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## The Dialogic Self: Language and Identity in Annie Ernaux

### Abstract

The nine largely autobiographical texts that Annie Ernaux (1940- ) has published to date, which range stylistically from early strident outpourings to the willed transparency of an "écriture plate," all reveal the narrator as a patchwork subjectivity comprised of the discourses surrounding the child, adolescent, and adult against which she reacts, frequently without comprehending her own motivations. I try to unravel the strands that make up Ernaux's language and explore how the self that emerges is an aggregate of the discursive spaces she has inhabited. I trace as well how her gender identity impacts her capacity and willingness to struggle against these various ideologically inflected languages. If the narrator's attempt to be independent of the formative forces surrounding her turns out to be misguided, the effort has not been wasted, for it has furnished a strikingly vivid account of the struggle of the individual to achieve an awareness, denied to her parents and other inhabitants of her socially marginal milieu, of the possibilities that open up through entry into the spheres of other languages.

### Keywords

Annie Ernaux, child, adolescent, author intent, language, self, space, discursive space, French literature

The Dialogic Self:  
Language and Identity in Annie Ernaux

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For the ten-year-old Denise Lesur of Ernaux's first book, *Les armoires vides* (*Cleaned Out* [literally, *The Empty Wardrobes*], 1974), a voracious reader of escapist romances, the stories she devours betray no authorial mediation. Giving free flight to her imagination, these texts, through their illusion of perfect transparency, offer a gateway to a solidly bourgeois world of businessmen and housewives that contrasts with the socially marginal milieu of her parents, proprietors of a café-grocery. The fictions she reads at home separate her reverie from the coarse banality of the quarrels and drunkenness that she experiences daily not by the artificial and self-consciously literary style of the belletristic works foisted on the young Denise by her teachers, but by the feigned effacement of their textuality that opens up a conduit for her vicarious living of both social propriety and intense passion.

This transparency of style becomes increasingly the goal of the narrator Anne in Ernaux's books starting from *La femme gelée* (*A Frozen Woman*, 1981). In *La place* (*A Man's Place*, 1983), the adult Anne, after renouncing her attempts to write a novel about her father, deceased more than fifteen years earlier, claims that the stripped down, neutral, and uninflected language in the account of his uneventful life comes to her effortlessly: "L'écriture plate me vient naturellement, celle-là même que j'utilisais en écrivant à mes parents pour leur dire les nouvelles essentielles" 'Flat writing comes to me naturally, the sort I would use to write my parents to tell them the essential news' (*Place* 24).<sup>1</sup> The issue at the heart of this essay is the uncomfortable no-(wo)man's-land between language as arising spontaneously and naturally from a long-ingrained assimilation or

rather as resulting from a conscious laboring of deliberate expression. The question far exceeds a study of “style” in a narrow rhetorical sense, a major focus of Ernaux criticism to date, for language in Ernaux’s multi-volume fictionalized autobiography (only the original editions of her earliest books bear the label *roman*) blends itself intimately with the creation and projection of the narrator’s personal identity. Ernaux’s self-described *écriture plate* or unadorned style aims at a transparency that returns the adult, discursively sophisticated Anne to a prelapsarian linguistic state prior to the focused contention between the language of home and school that comes to alienate the adolescent from her family and past.

The nonstandard vocabulary, run-on sentences, interrupting onomatopoeic words, and blurred markers of speech attribution in *Armoires* and *Ce qu’ils disent ou rien* (*Whatever They Say or Nothing*, 1977) echo the confusion between contending tongues that even the mature Anne cannot discriminate. The effort to define the relations between the self and her conflicted milieu reflects what Claire-Lise Tondeur calls “un traumatisme qui devient la source de toute son oeuvre ancrée dans l’autobiographique” ‘a traumatism that becomes the source of all her work anchored in the autobiographical’ (“Passé” 133). If writing an autobiography is ostensibly an act of accounting for the self that has evolved—even though that self has, at least since Rousseau, been an evident product of the autobiographical text itself—then Ernaux’s books cannot be easily assimilated into the genre of self-descriptive writing prominent in contemporary French literature. For the autobiographical work, whether ostensibly factual or fictive, has an implicit teleology, the enumeration of the stages involved in forming the shifting complex of selfhood. Ernaux’s texts depict instead a patchwork subjectivity comprised of the discourses surrounding the child, adolescent, and adult against which the narrator reacts, frequently without comprehending her own motivations. Imbued with *argot*, provincialisms, billingsgate, abrupt shifts, and fluid connections, the language of her early texts is a paratactic hodgepodge that mirrors the babel of heteroglossic discourses influencing her development. The shift to the *écriture plate*, while occluding the most obvious markers of these formative languages, still betrays their massive impact on the narrator’s ideological mindset. In what follows, I will try to unravel the strands that make up Ernaux’s language and explore how the self that emerges is an aggregate of the discursive spaces she has inhabited.

