ABSTRACT

WRITING “AU-DESSOUS DE LA LITTÉRATURE”:
ANNIE ERNAUX

By Maureen Mahany Berger

Annie Ernaux professes to write “au-dessous de la littérature.” (Une femme, 23) It is the aim of this paper to uncover what Ernaux means by that phrase and to examine the complexities involved in the resultant ramifications of attempting such a thing within the context of contemporary French literature. In the course of this study, I look at the issues of subjectivity, fictionality, historicity, law and language as they relate to the writings of Ernaux with the aid of critics Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes.
WRITING “AU-DESSOUS DE LA LITTÉRATURE” :
ANNIE ERNAUX

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DEDICATION

To all who know what Annie’s writing about…
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Introduction

[L’acte d’écrire est comme une] déscente sans garde-fou dans une réalité qui appartient à la vie et au monde, pour en arracher des mots qui aboutiront à un livre.

--Annie Ernaux

Annie Ernaux’s mission as a writer is to record an account of her life experiences—not because they are her personal experiences but because she has had these experiences and she is capable of writing them down and giving witness to a certain slice of women’s experience. In fact, Ernaux feels that to not give witness to what has really happened in her life as an example of what has happened in other’s lives is tantamount to participating in the patriarchal domination of society.

In an authorial side comment in her book about abortion, L’événement, Ernaux says:

Il se peut qu’un tel récit provoque de l’irritation, ou de la répulsion, soit taxé de mauvais goût. D’avoir vécu une chose, quelle qu’elle soit, donne le droit imprescriptible de l’écrire. Il n’y a pas de vérité inférieure. Et si je ne vais pas au bout de la relation de cette expérience, je contribue à obscurcir la réalité des femmes et je me range du côté de la domination masculine du monde. (E, 58)
Ernaux is not the first author to write on women’s experience, of course, but she has found some gaping holes in the corpus of published women’s literature. Regarding abortion, for example, she did a search at the library and came up with mostly “revues médicales” or “articles [qui] ne paraient que des suites de l’ ‘avortement criminel’.” (E, 40) What she found lacking was the play-by-play description of what it’s actually like to go through the experience of a clandestine abortion.

Si beaucoup de romans évoquaient un avortement, ils ne fournissaient pas de détails sur la façon dont cela s’était exactement passé. Entre le moment où la fille se découvrait enceinte et celui où elle ne l’était plus, il y avait une *ellipse.* (E, 40) (Italics mine)

That’s where Ernaux comes in. She writes in the space of that ellipsis. She wants to fill in that gap. She aims to fill in the details. She wants us to know what it’s like for a woman with an unwanted pregnancy to have to resort to going to an illegal abortionist who pokes a hole in her amniotic sac and then tells her to wait around for a few days with a catheter hanging out of her vagina to see if the procedure is ‘successful’ or not. She wants us to know what it feels like for that woman to have to run to the bathroom because of “une violente envie de chier” and then to have a foetus explode “comme une grenade” from her vagina “dans un éclaboussement d’eau qui s’est répandu jusqu’à la porte” and then to see a “petit baigneur pendre de [son] sexe au bout d’un cordon rougeâtre” with which she was required to “marche[r] avec jusqu’à [sa] chambre.” (E, 100) Then comes the most graphic of details, which might well “provoquer … de la répulsion” (E, 40) but which, nonetheless, is a part of the experience: “[Elle] l’[a] pris dans une
main…et [elle s’est] avancée dans le couloir en le serrant entre [s]es cuisses.” (E, 100-101)

If Ernaux is sure about why she wants to write and what she wants to write, she seems less sure about how to actually write it and she seems less sure about how to describe the end product.

Ernaux seems to have had a change of heart in how to go about writing her stories which is evidenced by a change of tack in the execution of her writing over the course of her body of work—which ranges from her first published work, Les armoires vides, published in 1974, to L’occupation, published in 2002.

One example of this is her use of the narrator and her use or non-use of a protagonist. In her first published piece, there is a protagonist with a name—Denise Lesur. Denise’s biographical details are very close to—but not exactly like—the biographical details of the author (that we discover in more recent works or from outside empirical evidence). In her second work, Ce qu’ils disent ou rien, the protagonist only has a first name: Anne—one letter away from the author’s own first name. By the time Ernaux gets to her third book, La femme gelée (1981), she has dropped the veil of a protagonist altogether in favor of a simple narrator—je. But why does she do this? What does this evolution mean in the context of the body of Ernaux’s work? Or, is this shift in narration meaningless happenstance?

