualité », ils auraient bien pu dire « une telle fraîcheur ! » ou « une telle violence ! » sans que l'absence de rapport entre le tableau et l'appréciation soit modifiée : il ne s'agit que de l'acquisition d'un code. (21-22)

“Ardèche, la tache rouge,” functions as a miniature representation of the two journals, a *mise en abyme* of the entire project. Furthermore, the reillustration of this painting through another artist's ekphrasis takes on a larger signification. Ernaux's insertion of this frame within an individual entry (which is itself just one of many “tableaux” that makes up the collection) is a technique that artists employ to create a variety of effects. In this instance, readers “see” this painting through a sort of equivocating narrative lens that refuses to provide a definitive judgement about the painting's artistic value. The director's enthusiasm for the artwork might arouse suspicion given that profit, not art, is the primary concern of an art gallery. But the narrator notes that the paintings in this gallery have all been priced the same. Ernaux concludes the entry with the assertion that one's appreciation of a work of art is contingent on knowing the agreed upon code. It is not the words that one uses to describe the art, but a mutual—and arbitrary—agreement of its worth by members who value its mode of representation. The indecipherable aesthetic reaction of the woman in the art gallery to “Ardèche, la tache rouge” is analogous to the reactions different readers might have to Ernaux's “art exhibit.” Some may find nothing of interest in the author's Mercier-like *Panorama de Paris*, but readers who have picked up on the Ernauxian code for understanding her works will be moved by the humor, truth, and stylistic rendering of her portraits of society.

The narrator's indecisive appraisal of the painting is full of rich ambiguities that allow for multiple, significant interpretations that connect the abstract painting to many attributes of the two journals. "Ardeche, la tache rouge" might be seen to double as a literal representation of a graffito as defined by the American Heritage Dictionary: "a drawing or inscription made on a wall or other surface, usually so as to be seen by the public." While the painting may not at first strike us as an abstract representation of graffiti, Ernaux's placement and descriptions of graffiti in these two journals may not at first strike us as artistic either. Within each of the entries of these two journals, a shocking detail, like the red splotch of paint in "Ardèche, la tache rouge," is observed against the bland landscape of everyday life. Just as the artistic value of the painting in the gallery is ambiguous and difficult to appreciate for the uninitiated, so too is the art behind the seemingly chance assemblage of entries of Ernaux's journals. The narrator informs us that the red splotch of paint in "Ardèche, la tache rouge" can be interpreted as "sensual" like the red rose in the graffiti "Elsa je t'aime," or as "fresh" as in the depiction of a red rose in general, or "violent" as in the blood-splattered walls of the Saint Michel subway station. Whether the color red connotes "sensuality," "freshness," or "violence," in its literal and figurative sense red is the *donnée* that inspires these artists and that catches the spectator's attention. In short, this painting is a metaphor for all of the entries.

Moreover, "Ardèche, la tache rouge" and the fresco with the graffito of blood in the Cergy train station have several common associations that link them to one another. Both the painting and the final graffiti image can be likened to the entries of the two journals. They each have an attention-grabbing element that the artists have placed at the center of their work. The descriptions of the train station graffito and "Ardèche, la tache rouge" function as emblematic allusions to Ernaux's own "tableaux." According to the director of the art gallery, the splotch of



red in “Ardèche, la tache rouge” is the artist’s transgressive mark (“On ne met pas une tache rouge en plein milieu”) that imbues the painting with its “sensuality.” The red splotch of the artist can be seen not only on the painting, but also in the graffito on the woman’s body on the fresco in the Cergy train station, as well as in the eye-catching details of previously discussed entries.

“Ardèche, la tache rouge,” is also reminiscent of another artist’s work: Monet’s seminal painting “Impression, soleil levant.” Each of these two landscapes contains a single dominant focal point of red against a murky background of muted tones. Monet’s painting was at first derided as “impressionist.” His seminal landscape, and the controversy surrounding it, added momentum to a new direction in art. In these two journals, Ernaux pushes the boundaries of art by creating her own exhibition of tableaux that violate accepted norms, portraying “inappropriate” and quotidian details that are normally absent from traditional works of literature which “tastefully” suppress certain vulgar realities.

Ernaux alludes to the function that bourgeois art often plays for members of that class in an entry that describes the way a homeless man successfully extorts money from passengers in the subway. Like an expert rhetorician, he knows what and what not to say, and how to say it. His plea for money does not challenge preconceived notions about the causes of social marginalization and poverty : “Excellence de cette stratégie où les places sont respectées : je suis clodo, je bois et je ne travaille pas, tout le contraire de vous. Il ne dénonce pas la société mais la conforte. C’est le clown, qui met une distance artistique entre la réalité sociale, misère, alcoolisme, à laquelle il renvoie par sa personne et le public-voyageur. Rôle qu’il joue d’instinct avec un immense talent” (*Journal du dehors* 78-79).

Ernaux seems to position “Ardèche, la tache rouge” near the beginning of the first journal as representative of *Journal du dehors* and *La vie extérieure* thus creating an implicit pronouncement that these journals, too, are art. All of the aforementioned artists (excepting the clown in the subway) challenge their spectators to think and see the world in new ways by transgressing conventions. In one of her *tableaux vivants*, Ernaux correlates her depiction of the lifestyle of a group of young men, delinquents, to the work of another subversive artist, the marquis de Sade, with this qualification: “Et c’est cela qu’on ne peut pas voir, qui est plus terrifiant que les livres de Sade, parce que brut, sans conceptualisation ni distance esthétique” (*La vie extérieure* 117-18).<sup>56</sup> Ernaux’s illustrations of public life do not provide the viewer with a protective, intellectual aesthetic distance. Ernaux is making a point that, although these journals may provoke ambiguous mixed reactions depending on the code one subscribes to, she intends them to be a form of art, and that in order to move forward artistically and socially, the artist-activist must move art forward even if it means upsetting established codes that dictate what is and is not worthy of our attention and admiration.

An analogous transgressive red splotch can be found in several of Ernaux’s other works. This recurring image of the *tache rouge* further supports assertions that an intertextual reading increases one’s appreciation and comprehension of Ernaux’s œuvre. In *L’événement* Ernaux describes a painting that would represent her experience of abortion: “Si j’avais à représenter par un seul tableau cet événement de ma vie, je peindrais une petite table adossée à un mur, couverte de formica, avec une cuvette émaillée où flotte une sonde rouge. [...] Je ne crois pas qu’il existe un *Atelier de la faiseuse d’anges* dans aucun musée du monde” (82).

In *Fragments autour de Phillippe V*, Ernaux and her lover, at the time, Philippe Vian, together created a sort of painting that appears to be yet another declension of this theme. This

particular “painting,” like the red splotch in “Ardèche, la tache rouge” lends itself to several interpretations that Ernaux and Vian treat like a Rorschach image:

Nous avons fait l’amour un dimanche d’octobre, une feuille de papier à dessin étalée dans le lit, sous mes reins. Il voulait savoir quel tableau naîtrait du mélange de son sperme et de mon sang des règles.

Après, nous avons regardé la feuille, le dessin humide. On voyait une femme à la bouche épaisse dévorant le visage, au corps évanescent et coulant, informe. Ou encore une aurore boréale, ou un soleil couchant. [...]—quelque chose de pareil à une œuvre d’art. (26)

In her novel, *La femme gelée*, the narrator uses a personal metaphor, “mon soleil rouge dans ma vie décolorée,” to describe the outburst of vulgar language and anger, in contrast to her otherwise poised demeanor as a middle-class housewife, that she unleashes on occasion when fighting with her husband over the inequalities of their marriage:

Depuis le début du mariage, j’ai l’impression de courir après une égalité qui m’échappe tout le temps. Reste la scène, la bonne scène qui mime tout, la révolte, le divorce, remplace réflexion et discussion, la dévastation d’une heure, *mon soleil rouge dans ma vie décolorée*. Sentir monter la chaleur, le tremblement de rage, lâcher la première phrase qui démolira l’harmonie : « J’en ai marre d’être la bonne ! » Guetter qu’il prend le masque, attendre les bonnes répliques, celles qui vont me stimuler, m’aider à retrouver un langage perdu, violence et désir d’autre chose. Dire dans le désordre et cette grossièreté qui lui répugne que cette vie est conne [...]. Mais il viendra le temps où je me l’interdirai, la scène, « à cause du petit », tu n’as pas honte, devant lui, la dignité, la soumission ça veut dire. Un

père ferme et une mère qui ne pipe pas mot, très bon pour la tranquillité des enfants. (167; italics mine)

Like the scenes Ernaux describes in the two journals, her protagonist's fits of rage are deemed inappropriate for representation; in this case the husband is symbolic of the upper middle class. The metaphor "mon soleil rouge dans ma vie décolorée" resembles the foreground and background of the abstract painting. The wife's transgressive behavior (her "soleil rouge") and attempts to rebel against an inferior social status in her own home are ultimately extinguished by the disapproval of her husband—and upper middle class mores in general. The changing punctuation in this passage from the unattributed direct discourse, "« à cause du petit »,” to a string of admonitions that are not punctuated as direct speech, "tu n'as pas honte, devant lui, la dignité," "très bon pour la tranquillité des enfants," stylistically signals the gradual internalization of the husband's voice (and society's unspoken expectations) to words that gradually become her own internal discourse. If *La femme gelée* documents the awakening of the narrator's consciousness of a double social inferiority—gender and class—her later works seek to shift this imbalance of power by creating an alternative literary form of writing—and reading. The recurring permutations of the image of the red splotch against a dull background thus tie the themes of several of her works together and are yet another example of the importance of intertextuality as a key to appreciating Ernaux's œuvre.

### **Optical Illusions and Perceptual Games**

Two critics have already used the analogy of optical illusion to describe Ernaux's prose. Carole Allamand proposes reading Ernaux's writing in the same manner that one uses in the decoding of a magic eye image: "Sa littéralité, nous allons le voir, ne cesse même de percer la toile métadiscursive. Notre lecture d'Ernaux prendra donc pour jalons ces saillies, des accrocs

qui, reliés entre eux comme dans les “dessins cachés” pour enfants, feront peut-être apparaître un sens nouveau [...]” (204). In a similar manner, Marie-France Savéan likens a passage in *Une femme* to another type of optical illusion, a gestalt image: “Mais l’apparente simplicité du récit se trouble. Comme dans ces dessins jouant sur les illusions d’optique dans lesquels on voit tantôt un visage de jeune femme tournée vers la gauche, tantôt un profil de femme âgée tournée vers la droite, une seconde et même une troisième image se superposent à la première, s’imposant et s’effaçant tour à tour [...]” (11-12). These two critics have intuitively sensed this recurring phenomenon in Ernaux’s writing. Evidence of the extent to which Ernaux creates these effects can be seen in *Une femme* and « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* ». Furthermore, these games of perception show up in one of Ernaux’s more recent works, *L’Usage de la photo*.

In « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* », a journal Ernaux maintained over a period of two and a half years, recording periodic visits to her mother in a nursing home, and her mother’s progressive decline from Alzheimer’s, Ernaux relates a personal experience she herself had of perceiving an optical illusion. While visiting in July of 1984, she was taken aback by a piece of junk mail her mother had received, a sweepstakes announcement informing her that she might “already be a winner.” The letter was accompanied by a “fun” optical illusion. This particular image is an example of anamorphosis: an image that can only be perceived by viewing it from a skewed angle, or from a certain distance:

Au courrier, cette semaine, il y avait une lettre pour ma mère. *France Million*, les nouvelles de la Chance. À côté d’une photo d’Anne-Marie Peysson, tout sourire, était écrit : « Est-ce à Mme Blanche Duchesne [the name of Ernaux’s mother] qu’Anne-Marie Peysson va remettre le chèque de 25 millions de centimes ? » Un fac-similé du chèque au nom de ma mère figurait en bas et aussi : « Unique au monde, le portrait électronique de

Mme Blanche Duchesne », portrait qui « prend du relief lorsqu'on l'observe à un mètre de distance ». À un mètre, on distinguait les contours d'un visage jeune, à la bouche pulpeuse. Le nom de ma mère était répété une centaine de fois, pour l'assurer qu'elle était choisie, qu'elle allait gagner si elle répondait avant le 5 octobre. Cons. Attraper A.-M. Peysson par la peau du cou et la traîner au 'long séjour' de l'hôpital de Pontoise. (« *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » 41-42)

Ernaux's perception of the youthful woman, advertised as her mother's portrait, angered her, but it is not initially apparent why it provoked such a strong emotional response. Ernaux typically writes in a manner that requires the reader to make sense of her seemingly offhand remarks. Not only was the image of the attractive young woman in the electronic portrait an inaccurate representation of her mother, it was the reverse image of her mother. The disease had undoubtedly brought about acute changes not only to her cognitive abilities, but to her physical appearance as well, and therefore the youthful face in the anamorphic image presented an opposite portrait of her actual physical state at that moment in her life. The sweepstakes letter's insincere personal tone and its unwitting insensitivity to her mother's actual state of health infuriated Ernaux. Not only would winning the lottery be irrelevant to her mother in her condition, it would be a cruel juxtaposition of fates.