Against feminists who would claim that the boundaries of the woman autobiographical subject are necessarily fluid and blurred because of the inescapable influences of the female body, Leigh Gilmore persuasively argues that writing the self enables women to reconstruct the network of different formative discourses in which the female subject is inscribed. In rejecting the essentialist connection between, on the one hand, sexual difference (and consequently the gendered self), and on the other, the subject of representation, Gilmore gains greatly in the subtlety of her reading strategies while eschewing polemical simplicity. My reading, although remembering Gilmore's remarks about the gendered specificity of at least recent women's autobiographical writing, follows her central thesis in not seeking to describe how the adolescent protagonist of Ernaux's texts "becomes a woman." Rather, I observe as I describe this fluctuating rebellion and submission to the discursive forces surrounding the narrator how her gender identity impacts her capacity and willingness to struggle against these various ideologically inflected languages.

*Les armoires vides*, whose title encapsulates Denise's sense of herself as empty container for the costumes that would outwardly fix her being, traces her unresolved and generalized hatred of those surrounding her, her desperate fear of becoming like them, and an equally strong impulse to imitate them. On first crossing the threshold of the schoolroom, she feels constricted by the interdictions on popular speech that the ironically named *école libre* imposes. The language of the canonical texts to which she is exposed at this age strikes her as inauthentic and alienated from her daily experience. Between the ages of eight and twelve, she becomes more adept at the code-switching required to suppress her native earthy and resonate tongue at school and still communicate with her parents for whom—especially her father—standard French feels as uncomfortable as an overstarched collar. "Je porte en moi deux langages, les petits points noirs des livres, les sauterelles folles et gracieuses, à côté des paroles grasses, grosses, bien appuyées, qui s'enfoncent dans le ventre, dans la tête . . ." "I bear in myself two languages, the tiny black specks in books, mad and graceful grasshoppers, next to the heavy, imposing, emphatic speech that rams itself into your belly, into your head" (*Armoires* 77). While a rare self-consciously literary metaphor infiltrates itself into her description of bookish language, she views demotic speech as visceral, even sensual, impelling an emotional response.

Though she exalts in her scholastic success, her fear of being scolded for the intrusive colloquialisms that she has trouble banishing from her speech, however easily she manipulates formal vocabulary in writing, leads her to blame her parents for her occasional slips. Sexuality serves as a form of rebellion as much through the prurient pleasure of looking up *lupanar* and *rut* in the Larousse as from the physical act and its unwanted consequences. Language comes to erect a barrier between herself and the world of her parents, to whom she cannot speak of certain things in any words. Uncomprehending, her parents, and especially her mother, nevertheless have given her the opportunity to break out of a humdrum life by providing for her education and making excuses for her inclination to isolate herself with a book rather than serve customers downstairs. The social and cultural differences that set her apart from her peers, at least until she can eradicate vestiges of her class from her speech, she recognizes as the result of lack of money and hence education rather than moral or intellectual defects, a realization that implicitly gives her the hope of finally removing herself from her past. (In speaking of class, I point not simply to an occupational rubric but a participation in an ideological system. Expurgating her speech thus means more than acquiring surface polish, but rather undergoing a fundamental shift of allegiances.) Like the ideal of perfectly transparent language, she treasures the possibility of absolute and unmediated individuality: "Le véritable bonheur, se foutre de tout le monde, être Denise Lesur sans remords" 'True happiness is saying to hell with everybody, being Denise Lesur without qualms' (*Armoires* 137).

