

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

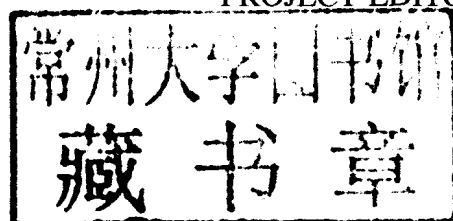
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Volume 330

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

Jeffrey W. Hunter
PROJECT EDITOR



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Contemporary Literary Criticism

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Preface

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
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- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Annie Ernaux

1940-

French autobiographer, memoirist, journal writer, novelist, critic, and essayist.

The following entry presents an overview of Ernaux's career through 2011. For further information on her life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 88 and 184.

INTRODUCTION

Ernaux is credited with reinventing the form of the autobiography with a series of life writings that now includes close to twenty publications. Having begun her career with a trio of autobiographical novels, Ernaux soon rejected fiction in favor of a more objective approach. The transition in her writing is marked by *La place* (1983; *A Man's Place*), a memoir of her father that combines personal memories of him with an account of the social, historical, and political conditions that shaped his life. Through authorial interventions in this and succeeding texts, Ernaux explains her distrust of subjective memory and the limitations of existing literary forms to uncover the "truth" of experience. Her almost scientific method, including description and analysis of relevant material evidence, such as photographs, newspaper clippings, postcards, and other artifacts, has caused critics to deem her writings *autoethnographic*. While many of the texts deal with individual aspects of Ernaux's life or its most traumatic episodes—her witnessing of her father trying to kill her mother, her illegal abortion, her struggle with breast cancer—in their totality the volumes document Ernaux's entire life, from her childhood in a small town in Normandy, France, through her current fears, as a woman in her seventies, of senility and death. Ernaux has been well known in France since the publication of *A Man's Place*, for which she was awarded the Prix Renaudot, one of France's top literary honors. Her writings are bestsellers in her native country and, because of their feminist themes, often appear on university course lists in France as well as in the United States and Britain.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

An only child, Ernaux grew up in Yvetot, a small town northwest of Rouen in the Normandy region of France. Her parents came from working-class backgrounds

and owned a small grocery store that housed a café, a setting that figures prominently in many of her works. Ernaux attended an all-girls Catholic school and then Rouen University, where she earned a degree in modern French literature. She taught secondary school in Haute-Savoie and Paris and was a professor at the Centre National d'Enseignement par Correspondance from 1977 to 2000. Ernaux's 1964 marriage to Philippe Ernaux ended in divorce in 1985. Ernaux credits her parents, especially her mother, with enabling her to receive the kind of education that permitted her to achieve literary prestige and professional success as an educator. At the same time, she was for much of her adult life alienated from her parents, both plagued by the guilt of her social migration and deeply ashamed of her origins.

MAJOR WORKS

Ernaux's first two published works, *Les armoires vides* (1974; *Cleaned Out*) and *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* (1977), are fictionalized versions of her childhood and adolescence. The narrator of *Cleaned Out*, twenty-year-old college student Denise Lesur, is recuperating from the physical and psychological pain of a backstreet abortion. Trying to understand how she arrived at her present predicament, Denise reflects back on her relationship with her parents, small shopkeepers who made great sacrifices to send her to private school but who in turn demanded her thorough devotion to her studies. She recalls the rigidity of her Catholic upbringing and how it made her feel sinful when she thought about boys or sensual pleasures. *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* is narrated by a fifteen-year-old girl, Annie, who describes her summer vacations away from school. Ernaux's next work, *La femme gelée* (1981; *A Frozen Woman*), though generally designated a novel, begins to approach autobiography. The first-person narrator here is unnamed, frustrating the reader's identification of her as a "character." The heroine is a deeply dissatisfied thirty-year-old married woman who has put a promising teaching career on hold in order to raise her two young children. She condemns a social system that would enable her to transcend her working-class origins through education but that will not allow her to realize her professional goals. She ponders the irony that her social ascent into the

bourgeoisie has alienated her from her mother, at whose insistence she pursued the promise of social mobility through academic achievement.