At a later point in the journal, Ernaux expresses hostility towards another representation of women who do not resemble her mother. This time it is in a play by Roussin being shown on television: "En voyant *Les œufs de l'autruche* de Roussin, à la télé, je retrouvais toutes les femmes haïes, images inversées de ma mère, avec leur corps et air fragiles, leur soie et leurs perles, leur minauderie" (« *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » 79-80). Like the woman in the sweepstakes letter, the women of Roussin's play are reverse images of her mother. The elegant

women in the play remind Ernaux of what her mother endeavored to become, but never entirely mastered, in spite of a lifelong effort to refine her looks, tastes, and manners. In *Une femme* Ernaux describes the conscious efforts her mother had to make, even in her later years, to give the appearance of being middle-class: “Il ne lui échappait plus aucun gros mot, elle s’efforçait de manipuler « doucement » les choses, bref, se « surveillant », rognant d’elle-même sa violence. Fière, même, de conquérir sur le tard ce savoir inculqué dès la jeunesse aux femmes bourgeoises de sa génération, la tenue parfaite d’un « intérieur »” (*Une femme* 79-80). But passing for middle-class is always an affectation, and certain gestures and words occasionally betray class origins. In photographs of her mother, the detail that Ernaux notices is her mother’s large hands. “Ce sont les mêmes mains larges et repliées que sur sa photo de jeune mariée” (*Une femme* 80). Portraits of her mother do not match the delicate-boned women portrayed in Roussin’s play.

Further irritation comes from the fact that Ernaux’s upper-class mother-in-law, whom Ernaux often contrasts with her own mother, does resemble the women of Roussin’s play: “La mère de mon mari, le même âge que la mienne, avait un corps resté mince, un visage lisse, des mains soignées. [...] (type de femmes que l’on voit dans les pièces de boulevard à la télévision, la cinquantaine, rang de perles sur une blouse de soie, « délicieusement naïves »)” (*Une femme* 70-71). Ernaux and her mother were both sensitive to the fact that the mother-in-law benefitted from a superior social status. Ernaux highlights this inequality through the words of her mother: “Jalousie toujours vivace vis-à-vis de ma belle-mère : ‘Si ç’avait été la mère de Raymond (elle veut sans doute dire Philippe, mon mari) on lui aurait fait une petite place’ “ (« *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » 31). Ernaux’s mother senses that had the mother-in-law found herself in similar circumstances, she probably would have been invited to come live with Ernaux’s family instead of being placed in a nursing home.

As hinted at by Carole Allamand, another type of optical illusion that Ernaux's flat style produces is analogous to that of a gestalt image such as the popular old woman-young woman picture in which the profile of a woman's face represents alternately an old woman's mouth or a young woman's neck depending on how the viewer conceptualizes the shared contours of the image. But unlike this well-known and easily recognized gestalt image, each of the two images of Ernaux's gestalt-like word images interacts with its complement in ways that enhance their separate and combined meanings—as the term *gestalt* implies. (This metaphorical phenomenon produces a sort of blending, instead of the vehicle, tenor, ground, explanation.) The fleeting, back-and-forth phenomenon common to the perception of a gestalt image can be perceived here in Ernaux's frank avowal of the ambivalent feelings she has about her mother's strictness as a parent:

En écrivant, je vois tantôt la « bonne » mère, tantôt la « mauvaise ». Pour échapper à ce balancement venu du plus loin de l'enfance, j'essaie de décrire et d'expliquer comme s'il s'agissait d'une autre mère et d'une fille qui ne serait pas moi. Ainsi, j'écris de la manière la plus neutre possible, mais certaines expressions (« s'il t'arrive un malheur ! ») ne parviennent pas à l'être pour moi, comme le seraient d'autres, abstraites (« refus du corps et de la sexualité ») par exemple. Au moment où je me les rappelle, j'ai la même sensation de découragement qu'à seize ans, et, fugitivement, je confonds la femme qui a le plus marqué ma vie avec ces mères africaines serrant les bras de leur petite fille derrière son dos, pendant que la matrone exciseuse coupe le clitoris. (*Une femme* 62)



Ernaux uses the words “balancement,” “fugitivement,” and “je confonds,” all of which are indicative of the sensations produced in the perception of a gestalt image. Pierre-Louis Fort, in his edition of *Une femme*, has commented specifically on the “oscillation” and “balancement” present in this and other ambivalent remarks that Ernaux makes about her mother: “Le balancement entre les deux adjectifs mis entre guillemets (pour pallier l’insuffisance de la qualification) montre l’oscillation de l’image de la mère dans le souvenir. L’écriture convoque des images fortes et l’image de la mère revient spontanément de façon dichotomique. Le livre pose ainsi la question de la remémoration” (121). But neither Savéan nor Fort connects Ernaux’s oscillating representations of her mother to other instances of the effect of optical games in her writing.

Complex feelings toward her mother are apparent in another significant instance in which Ernaux records a casual real-life experience of perceiving her as a gestalt-like image. She has this experience while visiting her in the nursing home: “Elle portait aujourd’hui une robe de chambre à fleurs, le tissu était plein de poils tirés par l’usure. Fugitivement, ma mère m’a paru couverte d’un pelage de bête” (« *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » 88). For a moment, it appears to Ernaux that the floral nightgown has been replaced with animal fur. She is undoubtedly shocked to see what appears to be the surreal transmogrification of her mother’s body into that of an animal. This sudden impression is due in part to the fact that the frayed and protruding threads of her mother’s gown resemble the fur of an animal’s coat. But Ernaux also seems to be predisposed to perceive her in this way. Ernaux’s cognitive perspective has no doubt been altered by the trauma of dealing with her mother’s deteriorating physical and mental health. In *Une femme* she gives this telling description of her worsening condition: “Elle n’avait plus honte de rien, porter une couche pour l’urine, manger voracement avec ses doigts” (*Une femme* 98).

Ernaux neither suppresses nor glosses over the realistic circumstances of her condition, as one might be tempted to do. As Pierre Louis-Fort points out, the oscillation of seemingly opposite representations of her mother articulates the difficulty of writing about her life. Ernaux struggles with the challenge of capturing and portraying a stable image. Which woman was she? The proud, energetic wife and mother who ran the family business, or the hospital patient who was no longer able to feed and care for herself, and whose manner had become animal-like? The analogy of a gestalt image aptly represents Ernaux's project of writing about her mother. By recreating the effects of gestalt images, Ernaux is able to bring together conflicting images of the most important woman in her life. The analogy of morphing images aptly represents her effort to connect, in one cohesive narrative, the seemingly contrary portraits of who her mother was as a person: "Pourtant, je sais que je ne peux pas vivre sans unir par l'écriture la femme démente qu'elle est devenue, à celle forte et lumineuse qu'elle avait été" (*Une femme* 89).

### **Transfiguration of Excrement**

The same effect of unifying and transforming disparate images comes into play in relation to the significance of excrement in Ernaux's and her family's daily existence. She recorded the following experience of perceiving a gestalt-like image during another visit to her mother in the nursing home. In this instance it is clear that Ernaux's frame of mind predisposes her to misinterpret certain visual clues. Checking to make sure her mother still had something in her bedside table to snack on, Ernaux opened the drawer expecting to see cookies, but found something else instead: "Le pire, imprévisible. J'ai ouvert le tiroir de sa table de nuit pour vérifier s'il lui restait des biscuits. J'ai cru voir un gâteau : je l'ai pris. C'était un étron. [...] Un épisode de mon enfance m'est revenu, j'avais caché un excrément dans le buffet de la chambre par paresse de descendre aux cabinets de la cour" (« *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* » 42-43). It

is natural that what she is expecting to find (cookies) momentarily causes her to see a small cake instead of feces (Ernaux actually uses the colloquial, and more humorous term “étron”). There are, unfortunately, certain similarities of color and texture between feces and cake that may cause the confusion of one for the other. These shared characteristics are similar to the shared contours of a gestalt image. Her mistake in visual perception resonates with personal and literary significance. Ernaux is of course shocked to discover that what she has picked up is not a small cake. However, just as with the Proustian experience of the *petite madeleine*, a scene from her childhood suddenly returns to her consciousness. It is certain that the irony of the event is not lost on Ernaux, the well-read *agrégée de lettres*: for her, long-forgotten childhood memories are recaptured not from a fragrant tea-soaked cake, but its digested opposite, its “inverse” image.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, this experience of encountering excrement in her mother’s night table is yet another reminder to Ernaux of the omnipresence of urine and feces in the nursing home—a detail that she often mentions in the journal. The feces in the drawer of her mother’s night table is a *visceral* example, in its most literal sense, of her family’s place in society. Ernaux points out this unglamorous fact in *Les Années*: “On vivait dans la proximité de la merde. Elle faisait rire” (39).

While the incident of mistaking feces for cake has its tragicomic side, the proximity of Ernaux’s family and her social class to excrement was not always a laughing matter. This is apparent in Ernaux’s description of their home located in the sector called “La Vallée” that was built around the textile factory where her parents managed their first small grocery store. Ernaux notes the system of open sewage common to all of the homes in the neighborhood: “[...] une minuscule courette avec un cabinet qui se déversait directement dans la rivière” (*La Place* 40). But after heavy rains, the effluent from the community’s outdoor plumbing didn’t always stay in the river: “Aux fortes pluies, la rivière inondait la maison” (*La Place* 44). Inadequate

infrastructure coupled with social problems made life difficult. Ernaux describes La Vallée in these words: “Encore aujourd’hui, dire la Vallée d’avant-guerre, c’est tout dire, la plus forte concentration d’alcooliques et de filles mères, l’humidité ruisselant des murs et les nourrissons morts de diarrhée verte en deux heures” (*Une femme* 39-40).<sup>58</sup>

For the attentive reader, certain details from the passage just quoted will resonate when Ernaux describes the only dream she can clearly recall during the ten months she takes to write *Une femme*. Considered side by side, these two passages bear a curious resemblance to one another. The result is what one might liken to the aforementioned old woman, young woman gestalt image that changes when the shared contours are conceptualized differently. One part of this bi-focal word-image is contained in the description of La Vallée: “[...] filles mères, l’humidité ruisselant des murs et les nourrissons morts de diarrhée verte en deux heures” (*Une femme* 40). The word-image with “shared contours” is contained in the description of the dream, previously discussed and quoted in Chapter 2:

Pendant les dix mois où j’ai écrit, je rêvais d’elle presque toutes les nuits. Une fois, j’étais couchée au milieu d’une rivière, entre deux eaux. De mon ventre, de mon sexe à nouveau lisse comme celui d’une petite fille partaient des plantes en filaments, qui flottaient, molles. Ce n’était pas seulement mon sexe, c’était aussi celui de ma mère. (*Une femme* 104)

Several pictorial aspects of the description of the dream resemble the narrator’s earlier account of the family’s situation in La Vallée. One of the characteristics common to these two passages is the presence of water: “l’humidité ruisselant des murs,” and “au milieu d’une rivière, entre deux eaux.” The mention of water in the dream influences our reception of the figure “entre deux eaux” (to occupy an intermediate space). The graphic details of the dream encourage the

reader to interpret the figure literally. Another perhaps more striking similarity between the two passages is the flowing of green substances from the body.<sup>59</sup> In the description of La Vallée the diarrhea is green. In the dream Ernaux does not describe the plants as green, but one can assume that, being plants, they are indeed green. A third similarity is the word *filles mères*, which refers to the young unwed mothers in the description of La Vallée. The compound noun *filles mères* (a young unwed mother) also evokes the image in the dream of the mother and daughter who are one person—a sort of mother-daughter body. These three visually similar elements link the two passages.

The shared contours (streaming water, the color green, and the child-mother body) of these two different word-images, when considered side-by-side, are like a gestalt image. Furthermore, these two descriptions illustrate the qualitative change in Ernaux's and her mother's socio-economic reality. The dream image portrays a rejuvenated mother and daughter who simultaneously occupy the body of a healthy prepubescent girl who has made it through the vulnerable period of childhood, who has not succumbed to any of the potentially fatal diseases or statistical probabilities associated with having to live in the impoverished conditions of the working-class sector of La Vallée. Although Ernaux's sister died of diphtheria, the parents were able to save their second daughter, Ernaux herself, from a similar fate by moving to a different city. For the reader able to visualize and thus compare the two passages, the morbid image of the infant with green diarrhea in La Vallée morphs into the more optimistic and healthy image in the dream of a prepubescent girl with plants growing from her viscera. In real life, Ernaux's mother transformed the family's social reality through years of hard work and by imitating the manners and tastes of the middle class: “[Mon père] l’a suivie, elle était la volonté sociale du couple” (*Une femme* 39). Ernaux, however, does not tell her mother's life story by imitating traditional

modes of literary discourse, which are usually marked by the use of artistic (literary) metaphors and other poetic rhetorical figures. Nor does she shun the unglamorous details of her family's social reality to avoid subjects that are considered inappropriate for *literature*. Instead she artfully represents her mother's lifework by employing a novel form of transfiguration that is very metaphorical, but that circumvents traditional literary style.

### **A Portrait of the Artists**

Similar effects of optical illusion are to be found in *L'Usage de la photo*, which was written nearly two decades after *Une femme* and « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit.* » Like most of Ernaux's works, *L'Usage de la photo* defies genre classification. As Akane Kawakami aptly points out, Ernaux's and Marie's book can be read in many ways: "as an experimental work featuring multiple media and authors; as an autobiographical, or perhaps autoethnological chronicle; as a meditation on the relationship between photography and writing; or as a cancer narrative, specifically focused on breast cancer from a feminist perspective" (451). To this I would add that it can also be read as a reflection on pleasure. Ernaux and her lover at that time, Marc Marie, undertook their writing project as a way of holding on to, and thereby extending, their moments of shared intimacy: "comme si ce que nous avons pensé jusque-là être suffisant pour garder la trace de nos moments amoureux, les photos, ne l'était pas, qu'il faille encore quelque chose de plus, de l'écriture" (12).