Ernaux calls herself a writer (sometimes): “Je n’ai pas envie de jouer à l’écrivain. [...] Je suis professeur. C’est parce que j’écris des livres que je suis écrivain, pas l’inverse.” (“L’entretien avec Annie Ernaux” in Lire, avril 2000 par Catherine Argand) But she seems much less sure of what she’s
actually writing. In describing *Une femme* (but which self-ascribed
description might well describe the whole corpus of Ernaux’s work), Ernaux
says, “Ceci n’est pas une biographie, **ni un roman** naturellement, peut-être
quelque chose entre la littérature, la sociologie et l’histoire.” (*F*, 106) She
also says that her books are “**ni des romans** ni de l’autofiction.” (*Argand,*
40) (Emphases mine)

Well, one thing seems sure. Ernaux wants us to know that she thinks
she is *not* writing *novels*. But is that true? Is Ernaux not writing novels?
And, if she is or is not writing novels, why would it be important for her to
posit that she is not writing novels, even when she seems unsure as to how to
name what she *is* writing?

Ernaux is adamant that she wants to stay “au-dessous de la littérature”
with her writing. (*F*, 23) But what does that mean? And why does she want
to do that?

Fabrice Thumerel, in his article, “L’autobiographie selon Annie
Ernaux” describes Ernaux’s methodology as it relates to conventional
literature in this way: “L’entreprise d’Annie Ernaux […] fait prévaloir
l’exposition sur l’explication, démarche s’opposant à toute la tradition
française d’analyse (de Mme de Lafayette à Proust).” (Thumerel, 13)

Clearly, there is some *mouvance* with regard to the how and the what
of Annie Ernaux’s body of work. I think that in delving into these
unresolved issues of the writing we have in front of us, we will come to a
better understanding of why Ernaux has written in the manner she has and
why it is important for her to hold her work apart from that of mainstream
literature.
I propose a look at the subjectivity issues of Ernaux’s work with the help of Hélène Cixous and “The Character of ‘Character’” and the problems surrounding issues of authenticity and historicity with Roland Barthes’ “The Discourse of History.” Jacques Derrida informs my discussion of veracity with “‘Le Parjure,’ Perhaps: Storytelling and Lying” and legal considerations with “Devant la loi.”
I. Subjectivity

From “Denise Lesur” to “Anne” to “je.” From a conventional protagonist with the very specific name of Denise Lesur—a first and a last name—which is entirely different from that of the author and hence, distanced from the author, to a less specific, first-name-only protagonist—whose name (Anne) is very close to that of the author—to a non-named narrator, “je.” So we have already traced the metamorphosis of the narrator/protagonist in Annie Ernaux’s body of work. To discuss the main character in the oeuvre of an author is not insignificant.

Hélène Cixous, in “The Character of ‘Character,’” says “‘Character’ occupies a privileged position in the novel.” It is so important that “without ‘character,’ passive or active, no text. He is the major agent of the work, at the center of a stage that is commanded by his presence, his story, his interest. Upon his ‘life’ depends the life of the text.” (Cixous, 386)

The downside of character, according to Cixous, is that by choosing to couch the protagonist of a story in specificity—that is, to give her a name and a well-defined set of circumstances and a historicity—you, automatically restrict the amplitude of possibility for the character’s universality and unexpressed unconscious. “The ‘socialization’ of the subject,” says Cixous, […] can be accomplished only at the price of […] repressing the production of the unconscious that poses a threat to
established order, with the Ego relegated to its ‘civil’ place in the social system.” (Cixous, 384)

I believe this gives us a clue into the thought process of Ernaux as she morphed her narrator/protagonist from Denise Lesur to Anne to “je.” On one hand, naming a character and having experiences happen to a fictitious being, even if the events recounted in the work seem to be thinly veiled autobiography, is probably more comfortable than ‘baring all’ and showing up in a book as ‘je.’ On the other hand, Ernaux must have felt somehow that the very act of characterization was somewhat limiting in her work or, at least, that it wasn’t helpful to her mission of relating women’s experience.

Ernaux has professed to write for all women, because, “le silence retombe toujours sur l’histoire des femmes” (Argand, 40) and “on se moque de ce que pense la femme, de ce qu’elle ressent.” (Argand, 39) Therefore, she must have felt, after a certain point in her writing career, that the universality of her message was being undermined by specific characterization. Cixous says, “It is precisely this open, unpredictable, piercing part of the subject, this infinite potential to rise up, that the ‘concept’ of ‘character’ excludes in advance.”

According to Cixous, because of the etymology of the word character—taken from the Greek kharattein, which means “the mark or preserved sign, the title, which confers a rank or a right,” the word character “includes in its lexical evolution [...] that which morally differentiates one person from another.” (Cixous, 386) This certainly goes against what Ernaux is attempting to do with her prose. Ernaux is not trying to differentiate and stratify and exclude with her stories. To the contrary, she wants her stories to
be those of the universal feminine experience. She has found that the “je” works in concert with this desire rather than against it.

It is worth noting here that, in the metamorphosis of the narrator/character—even in the beginning of her writings with named protagonists, Denise Lesur and Anne—Ernaux never employed the third person narrative, as she could have. Rather, she always used the first person narrative. I think this choice in narrative voice was also a conscious attempt to be less distanced from the reader.