For Anne of *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*, the notion of asserting her being by walling herself off from her surroundings proves increasingly illusory. She reflects, "je perdais pied moi-même, je répétais Anne mais le nom tout seul sonne creux quand on ne sent plus rien autour" 'I was losing my grip on myself; I kept repeating Anne but the name by itself sounds hollow when you no longer feel anything else around you' (*Disent* 66). Personal identity, encapsulated in the pronunciation of the proper name, remains an empty wardrobe without an acknowledgement of the necessary role of the Other in that self-construction. As with Denise, the jumbled fragments of her subjectivity are the site of a conflict of languages, the rule-governed exclusionary formality of scholastic discourse and the vibrant yet vulgar speech of the *café-épicerie*.<sup>2</sup> This tension leads her to note

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when reading *Paris-Normandie* and *France-Soir*. Her mother becomes increasingly the buffer between her and an uncomprehending paternal authority figure, himself reduced to silence by his wife's remark that he does not after all want Anne to end up a factory worker. Yet her mother herself cannot break out of her linguistically defined class. "Je parlais comme mes parents mais je ne voyais rien d'autre" 'I spoke like my parents but I didn't see anything else,' Anne says in self-justification (*Disent* 97), but the reason is that she has blinded herself, as Denise had done, to the pleasure of a world made accessible through the language of high (or even middle-brow) culture. She instinctively assumes that the books her teacher recommends for summer reading must be boring, when out of *ennui* she picks up *L'étranger* (*The Stranger*), presumably one her schoolmistress would have approved, and becomes absorbed to the point of distancing the world around her. Losing herself in a book, as the Anne of later continuations of her story will find, turns out to be a way of finding herself, not as self-authored and unique but as part of a culture to which well-crafted writing gives access. The price of that absorption and the movement away from the language of her parents that it implies is an increasing alienation as she recognizes she could not communicate to her parents the sense of wonder provided by the books she reads.

Instead of conceiving her being as self-creation, the young Anne believes, in a remark she as mature narrator will repudiate, that experience will provide her with a language, and more particularly, that absorbing the male organ will be the equivalent of being penetrated by the signifier of signifiers, the male discourse represented by the phallus: "Plus tard quand j'aurai vécu longtemps, ou quand j'aurai couché avec un garçon, je pensais alors, je saurai m'exprimer" 'Later, when I will have lived longer, or when I will have slept with a guy, I thought back then, I will know how to express myself' (*Disent* 64). In fact, as the later books show, she all too willingly accepts this abandonment to the Other, as her friend Alberte says prophetically to the future protagonist of *Passion simple* (*Simple Passion*), "quand on aime un homme on mangerait sa merde" 'when you love a man you would eat his shit' (*Disent* 49).

Giving herself over to the language of the book becomes an exquisite form of the pleasure of the text for Anne, who in *La femme gelée*, the next volume of her story, who finds a provisional identity paradoxically in the act of faultlessly reciting the words of great poets. Academic success comes to set her apart, at least in her own

mind, from her peers, whose preoccupations with appearance and especially hair she finds superficial, yet as always the internal conflict of these irreconcilable value systems leads to self-doubt: "Si je ne suis pas poupée, qui suis-je alors?" 'If I'm not a doll, who am I then?' (*Femme gelée* 53). The old dream of *being* as an act of autonomous self-creation does not fade, however, as she chafes at her teachers' expectations of the sacrifices that young girls should endure and that mitigate her pride in her accomplishments.

Les petites filles doivent être transparentes pour être heureuses. Tant pis. Moi je sens qu'il est mieux pour moi de me cacher. Portée à croire que ça me sauvait cette attitude, je me préservais par en dessous, les désirs, les méchancetés; un fond noir et solide.

Little girls ought to be transparent in order to be happy. Too bad. For my part I feel it's better for me to hide. Led to believe that attitude would save me, I preserved my deep-down desires and maliciousness; a black and solid depth. (*Femme gelée* 58)

Unable to speak in the bourgeois society to which she aspires of the erotic matters that form her major preoccupations—where severe restrictions reduce one's vocabulary to such euphemisms as *ça* (sexual organ), *comme ça* (sexually mature) and *faire ça* (have intercourse)—the ideal of transparent language would be a way paradoxically of making opaque and stable a woman's self that men wish would remain on the surface. Yet rather than authentic being, the hidden "fond noir et solide" 'black and solid depth' may in fact be little more than the vacuous hole that allows Anne, like Emma Bovary, to be filled up by the masculine discourses surrounding her. The illusory independent self would appear to be falling victim to the woman's biological destiny as receptacle for both the penis and the phallus. When she becomes a mother, Anne takes her cue from the childbirth scenes in *Gone with the Wind*, reminding herself that she owes her milk to her newborn, and reads a handbook for advice. If she rebels inwardly at her own tendency to submit to the language of her reading, she also promises herself that if she has a second child she will do it by the book.