But erotic pleasure is not the only form of pleasure that the work explores. Another form comes in part from the manner in which Ernaux and Marie agreed to structure the work. Together they decided that they would write about a selection of snapshots as they collected them over the period of their relationship with the understanding that one not show the other what each had written until they had both reached the end of the project. Each of the fourteen

pictures depicts the couple's clothing left scattered pell-mell in one room or another of Ernaux's home—remnants, proof as it were, of having lived a moment of passion, in short, of having lived. In the text that accompanies each photograph Ernaux and Marie almost never evoke specific details of their sexual relations; instead each photograph serves as a new starting point for a joint creative act that becomes yet another form of pleasure.

Ernaux nonetheless exerts more creative influence over the project than her partner. As Natalie Edwards points out:

[Ernaux] controls [the work's] *mise-en-scène*. She writes the preface and the postface, and the text that she writes in response to each photograph comes first. The photographs are all taken on her territory, in her apartment, apart from one in a hotel room. Ernaux also takes the liberty of writing about other photographs taken by the pair that they had chosen specifically not to include. She even compares the camera to a penis and claims to feel in possession of a phallus when she aims her lens at a subject. Elizabeth Richardson Viti points out that Ernaux writes of Marie's penis, objectifying and fragmenting his body and placing him in the role of the sex object, in a reversal of the way in which women have traditionally been objectified in images. (709-10)

Furthermore, Ernaux's control of the overall structure ensures that she is able to imbue the work with her vision. This also allows her to create an effect of optical illusion in which she juxtaposes one form of pleasure with another.

Ernaux creates this effect at the very beginning of the work in the introductory remarks that she alone writes. In this preface Ernaux describes a photograph that is *not* one of the fourteen pictures that the couple had chosen to publish as part of their joint writing project. She

explains that this photograph in particular represents a sort of substitute for pleasure because the couple did not have time to make love that morning: “J’ai pris cette photo le 11 février, après un déjeuner rapide. [...] Je devais prendre le RER pour aller à Paris, nous n’avions pas eu le temps de faire l’amour. La photo c’était quelque chose à la place” (15). She describes it in words only because, one might assume, of its frank and graphic nature—it is a picture of her lover’s erection: “Je peux la décrire, je ne pourrais pas l’exposer aux regards” (15). But Ernaux’s description conceals nothing—on the contrary it is unflinchingly graphic:

Sur la photo, on ne voit de M., debout, que la partie du corps comprise entre le bas de son pull gris, à larges côtes torsadées, tombant au ras de la toison rousse, et le milieu des cuisses sur lesquelles est baissé son slip, un boxer noir avec la marque Dim en grosses lettres blanches. Le sexe de profil est en érection. La lumière du flash éclaire les veines et fait briller une goutte de sperme au bout du gland, comme une perle. L’ombre du sexe dressé se projette sur les livres de la bibliothèque qui occupe toute la partie droite de la photo. On peut lire les noms d’auteurs et les titres écrits en gros caractères : Lévi-Strauss, Martin Walser, *Cassandra, L’âge des extrêmes*. Un trou est repérable au bas du pull. (15)

She goes on to compare her photograph to Gustave Courbet’s painting, *The Origin of the World* (1866): “Je m’aperçois qu’elle est, d’une certaine façon, le pendant du tableau de Courbet, *L’Origine du monde*, dont je n’ai longtemps connu que la photographie dans une revue” (15-16). The similarities between the two are obvious. Courbet’s painting depicts in frank detail a nude woman whose genitals are the focus of the picture, but whose head, arms, and legs are obscured by the artist’s choice of perspective and “framing.” Elizabeth Richardson Viti points out the fact that Ernaux’s exploitation of “Man as sex object could not be clearer. Ernaux turns on their head



the traditional techniques in the objectification of women. Marie's body is fragmented: it is invisible and simply collapsed into his phallus. The sex organ itself is erect to underscore its use for sexual pleasure" (84). Courbet's and Ernaux's nudes are linked not only by their shared subject matter, but also by similar styles of representation; the raw realism of Courbet's painting is analogous not only to the clinical description Ernaux gives of her model's body, but also to her prose style in general.

But it is not solely for these reasons that Ernaux likens her photograph to Courbet's painting. Within this word-photograph Ernaux has created effects of optical illusion similar to those found in *Une femme* and « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* ». At this juncture it is pertinent to note that Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* was also associated with a sort of optical illusion that concealed the actual theme of the painting from view. In 1955 Lacan, the owner of *L'Origine du monde* at that time, commissioned the artist André Masson to create a cover for the painting that would cleverly hide its subject matter. When viewed separately for the first time, Masson's cover appears to be a sort of abstract landscape. But when one sees Masson's painting placed on top of Courbet's, it becomes obvious that the bushes and gently sloping hills share the contours of the model's anatomy below. Not only does Masson's abstract landscape camouflage the nude, it is a gestalt image of Courbet's painting (Padberg 98-99).<sup>60</sup> Given the previous discussion of the effects of optical illusion in *Une femme* and « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* », Ernaux's assertion that her photograph and Courbet's painting are a pair suggests that the photograph might also have its own clever cover that recreates an effect of optical illusion. Like Masson with his landscape, Ernaux has veiled our viewing of the photograph with her own art; a camouflage of words simultaneously conceals and exposes the word-picture. Behind the graphic description of her model's body Ernaux has inserted effects of optical illusion.

One of the factors that might initially interfere with a reader's ability to perceive these effects is Ernaux's description of the shocking subject matter of the photograph. Ernaux is quite conscious of this, for she goes on to tell us that the image is analogous to a scene she witnessed in Rome the summer she was twenty-three. While sitting in her train compartment in the Termini station she was suddenly exposed to a startling sight: "Juste en face de moi, dans le train arrêté de l'autre côté du quai, un sexe érigé sorti du pantalon était violemment branlé par la main d'un homme dissimulé jusqu'à la taille par le store, qu'il avait à moitié baissé, d'un compartiment de première" (16). In addition to the obvious visual similarities and framing techniques, another link between the exhibitionist in the train window and Ernaux's photograph might be similar motives. One's natural reflex is to look away when confronted with an exhibitionist as Ernaux herself explains in *Journal du dehors* when describing people's reactions to a similar scene in one of the stations of the Paris métro, "Geste insupportable à voir, forme déchirante de la dignité : exposer qu'on est un homme. [...] On ne peut pas lui donner d'aumône, juste feindre de n'avoir rien vu [...]. C'est un geste qui ruine tout [...]" (36). Just as the flasher intends to aggressively shock and awe his unsuspecting victim, so too does Ernaux with her written description of her lover's anatomy. It is therefore no surprise that critics have tended to avoid commenting on the description of this particular photograph, perhaps ascribing its presence to yet another transgression of this *femme de lettres mal tournée*. Antoine Compagnon refers elliptically to this passage as "la photo absente" and in quoting a passage from the work corrects her failure to use the subjunctive. But if one suspends moral judgement and dares to "stare," it becomes apparent that Ernaux's word-photograph describing her lover's pose, and the details in the room surrounding it, can be interpreted as a sort of burlesque sight gag in which the humor is communicated visually, not verbally. In order to perceive the effects of visual games in this

photograph one must develop it in the darkroom of the mind's eye. The resulting image is yet another instance of an Ernausian reversal that playfully tests cultivated readers who may be adroit at recognizing phallic symbols in art, but perhaps fail to see symbolic phalluses as quickly. Ernaux's trick photograph also plays on the "some people are so literal" stereotype that is often exploited in comical portrayals of "country bumpkins."

Imagined from another perspective, this word-photograph might be likened to a portrait of the artist; Marc Marie is one of the authors of *L'Usage de la photo*, but instead of the author's face, we "see" a synecdochic stand-in posing in front of a backdrop of books, which calls to mind the type of photograph one often sees of a writer posing in front of a wall of bookshelves, as if the edifice of literature confirms to the viewer the writer's erudition as a sort of visual credential. A particularly striking example of authors being "endorsed" by a background of books is the French literary television program "La Grande Librairie," in which the guests are surrounded by brightly lit bookshelves that tower over them and the audience.<sup>61</sup>

Elizabeth Richardson Viti also notes an effect of synecdoche with regard to Ernaux's depiction of Marc Marie: "[...] the reduction of Marc Marie in the text to a simple M. necessarily brings to mind the abbreviation for Monsieur, subtly supporting the notion that all men are the same and that a man, any man, will do" (85). Ernaux's word-picture pokes fun, not at Marc Marie specifically, but at this sort of photograph, and at the dominant phallogocentric—phallus in the center—perspective.

If one is able to momentarily "look past" the distracting focal point in the foreground and consider the significance of the books in the background, a second image comes forth. The shadow of the erection that falls on the books metaphorically associates one form of pleasure with another—reading and writing. As previously noted, Ernaux likens intellectual activity with

erotic pleasure: “[...] comme si le cerveau, sous l’afflux répété des mêmes images, des mêmes souvenirs, pouvait jouir, qu’il soit un organe sexuel pareil aux autres” (*Passion simple* 42). The visible letters “Dim” on Marc Marie’s underwear counterpoint the other words that can be made out on the spines of books. Moreover, the heteroclite collection of authors and titles on her bookshelves metonymically hints at the portrait of another artist, Ernaux herself. The genres of sociology, history, biography, and political analysis allude to Ernaux’s approach to writing in general, which is itself a combination of textual modes. She describes writing *Une femme* in this manner: “Ce que j’espère écrire de plus juste se situe sans doute à la jointure du familial et du social, du mythe et de l’histoire. [...] Mais je souhaite rester, d’une certaine façon, au-dessous de la littérature” (*Une femme* 23). Ernaux’s use of “au-dessous” can be interpreted in two ways. One might see it as a modest author’s admission that her work is not literary. Or, that she intends to be “subversive,” emphasis on the the meaning of the latin prefix *sub-*, and its correlative “sous.”

The inaugural fragment containing this word-photograph in *L’Usage de la photo* hints at Ernaux’s intent to put forth a subversive narrative that seeks to disrupt and reshift the focus of traditional literary forms. Although Ernaux’s graphic description of the photograph does not conceal the nude from the reader’s ability to “see” it, as does Masson’s cover for Courbet’s painting, her “illustration” is a sort of camouflage, and it does contain effects of optical tricks that conceal a major theme of the work—writing and retaliating through writing are their own forms of pleasure! For those who are able to appreciate Ernaux’s effects of optical illusion, a “magic eye image” of complex and artfully produced writing will emerge from the nondescript surface of her flat prose.

## Traumatic Associations

In several of Ernaux's works the writer recounts acutely painful and unsettling life experiences in her and her family's lives. This is especially true in *La Honte* where she articulates the process by which a traumatic event can leave an indelible image in the memory that functions like one pole of a metaphor that will be forever present as a point of comparison. The traumatic image, like an exposed nerve, is always sensitive to associative stimuli that might recall and thereby reawaken that particular painful memory. As a case in point, Ernaux articulates for the first time in writing in *La Honte* a disturbing scene of family violence. The narration begins with an account of how she remembers a Sunday afternoon in June, 1952, when some typical bickering between her parents escalated into a situation in which her father almost murdered her mother. The shock of witnessing this event had a profound emotional and cognitive impact on Ernaux, leaving her with a permanent sense of shame—which gives the book its title. Ernaux describes what she euphemistically refers to as “la scène” thus:

Puis j'ai entendu ma mère hurler : « Ma fille ! » Sa voix venait de la cave, à côté du café. Je me suis précipitée au bas de l'escalier, j'appelais « Au secours ! » de toutes mes forces. Dans la cave mal éclairée, mon père agrippait ma mère par des épaules, ou le cou. Dans son autre main, il tenait la serpe à couper le bois qu'il avait arrachée du billot [...]. (14-15)

The traumatic scene of family violence that launches the narration of *La Honte* has several elements in common with another incident recounted in *La Place* in which the father, during a visit to his family, helped his sister with the preparation of the meal by taking charge of the necessary task of dressing a chicken: “Un été il m'a emmenée trois jours dans la famille, au bord de la mer. [...] Pour ma tante, il a tué un poulet qu'il tenait entre ses jambes, en lui

enfonçant des ciseaux dans le bec, le sang gras dégouttait sur la terre du cellier” (*La Place* 66). Ernaux was present at both of these events. The textual similarities describing these two scenes of violence are striking. In both cases the action takes place in a cellar, the father wields a sharp object (a pair of scissors in one scene, a billhook in the other) and he holds his victim with a firm grip. Although we know the scene of domestic violence took place June 15, 1952, we do not know the date of the trip to the seashore to see the father’s family.<sup>62</sup> Though these memories are recounted in two different works, it seems plausible that Ernaux (and perceptive readers) would associate one powerful image with the other. Ernaux does in fact write that the scene between her parents became a standard by which she measured other painful events in her life: “[La scène] est toujours ce qu’elle a été depuis 52, une chose de folie et de mort, à laquelle j’ai constamment comparé, pour évaluer leur degré de douleur, la plupart des événements de ma vie, sans lui trouver d’équivalent” (*La Honte* 32).