Here are a few snapshots from Ernaux’s books. Imagine how different it would be if the prose were written in third person narrative:

“Toute la liberté de ma vie s’est résumée dans le suspense d’un enfant l’après-midi.” (FG, 156) “Lui-même aurait été stupéfait d’apprendre qu’il ne quittait pas ma tête du matin au soir.” (PS, 40) (Après avoir fait couper le cordon du foetus, voilà la narratrice assise sur son lit avec l’amie qui la fait :) “Nous pleurons silencieusement. C’est une scène sans nom, la vie et la mort en même temps. Une scène de sacrifice.” (E, 101-102) “Pour faire cesser ce carrousel atroce [d’images de notre histoire], je savais que je pouvais me verser un grand verre d’alcool ou avaler un comprimé d’Imovane.” (O, 23) (Emphases mine)

The themes in Ernaux’s works are disagreeable or difficult to accept but they are also the everyday life of women’s experience.

In her article, “Pourquoi écrivez-vous?” Marguerite Andersen documents the answers of 400 women world-wide who answer that question.

Christa Wolf, a German writer, “définit l’écriture comme le chemin qui conduit au dépôt des interdits.” Kirsten Thorup of Denmark says, “Quelqu’un doit faire le travail de raconter les sales histoires de notre temps.” Joyce Carol Oates of the United States says she “cherche à établir
un dialogue avec son être le plus secret et le plus connu” while American Jayne Anne Phillips says, “l’écriture porte témoignage.” Finally, Augustina Bessa-Luis, of Portugal, “a pour but de déranger le plus grand nombre possible de gens.” (Andersen, 30)

In her writing, Ernaux joins this coterie of writers. She appropriates for herself the contemporary role of the “ancient female task of discharging unspeakable things on behalf of the city” as described in Anne Carson’s article, “The Gender of Sound: Description, Definition and Mistrust of the Female Voice in Western Culture.” Carson describes the ancient Greek religious practice called *aischrologia*, which is defined as “‘saying ugly things.’ Certain women’s festivals,” in ancient Greece, she says, “included an interval in which women shouted abusive remarks or obscenities or dirty jokes…” (Carson, 28)

If Ernaux is speaking for women as a group, she must find a way for her narrator to speak universally. Speaking through a specific protagonist proved narrowing and Cixous lends an understanding of why.

Once more referring to “The Character of ‘Character’” essay, Cixous further denigrates the concept of the system in which the character represents a set of externals. “He has referents (real causes that are anterior and exterior to the text: he could be the portrait of a real person) to which he alludes, while he fixes his essential traits so as to preserve them in the book.” (Cixous, 385) She acerbically calls him (the character) the “guarantor of the transmission […] of the ‘true,’ at once *porte-parole* […] and idol” (Cixous, 385) preferring, instead the “*imaginary* [which is] secreted by a
subjectivity that has always been disturbed, changeable, literally populated
with a mass of ‘Egos.’” (Cixous, 383)

Cixous rails against the character frozen in its small specificity—the
uni-faceted, or at least minimally-faceted purveyor of story in an instance of
prose. But what is the prognosis? How is this situation to be amended?
Especially if the “life of the text” depends on the character? Cixous believes
the character must be unmasked. He must be “brought back to the mask as
mask.” (Cixous, 387) She says:

He is given up then to the complexity of his subjectivity, to his
multiplicity, to his off-center position, to his permanent escapade: like the
author, he disappears only to be multiplied, attains the self only to be, in the
same instant, differentiated into a trans-subjective effervescence. (Cixous,
387)

Cixous believes that, if we do not put aside “character,” we will be
“locked up in the treadmill of reproduction” and we will find ourselves in
the “syndrome of role-playing.” She believes that, as long as we “take to be
the representation of a true subject that which is only a mask,” we will
remain “prisoners of the monotonous machination that turns every
‘character’ into a marionette.” (Cixous, 387)

I believe this is an important subject of discussion for Ernaux because
she is attempting to tackle certain subjects that have not been approached in
quite the same way before—such as abortion. But even with her subjects
which are not so unique—such as her affair with the Russian diplomat—she
does not want to be typecast and pegged into a corner. She does not want her
protagonist to be a wooden puppet whose every move is predictable. There
is an element of surprise and freshness in the writings of Ernaux which is consistent with what Cixous is talking about in her characterization discussion. And the choice by Ernaux to use “je” is of paramount importance to that end. Cixous says:

‘I’ must become a ‘fabulous opera’ and not the arena of the known. Understand it the way it is: always more than one, diverse, capable of being all those it will at one time be, a group acting together, a collection of singular beings that produce the enunciation. Being several and insubordinable, the subject can resist subjugation. (Cixous, 387)

So, the choice by Ernaux to switch from a named protagonist to a non-named “je” is a choice which allows the reader a deeper richness of meaning in the text. Rather than the story of one well-defined fictitious character, the story becomes that of multiple possibilities—potentially “Everybody’s” story or, as Cixous would say, that of “Nobody.” “The ‘personage’ is, in fact Nobody (Personne)—he is that which escapes and leads somewhere else.” (Cixous, 388)

“Even when Nobody is dubbed with names of ‘characters,’” says Cixous, “when Nobody is alive, there is still a part of his subjectivity that remains unassigned, on which the code has no hold, which disorganizes the discourse, and which produces itself (it is not produced or reproduced or reproductive, but inventive and formative).” (Cixous, 388)

Certainly, Ernaux would settle on the side of having her narrator/protagonist “inventive and formative” rather than “reproductive.”