Her rebellion against one of those masculine discourses, already suggested in earlier texts, becomes accentuated in her exasperation at her father's speech in *La place*. Though experiencing



has instead constantly to reproach him for such non-existent expressions as “se parterrer” and “quart moins d’onze heures,”<sup>3</sup> which insinuate themselves into her own speech and provoke her teachers’ ire. Her father can bring himself to affect polite speech, meaning not only a standard lexicon but measured tones, only with constant vigilance, an effort he relinquishes immediately when alone with his family and friends. Although her father senses the stigma of inferiority attached to *patois*, he remains unable to break himself off from his rural origins either in language or outlook. As the 16-year-old Anne struggles with imperfect success to rid herself of the values in which her father is entrenched, the mature narrator rejects her plebeian taste, branding it (as well as by extension her parents) as “*péquenot*” ‘hick’ (*Place* 79). The frequent domestic arguments about language, even more often a cause of dispute than money, externalize the adolescent’s internalized struggle to find a way to mediate between the two linguistic spheres that pull her apart.

The *écriture plate* described in the text’s opening pages, which she would use to write home, would thus appear to form a *lingua franca*, a bridge between writing and colloquial speech, yet its use only in the communication of essential news suggests the limits of this constricted language. For Christian Garaud, in his detailed study of the linguistic registers of *La place*, the opposition is between a pretentious dominant language and a subaltern but true discourse, and so Anne’s uninflected style, which separates off alien discourses in italicized phrases, reconciles her, if only partially, to the ideology of her parents. Yet the search for a verbal room of her own, a position (*place*) that would define her against the speech and hence the values of her parents and particularly her father, occupies the forefront of *La place* and suggests that the quest represents more an exorcism of the environment from which she struggles to emerge into selfhood than a reconciliation. Ernaux herself, in an interview, underlines her sense of this alienation: “Je suis exilée de mon propre milieu. Jamais je ne me départirai de cela. J’ai le regard fait par cet exil intérieur” ‘I am in exile from my own milieu. I’ll never get beyond the fact. My outlook has been formed by that internal exile’ (Tondeur, “Entretien” 38). Memory should not be confused with nostalgia. For the grown-up narrator (Ernaux’s father died when she was in her mid-twenties), no longer in an adolescent phase of generalized rebellion, writing becomes a way of sorting out and positioning levels of language and values, assigning her father a prominent role in her development, at least as *repoussoir*, while striving to filter out those influences from which she has been working so hard to escape.

Anne's debt as practitioner of this *écriture plate* to the Camus she admired as a young girl becomes apparent in *Une femme* (A Woman's Story, 1987), whose opening paragraph gives an intertextual nod toward the incipit of *L'étranger*.<sup>4</sup> But whereas for Meursault, notoriously neglectful of his genetrix, whose death meant nothing to him, for Anne the demise of the woman who could never truly be a role model despite her evident superiority over her father is profoundly affecting. The linguistic contrast between her two parents sharpens from the image in *La place*, as her father makes clear his indifference to norms of standard French. Her mother, who reads *Le Monde* and *Le Nouvel Observateur* as well as Catholic writers such as Bernanos and Mauriac (occasionally dipping into the supposedly scabrous Colette), appears superior to her other parent since she resembles more closely the professors who have become the objects of her emulation. Yet as with her father, her sense of distance from her mother arises from the frustration with her own inability to separate herself fully from the formative molding impressed on her by her upbringing. "J'avais honte de sa manière brusque de parler et de se comporter, d'autant plus vivement que je sentais combien je lui ressemblais" 'I was ashamed of her brusque manner of speaking and behaving, all the more so since I sensed how much I resembled her' (*Femme* 63). (The tension between identification and shame will become central in later books.) This alienation becomes crystallized not merely as a matter of vocabulary or speech habits, but as an ideological divide signaled by difference of language.<sup>5</sup> "A certains moments, elle avait dans sa fille en face d'elle, une ennemie de classe" 'At certain moments, she had in her daughter before her a class enemy' (*Femme* 65). If Anne's portrait of her mother reveals her as a much more sympathetic character than her brusque and inarticulate father, her sober reflections on her mother's limited outlook as well as the indignities of the old woman's decline, a concomitant of the *écriture plate*, also point to the fissures that the narrator tries to highlight in the values she has inherited.