Traumatic images have the potential to haunt an individual for very long periods of time during which the painful memory remains sensitive to stimuli. In *Coping With Trauma*, Rolf Kleber and Danny Brom cite an experiment from the 1930s (which would now be considered unethical) in which an eleven-month-old boy was conditioned to be afraid of a white rat. The researchers discovered that “this fear grew to include other things that resembled the white rat. A fur coat, woolly fabrics and rabbits could also evoke an anxiety reaction in the child, even though they were not included in the experiment” (211). Like a film loop, these images continuously replay themselves, and are all too easily recalled long after the trauma.<sup>63</sup> If the family visit to the seashore took place first, then the memory of her father slaughtering a chicken might have come back to her when she saw him on the verge of striking her mother, making the possibility of seeing her mother murdered all the more real and terrifying. If instead the scene of domestic

violence took place first, then seeing her father at a later point butcher the chicken may have reminded her of the day when he almost murdered her mother. The blood from the chicken would reify the scene of her parents' dispute in the cellar, and in an associative manner play out what might have happened to her mother, thus reawakening the terror associated with the original trauma. Towards the end of *La Honte* Ernaux summarizes the profound effect the scene of family violence had on her and the way it altered her understanding of the world afterward: “(Après chacune des images de cet été, ma tendance naturelle serait d’écrire « alors j’ai découvert que » [...] Il n’y a peut-être pas de rapport entre la scène du dimanche de juin et ce voyage<sup>64</sup> autre que chronologique mais comment affirmer qu’un fait survenant après un autre n’est pas vécu dans l’ombre portée du premier, que la succession des choses n’a pas de sens)” (134-35).

One possible explanation as to why Ernaux avoids metaphors as they are conventionally expressed in works of literature can be appreciated in light of the previous discussion by comparing it to a passage from *Germinal* by Emile Zola. The following excerpt typifies how the traditional novel portrays the lower classes negatively in an episode that metaphorically associates the killing of a human being with the slaughtering of a chicken. The sort of metaphor that Zola invokes (but that Ernaux abstains from using) is of the peasant as savage animal in the episode where Jeanlin kills the little soldier: “[...] Jeanlin sauta sur les épaules du soldat d’un bond énorme de *chat sauvage*, s’y agrippa de ses *griffes*, lui enfonça dans la gorge son couteau grand ouvert. Le col de crin résistait, il dut appuyer des deux mains sur le manche, s’y pendre de tout le poids de son corps. *Souvent, il avait saigné des poulets*, qu’il surprenait derrière les fermes. Cela fut si rapide [...]” (404; italics mine). Zola’s passage shares several similarities with the two scenes previously discussed in Ernaux’s representation of the scene of family violence:

Jeanlin forces a knife into the throat of his victim, and he holds on tightly to his victim's shoulders. Although the murder of the soldier does not take place in a cellar, it does take place during the dark of night, and later on Etienne and Jeanlin bury the body in the mine: Zola correlates the act of killing a human being with that of slaughtering a chicken, and likens Jeanlin to a predatory wild animal with claws. Perhaps consideration of this quote from Zola sheds light on one of the reasons why Ernaux shuns such traditional forms of literary metaphor. Such comparisons are humiliating to anyone from the lower classes as there has been a long literary history of metaphorically comparing them to savage animals. One wonders if Ernaux, as a student and teacher of literature, noticed this passage and if it may have recalled, and "twisted the knife" in the psychic wound of witnessing the threat of such terrifying violence in her own family.

A scene that Ernaux recounts from her father's life illustrates more directly how one humiliating experience created emotional side-effects that for him did indeed resonate for a lifetime. The initial trauma occurred during his adolescence when he worked as a farmhand with a group of young and old men. In addition to their nominal wages, he and the other laborers received room and board—or to be more precise, a place to sleep in the barn above the noisy and, as one can imagine, smelly stables. The land-owning farmer skimmed on the food served to the farmhands either because he thought that being farmhands they would not be very discerning about the food they ate, or he wanted to maximize profits, or both: "Les fermiers rognèrent sur la nourriture. Un jour, la tranche de viande servie dans l'assiette d'un vieux vacher a ondulé doucement, dessous elle était pleine de vers. Le supportable venait d'être dépassé. Le vieux s'est levé, réclamant qu'ils ne soient plus traités comme des chiens" (*La Place* 32). Ernaux indicates that the nauseating image of seeing one's food undulate because it is infested with worms,



coupled with the disregard of the landowning farmer for the well-being of his hired help, seems to be the source of the father's seemingly exaggerated anger in reaction to their treatment while dining in the previously mentioned upscale restaurant in Tours. The group that she and her father were traveling with were seated (*placed*) in an out-of-the-way section of the restaurant:

“Souvenir de Tours 1952. La salle de restaurant luxueuse, d'un côté, le groupe du voyage organisé, nous, les péquenots, de l'autre, les clients normaux, cette fille bronzée, avec son père, chic” (*Se perdre* 141). They receive intentionally indifferent service—and mediocre food. The restaurant staff “put them in their place” by letting them know that it was obvious that they were not part of the well-heeled, fashionable crowd that regularly frequented this restaurant. In this particular scene her father's emotional response seemed to be out of proportion with this minor slight. “Mon père s'est plaint ensuite avec une violence inhabituelle de ce restaurant où l'on nous avait donné à manger de la purée faite avec « de la pomme de terre à cochons », blanche et sans goût” (*La Honte* 133). Being treated, in her father's words, like “chiens” and “cochons” is a degrading experience. It is one thing to be metaphorically compared to a savage animal by Zola, a writer who is supposedly sympathetic to the plight of *le peuple*,<sup>65</sup> but arguably much more painful to actually be treated as sub-human in real life. It is not only her father, but her aunt, her mother, indeed her entire class who show signs of the indelible wounds of a lifetime of “small” humiliations—if indeed there is such a thing as a *small* humiliation. Like Chinese water torture, it is not the single minor offense that is intrinsically torturous, but the intermittent yet endless repetition.

### **Symbolic Violence by Way of Comic Stooges**

Ernaux eschews a traditional literary style, and yet she constructs stylistically complex works that strike back at the dominant class—the gatekeepers of cultural capital. She does this

because she herself has encountered the painful barbs of prejudice and marginalization communicated through satiric representations of her class. Her recollections of the comedy of Bourvil and the Bécassine cartoons are evidence of this:

Dans les films comiques de cette époque, on voyait beaucoup de héros naïfs et paysans se comporter de travers à la ville ou dans les milieux mondains (rôles de Bourvil). On riait aux larmes des bêtises qu'ils disaient, des impairs qu'ils osaient commettre, et qui figuraient ceux qu'on craignait de commettre soi-même. Une fois, j'ai lu que Bécassine en apprentissage, ayant à broder un oiseau sur un bavoir, et sur les autres *idem*, broda *idem* au point de bourdon. Je n'étais pas sûre que je n'aurais pas brodé *idem*. (*La Place* 60)

Bécassine's mistake comes from reading too literally. She lacks the education to interpret the supplemental code, Latin, that she would need to fully understand the sewing instructions. In a similar manner, readers who are unaware of Ernaux's subversive manner of encoding a text might only be able to perceive its literal meanings. Ernaux's *écriture plate* potentially turns the tables on certain members of the cultural elite who themselves might unwittingly interpret her writing too literally. These stereotypical caricatures of the ignorant peasant buffoon made people laugh—but perhaps not always, not if one recognized one's self in these caricatures. Ernaux admits having identified with Bécassine saying that she too might have interpreted the sewing directions literally and committed the same “ridiculous” mistake. The shame-inducing recognition of herself in the ridiculous backward provincial girl is an example of the humiliation caused by symbolic violence.

In *L'événement*, Ernaux portrays the effect of symbolic violence as a real physical attack. The doctor who performed the dilation and curettage procedure to stop the excessive bleeding

after the abortion made an unguarded and condescending, sardonic remark about “not being the plumber.” Apparently he felt comfortable being flippant because he assumed that Ernaux was a factory worker or a sales clerk at Monoprix—his social inferior:

(« Je ne suis pas le plombier ! » Cette phrase, comme toutes celles qui jalonnent cet événement, des phrases très ordinaires, proférés par des gens qui les disaient sans réfléchir, déflagre toujours en moi. Ni la répétition ni un commentaire sociopolitique ne peuvent en atténuer la violence : je ne « l’attendais » pas.

Fugitivement, je crois voir un homme en blanc, avec des gants de caoutchouc, qui me roue de coups en hurlant, « Je ne suis pas le plombier ! ». *Et cette phrase, que lui avait peut-être inspirée un sketch de Fernand Raynaud qui faisait alors rire toute la France*, continue de hiérarchiser le monde en moi, de séparer, comme à coups de trique, les médecins des ouvriers et des femmes qui avortent, les dominants des dominés.) (97; italics mine)

Ernaux does what many upwardly mobile class-immigrants do *not* do. She does not forget where she came from. As a member of the educated upper-middle-class she could, if she chose to, write from a position of superiority. But instead, she refuses to join in on the joke being made about her and her class. In *L’écriture comme un couteau*, she asserts her literary and stylistic stance: “La seule écriture que je sentais « juste » était celle d’une distance objectivante, sans affects exprimés, sans aucune complicité avec le lecteur cultivé (complicité qui n’est pas tout à fait absente de mes premiers textes)” (34).

In a subtle but telling footnote in *Une femme*, Ernaux proffers an insidious example of symbolic violence when she cites an authority’s “evidence” of her social class’s intellectual inferiority in an article from *Le Monde*, the most respected national newspaper in France. The

article proclaimed that any attempts to educate disadvantaged youth from her (and her mother's) region were futile:

Dans *Le Monde* du 17 juin 1986, on lit à propos de la région de ma mère, la Haute-Normandie : « un retard de la scolarisation qui n'a jamais été comblé, malgré des améliorations, continue de produire ses effets (...). Chaque année, 7.000 jeunes sortent du système scolaire sans formation. Issus des "classes de relégation", ils ne peuvent accéder à des stages de qualification. La moitié d'entre eux, selon un pédagogue, ne "savent pas lire deux pages conçues pour eux". »

(30)

Ernaux's "écriture plate" is not just a technique of rejecting complicity with the cultivated reader of the dominant class, but a political move that proposes an alternative literary view. As Cathy Jellenik explains: "In order to validate her work in the eyes of working-class readers who might disdain it, Ernaux writes and rewrites texts that put into play an increasingly austere, antimannerist aesthetic, thereby rejecting a more traditionally literary, 'bourgeois,' style" (74).

One might hypothesize that Ernaux's irritated reactions to the newspaper report, to Roussin's representation of the simpering women in his play ("images inversées de ma mère"), to the "electronic portrait" of her mother in the sweepstakes letter, to phallogocentric attitudes towards women's writing, to the stooge representations of Bourvil, Bécassine, and Raynaud, in short to a lifetime of similar small humiliations, inspired her to retaliate through her writing. The traditional tools of decoding texts to understand and appreciate works of art are inadequate for decoding Ernaux's works. In this manner she is able to elude the "cultivated" critic and avenge her own "race." The journal entry recording Ernaux's anger in reaction to the clever image that accompanies the sweepstakes letter might be a double entendre<sup>66</sup> obliquely alerting us to the

event's inspirational significance—a signpost to similar techniques of the artful construction of hidden word-images that Ernaux will place in her own texts. In this manner, she turns the tables on those who are usually in the position of lampooning the ridiculous mistakes of the uncultivated, lower classes. Ernaux's prose style, with its hidden effects of optical illusion, is not only an aesthetic created in defense of the lower classes—from which she and her parents originate—but also a covert attack on, and challenge to, the representatives of pedagogical and cultural authority—academics and journalists, whom she has quoted in *Le Monde*—to make the point that many members of the matriculated elite might themselves have difficulty decoding stylistically simple texts “conçus pour eux.”

### **An Ideal Image of Literature**

If a metaphor is the transposition of one image upon another in which the associations between the two images bring new light to understanding the tenor, then every metaphor is in itself a sort of gestalt image (but not all gestalt images are metaphors). Ernaux uses what some might see as a distasteful and profane association to illustrate her ideal of literature at the beginning of *Passion simple*. It is a graphic description of a scene from an X-rated film, but the scene itself was rather difficult to perceive because Ernaux was viewing it on a television that did not have the device that unscrambles coded cable television broadcasts:

Mon poste n'a pas de décodeur, les images sur l'écran étaient floues, les paroles remplacées par un bruitage étrange, grésillements, clapotis, une sorte d'autre langage, doux et ininterrompu. On distinguait une silhouette de femme en guêpière, avec des bas, un homme. L'histoire était incompréhensible et on ne pouvait prévoir quoi que ce soit, des gestes ou des actions. L'homme s'est approché de la femme. Il y a eu un gros plan, le sexe de la femme est apparu, bien

visible dans les scintillements de l'écran, puis le sexe de l'homme, en érection, qui s'est glissé dans celui de la femme. Pendant un temps très long, le va-et-vient des deux sexes a été montré sous plusieurs angles. La queue est réapparue, entre la main de l'homme, et le sperme s'est répandu sur le ventre de la femme. On s'habitue certainement à cette vision, la première fois est bouleversante. Des siècles et des siècles, des centaines de générations et c'est maintenant, seulement, qu'on peut voir cela, un sexe de femme et un sexe d'homme s'unissant, le sperme—ce qu'on ne pouvait regarder sans presque mourir devenu aussi facile à voir qu'un serrement de mains.