With *A Man's Place*, published two years after *A Frozen Woman*, Ernaux's writing became simultaneously more overtly autobiographical and less subjective. In this and later writings she vows to search for the truth of experience, adopting a more impartial approach that presents relevant material circumstance as a check on the vagaries of memory. She also declares her intention to restrict herself to a simple, factual prose style she refers to as *l'écriture plate* (flat writing). In *A Man's Place* and its companion piece about her mother, *Une femme* (1987; *A Woman's Story*), Ernaux describes how her parents' lives—their speech, mannerisms, behaviors, and beliefs—were defined and limited by their humble social status. In direct addresses to the reader in both books, Ernaux explains that the change in her form and style was dictated by the subject matter, working-class people whose stories could not be told with authenticity through the conventions of bourgeois literary forms.

With the exception of *La honte* (1997; *Shame*), Ernaux's subsequent works all describe her changing understanding of her female identity and woman's role in society. *Shame* describes what Ernaux considers the single most traumatic event in her life—her father's attempt on her mother's life in the summer of 1952. Ernaux internalized this episode as having transformed her family from one of humble respectability to one of shameful coarseness. She records that it not only marked her passage out of innocence but precipitated her estrangement from her parents, the most dominant theme in her writings. The narrative begins with a three-page account of the horror of the "scene"—her mother's screams coming from a corner of the cellar, her father holding her mother's neck in one hand, a scythe in the other. As in her earlier studies of the social injustices that circumscribed her parents' lives, she attempts to collectivize the personal, characterizing the event as "an ordinary incident, far more common among families than I had originally thought." But this attempt at disassociation fails to relieve the trauma of the memory and in what follows Ernaux analyzes the social context and relational dynamics that allowed the event to occur. She collects and interprets material evidence dating from that year—a sewing kit, a black belt, sheet music, a photograph of herself in a Communion dress, newspapers. She reconstructs the world she once thought was normal, enumerating all the aspects of the culture that contained and defined her before the incident, including the social rituals of her Normandy village, the

geography of the town, the physical details of her family's café and apartment and her school. She explains her strategy to her readers: "I shall not opt for narrative, which would mean inventing reality instead of searching for it. Neither shall I content myself with merely picking out and transcribing the images I remember; I shall process them like documents, examine them from different angles to give them meaning. In other words, I shall carry out an ethnological study of myself."

On many occasions, in her books as well as in interviews, Ernaux has admitted to being frustrated in her ambitions to social realism. Her works from the 1990s and beyond continue the experiments with representational strategies that might more closely reveal the truth. Many of the works address taboo subjects while remaining focused on a delineation of class and gender issues. Notably, Ernaux began publishing her journals verbatim, uncensored and unedited. These include *Journal du dehors* (1993; *Exteriors*) and *La vie extérieure: 1993-1999* (2000; *Things Seen*), which contain her observations on passing strangers and the activities in her hometown of Cergy-Pontoise, as well as her thoughts on current stories in the newspaper headlines. *Se perdre* (2001) collects intimate diary entries about her affair with a married Soviet diplomat, which she had previously recounted in *Passion simple* (1991; *Simple Passion*). *L'événement* (2000; *Happening*) returns to the subject of her abortion, and "*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*" (1997; "*I Remain in Darkness*") revisits the painful circumstances of her mother's mental and physical decay from Alzheimer's disease. The title refers to the last words written by her mother to a friend as her condition worsened. *L'usage de la photo* (2005) chronicles the year in Ernaux's life, 2003, when she was undergoing treatment for breast cancer and engaged in a passionate sexual relationship with a man thirty years her junior, Marc Marie, her coauthor. This book marks an entirely new representational strategy by its inclusion of actual photographs, as does *L'autre fille* (2011), which is written in the form of a letter to Ernaux's sister, who died several years before Ernaux was born. *Les années* (2008) charts changes in French society over seven decades—their autobiographical import and wider implications—and is unique among Ernaux's output in its attention to the whole of her life.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

From a literary perspective, scholars have analyzed Ernaux's writings as deliberate attempts to subvert the conventions of the autobiographical genre. Many crit-

ics have traced her strategies for objectification and the evolution of her narrative "I" in its various renditions: autoethnography, memoir, fiction, and journal, and the various combinations of these forms. Thematically, critics have focused on Ernaux's class- and gender-based examination of her fractured identity and her efforts to universalize her personal experiences as well as those of her parents. While a numbers of critics have responded negatively to Ernaux's journal publications, considering them scattered and unnecessarily disturbing in their shocking detail, others have found them to be redeemed by the same pursuit of truth and minority representation as the earlier works. Some commentators adopt Ernaux's own term—*je transpersonnel* (transpersonal I)—to refer to her goal of writing about personal experiences that will resonate with a large section of the population, notably women and the working classes.