Finally, Cixous makes a comment that is especially germane to the texts of Ernaux. She says: “No designation can connect Nobody. This subject is any other—and also all those that precede it and those it
anticipates.” (Cixous, 389) (Italics mine) We find a similar comment by Ernaux in *L’événement* when she explains her feelings after having read an obituary in *Le Monde* of Soeur Sourire (whose light-hearted strains of *Dominique-nique-nique* filled the airwaves of her childhood)—who had committed suicide. Apparently, the nun quit her religious order some time after her immense musical success, and revealed herself as an alcoholic and a lesbian:

Soeur Sourire fait partie de ces femmes, jamais rencontrées, mortes ou vivantes, réelles ou non, avec qui, malgré toutes les différences, je me sens quelque chose de commun. Elles forment en moi une chaîne invisible où se côtoient des artistes, des écrivaines, des héroïnes de roman et des femmes de mon enfance. J’ai l’impression que mon histoire est en elles. (*E*, 43)

With her detailed analysis of some of the underlying dynamics of the written narrative, with considerations of some elements that seem so simple as the choice of a personal pronoun, Hélène Cixous has shed valuable light on the subject at hand. However, tailoring one’s own prose after philosophical analysis doesn’t necessarily make the reading process accessible to the larger public. Anyone who is familiar with Cixous’ fiction will testify that it is not exactly an easy evening read.

Ernaux, on the other hand, really does aspire to appeal to the masses. Her books are short and engaging. Her language is familiar. She has struck a compromise with this characterization issue. As we have attested, she has opted for the anti-character “je”—a Nobody in particular which encompasses the whole realm of endless possibilities—so as not to limit the appeal of her prose. But she is not immune to the needs of the reader. She has also grounded that “je” narrator with enough anchoring details so that
the reader can empathize and relate. The “je” of Ernaux is not a disembodied multiplicity of possibilities floating around in who-knows-where touting philosophical concepts beyond the reach of the average person on the street.
II. Fictionality

There is a fascination—if not an obsession—in the writings of Annie Ernaux with the concept of truth. Again and again in her work, we find authorial comments where she is pondering her ability to render whatever subject it is that she’s writing about fully but without superfluity.

In *La honte*, she says that in order to find her “réalité d’alors,” she must not write a “récit, qui produirait une réalité au lieu de la chercher.” (*H*, 40) (Emphases mine) In *L’événement*, she says that the upset she feels when remembering the pharmacist’s question: ‘Do you have a prescription?’ when she was trying to purchase pain medication after having been catheterized, “permet l’écriture et en constitue le signe de vérité.” (*E*, 96) (Emphasis mine) In *Une femme*, she says, in writing about her mother, “Mon projet est de nature littéraire, puisqu’il s’agit de chercher une vérité sur ma mère. [...] Ni mes souvenirs, ni les témoignages de la famille ne peuvent me donner cette vérité.” (*F*, 23) (Emphases mine)

There are many more examples that could be cited. Certainly, this writer is trying to ‘get it right.’ But, is that possible—even for someone as conscious and assiduous in pursuing the truth as Ernaux? In “‘Le Parjure,’ Perhaps: Storytelling and Lying,” Jacques Derrida says that the term *storytelling* contains the double sense of “lying and narration, with memory as a precarious support of narrative continuity.” (Derrida, 199) (Italics mine)
In essence, Derrida is saying that even when the narrating author is not consciously trying to lie, the narrative falls short of truth anyway because of the unreliable nature of memory.

Ernaux is acutely aware of the precariousness of memory. She is aware that her memory does not always serve her well in remembering whatever it is she’s writing about. An example of this is found in *Passion simple* where she says: “Je ne raconte pas une histoire (qui m’échappe pour la moitié) avec une chronologie precise…” (PS, 31) (Italics mine) And, of course, even if she did “remember” an event precisely—an event from her childhood, for example—she would remember it now as an adult, not as the child she was when the event in her childhood occurred. Now, as an adult, she would have layers upon layers of added information and prejudices and leanings that she didn’t have as a little girl. And next year, if she were to write the same scene over again, other aspects of the same experience might seem more important to write about that weren’t included in the former account and, indeed, things she had already written about might seem unimportant. There really is no such thing as right memory.