Il m'a semblé que l'écriture devrait tendre à cela, cette impression que provoque la scène de l'acte sexuel, cette angoisse et cette stupeur, une suspension de jugement moral. (11-12)

This provocative metaphor fits Elżbieta Chrzanowska-Kluczevska's definition of a type 2 catechresis:

In contrast to Catachresis One, Catachresis Two is a full-blown metaphor which tends to occupy the other end of the metaphorical cline (sic) [spectrum]. It is a metaphor marked by the feature of illogicity, often close to absurdity, and generates far-fetched associations. [...] In this role Catachresis Two shows a strong clash or incongruity, conflict or discordance between its two constitutive elements, the vehicle and the tenor or the source and target domains. (41)

Ernaux's detailed description of the "money shot" is shocking in and of itself, but perhaps even more "abusive" is the daring assertion that literature should resemble the impression created by this pornographic image. While some of the themes of Ernaux's works do

purposely transgress the limits of “appropriate” subject matter, purposely shocking her readership is not the only goal of her writing. Embedded in the description of the X-rated scene are several words encoded with double meanings that point to other facets of Ernaux’s writing. As she explains, not having the “décodateur” made it difficult at first to perceive the image. Watching an X-rated movie without a decoder box can be likened to the process of reading without having the critical tools needed to decode a text. The interfering static caused by the poor reception created an opaque screen over the action taking place in the film, making it difficult for her to hear and see what was being broadcast, and to understand fully what was happening. Ernaux uses the word “distinguer” meaning to perceive with difficulty, but after a period of staring at the screen, and adjusting her visual focus, the ghost image behind the snowy interference began to be more readily visible. A reader versed in Ernaux’s works might experience a similar process of gradually discovering a clearer picture of her works behind the veil of her nondescript style. Ernaux’s flat prose is like a smoke screen that obscures, just as Masson’s abstract landscape conceals Courbet’s *L’Origine du monde*, from those who do not know about the shared contours below the cover. In order to see the skill of her writing, one must “suspend moral judgement,” not be offended by the subject matter, and dare to look intently at what is going on in the background. The “angoisse” and “stupeur” (*Passion simple* 12) that the pornographic image in the X-rated film incite are reminiscent of the palpable emotional responses Emily Dickinson used to gauge whether or not she was encountering art: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?” (19).

Changing one's perspective to "see" the optical illusion is its own kind of metaphor for the representation of separate and unique social realities of the dominated and the dominant. In instances where perception of metaphorical effects (whether it be a word-image or just in a narrative passage) relies on shifting one's attention from the focus in the foreground to see what is in the background, details that might seem marginal may in fact emerge as essential to appreciating deeper meanings in Ernaux's works. To perceive this level of signification, it is necessary to pay attention to seemingly insignificant, peripheral details, and to the possibility of an alternate interpretation. In this way, Ernaux's prose style privileges reading from a different perspective and is symbolic of the dominated classes who have always occupied the distorted, out-of-focus background of traditional literary representation.



## Conclusion

My goal in writing this dissertation has been to show that Annie Ernaux's very plain, unadorned, flat prose style is in fact stylistically interesting in and of itself. In this study I have emphasized the evolution of her use of metaphor (and related figures) throughout a body of work that now spans four decades. An attentive reading, as I have illustrated, can reveal unexpected depth in the "apparent" flatness of her narratives. An appreciation for her artistic innovations requires, however, a familiarity with her œuvre as a whole and an attitude of active reflection on the reader's part.

While Ernaux's first published work, *Les Armoires vides* (1974), contains many of the standard ornaments of traditional literary style, there are already signs that the conventions of writing in a high style are creating obstacles to the author's attempts to write her story. The literary feel of Ernaux's first published work comes in part from the mixing of linguistic registers, a technique reminiscent of Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, but also from the use of metaphor, simile, and synaesthesia. While this first novel does show clear signs of a young author trying to write in a higher style, a certain hostility towards metaphor, and all forms of literary ornamentation, is evident in Ernaux's literary début. Her frustration with an inability to transfigure the circumstances of her life into something beautiful repeatedly reminds her that she lives in a social universe quite different from the one she reads about in the works of Proust, Pagnol, and other authors: "Je comprenais les écrivains avec leurs descriptions de salons, de parcs, du père instituteur et de la vieille tante à thé et à madeleines. C'était joli, propre, comme il faut, comme j'en rêvais" (100).

My analysis of *Les Armoires vides* and *La Place* suggests that Ernaux encountered stylistic obstacles in her attempts to transfigure her story into literature. There was no place in

the bourgeois genre of the novel for the “obscenities” of Ernaux’s life experiences: insanity, poverty, disease, abortion, domestic violence, and feminine sexual desire. The analysis in Chapter 1 with regard to *L’Occupation* (written nearly thirty years after her first novel) and Ernaux’s need to rid herself of the “figures” in her head, supports the view of what appears to be the author’s lifelong ambivalent relationship with metaphor and, in fact, with all forms of conventional literary figuration.

The tensions caused by living between two opposing social realities, already in evidence in her first novel, eventually lead Ernaux to abandon the genre of the novel and its accoutrements of style. Ernaux’s writing journal, *L’Atelier noir*, begun in 1982, shows signs of the author’s struggles as she worked on *La Place* in the early 1980s to find new modes of representation to accurately portray *her* perspective of reality. Within the narrative of *La Place* (1984), she self-reflexively asserts her break with the genre of the novel and announces a radical shift in her style and narrative technique: “Depuis peu, je sais que le roman est impossible. Pour rendre compte d’une vie soumise à la nécessité, je n’ai pas le droit de prendre d’abord le parti de l’art, ni de chercher à faire quelque chose de « passionnant », ou d’« émouvant »” (24). Ernaux’s innovative narration of her father’s life in her new style was well received; *La Place* won the Prix Renaudot in 1984. No doubt the immediate positive reaction to her first work encouraged her to continue in the same vein with works such as *Une femme* (1987) and *Passion simple* (1991).

In a recent interview with Évelyne Bloch-Dano, Ernaux clarified that not all of her works after 1984 are written in her *ton du constat* and *écriture plate*; even so, her writing continues to appear stylistically simple, fragmented, relatively free of metaphor, lyricism,<sup>67</sup> and other markers of *literary* style: “Mais je ne crois pas que mon écriture soit jamais demeurée identique, et la différence est très nette, par exemple, entre celle des journaux intimes que j’ai publiés, *Se perdre*

et *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*, et les textes qui traitent de la même période, *Passion simple* et *Une femme*” (“Il s’agit toujours de cela” 91). Throughout Chapters 2 and 3, I have shown that while Ernaux abandoned all efforts to write in an overtly literary style while she was working on *La Place*, she has developed a variety of techniques to create metaphorical effects that function beyond the sentence-level. But a reader must apply a different kind of sophisticated reading than one uses to decode canonical works. Chapters 2 and 3 expose a kind of underworld of metaphor and alternative figuration in Ernaux’s œuvre, the appreciation of which depends more on a reader’s ability to visualize and correlate intertextual clues than it does on understanding the straight-forward denotative message on the surface of the page. Like all artists who exploit the possibilities of figuration, Ernaux creates levels of signification that may not be immediately perceived by the uninitiated, casual readers of her works. Further supporting evidence that her books, and the style they are written in, are not as simple and straight-forward as they may first appear comes from comments made by Ernaux herself. Her writing journal, *L’Atelier noir* (2011),<sup>68</sup> is full of the author’s musings on how to grapple with the technical and theoretical approaches to creating a style and form of writing that suits her needs. She has frequently stated that she devotes an enormous amount of time and effort to the composition and revision of her texts, but that her journals are an extemporaneous flow of language: “Le journal est écrit spontanément, toujours. Il n’y a jamais de ratures. À l’inverse, aucun de mes textes publiés qui ne soient pas mes journaux n’est écrit spontanément. Les manuscrits sont très épais, très raturés, modifiés” (Moreau 10).

While Ernaux’s tributes to her father and mother were praised, her use of the same straight-forward, unsentimental prose style to express a woman’s sexual desire in works like *Passion simple* (1991), *Se perdre* (2001), and *L’Usage de la photo* (2005) was more

controversial and drew criticism. These and other works have been deprecated by some critics for, among other things, Ernaux's unliterary prose style. While the question of style is no doubt a nerve that Ernaux wanted to irritate, it is more likely that these critics reacted negatively because of Ernaux's transgression of the unwritten and unspoken code of sexual politics: women do not take the active role, they are desired—but it is not their prerogative to desire.

My analysis and discussion of Ernaux's photographic nude, which she calls the counterpart to Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* in *L'Usage de la photo*, supports my assertion that one aspect of Ernaux's authorial intent has been to provoke—and to mock—one particular sector of France's literati.<sup>69</sup> The reversal of foreground and background, and of surface and depth, at play in the linking of her nude with Courbet's painting, is a dramatic example of how Ernaux circumvents traditional kinds of figuration in her writing. The provocative word-photograph in *L'Usage de la photo* is only one of several instances in which Ernaux uses a technique of explicitly or implicitly juxtaposing word-images as a means of creating new, figurative meanings. While the existence of these kinds of hidden, or camouflaged, image-pairs in Ernaux's works is, in my opinion, one of the more interesting discoveries of my research, it is not just through the associative linking of word-images that she is able to add dimension to her flat prose. Another technique that Ernaux uses is simply that of repetition. In *Une femme*, the repeated references to flowers gradually coalesce to create a pattern of symbolic meanings through which Ernaux simultaneously commemorates her mother's life and criticizes several aspects of French society. The recurrence of the color "red," and its frequent correlative—blood—in *Journal du dehors* and *La vie extérieure*, along with the technique of creating word-image pairs, unifies these two "journals" into a more cohesive—and artistic—whole. One might say that the color "red" unifies these journals—"unité de sang" and "de sens."

As I have frequently noted, the perception of such metaphorical effects is dependent upon a reader who is familiar with several of Ernaux's works, and who is able to connect the associative dots of intertextual linkings that Ernaux has, at various places in her œuvre, encouraged her readers to see. One is reminded that figuration in many genres of art and literature may go unnoticed by readers, viewers, and listeners who perhaps lack the academic and literary sophistication of being able to perceive and appreciate the symbolic layers in a work of art. Furthermore, the ground (or the set of associations) produced by a metaphor may not correspond with the mental set of associations of every individual. For this reason, the perception of metaphor is always somewhat hit-or-miss and dependent on the reader's, the viewer's, or the listener's ability to winnow out the appropriate associations. If some readers of Ernaux's works do not immediately see the metaphors therein, this could be ascribed to what happens in all forms of art (literature, painting, photography, music, cinema) when one lacks familiarity with an artist's code. It would seem that Ernaux is alluding to this phenomenon in *Journal du dehors* when she describes her own inability to appreciate what the gallery director describes as "the sensuality" of the painting, "Ardèche, la tache rouge": "Je cherche à associer la sensualité telle que je la sens à ce paysage désertique qu'il me semble voir. Il y a là une opération de l'esprit, ou de la sensibilité, que je n'arrive pas à effectuer. Impression qu'il me manque l'initiation à un savoir" (22).

In writing *La Place*, Ernaux stated that she wanted to write a book that her father could read, noting in one passage the difficulty that many people like her father had of reading the short captions below the images in silent movies: "Tout le monde lisait à haute voix le texte sous l'image [du film], beaucoup n'avaient pas le temps d'arriver au bout" (*La Place* 33). The paradox of Ernaux's flat prose style is that many aspects are accessible to a non-academic

audience, but hidden complexities remain imperceptible to all readers who lack the “decoder box” of an alternative literary perspective that reveals the full picture of Ernaux’s œuvre.

It is my hope that research along the lines that I have laid out will continue to pave the way for new readings of Ernaux’s writing. The fact that two articles have already been published from this research—“Effects of Optical Illusion” in *The Cincinnati Romance Review* and “The Language of Flowers in Annie Ernaux’s *Une femme*,” in *Women in French Studies*—suggests that a broader appreciation of Ernaux’s writing is valid. The intent of this dissertation has been to analyze the status of figurative language in Ernaux, which has not garnered in-depth critical attention in the field. Several promising lines of research remain to be explored. I can imagine, for example, a productive study on Ernaux’s frequent use of analogies and similes based on associations with Catholicism. Ernaux’s style, while original, also has many points in common with that of Sarraute, Hemingway (and other American writers of the 1930s), and there is, I think, an article to be written on the precursors to Ernaux’s narrative techniques.

Many contemporary French authors share certain points in common with themes found in Ernaux’s œuvre. While Camille Laurens comes from a distinctly different social class than Ernaux, there seems to be a mutual respect between these two women, and several affinities between them (professionally and personally). The portraits of marginalized individuals in *Journal du dehors* and *La vie extérieure* are reminiscent of Agnès Varda’s sensitive and unflinching representations of individuals in “La Pointe courte,” “Sans toit, ni loi,” and “Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse.” Ernaux’s iconoclastic approach to literature, and her creation of new “genres” calls to mind the dystopian fictional world of Antoine Volodine’s incarcerated dissidents in *Le Post-exotisme en dix leçons, leçon onze*, as well as Nathalie Sarraute’s assertions in *L’Ère du soupçon* that certain narrative conventions are no longer tenable. The themes of

cultural alienation and upward class mobility through education link Ernaux to Francophone writers such as Azouz Begag, Albert Memmi, and Mehdi Charef. Indeed, the title of Charef's *Le Thé au harem d'Archi Ahmed*, a play on the words "Archimedes Theorem," echoes similar oscillating cultural perspectives in Ernaux's portrayal of the effects of living between dual social and economic realities. In short, much remains to be done on the relation of Ernaux's work with that of other contemporary writers. Ernaux herself has recently suggested that she intends to continue writing and publishing; it will be interesting to see what form her new works take, and if readers will continue to find complexity in her ostensive simplicity of expression.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> But obscenity is in the eye of the beholder as Ernaux points out in *La vie extérieure*: “La prof de français du lycée d’A., dans le Nord, qui enseigne dans une classe « défavorisée », roule en Mercedes, bijoux, écharpe chic, discrétion blonde. Qu’elle soit née dans un milieu populaire, comme elle le proclame, ne change rien à ceci pour les élèves : elle est *maintenant* une bourgeoise. Tout ce qu’elle dit en classe contre la publicité, l’argent-roi, ne peut rien contre la vision obscène d’une Mercedes garée devant le lycée Guy-Mollet” (44).