*Passion simple* (1991) would seem to mark Anne's liberation from that inheritance as she, now separated from her husband (who figures surprisingly little in the series), embarks on an affair with a married foreigner. The vestiges of narrativity that form composite pictures of her childhood and parents are refused in a text that seeks to describe only in an atemporal fashion the lover's presence or absence.<sup>6</sup> That apparent space of freedom, the house in a new bedroom community outside Paris, undoubtedly accentuates at least

this reader's growing irritation with the narrator's voluntary abandonment of a sense of purpose to a man who appears in the text as remarkably ordinary. To one who has followed the maturation of the narrator as she struggles to fix an identity through the adoption of a language that would set her apart from both the spheres of the pedantically and prudishly correct as well as the crudely parochial, the uses she makes of her liberty seem disappointing. Her obsession with her lover enacts her friend's monition in *Ce qu'ils disent* that for a woman, as the friend colorfully expresses it, loving a man means being willing to eat shit.

Such a sense of frustration has little to do with either her desire to recount an eternal present or with her explicit rejection of a moral reflection on her actions. Rather, the languages of the Other, from which she has striven to free herself, become once again her constant guide and justification. "Les chansons accompagnaient et légitimaient ce que j'étais en train de vivre . . . il me prenait l'envie de voir sans délai tel film dont j'étais persuadée qu'il contenait mon histoire . . ." 'Songs accompanied and legitimized what I was living . . . I had the sudden urge to see right away such and such a film that I was persuaded contained my story . . .' (*Passion* 27). Her libido is borrowed from the texts that have formed her conception of love. As mimetic desire, her passion loses its depth and authenticity, becoming mere repetition, an imitation that muddies the discursive contours of her account.

Tout ce temps, j'ai eu l'impression de vivre ma passion sur le mode romanesque, mais je ne sais pas, maintenant, sur quel mode je l'écris, si c'est celui du témoignage, voire de la confidence telle qu'elle se pratique dans les journaux féminins, celui du manifeste ou du procès-verbal, ou même de commentaire de texte.

The whole time, I had the impression of living my passion as if it were a novel, but I do not know, at this point, how I am writing about it, whether as a testimony, even a confession like the kind published in women's magazines, a manifesto or a courtroom statement, or even a paper for a literature class. (*Passion* 30-31)

No longer sure if she is living pulp fiction from a trashy woman's magazine, a neutral testimony of her actions, or a schoolgirl's uncomprehending exercise in formulas learned by rote, Anne reveals herself to be shot through with the language of the Other, in the end

failing to attain the space of freedom promised by the Grail of a self-constructed language. Even after the departure of her foreign lover, doubly an image of alterity as his imperfect mastery of French introduces at least a partial barrier to their bonding, she seems to encounter nothing but love stories on TV or in magazines.

If I use such a suspiciously “uncritical” term as *irritation* to describe *Passion simple*, I do so with the aim of underlining the direction of the narrator’s self-development and the anticlimax—but the word seems precisely inappropriate to Ernaux—to the expectations built up in the course of the preceding five books sketched above. Appearing only two years later, *Journal du dehors* (*Exteriors*, 1993), by its very title, announces an abrupt turnabout from the paradoxically unreflecting introspection in the account of her affair. Like a lighthouse pointing the way out of the fog, the epigraph from Rousseau that opens this scrapbook of quotations—“Notre *vrai* moi n’est pas tout entier en nous” ‘Our *true* self is not entirely within us’ (*Journal* 9)—signals the narrator’s realization that the quest for the authentic self apart from the language of the Other has been chimerical. Anne comes to recognize and adjust for her tendency to see reflections of herself in her reading, as she remarks parenthetically, “Je m’aperçois que je cherche toujours les signes de la littérature dans la réalité” ‘I realize that I am always looking for signs of literature in reality’ (*Journal* 46). That understanding allows her to abandon her narcissistic misreading of every text as a reflection of her own situation in favor of an acceptance of herself as having been formed by a particular culture, by certain discourses, and by the values they imply, even though they are no longer a living part of the person she has become. Observing a scene in a pharmacy, she notes, “Paroles transmises de génération en génération, absentes des journaux et des livres, ignorées de l’école, appartenant à la culture populaire (originellement la mienne—c’est pourquoi je la reconnais aussitôt)” ‘It is speech transmitted from generation to generation, absent from newspapers and books, ignored in school, belonging to popular culture (originally my own—which is why I recognize it immediately)’ (*Journal* 70). If Anne finally comes to a reconciliation with her past, it is not as an acceptance of what once repelled her, but as an awareness that personal identity means the very matrix of languages and ideologies that have conditioned her growth. There is no outside to language(s), no

self, a self that may in turn contribute to the re-formation of those languages by the skill and finesse she applies to their manipulation.