The qualities of Ernaux's writings that have made her consistently popular with readers—her simple prose style and absorption in the everyday—have contributed to the impression among French academic critics that her works are not theoretically challenging. Still, Ernaux's writings are often studied within the context of the sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu, and her feminist critiques are thought to rival those of Simone de Beauvoir and Marguerite Duras. Ernaux's complex representational strategies are regarded by many as postmodernist in their constant reformulation and rearticulation of the same events from different angles. While such strategies are perceived by the majority of critics as consistent with her stated aim of truth-telling, a few have dismissed Ernaux as narcissistic in her compulsion to self-exposure. There also exist a considerable number of psychological readings of Ernaux's works, especially as her confessions illuminate theories of shame, trauma, and repression.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Les armoires vides [*Cleaned Out*] (novel) 1974
Ce qu'ils disent ou rien (novel) 1977
La femme gelée [*A Frozen Woman*] (novel) 1981
La place [*A Man's Place*; published in the United Kingdom as *Positions*] (memoir) 1983
Une femme [*A Woman's Story*] (memoir) 1987
Passion simple [*Simple Passion*; published in the United Kingdom as *Passion Perfect*] (autobiography) 1991
Journal du dehors [*Exteriors*] (journal) 1993
La honte [*Shame*] (autobiography) 1997
 "Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit" [*"I Remain in Darkness"*] (diary) 1997

L'événement [*Happening*] (autobiography) 2000
La vie extérieure: 1993-1999 [*Things Seen*] (journal) 2000
Se perdre (journal) 2001
L'occupation [*The Possession*] 2002
L'écriture comme un couteau [with Frédéric-Yves Jeanet] (interviews) 2003
L'usage de la photo [with Marc Marie; photographs by Ernaux and Marie] (autobiography) 2005
Les années (autobiography) 2008
L'atelier noir (notebooks) 2011
L'autre fille (autobiography) 2011
Écrire la vie (novels, autobiography, and journals) 2011

CRITICISM

Lyn Thomas (essay date 1999)

SOURCE: Thomas, Lyn. "Ernaux's Auto/biographical Pact: The Author and the Reader in the Text." In *Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer and Her Audience*, pp. 29-53. New York: Berg/Oxford International Publishers, 1999.

[The following essay is drawn from the first full-length study of Ernaux written in English. Thomas traces the evolution of the narrative "I" in Ernaux's works, focusing on authorial interventions in the texts in which Ernaux explains her intentions, raises issues about realism and representation, and discusses her strategies for arriving at the truth of the self.]

FROM AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION TO AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL PACT

Philippe Lejeune's *Le Pacte autobiographique*, published in 1975, still exerts a significant influence in discussions of autobiography, despite the fact that it has been subjected to numerous critiques, including those of Lejeune himself (Lejeune, 1986). For Sheringham, for instance, the publication of *Le Pacte autobiographique* is the beginning of 'serious attention to the genre' in France (Sheringham, 1993, p. 20). Definitions of autobiography, such as those proposed by Lejeune, are perhaps inevitably ill-fated at a moment in literary history characterised by attempts to question and subvert the conventions of genre. In this sense, Ernaux's work is in tune with the times. We do not find in her writing the characteristics associated with autobiography in its most classic form: the exemplary life, the momentous turning points, the cohesive sense of self, and the conclusion written with the benefit of

hindsight. The identity described is more tentative, its textual presentation more fragmented than is the case for more conventional exponents of the genre, such as Beauvoir. Texts such as *Passion simple*, for example, deal with an aspect or episode of the author's life, rather than its totality (see Marrone, 1994, p. 78). In some of the texts the emphasis is not even on Ernaux's own life: *La Place* and *Une femme* focus respectively on her father's and mother's lives, and *Journal du dehors* on the author's experience of contemporary social reality, as it is embodied in chance encounters in the train and supermarket. As I have already indicated (preface, note 1), I have followed the spelling which Laura Marcus adopts in her recent book on theories of autobiography—*Auto/biographical Discourses*—in order to emphasise the lack of clear boundaries between biography and autobiography in Ernaux's writing from *La Place* onwards (Marcus, 1994). Here, this spelling may also serve to indicate that although Ernaux's work is indisputably autobiographical, deviations from the form, such as those mentioned above, prevent the texts from falling into the category of autobiography in the most classic, and narrow, sense of the term.