<sup>2</sup> “Beaux-Arts” is the nickname the narrator gave her boyfriend at the time because of his artistic and literary tastes. She later discovered that his knowledge of poetry was limited, and that he was a poser rather than a poet.

<sup>3</sup> Ernaux cites the work of Bourdieu as the source of her reasons for writing: “Plus lointainement, une phrase de mon journal intime atteste que je lie le désir d’écrire à une conscience de classe: ‘j’écrirai pour venger ma race’. Mais c’est la rencontre avec Bourdieu au travers des *Héritiers*, qui me donnera comme l’autorisation, plus même, l’injonction d’écrire sur tout cela, d’oser non seulement peser, mais oser écrire [...]”; and further on, “Par ses travaux, par son rôle dans le monde intellectuel, social et politique, et sans que je l’aie jamais rencontré personnellement, il me renforçait dans ma détermination à écrire ce que j’écris, à m’engager” (“Raisons d’écrire” 10, 14).

<sup>4</sup> In response to a question regarding the more literary style of *Les Années* in an interview with Évelyne Bloch-Dano, Ernaux points out that her style has not always been an “écriture plate”: “Mais je ne crois pas que mon écriture soit jamais demeurée identique, et la différence est très nette, par exemple, entre celle des journaux intimes que j’ai publiés, *Se perdre* et «*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* », et les textes qui traitent de la même période, *Passion simple* et *Une femme*” (91).

<sup>5</sup> In *Les Armoires vides* she says something very similar. “Abat-voix, abaisse-langue, allégorique, ça, c’était toujours un jeu, et je récitais les pages roses, la langue d’un pays imaginaire... C’était tout artificiel, un système de mots de passe pour entrer dans un autre milieu. Ça ne tenait pas au corps, ça ne m’a jamais tenu sans doute, embroquée comme une traînée que dirait ma mère, les jambes écartées par le spéculum de la vioque, c’est comme ça que je dois dire les choses, pas avec les mots de Bornin, de Gide ou de Victor Hugo” (78).

<sup>6</sup> “L’hiver 1981-1982, je me trouvais dans une période de désarroi. J’avais abandonné le manuscrit de 100 pages sur mon père, un roman commencé plusieurs années avant. J’hésitais entre plusieurs projets, délaissés aussi au bout de quelques pages. À un moment, j’ai fait ce que je n’avais jamais fait, prendre une feuille, écrire la date et noter mes hésitations, mes intentions. Jusqu’ici je ne dissociais pas mon travail d’écriture des interrogations qu’il m’inspirait, dont le manuscrit, d’ailleurs, portait peu la trace. Il me semble que ce geste d’adjoindre à l’écriture proprement dite une réflexion parallèle est venu de mes impasses, et que j’espérais les surmonter en prenant une distance, matérialisée par cette feuille à part (de la même façon que le journal



intime est une prise de distance avec la vie). Sans m'en rendre compte, le pli était pris" (*L'Atelier noir* 8).

<sup>7</sup> In *La Place*, for example, her father's sister leaves her job as a "bonne à tout faire" (31) without explaining to her family why she left: "[...] elle ne savait pas dire pourquoi elle s'était encore une fois sauvée de sa place" (32). One might infer that her silence is due to the shame associated with what is probably sexual exploitation by her employer which would explain why she could no longer tolerate her job. The figurative expression "servir le cul du maître" used in quotation marks in *Une femme* to denote irony seems to highlight its literal meaning: "les bonnes des maisons bourgeoises obligées de « servir le cul des maîtres »" (31).

<sup>8</sup> *L'Atelier noir*, Ernaux's "journal d'avant écriture" (9) dating from 1982 to 2007, contains entries documenting the beginnings of ideas for her works and the difficulties of finding the right "form" and mode of expression. She frequently expresses a desire to avoid writing in a literary register—"Je sens que je ne peux pas me livrer en aucune façon à l'autobiographie classique [...]" (159). She often makes notes in this journal about an *objective*, personal history that would eventually become *Les Années*, which documents her life in the context of significant historical and social events from 1940 to the present. Over the span of the journal, Ernaux makes entries about other writing projects that would later become, among others, *La Honte* (1997), *L'événement* (2000), and *L'Occupation* (2002). The actual drafts of manuscripts are not included in this journal. Ernaux reports that the original manuscript (or perhaps the dossier) for *La Honte* is "énorme !" (155). She also refers to authors whose works inform her own. Proust is the name that appears most often, but there are references to Perec, Härtling, Margaret Mitchell, and Sarraute as well.

<sup>9</sup> In her later works, varying amounts of empty space serve to punctuate the narration, and seem to signal a place for the reader to pause in order to reflect before continuing on. This typography creates a distinctly different reading experience from that of *Les Armoires vides* and *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*.

<sup>10</sup> Ernaux has since distanced herself from the prose style of her first three novels. In the book-length interview with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, she explains that this change came about while writing *La Place*: "Il n'était plus question de roman, qui aurait déréalisé l'existence réelle de mon père. Plus possible non plus d'utiliser une écriture affective et violente, donnant au texte une coloration populiste ou misérabiliste, selon les moments. La seule écriture que je sentais «juste» était celle d'une distance objectivante, sans affects exprimés, sans aucune complicité avec le lecteur cultivé (complicité qui n'est pas tout à fait absente de mes premiers textes)" (34).

<sup>11</sup> "École libre" is a private, Catholic school. It is a "free" school in the sense that it is independent from the secular school system.

<sup>12</sup> There are no quotation marks in the text for the priest's question. Ernaux often leaves out quotation marks in this work. The absence of this punctuation contributes to creating an effect of an unrestrained and fast narrative pace. It is also representative of Denise's casual "vernacular."

<sup>13</sup> There are no quotes around the word “orgueilleux” either, but there should be since it is referring back to the priest’s question.

<sup>14</sup> Abortion is a theme that comes up in de Beauvoir’s novel, *Le Sang des autres* (1945) and in Sartre’s *L’âge de la raison* (1945). While Ernaux does mention reading, and appreciating, both of these authors, perhaps she had not yet read these novels or did not feel that they dealt specifically with informing the reader of the gruesome details of the procedure and the medical dangers involved.

<sup>15</sup> Here, and in other places, Ernaux does not punctuate with *crochets* to indicate spoken words.

<sup>16</sup> In *L’événement* (2000), Ernaux recounts the experience of the abortion that she had while she was a college student in Rouen.

<sup>17</sup> This particular metonymy of the “oreille occasionnelle” is a good illustration of the difficulty of putting figures of style and tropes in distinct categories. In their book, *Rhetorical Poetics*, Donald Rice and Peter Schofer refer to this phenomenon: “On several occasions we have pointed out the overlap between metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche. At times the inability to define precisely a trope was attributed to the particular definition in question; however, at other times, the confusion arose from the very relativity of tropes. Depending upon the historical period in which a text is read, the cultural background and even the psychology of the reader, some tropes change their nature and consequently their meaning” (33).

<sup>18</sup> I am referring to the ironic, and “inappropriate” metaphor of “un beau feu d’artifice à l’intérieur” to refer to the miscarriage following the abortion, as well as to the other metaphors previously discussed in this chapter: “ça tourne comme du vieux lait” to describe the mortifying experience of being humiliated in class, and the negative body-image she creates after being shamed during her confession of having touched herself: “Une horrible bête grandit entre mes jambes,” “comme une punaise.”

<sup>19</sup> “Je rassemblerai les paroles, les gestes, les goûts de mon père, les faits marquants de sa vie, tous les signes objectifs d’une existence que j’ai aussi partagée” (*La Place* 24).

<sup>20</sup> Another example of an association of metaphorical thinking as a symptom of mental turmoil is the phrase, and title of the journal: « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* ». The journal documents the last few years of her mother’s life during which she had Alzheimer’s. Ernaux found an unfinished letter her mother had begun to write to a relative telling her, with this metaphor, that she was not getting better: “J’ai trouvé une lettre qu’elle avait comencée : « Chère Paulette, je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit. »” (18). Later in the journal Ernaux realizes that these were the last words her mother ever wrote: “Je me rappelle la dernière phrase qu’elle a écrite : « Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit. »” (45).

<sup>21</sup> The two articles are by Karin Schwerdtner and Lola Bermúdez Medina. Bruno Blanckeman also gives considerable space to *L’Occupation* in his article, “Annie Ernaux : une

écriture des confins.” In spite of not being one of Ernaux’s best sellers, *L’Occupation* was adapted into a movie, entitled *L’Autre*, in 2009.

<sup>22</sup> The term “*fait divers*” does not have an exact equivalent in English; it is more than just a news item. The term refers to a short story in a newspaper, usually about a dramatic crime that inspires a sort of morbid fascination in the law-abiding, middle-class reader. More than one author has been inspired to write a novel based on the details of a *fait divers*.

<sup>23</sup> Proust’s *Un amour de Swann* deals with jealous obsession.

<sup>24</sup> In an interview with Karin Schwerdtner, Ernaux said that she does not believe in “identity,” however she does acknowledge nonetheless the phenomenon of identity in herself: “La troisième personne, c’est pour moi une découverte, peut-être aussi en avais-je assez du “je”... La plongée dans un livre comme *Les années* a été extrêmement dépersonnalisante. Je n’ai jamais cru à l’identité mais, dans ce texte, je fais acte de non-identité. Il est certain que je ne suis pas sortie indemne de ce livre. Retourner au “je” dans *L’autre fille* a été très étrange” (Interview “Le dur désir” 765). And in *La Place* Ernaux writes: “À chaque fois, je m’arrache du piège de l’individuel” (45).

<sup>25</sup> Ernaux herself notices this tendency in her own thinking: “Je m’aperçois que je cherche toujours les signes de la littérature dans la réalité” (*Journal du dehors* 46).

<sup>25</sup> Day explains: “[The mother] could never have hoped to match the linguistic sophistication which her daughter acquired through education. In these circumstances, an account of her life which employed the stylistic features usually associated with ‘literary’ modes of expression (imagery and symbolism, lyrical description, the use of the past historic to recount the past) would inevitably distort the mother’s experience and accentuate the gap between language and reality” (68). And Michael Sheringham points out that: “The change was partly dictated by the feeling that literary embellishment constituted a betrayal not only of her father but also of her own past self. If understanding her father was to serve as a means of understanding herself it was important to record the reality of his world as objectively as possible, substituting an *écriture plate* [flat style] for literary artistry [...]” (196).

<sup>27</sup> As several critics have noted, Ernaux uses metadiscursive comments, sometimes within the text, or in a footnote at the bottom of a page, in an effort to maintain control of readers’ reactions to her works. These remarks by the author can also function to mislead some readers.

<sup>28</sup> In *L’Atelier noir* Ernaux says: “Je trouve belles, lumineuses, les métaphores de Proust et pourtant je m’interroge sur leur nécessité pour moi : elles ne me paraissent pas indispensables pour rendre un sentiment, un paysage. Ce qu’il y a seulement, c’est qu’une odeur, un paysage renvoient à quelque chose de déjà vécu, même différemment, mais les deux membres d’une comparaison sont rarement évidents à la conscience *quand on vit*. Ce n’est qu’ensuite qu’on établit parfois des rapports. La comparaison, bref, c’est le mode de pensée *exceptionnel* sauf si on s’y applique” (24-25).

<sup>29</sup> There is a similar description of trees in a short piece entitled “Retours” that Ernaux wrote in 1985 before *Une femme*: “J’ai regardé par la vitre baissée, le quai était vide, de l’autre côté de la barrière SNCF, les herbes hautes et les branches basses des pommiers se touchaient presque. À ce moment-là j’ai senti réellement que j’approchais de C. et que j’allais revoir ma mère” (70).

<sup>30</sup> Marcel Pagnol evokes a similar image of embracing trees in *La Gloire de mon père*: “Je ne pus y distinguer rien d’autre qu’une petite forêt d’oliviers et d’amandiers, qui mariaient leurs branches folles au-dessus de broussailles enchevêtrées : mais cette forêt vierge en miniature, je l’avais vue dans tous mes rêves, et, suivi de Paul, je m’élançai en criant de bonheur” (98). Pagnol’s figuration is explicit because he uses the verb “marier.”

<sup>31</sup> As discussed previously in note 17 with regard to the metaphoric overtones of the synecdoche of the “oreille occasionnelle,” “roof” is another case in point. In *Metaphoric Thinking*, Eli Rozik discusses the synecdoche of “roof” particularly: “As typical of modernist theory, Jakobson does not consider nonverbal associations. I suggest that their induction depends on the domain in which a metonymy is used. It would be absurd to understand a sentence such as ‘he needs a roof for his family’ as only reflecting the need for a house. ‘Roof’ is rather a symbol that stands for ‘home’, which bears verbal associations of ‘shelter’, ‘warmth’ and ‘care’, and their emotive referential associations. Jakobson contrasts metaphor and metonymy on the grounds of the principles of similarity or contiguity respectively. He also supports this distinction by distinct aphasic disorders that impair the ability to operate either the one or the other. This distinction, however, is hardly defensible, because metaphor is much more complex and, *inter alia*, includes elements of contiguity (syntagmatic association), typical of metonymy” (82-83).

<sup>32</sup> In *Les Années*, Ernaux writes about herself and her life from an impersonal and objective perspective.

<sup>33</sup> In a televised literary program Ernaux made the assertion that for a lot of French people, Proust was meaningless. Her remark was met with a loud roar of disapproval from the audience. “[Ernaux’s] insistence that the complex syntax of Proust’s works renders them unintelligible for most of the population, and that the world which Proust depicts is not of universal relevance and significance, caused such a level of protest that the discussion again collapsed into incoherence” (Thomas, *Annie Ernaux: An Introduction* 157).