The way memory really works seems much more like the “crystalline regime” in Gilles DeLeuze’s *The Time Image*, where the movie camera shows an object being filmed and then “replaces it, both creates and erases it […] and constantly gives way to other descriptions [from the camera’s eye] which contradict, displace, or modify the preceding ones.” (DeLeuze, 126) It is relatively easy for us to talk dispassionately about a movie camera playing tricks on us and replacing one image with another. After all—that’s what a movie camera does. Its job is to re-place and re-appropriate reality.
We are much less able to freely admit that our memories aren’t perfect receptacles of the past. After all, we do remember an event being a certain way. But, if the same person were to record an event one year after the fact and then again five years after the fact without looking at the first account, the two accounts would undoubtedly be different. Is that to say one is a lie? Or are they both lies? Perhaps. If both accounts are accurate but the accounts contradict one another, then perhaps they are both lies. Or perhaps they both tell partial truths or differing versions of the same truth.

Or, another way of looking at this phenomenon is to simply accept that we all have filters through which we experience life. These filters, at any given time, predict what is of foremost importance to us and what, therefore—among the infinitesimal details of life—our memories will choose to store, of a particular slice of life, for future reference. The fact is that two people can be present at the very same event and yet produce very different accounts of the same event. And, to complicate matters even more, these filters change as we go along in life. What is fascinating to us at one point in our lives fades into the background and becomes ho-hum whereas, conversely, something we were entirely unaware of formerly might come to the foreground of our awareness with an absolutely looming presence.¹

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¹An example of this would be something discovered during a trip abroad. Perhaps, on a trip to Rio de Janeiro, someone discovered samba music. That same person, back home, suddenly notices samba music being played at local restaurants. He swears he has never heard samba music being played before. But is it true? Or is it just that he now has a heightened awareness of samba music?
Roland Barthes explains this sort of thing very nicely in his *Camera Lucida*, where he brings this type of discussion into the realm of photography. He explains that it is the “*studium*” which is the general interest that a photographer has in a given scene but it is the “*punctum*” which “will break (or punctuate) the *studium*. […] It is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces [him].” (Barthes, 26) It is at this moment during the photographic event that the photographer is moved to depress the shutter. If all goes right, the resultant photograph will be the result of the specific thing that piqued the photographer’s interest (*punctum*) amidst a scene that interested the photographer in general (*studium*).

Here again, two photographers with cameras around their necks present at the same scene wouldn’t end up with identical photographs in their portfolios. Their resultant photographs would undoubtedly be quite different. This is exactly how our memories work. We all have our different *a priori* interests and so, our memories of life—as well as what interests us while we’re doing the living—will, perforce, be different as well.

So, what does all this have to do with Ernaux’s writing? Everything. As we have noted, Ernaux is overtly concerned that accounts of her life experiences be *true* accounts as recorded in her narrative. We have also seen that she adamantly refuses to be mentioned in the same breath as the word “novel” (*roman*), read “fiction.” (“Ceci n’est pas […] un *roman*…” “[M]es livres […] ne sont ni des *romans*…” (Emphases mine) Why is that?
Webster says *fiction* is: 1) an imaginative creation or a pretense that does not represent actuality but has been invented. 2) a literary work whose content is [...] not necessarily based on fact. 3) a lie.

Quite simply, Annie Ernaux does not want her fiction to be taken as a lie. She sees her works, rather, as “récits vériddiques.” (Argand, 40) And it is fully understandable that she would want her subject matter to be perceived as such. This is not the fantastical, quirky, surreal-but-somehow-humorous *World According to Garp* account of abortion (NB: written by a man). This is the account of someone who actually had first-hand experience walking in the hallway of her dorm with a foetus hanging by the umbilical cord as she tried to hold it in place by squeezing her thighs together and finally had to resort to holding its head so it wouldn’t fall out.

But Truth is slippery.

We have seen that our memories are precarious vessels of truth. And we have seen, with Hélène Cixous, that choice of narrator is also crucial as a conveyor of “truth.” Cixous feels that the je=Nobody, the unassigned narrator, which, in fact contains a multiplicity of possiblilities, a “fabulous opera” is the way to ‘get at’ the truth.

But Derrida, in his “Le Parjure” essay, challenges that. He talks of the “polylogology” which is a “multiplicity of voices, narrative or narrating origins.” (Derrida, 200)

One imagines oneself in a court of law, for example, where many different witnesses take the stand in order to tell *their version* of a fatal accident that happened on a specific date at a specific place.
Each witness has a different account of the same accident, depending on their individual circumstances and their own point of view. Mind you, all these witnesses taking the stand would have sworn to tell the truth. But, in the case of competing stories, which truth do we believe? Or, do we have to throw out all testimony?

How can one possibly take “rigorous account of them” when there are so many “legitimating sources, sources of authority or legitimacy”? (Derrida, 200) A very logical question. In other words, if there are several different voices which all claim to be telling the truth, how can one decide which one is actually telling the truth? “As soon as there is more than one voice in a voice, the trace of perjury begins […] to lead us astray. This dispersion,” he says, “threatens even the identity, the status, the validity of […] the word and the concept ‘I.’” (Derrida, 200)

Is this argument not in direct opposition to the Cixous concept of a “multiplicity of voices” speaking a greater truth than one very well-defined voice?