Ernaux's two most recent books, "*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*" (*I Remain in Darkness*) and *La honte* (*Shame*, both 1997), explore how the refusal of narrative sequences, which have been steadily fragmenting throughout her work, can permit a reconciliation with two painful episodes in the life of her mother: the latter's deterioration in the face of Alzheimer's disease and a much earlier episode of her father's attempted murder of his wife in a moment of rage. The "night" of confusion and physical degeneration that overcomes her mother confronts Annie (as she now refers to her persona), whose notes during her mother's final months comprise the bulk of the text of *Sortie*, with uncertainties about her own identity. Compounding her disturbing sense of being merely a substitute for an elder sister who died at an early age, the narrator finds continuing parallels between the behavior of her senile parent and her own actions and language as a child. The malaise she apprehends at this identification—"Impression terrible de dédoublement, je suis moi et elle" 'I have a frightening impression of being double; I am myself and her' (*Sortie* 23)—arises marginally from the premonition of seeing herself in undignified old age, more significantly from the psychological untenability of the inversion of mother/child roles, and most insistently from a vague sense of guilt at supposedly allowing her early caregiver to become stripped not only of dignity but her mother's own sense of self and then relegating the incapacitated woman to a nursing home.

If the narrator's repeated avowals of *culpabilité* are authentic transcriptions of her state of mind a decade earlier, their function in the text is precisely to demonstrate the illegitimacy of those feelings.<sup>7</sup> Annie's confession to an occasional sadistic impulse is left without further elaboration and contradicted by her scrupulousness in caring for her parent, compelling the reader who cannot help be both saddened and empathetic with the narrator to believe this feeling unwarranted. Her insistent rejection of the transformation of roles thrust upon her—"Tout est renversé, maintenant, elle est ma petite fille. Je ne PEUX pas être sa mère" 'Everything is backwards, now; she is my girl. I CANNOT be her mother' (*Sortie* 29)—demonstrates not her neglect but on the contrary the strength of her *filial* devotion and respect that cannot bear the indignities brought on by her mother's incontinence and "folie."

At a more profound level, the strategy of inducing the reader's complicity in banishing the impression of guilt likewise acts to rewrite the understandable but finally erroneous fusion of narrator and mother on both the physical and psychical levels. Just as the accidental similarity of certain words and acts does not literally replicate the aged Mme Duchesne as the child Annie by a sort of backwards cloning, the phantasmic bond that the narrator senses is belied by Annie's self-awareness even when much younger as well as by her present verbal mastery that contrasts sharply with her mother's incoherence. The maternal figure portrayed in *Une femme* has had a marked impact on the formation of her daughter, but the assertion of an identification with a body that now is but an empty signifier of the person who once was serves in fact to reaffirm the reader's consciousness of the narrator's superiority and autonomy, a superiority demonstrated by her compassion and an autonomy proven by the act of returning to and so transcending the emotional perplexity resulting from the trauma of this period.

Akin to the discursive maneuver of "*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*," the act of writing in *La honte* about the quarrel between her parents, which occurred at a pivotal moment in the young adolescent's life when the sense of shame came to define her relation to the world outside the family circle, serves to bring that memory out of the private sphere associated with fear and enclosure. As with the feeling of guilt over the decline of her mother decades later, the text makes clear the nature of shame as a social construct—even while producing the impression of being alone in feeling this humiliation—arising from her parents' marginal position in the town's social stratification and the bourgeois values of the religious school she attends. But unlike in *Sortie*, whose diary form plunges the reader into the thick of inchoate emotion, the distance in time and place from the events, along with the narrator's youth in 1952, allows the recognition that her sense of being stigmatized by others constituted a formative influence on her adolescence and that to attempt to reconstruct who she was requires recapturing the milieu in which she was submerged.

Naturellement pas de récit, qui produirait une réalité au lieu de la chercher. Ne pas me contenter non plus de lever et transcrire les images du souvenir mais traiter celles-ci comme des documents qui s'éclaireront en les soumettant à des approches différentes. En ce en somme ethnologue de moi-même.