<sup>34</sup> Azouz Begag in *Le Gone du Chaâba* makes a similar comment about the people who foolishly buy flowers from him when they could simply go pick them: “Et puis je me marre bien quand je vois les Français dépenser leur argent pour acheter des fleurs que la nature leur offre à volonté” (76).

<sup>35</sup> The factual tone of Ernaux’s *écriture plate* might at first appear to mask the emotional pain of dealing with complex family issues and the death of each parent, but as Warren Motte has convincingly argued, Ernaux’s seemingly flat style exploits an economy of words for maximum pathetic effect. “This simplicity is at the crux of the minimalist aesthetic that animates *La Place*,” Motte says, and “*La Place* relies on formal simplicity for effect” (56).

<sup>36</sup> A similar disconnect between signage and signification comes up in Mehdi Charef's *Le thé au harem d'Archi Ahmed*. The streets of the banlieu where the characters live are all named after flowers causing the main character, Madjid, to reflect on the irony of this fact: "Toutes les allées ici portent des noms de fleurs. La Cité des Fleurs que ça s'appelle!!! Du béton, des bagnoles en long, en large, en travers, de l'urine et des crottes de chiens. Des bâtiments hauts, longs, sans cœur ni âme. Sans joie ni rires, que des plaintes, que du malheur. Une cité immense entre Colombes, Asnières, Geneveilliers et l'autoroute de Pontoise et les usines et les flics.[...]. Les fleurs! les fleurs!..." (22).

<sup>37</sup> Several critics have commented on the "maintenant tout est lié" fragment. No one has suggested a connection between the forsythia present in the passages describing the day of her mother's death, the day after, and the passage just before the "maintenant tout est lié" assertion.

<sup>38</sup> « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* », although written before *Une femme*, was not published until nine years after the publication of *Une femme*. The preface was written for the publication of the journal.

<sup>39</sup> Pierre-Louis Fort in the chapter on Ernaux in his book *Ma mère, la morte : L'écriture du deuil chez Yourcenar, Beauvoir et Ernaux*, views *Une femme* as a work of mourning, and homage as well.

<sup>40</sup> The song is by Berthe Sylva. The lyrics can be found on the website: <http://www.fr.lyrics-copy.com>.

<sup>41</sup> Again, Ernaux uses the third person to refer to herself in *Les Années* because she has written it as a sort of impersonal autobiography.

<sup>42</sup> "Ainsi, j'écris de la manière la plus neutre possible" (*Une femme* 63).

<sup>43</sup> The Tree of Jesse is a reference from the Bible, the book of Isaiah (11.1). It recounts the genealogy of Jesus. This image, and the suggestion that the filaments of plants are like umbilical cords, are ideas that were suggested to me by Professor Caroline Jewers.

<sup>44</sup> In *La Place*, written four years before *Une femme*, Ernaux uses a figure of speech, "mettre au jour," which suggests both revelation and birth. The word, "cultivated," also appears in conjunction with this figure: "J'ai fini de mettre au jour l'héritage que j'ai dû déposer au seuil du monde bourgeois et cultivé quand j'y suis entrée" (*La Place* 111).

<sup>45</sup> The words "rivière" and "ruisseau" are only present in the quote from *La Place*. A similar quote in *Une femme* does not use words that might evoke an association with "deux eaux": "En 1945, ils ont quitté la Vallée, où je toussais sans arrêt et ne me développais pas à cause des brouillards et ils sont revenus à Yvetot" (*Une femme* 47).

<sup>46</sup> "Elle raconte qu'ils ont eu une autre fille que moi et qu'elle est morte de la diphtérie à six ans, avant la guerre, à Lillebonne" (*L'autre fille* 16).

<sup>47</sup> The chapter on Ernaux in Cathy Jellenik's book, *Rewriting, Rewriting* also deals specifically with the analysis of several of Ernaux's works through the prism of Bourdieu's theories.

<sup>48</sup> Michèle Bacholle-Bošković devotes the first section of Chapter II in her book, *Annie Ernaux: De la perte au corps glorieux*, to analyzing Ernaux's use of *photos en prose* and actual photographs reproduced in Ernaux's œuvre.

<sup>49</sup> Until recently the only exception to this was *L'Usage de la photo* (2005, co-written with Marc Marie) which contains a collection of fourteen photographs that accompany her and Marie's prose. More recently other works have come out in which photographs are present. *L'autre fille* (2011) contains two photographs of her childhood home, and *Écrire la vie* (2011) contains about a hundred pages of family photographs accompanied by excerpts from her personal journal. She calls this a "photojournal." Several of her journal entries are superimposed onto a photograph that fills the entire background as if to indicate that both the photograph and the text are "illustrations." Several of the photos discussed in the dissertation can be seen in *Écrire la vie*, most notably the wedding photograph is on page 3, and the photograph described in *La Honte* of her and her father in Biarritz is on pg 29.

<sup>50</sup> Gilles Martin-Chauffier, in a review of *Les Années* in *Paris Match*, asserts that "Avec elle, on n'a jamais droit à un trait d'esprit. L'humour est banni. [...] Annie Ernaux, cette fois-ci, n'est pas une grande plume. Juste une inlassable documentaliste" (23).

<sup>51</sup> Elżbieta Chrzanowska-Kluczevska's definition: "The third level of description which I will call metatropes, consists of 'large figures' that construe entire discourses at a higher level of organisation, and that act as an external commentary on them. In contrast to micro- and macrotropes, which are always overt (that is explicitly present in the text), metatropes are figures of the second order, tacitly structuring the text and requiring a certain interpretive effort in order to be recognized. In brief, they have to be processed by a sort of inferring mechanism that belongs to what might be called *stylistic competence*. As such, metafigures address a more mature readership. In accordance with its etymology, a metatrophe should be understood as a 'self-aware' and 'auto-reflexive' figure capable of 'referring to itself' and possibly to figures subordinate to it. Thus a metatrophe which is part of a rhetorical metacode at our disposal, can refer to the language of which it is part and can transcend and comment upon it from a 'bird's-eye' perspective. However, I will use the term metatrophe, in a broader sense, meaning by it a 'large figure,' indeed a megatrophe, which may, but does not have to, be exclusively self-referential" (37).

<sup>52</sup> In *Une femme* the physical space of the café and the small grocery were connected by the private domestic space of the family's kitchen that was situated in the middle of the two businesses. The proximity of public and private space affected her mother's social role as well: "Elle était une mère commerçante, c'est-à-dire qu'elle appartenait d'abord aux clients qui nous « faisaient vivre ». Il était défendu de la déranger quand elle servait (attentes derrière la porte séparant la boutique de la cuisine [...]). C'était une mère que tout le monde connaissait, publique

en somme” (52-54). Her parents’ constant financial worries required that they live very precarious private lives, always mindful of their public image so as not to offend their clientele.

<sup>53</sup> Ernaux’s approach is similar to Bourdieu’s as described in a talk he gave in 1974 entitled “Haute couture and haute culture” in which he states: “The hierarchy of research areas is regarded as one of the most important areas in the sociology of knowledge and one of the ways in which social censorships are exerted is precisely this hierarchy of objects regarded as worthy or unworthy of being studied. This is one of the very ancient themes of the philosophical tradition; and yet the old lessons of the *Parmenides*, that there are Ideas of everything, including dirt and body hair, has not been taken very far by the philosophers, who are generally the first victims of this social definition of the hierarchy of objects” (Bourdieu 132).

<sup>54</sup> In *Se perdre* Ernaux correlates her attraction to her Russian lover in part with her sense that she still identifies with her family’s peasant origins: “Et si merveilleusement homme russe, accordé donc à la paysanne que je suis toujours au fond de moi” (175).

<sup>55</sup> Robin Tierney also associates the first and last entries with menstrual blood. “The most “shameful” unveiling of the workings of the female body—menstrual stains—are emblazoned on the larger-than-life image of a woman frozen in public view. The entry that first begins these journals in 1985 places a woman’s concealed and exposed body amidst the anonymity of modern life in the same way that the final scene in 1999, with throngs of commuters passing by the vandalized poster, fixes a female body in a modern crowd” (119).

<sup>56</sup> In this same entry there is a comment by Ernaux that can be likened to her own fragmented compositions that might start in the middle or lower part of a page: “Certains [of these juvenile delinquents] ne savent pas lire. Beaucoup ignorent qu’on commence à écrire dans le haut d’une page de cahier, ils le font au milieu, en bas, n’importe où” (*La vie extérieure* 117).

<sup>57</sup> Ernaux’s narrator in *La femme gelée* also notes that her days were a continuous cycle of “Nourriture et merde sans relâche” (143) that, as she sardonically points out, she was supposed to perceive through a romantic vision of the beautiful burden of motherhood: “Bien sûr, magnifier l’humble tâche, l’œuvre de choix qui veut beaucoup d’amour, etc., transfigurer la merde. Chercher de la poésie dans les traces de lait dégouliné” (143).

<sup>58</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, the family later left La Vallée because Ernaux, who was five years old at the time, had developed a chronic cough. Having lost their first daughter to diphtheria before Ernaux was born, her parents did not want to lose their second daughter, and only child, to the disease. Living in such conditions had mortal consequences for children born during the difficult years leading up to and during the Second World War, many of whom did not survive due to the unsanitary conditions of La Vallée, and other similarly impoverished communities throughout Europe.

<sup>59</sup> The “plantes en filaments” might also be linked to male genitalia. In *La femme gelée* Ernaux notes that her mother euphemistically used the term “*misère*,” to refer to a man’s sex: “Ma mère l’appelle comme ces plantes minables sur le bord des fenêtres, les misères” (43). And

in *La place* Ernaux's mother, while dressing her father's body after he has passed says: "Cache ta misère, mon pauvre homme" (15).

<sup>60</sup> According to Martina Padberg, *The Origin of the World* was previously concealed by another one of Courbet's paintings when it was first owned by Halil Serif: "[Courbet] never exhibited it in public and it was not until Serif's treasures were auctioned following his bankruptcy in 1868 that it came to light. After this, the trail of *The Origin of the World* was lost for a time until it was sold in 1913 via the famous Bernheim-Jeune Gallery to the Hungarian painter, Baron Ferencz Hatvany, in Budapest. In the meantime, the offending picture had long since been concealed from public view behind an inoffensive landscape, also by Courbet, entitled *The Castle of Blonay* (1874-1877). The outer panel had to be unlocked and removed before yielding up its secret to its lawful owner" (97).

<sup>61</sup> Lyn Thomas also discusses the power of the visual presence of books citing two examples of media techniques used to glorify its symbolic capital: "The cultural value symbolised by this design [of Gallimard's covers], and by books generally, is underlined by the technique used in television discussion programmes such as *Apostrophes* or its more recent incarnation, *Bouillon de Culture*, of foregrounding the book as physical object.[...] The set for *Apostrophes* was often a book-lined room, so that books also provided the background for the 'talking heads' [...]. I have not seen anything similar on British television [...] and would argue that there is a particular fetishisation of the literary text in French culture" (*An Introduction to the Writer* 148).

<sup>62</sup> A description of a photograph in *Les Années* indicates that this might be the same trip taken in 1949 when Ernaux was nine years old: "Au dos : août 1949, Sotteville-sur-Mer. Elle va avoir neuf ans. Elle est en vacances avec son père chez un oncle et une tante, des artisans qui fabriquent des cordes. Sa mère est restée à Yvetot, tenir le café-épicerie qui ne ferme jamais" (35; italics mine).

<sup>63</sup> In *Coping With Trauma*, Kleber and Brom distinguish between two processes that individuals go through when working through a traumatic event, denial and intrusion: "Intrusion refers to the compulsive reexperiencing of feelings and ideas that directly or indirectly relate to the experience: nightmares about the event, startle reactions, preoccupation with the event, the wish to continually review the event and pangs of emotion" (188).

<sup>64</sup> Ernaux is referring to the bus trip here, not the trip to the seashore, but the quote still seems relevant to the other scene of violence.

<sup>65</sup> In his collection of essays, *The Art of Fiction*, David Lodge makes this argument with regard to the English industrial novel, which might apply to the traditional French novel as well: "One of the difficulties of writing truthfully about working-class life in fiction, especially evident in the well-intentioned industrial novels of the Victorian age, is that the novel itself is an inherently middle-class form, and its narrative voice is apt to betray this bias in every turn of phrase. It is hard for the novel not to seem condescending to the experience it depicts in the contrast between the polite, well-formed, educated discourse of the narrator and the rough colloquial, dialect speech of the characters" (106).



<sup>66</sup> The argument that I make here is similar to Warren Motte's argument about Ernaux's use of understatement not only as characteristic of her flat style, but also as a way of introducing another layer of signification. Referring to a passage in *La Place* in which Ernaux describes the events after her father's death, Motte says: "Within that description she carefully emblazons the very rhetorical technique that she will rely on throughout the text: 'There was an air of simplicity about the whole scene, no crying or shouting, just my mother's red eyes and the frozen rictus on her face. Our movements were calm and orderly, accompanied by simple words' (14/4). In addition to the role in the narrative economy of her father's story, the passage demands to be read as a commentary on the manner in which that story is *told*: Ernaux's narration too will unfold very simply, with simple words" (*Small Worlds* 56).

<sup>67</sup> *Les Années* (2007) is one work in which Ernaux seems to "allow" herself to slip occasionally into lyrical reminiscences. For this reason, this work merits more study within the context of Ernaux's avoidance of (an overt) literary style in her other works.