At this point, it is nonetheless useful to return to Lejeune: 'What defines autobiography, for the person reading it, is above all a contract regarding the author's identity, a contract which is sealed by the use of the real name' (Lejeune, 1975, p. 33). As this suggests, the defining feature of autobiography for Lejeune at the time of writing *Le Pacte autobiographique* was the coincidence of name and identity of the author-narrator-character, and the effect that this had on the reader, or mode of reading. In this sense it is possible to differentiate between Ernaux's first two novels, *Les Armoires vides* and *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*, and the rest of her work. In these two texts narratorial and authorial voices do not coincide, despite the autobiographical material on which both are based. The narrator of *Les Armoires vides*, who is named as Denise Lesur, is a young woman of about twenty, and in *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*, the heroine, Anne, is fifteen. There is a clear distance between these narrators and the author, who was in her early thirties at the time of writing. The fact that the narrators are named reinforces the reader's view of them as 'characters', and confirms the fictional nature of these works. Ernaux has commented that there were two decisive moments in her work: the initial choice to adhere to the novelistic form—'le moment où je m'inscris dans une forme romanesque'—and the subsequent change to an openly auto/biographical 'I', with the writing of *La Place*: 'Ever since *La Place*, which is a real turning point in my writing (. . .) the "I" and the name on the

cover, according to Lejeune's definition, are the same, without there really being an explicit pact. But in my opinion the pact is self-evident in the mode of writing itself' (IN [Thomas's unpublished interview with Ernaux, March 21, 1997]). This view is, however, not universal among the critics of Ernaux's work. P. M. Wetherill's detailed account of the process of writing *La Place* over a period of years, from 1976 to 1982, leads him to the conclusion that 'the narrator is not to be confused with the author' (Wetherill, 1987, p. 34). Warren Motte, on the other hand, arrives at the opposite conclusion; for him, the 'I' in *La Place* 'continually questions the theoretical dissociation of narrator and author' (Motte, 1995, p. 55). For this reason, Motte argues that the text is close to the discursive mode of autobiography, which he sees as one of the boundaries of 'the hybrid domain of autofiction'.

It may be useful at this point to clarify my own position. In pointing to the difference between the 'I' of the first two texts and the 'I' of *La Place* and subsequent work, I am far from denying the nature of the auto/biographical 'I' as textual construct. Auto/biography is clearly just as carefully constructed as any other literary text; the gap between reality and its representation in language is as much, if not more, in evidence here as in other genres. In this sense Wetherill is quite right to point out the difference between 'author' and 'narrator'. Nonetheless, auto/biographical writing does have its own codes and conventions, which in turn generate expectations and modes of reading particular to the genre. It is largely thanks to Lejeune that the concept of the reader has been introduced into the discussion, and it is in part for this reason that his work is relevant here, given my own interest in the reception of Ernaux's work (see chapter 5). My aim at this point is to differentiate between different kinds of textual construction of the 'I', and to point to the evolution of Ernaux's texts from this point of view. Ernaux's own struggle with this issue is a major focus of my analysis of her authorial interventions in this chapter.

Ironically, as I have suggested, it is at the point when she turns her attention away from her own life, to her father's, that Ernaux's writing becomes overtly auto/biographical. As we have seen, it is also at this point that there is a complete change of tone. The fictional first-person narrator had allowed Ernaux to express her feelings about her own past, and particularly about her change of social class through education, in an extreme, at times violent, form: 'I needed the screen of the novel, doubtless it enabled me to take as far as possible what I was researching at the time, that is, the

process of being wrenched from one's class of origin (*la déchirure sociale*)' (IN). Because of her strong sense of responsibility for the representation of her father's life and its reception, Ernaux adopts a direct and unadorned mode of writing in an attempt to present her position (*sa place*) clearly to the reader. The subject of *La Place*—the life of a working-class man—means that this is by definition a political choice:

But when it's about my father, the derisory mode of speaking is impossible, because of the danger of falling into miserabilism, or equally of writing from the standpoint of the dominant world, and of making a social judgement. Hence the questioning, as a result of which I concluded that the act of writing is a social commitment, not just in the content but also in the choice of form.