Besides those concerns already considered, there is another problem with well-intentioned truth-telling and believability of authorship which Derrida brings up: that of the memory lapse. “What is at stake ethically in the interruption of a memory[?] The essential finitude of a discontinuous anamnesis,” Derrida says, “inscribes ellipses and eclipses in the identity of the subject. It permits anyone to respond, in a manner that is at once responsible and irresponsible.” (Derrida, 201)

Here, we have the situation where someone is telling a story and can’t remember all the details. We imagine that person faltering for a moment
and, perhaps, someone else in the group picking up the thread of the story and telling a piece of it according to her recollection before bouncing the story back to the original storyteller. This is “responsible,” as Derrida says, in the sense that at least the story is told in its entirety. On the other hand, there are two authors to the story—the first, who absolutely couldn’t remember a part of it—and so is an unreliable source for any sort of verification of the truth of the other storyteller’s story. And, because the main storyteller couldn’t remember the whole story, doesn’t that shoot holes in the truth of the part of the story she could remember? Is it not then “irresponsible” to let someone else fill in eclipses of memory when telling a story?

This problem arises in the body of Ernaux’s work most glaringly with her reports of her affair with the Russian diplomat.

Her first book on the subject, Passion simple, was published in 1991 and is 77 pages long. As a matter of fact, only 40 pages of the book are involved in actively telling the story, as the book starts on page 11 and, by page 52, the author is talking about her lover who had already returned “dans son pays il y a six mois.” (PS, 52) And, we have already read an aside by the author in this volume where she says that this “histoire […] m’échappe pour la moitié.” (PS, 31) So, how can this person who couldn’t remember half of the events of the story just a few years after it happened be trusted to tell us a more fleshed-out story (Se perdre—377 pages) ten years later (published in 2001)? In the Derridian sense, how can another narrator (which is the same narrator but different because ten years have elapsed and this “new” narrator has an entirely different way of perceiving life and
remembered events) write a *different* account later of the same story and have us believe one word of it? Or, if we believe *this* version, must we throw out the first version?

Derrida brings up another point about the potential unreliability of the narrator in a passage he quotes from Proust via Hillis Miller in an article entitled, “The Anacoluthonic Lie.” He quotes Proust’s Albertine who says, “I remember, the other day, I…,” then Proust continues the narrative with, “She would suddenly, after a semi-quaver rest, change the ‘I’ to ‘she’: it was something that she had witnessed as an innocent spectator, not a thing that she herself had done. It was not she who was the subject of the action.” (Derrida, 202)

“The anacoluthon, or failure to follow a single syntactical track,” Derrida quotes Miller as saying, “for example in the shift from first to third person in the middle of a sentence, creates a narrative line that does not hang together. That shows, to anyone who notices it, that the story is—*may be*—a lie, a fiction. How could the same story apply at once to the teller and to someone else?” (Derrida, 202) We encounter this problem in the writings of Ernaux, in fact. Proust’s character starts her story in first person and then goes to third person. Ernaux starts her story with Denise Lesur and changes over time to “je.” Once again, we have to wonder which account to believe.

In *Ce qu’ils disent ou rien*, published in 1974, Ernaux has her fictionalized character, Denise Lesur, tell us, in syncopated fashion throughout the book, about her abortion experience. Then, a quarter of a century later, Ernaux’s “je” narrator gives us a more in-depth, more chronological report of the same experience. Whom do we believe? Is the
fictionalized narrator who tells the story in bits and pieces closer in time to the actual event to be trusted over an un-named narrator who tells the full story some twenty-five years later? Does it matter?
III. Historicity

In the book *La honte*, author Annie Ernaux recounts the story which summarily ended her childhood in the summer of her twelfth year: that of her father attempting to murder her mother. She frames the narrative with the description of two photographic images: the first was taken on June 5, 1952—the day of the “renouvellement des voeux” of her “communion solennelle.” The other was taken at the end of August while she was on vacation with her father in Biarritz.

Stephen Bann, in his introduction to Roland Barthes’ “The Discourse of History,” mentions Barthes’ critical work on photography, *Camera Lucida*. He says: “Against the ‘fiction’ of language, which Barthes so lovingly explored, the photograph offers the incontrovertible certainty of ‘That has been’: it is, as he strikingly expresses it, a ‘certificate of presence’.” (Bann, 6)

This certainly seems to be the case for Ernaux. It’s almost as if she has to convince someone (it’s not clear whether that someone is herself or the reader) that this most heinous occurrence actually happened. It’s as if she can see (and she wants to show us) in the demeanor of the girls in the two photographs that there is such a difference in so little time that something big must have happened in the intervening period to cause such a huge change. And then, of course, with the aid of language—that weaker conveyance of historical testimony—she proceeds to tell her story.
It is noteworthy that Barthes characterizes the written narrative as “the ‘fiction’ of language” in the quotation above. What Ernaux is certainly trying to get away from in her writing in general and maybe most specifically with La honte is fictitious writing. When Ernaux says that her writing is “quelque chose entre la littérature, la sociologie et l’histoire,” it’s this anti-fictive stance that she’s taking. She wants her writing to be as believable as historical discourse.