<sup>68</sup> "L'atelier noir" is itself a metaphor for the "dark room" of her mind where ideas are "developed."

<sup>69</sup> In her correspondence with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, Ernaux points out that the field of literature is not a "demilitarized zone" for the "battle of the sexes": "Ainsi *Passion simple* pourrait être considéré comme un antiroman sentimental. En un sens, maintenant, le cumul des deux situations, transfuge sociale et femme, me confère de la force, de l'intrépidité, dirais-je, face à une société, une critique littéraire qui « surveillent » toujours ce que font et ce qu'écrivent les femmes. [...] Il y a, à l'intérieur du champ littéraire, comme ailleurs, une lutte des sexes et je vois la mise en avant d'une « écriture féminine » ou de l'audace de l'écriture des femmes comme une énième stratégie inconsciente des hommes devant l'accès de celles-ci en nombre plus grand à la littérature, pour les en écarter en restant les détenteurs de « la littérature », sans adjectif, elle" (*L'Écriture comme un couteau* 104-05).

## Works Cited

- Allamand, Carole. "À la serpe, à l'aiguille et au couteau." *Romanic Review* 97.2 (2006): 201-12. Print.
- Bacholle-Bošković, Michèle. *Annie Ernaux: De la perte au corps glorieux*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011. Print.
- Baisnée, Valérie. "'Porteuse de la vie des autres': Ernaux's *Journal du dehors* as Anti-diary." *Women in French Studies* 10 (2002): 177-87. Print.
- Barthes, Roland. *Caméra Lucida*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1980. Print.
- Begag, Azouz. *Le Gone du Chaâba*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986. Print.
- Bermúdez Medina, Lola. "La sociologie perdue de vue, l'intime trop usé... Que peut l'écriture?" *Annie Ernaux: Se perdre dans l'écriture de soi*. Éd. Danielle Bajomée et Juliette Dor. Paris: Klincksieck, 2011. 57-68. Print.
- Blanckeman, Bruno. "Annie Ernaux: Une écriture des confins." *Annie Ernaux: Une œuvre de l'entre-deux*. Ed. Fabrice Thumerel. Arras: Artois Presse Université, 2004. 105-14. Print.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Sociology in Question*. Trans. Richard Nice. London: Sage, 1994. Print. Trans. of *Questions de sociologie*. Paris: Minuit, 1984.
- Charef, Mehdi. *Le thé au harem d'Archi Ahmed*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1983. Print.
- Charpentier, Isabelle. "Anamorphoses des réceptions critiques d'Annie Ernaux: Ambivalences et malentendus d'appropriation." *Annie Ernaux: Une oeuvre de l'entre-deux*. Ed. Fabrice Thumerel. Arras: Artois Presse Université, 2004. 225-42. Print.
- . "Annie Ernaux ou l'art littérairement distinctif du paradoxe." *Revue des Sciences Humaines* 299 (2010): 57-77. Print.

Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, Elzbieta. "Catachresis—A Metaphor or a Figure in Its Own Right?"

*Beyond Cognitive Metaphor Theory*. Ed. Monika Fludernik. New York: Routledge, 2011. 36-57. Print.

Compagnon, Antoine. "Désécrire la vie." *Critique* 740-741 (2009): 49-60. Print.

Day, Loraine. *Writing Shame and Desire: The Work of Annie Ernaux*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007. Print.

Day, Loraine, and Tony Jones. *Ernaux: La place, Une femme*. Glasgow: Univ. of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1990. Print.

Dickinson, Emily. *Selected Poems and Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Robert N. Linscott. New York: Doubleday, 1959. Print.

*Dictionnaire des expressions et locutions*. Ed. Alain Rey. Paris: Les Usuels du Robert, 1997. Print.

Dubois, Jacques. "Une socioanalyse à l'œuvre dans *La Place*." *Annie Ernaux: une œuvre de l'entre-deux*. Ed. Fabrice Thumerel. Arras: Artois Presses Université, 2004. 151-62. Print.

Edwards, Natalie. "Photography and Autobiography in Hélène Cixous's *Photos de racines* and Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie's *L'Usage de la photo*." *French Review*. 84.4 (2009): 704-15. Print.

Ernaux, Annie. *Les Années*. Paris: Gallimard, 2008. Print.

---. *Les Armoires vides*. Paris: Gallimard, 1974. Print.

---. *L'Atelier noir*. Paris: Éditions des Busclats, 2011. Print.

---. *L'autre fille*. Paris: NiL, 2011. Print.

---. *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*. Paris: Gallimard, 1977. Print.

- . *Écrire la vie*. Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2011. Print.
- . *L'écriture comme un couteau: Entretien avec Frédéric-Yves Jeannet*. Saint-Amand-Montrond, Fr.: Stock, 2003. Print.
- . "Entretien avec Annie Ernaux, Maison des Écrivains, 9 mars 2002." Ed. Dominique Rabaté. *Écritures blanches*. Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2009. Print.
- . "Entretien avec Catherine Lefort." *Nouveaux Cahiers François Mauriac* 17 (2009): 269-72. Print.
- . *L'événement*. Paris: Gallimard, 2000. Print.
- . *Une femme*. Paris: Gallimard, 1987. Print.
- . *La Femme gelée*. Paris: Gallimard, 1981. Print.
- . "Fragments autour de Philippe V." *L'Infini* 56 (Winter 1996): 25-26. Print.
- . *La Honte*. Paris: Gallimard, 1997. Print.
- . "Il s'agit toujours de cela, de ce qui se passe entre naître et mourir." Entretien avec Évelyne Bloch-Dano. *Le Magazine Littéraire* 513 (novembre 2011): 88-92. Print.
- . Interview. *Le cercle littéraire de la BnF* (2 mars 2011) [www.bnf.fr](http://www.bnf.fr). 13 Aug. 2012. Web.
- . Interview by Dominique Rabaté. "Entretien avec Annie Ernaux, Maison des Écrivains, 9 mars 2002." Ed. Dominique Rabaté. *Écritures blanches*. Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2009. Print.
- . Interview by Karin Schwerdtner. "Le 'dur désir d'écrire': entretien avec Annie Ernaux." *The French Review* 86.4 (March 2013): 758-71. Print.
- . « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* ». Paris: Gallimard, 1997. Print.

- . *Journal du dehors*. Paris: Gallimard, 1993. Print.
- . “‘La littérature est une arme de combat...’: Entretien avec Annie Ernaux réalisé par Isabelle Charpentier le 19 avril 2002 à Cergy.” *Rencontres avec Pierre Bourdieu*. Ed. Gérard Mauger. Broissieux: Eds. Du Croquant, 2005. 159-75. Print.
- . *L’Occupation*. Paris: Gallimard, 2002. Print.
- . *Passion simple*. Paris: Gallimard, 1991. Print.
- . *La Place*. Paris: Gallimard, 1983. Print.
- . “Raisons d’écrire.” *Nottingham French Studies* 48.2 (2009): 10-14. Print.
- . “Retours.” *L’Autre journal* 4 (1985): 70-71. Print.
- . *Se perdre*. Paris: Gallimard, 2001. Print.
- . *La vie extérieure*. Paris: Gallimard, 2000. Print.
- . “Vers un je transpersonnel.” *Cahiers de Recherches Interdisciplinaires sur les Textes Modernes: Autofictions et cie* 6 (1993): 219-21. Print.
- . “Vivre pour se raconter, se raconter pour vivre.” *Récits de vie et histoire sociale: Quelle historicité?* Ed. Vincent de Gaulejac et André Lévy. Paris: ESKA, 2000. 215-25. Print.
- Ernaux, Annie, et Marc Marie. *L’Usage de la photo*. Paris: Gallimard. 2005. Print.
- “Exemplum.” *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1990. Print.
- Flaubert, Gustave. *Madame Bovary*. Paris: Gallimard 1991. Print.
- Fort, Pierre-Louis. *Ma mère, la morte: L’écriture du deuil chez Yourcenar, Beauvoir et Ernaux*. Paris: Imago, 2007. Print.
- , ed. *Une femme*. By Annie Ernaux. 1987. Paris: Gallimard, 2002. Print.

- Golopentia, Sanda. "Annie Ernaux ou le don reversé." *Regards sur la France des années 1980: le roman*. Ed. Joseph Brami et al. Saratoga: Stanford French & Italian Studies, Anna Libri, 1994. 84-97. Print.
- "Graffito." *The American Heritage Dictionary*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. 2000. Print.
- Handyside, Fiona. "'J'ai aimé vivre là': Re-thinking the Parisian Suburbs in Annie Ernaux and Eric Rohmer." *Nottingham French Studies* 48.2 (2009): 43-54. Print.
- Hugueny-Léger, Élise. *Annie Ernaux, une poétique de la transgression*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009. Print.
- Jellenik, Cathy. *Rewriting, Rewriting: Marguerite Duras, Annie Ernaux, and Marie Redonnet*. New York: Peter Lang, 2007. Print.
- Johnson, Mark. *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981. Print.
- Kawakami, Akane. "Annie Ernaux's 'Proof of Life': *L'Usage de la photo*." *French Studies* 64.4 (2010): 451-62. Project Muse.
- Kemp, Simon. *French Fiction into the Twenty-first Century*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010. Print.
- Kleber, Rolf J. and Danny Brom. *Coping With Trauma: Theory, Prevention and Treatment*. Amsterdam: Swets & Zeitlinger, 1992. Print.
- Knowles, Murray, and Rosamund Moon. *Introducing Metaphor*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Ladimer, Bethany. "Cracking the Codes: Social Class and Gender in Annie Ernaux." *Chimères* 26 (2002): 53-69. Print.
- Laurens, Camille, et Annie Ernaux. "Toute écriture de vérité déclenche les passions."

- Interview by Raphaëlle Rérolle. *Le Monde: Le Monde des livres* 4 Feb. 2011. Web.
- Lodge, David. *The Art of Fiction*. London: Penguin, 1992. Print.
- . *Consciousness and the Novel*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002. Print.
- McIlvanney, Siobhán. "Annie Ernaux : un écrivain dans la tradition du réalisme." *Révue d'Histoire Littéraire* 98.2 (1998): 247-66. Print.
- . *Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001. Print.
- Mall, Laurence. "L'Ethnotexte de la Banlieue." *Französisch Heute* 2 (1998): 134-40. Print.
- Martin-Chauffier, Gilles. "Annie Ernaux se plante dans le décor." *Paris Match* 28 Feb. (2008): 23. Print.
- Moreau, Gilbert. "Entretien avec Annie Ernaux." *Les Moments Littéraires* 6 (2001): 3-13. Print.
- Motte, Warren. "Annie Ernaux's Understatement." *The French Review* 69 (1995): 55-67. Print.
- . *Small Worlds: Minimalism in Contemporary French Literature*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. Print.
- Padberg, Martina. *Musée d'Orsay: Art & Architecture*. Ed. Peter J. Gärtner. New York: Barnes & Noble, 2001. Print.
- Pagnol, Marcel. *La Gloire de mon père*. Montréal: Éditions Pastorelly, 1957. Print.
- Pierrot, Jean. "Annie Ernaux et l'« écriture » plate." Ed. Dominique Rabaté. *Écritures blanches*. Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2009. 109-26. Print.
- Reed-Danahay, Deborah. *Locating Bourdieu*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. Print.
- Rejchwald, Jolanta Rachwalska von. "Lector in fragmento. En lisant *Journal du dehors et La Vie extérieure* d'Annie Ernaux." *Perspectives Critiques*. Ed. Sergio Villani. Toronto: Legas, 2009. 51-60. Print.

- Rice, Donald, and Peter Schofer. *Rhetorical Poetics: Theory and Practice of Figural and Symbolic Reading in Modern French Literature*. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1983. Print.
- Rozik, Eli. *Metaphoric Thinking: A Study of Nonverbal Metaphor in the Arts and Its Archaic Roots*. Tel Aviv: Assaph Book Series, 2008. Print.
- Sanders, Carol, trans. *Cleaned Out*. By Annie Ernaux. Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990. Print.
- Savéan, Marie-France. *La Place et Une femme d'Annie Ernaux*. Paris: Gallimard, 1994. Print.
- Schwerdtner, Karin. "Endurance et écriture: une étude de *L'Occupation* d'Annie Ernaux." *Annie Ernaux: Perspectives critiques*. Ed. Sergio Villani. New York: Legas, 2009. 271-81. Print.
- Sheringham, Michael. "Changing the Script: Women Writers and the Rise of Autobiography." *A History of Women's Writing in France*. Ed. Sonya Stephens. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 185-203. Print.
- Thomas, Lyn. *Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer and Her Audience*. Oxford: Berg, 1999. Print.
- . "Annie Ernaux, Class, Gender and Whiteness." *Journal of Gender Studies* 15 (2006): 159-68. Print.
- Thumerel, Fabrice. *Annie Ernaux: Une œuvre de l'entre-deux*. Arras: Artois Presse Université, 2004. Print.
- Tierney, Robin. "'Lived experience at the level of the body': Annie Ernaux's *Journaux extimes*." *SubStance* 35.3 (2006): 113-30. *Project Muse*. Web. 11 Sep. 2011.
- Tournier, Michel. *Journal extime*. Paris: La Musardine, 2002. Print.



Viti, Elizabeth Richardson. "Passion simple, "Fragments autour de Philippe V." and *L'Usage de la photo*: The Many Stages of Annie Ernaux's Desire." *Women in French Studies* 14

(2006): 76-87. Print.

Webb, Jenn, Tony Schirato, and Geoff Danaher. *Understanding Bourdieu*. London: Sage, 2002.

Print.

Zola, Émile. *Germinal*. 1885. Ed. Henri Guillemin. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1968. Print.