Naturally, I do not want a narrative, which would produce a reality instead of searching for it. It is not enough to content myself with calling forth and transcribing images from memory but to treat them as documents that will become clear when analyzed in the light of different approaches. It is my role to be the ethnographer of myself. (*Honte* 38)

This search to convey the texture of her surroundings must first of all dispense with narrative structure, a series of preterites, for what she tries to evoke could only be conveyed by the imperfect or, more insistently, by an iterative present tense that emphasizes the continuing presence of the past to the adult narrator. Equally to be abjured is the scrapbook miscellany of *Journal du dehors*, for its refusal of linearity masks a shirking of the burden of analysis. She must then reconstruct the laws, rites, beliefs, and values that comprised the contradictory pulls of home, school, and region. The meaning of the events of that summer of 1952 for the future writer becomes apparent only through a process of (re)producing the shame that the memory of that violent dispute caused by making public through writing what was apparently kept quiet. The moment when her father threatens her mother with the billhook marks what would be an unspeakably radical violation of the social code of her milieu that suppressed domestic disputes, swearing, and unkempt dress in public. Even as an adult she cannot bear to continue her project of reading the archives of the local paper to see if her family contributed to the motley collection of horrifying *faits-divers*.

By exposing that incident, now that the participants are long deceased, the narrator asserts that she seeks to deprive it of its "caractère sacré d'icône" 'sacred character as an icon' (*Honte* 30). The catharsis that publishing her *Honte* can bring necessitates re-establishing its context, situating it as part of a series of points of friction between her parents, including over religion where her father's perfunctory and grudging fulfillment of Catholic ritual approximates much more closely the narrator's present scepticism. That moment of violence belongs to a complex of (potentially) shameful incidents, many trivial, that likewise must be re-enacted in order to purge them of their miasmatic effects on Annie's psyche, even though the act of writing itself is shameful, "[c]omme une action interdite devant entraîner un châtement" 'like a forbidden act necessarily leading to punishment' (*Honte* 16). As a creation of language, her shame has to be reconstituted in the languages that comprised her at around

age twelve in order to come to terms with who she was. "Ce qui m'importe, c'est de retrouver les mots avec lesquels je me pensais et pensais le monde autour. Dire ce qu'étaient pour moi le normal et l'inadmissible, l'impensable même" 'What is important to me is to recover the words with which I thought about myself and the world around me. I have to express what was for me the normal and the inadmissible, even the unthinkable.' But inasmuch as she cannot fully recreate those languages, her memory of her parents' quarrel, like that of the rest of her life during the period, will remain fragmentary and elusive. "Il n'y a pas de vraie mémoire de soi" 'There is no true memory of the self,' she is forced to conclude (*Honte* 37). She tries to recover a primordial "langue matérielle" 'material language' (*Honte* 69-70) that would precede even the concreteness of the *écriture plate*, a language deprived of sentiment and sentimentality (which would have to be borrowed later from songs and books), closely tied to the specific locale in which she was nurtured. By doing so, she has come full circle from Denise Lesur's taste for the escapist romances that offered a window onto a higher social caste, instead struggling to recapture ever more accurately the languages of her origins, though still valorizing texts to the degree that they present themselves as transparent and deny their nature as constructs. In marked contrast to her earliest books, whose non-standard vocabulary poses barriers for at least this foreign reader, she annotates in this text the one regional expression used, increasingly conscious of the distance that separates the language of her birth from that of her audience as well as herself as writing subject.

In this second panel of the diptych that returns to periods treated in previous books, the immediacy of *Sortie* gives way to a summary reflection on her being as impressed on by the ideological charge latent in varying registers of language and a confession that even while abandoning the artificiality of the *récit*, the evocation of memory does not reconstitute her as a unified self. She acknowledges, "la mémoire n'apporte aucune preuve de ma permanence ou de mon identité. Elle me fait sentir et me confirme ma fragmentation et mon historicité" 'memory does not furnish any proof of my permanence or of my identity. It makes me feel and confirms my fragmentation and historicity' (*Honte* 96). If the apparent pure temporal contingency of the sections forming *La honte* (she confesses not being sure if some of it has anything to do with the rest other than



her identity and its rootedness in a specific historical setting, the *bricolage* form of the text, by its very faithfulness to her piecemeal subjectivity, necessarily fails to account for the self she would become. For the stratagem of purging unjustified feelings of shame and guilt by making them public (which is precisely what the sense of shame should forbid) cannot be anything other than a rewriting of memory and of the self. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, that no observation is without intrusive consequences, applies equally well to the act of reconstructing the formative influences on personal identity. Ernaux's latest two texts mark a significant subutilization of her probing into her nature as formed by the languages of others, for she recognizes in these books that the sum is far greater, and much more uncertain, than the parts that collectively have impinged on her subjectivity.