Barthes, in his essay, “The discourse of history,” questions whether it’s “fully legitimate to make a constant opposition between the discourses of […] the fictional narrative and the historical narrative. […] Does the narration of past events,” he asks, “[…] really differ, in some specific trait, in some indubitably distinctive feature, from imaginary narration, as we find it in the epic, the novel, and the drama?” (Barthes, 7)

“Of course the two differ,” we would automatically respond. Any primary-school child knows that a history book recounts facts and a story book tells an imaginary tale. But, upon closer inspection, it’s not so cut and dry as that. Barthes asks what, in the realm of classic history, are the shifters (cf. R. Jakobson in Essais de linguistique générale, 1963) “which assure the transition from the utterance to the act of uttering?” (Barthes, 7)

The first type of shifter is the listening shifter which includes the 1) event reported, 2) the informer and 3) the speech of the utterer. This type of shifter has to do with the historian’s listening—“collecting testimony from elsewhere and telling it in his own discourse.” (Barthes, 8) It is true that the origin of reported history isn’t usually questioned too much. If it’s published in a history book, we usually concentrate more on trying to remember all the
dates and other “facts” collected in the text than on concerning ourselves with verification of the information. Like the photographers mentioned above who go to the same event but come away with different photographs, the informer of the historical event is a very important link in the chain of reported history. He reports whatever seems important to him. If the chunk of history reported is a battle, he might report how many men were in battle and which weapons were used but he might be oblivious to the time-frame of the battle. Another informer, on the other hand, might concentrate on the relative difficulty and length of the battle whilst providing sketchy information as to the specifics of numbers of combatants and their arms.

Then, of course, we have the historian’s intervention to his audience when he says things like: “as I have heard or to my knowledge.” (Barthes, 7) Of course, when we’re reading a history book, somewhere in the back of our minds, we know that the historian writing down the history can’t have been present at every single thing he has written about—especially (logically) if the events recorded precede his lifetime. But, it’s not until we hear the phrase “as I have heard” that we consciously think about that layer of unverifiability added to the mix.

This part of the process of getting history into its recorded form is actually quite tenuous. It’s a lot like the children’s game of “telephone.” There is a piece of information to be conveyed, but every step along the way, every listener who then becomes utterer has the opportunity to botch up the message. It’s such a fun game precisely because it’s so amazing how easily a message can get completely garbled by the time it goes around the circle.
In critical articles, Ernaux’s approach has been likened to that of Pierre Bourdieu, the great contemporary ethnosociologist.² I see in her approach one similar to that of Bourdieu’s *Misère de la monde*, where his adepts actually go out and collect stories from different slices of the socio-economic landscape (some of these interviewees don’t even know how to read or write) and then publish both the verbatim interview and an analytical essay using that raw material, side-by-side, in the book.

Ernaux doesn’t go so far as to interview the population she is talking about in order to write *La honte*. We’re talking about an event that happened some 50 years before the piece was published, after all. But, the author reports that:

Hier, je suis allée aux Archives de Rouen consulter *Paris-Normandie* de 1952, que le livreur du marchand de journaux apportait chaque jour à mes parents. [...] Je suis arrivée au numéro du samedi 14-dimanche 15 juin... (*H*, 33,37)

She is doing her homework. She says, “Pour atteindre ma réalité d’alors, je n’ai pas d’autre moyen sûr que de rechercher les lois et les rites, les croyances et les valeurs qui définissaient les milieux, l’école, la famille, la province, où j’étais [...] qui dirigeaient [...] ma vie [...] pour décomposer et remonter [...] le texte du monde où j’ai eu douze ans. [...] Être en somme ethnologue de moi-même.” (*H*, 40)

² (cf. “Fortement marquée par la […] sociologie de Pierre Bourdieu” in “Les pratiques autobiographiques d’Annie Ernaux” by Fabrice Thumerel and “explique-t-elle en termes très bourdieusiens” in “Annie Ernaux, Écrire la vérité” by Nathalie Crom).
This is a laudable endeavor. But, as we have already seen, there are many inherent layers of unreliability—the *shifters* Barthes talks about—between an actual historical event and the reporting of it. The Bourdieusian method of going right to the source to get your information, and then writing it down verbatim and going so far as to *publish* the verbatim interview alongside the essay analyzing the raw “data” seems about as foolproof as one could get. But, we have already seen that whoever gives the information has his or her personal biases already in place and, in the case of Bourdieu’s interviewer, he or she would have their areas of interest which would be reflected in which questions—of all the myriad of possible questions to ask—would ‘make it’ into the body of questions asked during the interview.