(IN)

The move to auto/biography is thus accompanied in *La Place* by a more overtly political definition of her role as a writer, and by the adoption of an authorial voice characterised by the desire to specify rather than imply, by a sincere rather than ironic tone.

In an earlier interview, Ernaux described *La Femme gelée* as a transitional work in this move, a view which would seem to be supported by the fact that unlike the heroines of the first two novels, the narrator in this case is not named:

With *La Femme gelée*, I begin to bid farewell to the novel. There really is no difference between the narrator and the character. From the outset the text does not present itself as a novelistic construction. The heroine, that is, the narrator, has no first name, no surname. The status of *La Femme gelée* is almost to declare itself as an autobiography.

(Ernaux in Tondeur, 1995a, p. 38)

Again here the subject matter imposes a formal choice. *La Femme gelée* is an account of the narrator's history as a woman, emphasising the contrast between the reality of oppressive gender roles and the discourses of equality and liberation prevalent in the existentialist literature and middle-class intellectual milieu of the time. The anonymity of the narrator of *La Femme gelée* may, as Rita Felski has argued in relation to the feminist confessional, play a double role. Firstly, as Ernaux herself suggests, this is a step away from the novel and towards auto/biography, with its emphasis on the authenticity of personal experience. Secondly, like the heroine of Marie Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* (*The Words to say it*), published six years earlier, the narrator of *La Femme gelée* is perhaps anonymous because there is a desire to emphasise the representative nature of her experience as

a woman (Felski, 1989, p. 94). *La Femme gelée* can thus also be seen as transitional in terms of the overt politicisation and *engagement* (commitment) which, as I have argued above, becomes a strong feature of Ernaux's work from *La Place* onwards. Finally, as P. M. Wetherill has shown, *La Femme gelée* was written during the long years of gestation of *La Place*, a fact which supports this view of it as a transitional text (Wetherill, 1987, pp. 30-5).

There are some reflections on the narrator's attempts to write in both *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* and *La Femme gelée*, but it is from *La Place* onwards that the author's project and experience as a writer constitute a significant part of the text, and that the reader is addressed directly. In Lejeune's view, the coincidence of identity of the 'I' in the text and the name on the cover can be confirmed, even if the name itself is not repeated in the text proper, by 'an initial section of the text where the narrator makes commitments to the reader' (Lejeune, 1975, p. 27). This kind of intervention in the text—to discuss her intentions as a writer and her experience of the writing process—is one of the most striking characteristics of Ernaux's fiction, and an important aspect of its general evolution from autobiographical fiction to auto/biography. The change of genre, or perhaps more significantly, of voice, is associated with a dramatic increase in the amount of commentary on the aims of the text. In *Les Armoires vides* the narrator's intention to investigate and explain the chain of events which has led her to the crisis of abortion is the topic of a short passage, leading into the main flashback narrative. The theme of this passage is summarised in one sentence, an image which evokes the parents' early lives as factory workers: 'Trace it all back to then, call it all up, fit it all together, an assembly line, one thing after another' (*Les Armoires vides*, p. 17; trans. p. 11).

The textual space (around 600 words) occupied by this topic is at its greatest in the first three overtly auto/biographical works, *La Place*, *Une femme* and *Passion simple*. There is slightly less in *Journal du dehors* (around 500 words) and *La Honte* (around 400 words). In '*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*' there is a significant reduction of the textual space occupied by these reflections to around 200 words. The evolution of these interventions, their role in defining the auto/biographical enterprise undertaken, and the relationship between author, text and reader, are my concern in the sections which follow.

THE AUTHOR IN THE TEXT

THE CLAIM TO 'TRUTH VALUE'

Laura Marcus has demonstrated how criticism of autobiography shows a consistent concern with the