If Ernaux has emerged as one of the leading contemporary French writers, one of the reasons may be that her texts, despite her erasure of the label *roman*, foreground what Bakhtin has identified as an essential constituent of the novel's verbal art, the mixture or heteroglossia of competing languages (or ideologies) that intermingle and renew each other. Far more than being merely the latest avatar of the *degré zéro de l'écriture*, Ernaux traces the coming into being of a female speaking subject, buffeted by the currents of contending discourses against which she struggles to define herself, who will finally concede that her being as speaking and writing subject—her ability to communicate perceived reality—is constituted by the languages she has absorbed and digested. In this sense, we can offer some possible conclusions about the narrator's efforts toward autonomy and self-definition. Should we read Anne as "oppressed" by exterior linguistic and ideological forces, as in *La femme gelée*, where she is mired in the routine of child-care and domestic chores while trying to get her career under way? Or is this failure to define the self to be seen as a capitulation (to phallic discourses, for example) stemming from her own personal insufficiencies? Or is the notion of coming to a sense of identity through a self-generated "natural" language such as the *écriture plate* an impossible project, one that Anne implicitly recognizes in *Journal du dehors* when she effaces her subjectivity and intervention in favor of being a transcribing eye and ear, collecting aleatory fragments and assembling them into a textual collage? Or does her success as writer of documents whose autobiographical content she has readily acknowl-

edged, texts that follow her labors to give birth to an independent self through an act of auto-parturition, demonstrate that she has in fact achieved her goal in creating that persona, even while ostensibly failing? Or do the two most recent books surveyed here suggest that Ernaux has achieved a fundamental breakthrough by recognizing that the reconstitution of the subject entails not only a recovery of the languages of her past but the mediation of the reader whose exteriority and axiological acuity can supplement the narrator's vision blurred by its proximity to the events she transcribes?

Ernaux's books, as is apparent from even a superficial reading, are neither tracts nor pathetic confessions, neither polemics nor exercises in self-abasement. The self that emerges from the nine texts surveyed here neither preaches against particular value systems, masculine domination, the situation of the underprivileged classes in France, or the pretensions of the bourgeoisie, nor does she wallow in a preoccupation with the obstacles that have stood in her path toward fashioning a sense of her own being with which she, in middle-age, can feel comfortable. If the project of being independent of the formative forces surrounding her turns out to be misguided, the effort has not been wasted, for it has furnished a strikingly vivid account of the struggle of the individual to achieve an awareness denied to her parents and other inhabitants of her milieu of the possibilities that open up through entry into the spheres of other languages. To the extent that Ernaux has succeeded in her work, from *La femme gelée* forward, of establishing her own voice, even in the negatively measured tones of an *écriture plate*, she has created a recognizable image of the self, but one that never ceases to acknowledge its constitution by a cacophony of discordant languages. She has at very least proven the falseness of the parental dichotomy between being "ce qu'ils disent ou rien." She is someone.<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

1. All translations are my own.

2. Carol Sanders concludes in her stylistic study that the long, grammatically unstable sentences of *Armoires* "seem to indicate the urgency of saying what has hitherto been suppressed, the pent-up feelings and expressions of generations of women" (23). Such a generalization, neglecting

the specificity of Ernaux's narrator's relation with her surroundings, tries too hard to force Ernaux into the mode of *écriture féministe* and ultimately tells us little about her language. Claire-Lise Tondeur (*Annie Ernaux*) argues more convincingly that Anne's identity is formed most importantly by her social origins, rather than by her sex.

3. Meaning, presumably, 'to fall down' and 'quarter to eleven.'

4. Tondeur ("Ecriture") notes this parallel between the initial page of the two works and Ernaux's general debt to Camus.

5. Laurence Mall claims the stripped-down language that avoids precious turns of phrase and rare images respects the simplicity of her mother's language. Yet as this and other Ernaux texts make clear, Anne's "mother tongue," with its *gros mots* (abandoned only when in old age her mother comes to stay with her), lower-class slang, and strident high-decibel projection, bears little resemblance to the *écriture plate*. Lucille Cairns recalls how Anne in *Ce qu'ils disent* would avoid conversations with her mother and reject her language because of its inability to convey anything other than platitudes.

6. Claire Marrone points out the contrast she discerns between the "very conventional narrative voice" and the "deliberately non-traditional narrative structure and strategies" (81).

7. In this sense, *Sortie* can be read as an inversion of the accusation constructed against Meursault on the basis of his insensitivity toward his mother in the intertext evoked by *Une femme*: Annie's avowed feeling of wrongdoing is sufficient to exculpate her.

8. My thanks to Lauren Doyle-McCombs for her skillful critique of an earlier version of this essay.

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