And there is a further problem in the realm of historicity: what Barthes calls the *organizing shifter*. This is the problem “arising from the coexistence or […] friction between two times—the time of uttering and the time of the matter of utterance.” (Barthes, 9) The “matter of utterance” is the event which is being described and the “time of uttering” is how long it takes to describe the event. One of the problems encountered here is when the event being described is linear in nature—such as the time of a presidential term—but then the description may be “saw-toothed,” according to Barthes. That is, the event may be described in a non-linear form, and references made to other, previous times in history have the effect of aggrandizing or amplifying the event being described. This is the kind of thing Ernaux did with her first book—*Les armoires vides*. She frames the book with the story of her abortion but constantly goes back in time between that account and her life anterior to that point.
Another, more problematic organizing shifter is the one which relates to the acceleration in a historical account. In other words, “An equal number of pages […] can cover very different lapses of time,” says Barthes. “In Machiavelli’s *History of Florence,*” he gives as example, “the same measure (a chapter) covers in one instance a number of centuries, and in another no more than two decades.” (Barthes, 9) This sort of discrepancy is problematic for historicity because our logical minds would prefer that like spans of time in history be given like treatment as far as length of the descriptive text. When a certain period of history is given more play in the text, it automatically becomes more important in our minds. It’s just a knee-jerk reaction.

We encounter this exact problem, as already mentioned, with Ernaux’s account of her affair with the Russian. The first book she wrote on the subject is a scant 77 pages whereas the second turned in at 377 pages.

On top of the shifters encountered in the process of getting the event described to be described, we encounter also “signs of the utterer” which are the “discursive elements through which the historian […] give[s himself] countenance.” (Barthes, 11) “A particular form of this ‘filling’ process,” says Barthes, “is the case where the utterer means to ‘absent himself’ from his discourse, and where there is in consequence a systematic deficiency of any form of sign referring to the sender of the historical message. The history seems to be telling itself all on its own. This […] corresponds […] to the type of historical discourse labeled as ‘objective’ (in which the historian never intervenes). […] In this case, the utterer nullifies his emotional
persona, but substitutes for it another persona, the ‘objective’ persona.” (Barthes, 11)

Ernaux struggles with objectivity in her writing. In *Une femme*, we witness her wrestling with this problem when writing about her mother: “En écrivant, je vois tantôt la ‘bonne’ mère, tantôt la ‘mauvaise’. Pour échapper à ce balancement, […] 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...” (F, 62) Ernaux is hoping that by having her prose appear more objective, it will be more believable.

“C’est sans aucun doute pour s’arracher du ‘piège de l’individuel’” says Fabrice Thumerel in his article “Les pratiques autobiographiques d’Annie Ernaux,” “qu’Annie Ernaux emprunte au sociologue le principe de la ‘distance objectivante’ et sa méthode d’investigation, […] allant jusqu’à résumer sa visite aux Archives de Rouen.” (Thumerel, 14)

But Barthes reminds us that “objectivity” is a commodity not so easily attained. He says, “On the level of discourse, objectivity—or the deficiency of signs of the utterer—thus appears as a particular from of imaginary projection, the product of what might be called the referential illusion, since in this case the historian is claiming to allow the referent to speak all on its own. […] Linguistics and psychoanalysis,” he continues, “have made us much more lucid with regard to privative utterances: we know that absences of signs are also in themselves significant.” (Barthes, 11)

As if the landscape of objectivity weren’t fraught enough with difficulties, Barthes mentions another “special case” within the “lattice of shifters on the linguistic level,” and that is, when the “utterer of the
discourse is also at the same time a participant in the process described in the utterance.” (Barthes, 11) Certainly this is Ernaux’s case. We know this. She is telling her own story—even when it’s told through the veil of another, and even if she aspires to tell a universal story. (cf. “Un événement individuel mais pas seulement, il appartient à l’histoire des femmes.” [Annie Ernaux in Argand, 40])

At this juncture, we could ask again why it might be important for Ernaux to position her writings as “quelque chose entre l’histoire et....” I feel she has this desire because she wants her stories to be taken as fact rather than fiction. We usually perceive history as fact. Barthes says, “The historical fact is linguistically associated with a privileged ontological status: we recount what has been, not what has not been, or what has been uncertain.” (Barthes, 14) (Italics mine) This is important for Ernaux. She wants to be perceived as historicized because she wants to be seen as having recounted ‘what has been,’ not ‘what has been uncertain.’ When she says, in La honte, that her father “agrippait ma mere par les épaules […et d]ans son autre main, il tenait la serpe à couper le bois,” (H, 15) she wants us to believe that it really happened.

In further discussion in his essay, Barthes questions the possibility of historical objectivity even more but then he talks about what really gives historical narrative its authority. “In ‘objective’ history,” he says, “the ‘real’ is never more than an unformulated signified, sheltering behind the apparently all-powerful referent.” (Barthes, 17) Basically, as long as the teller garners enough authority, the accuracy of the act being reported is secondary. Barthes says historians are “constantly repeating that it
happened” (Barthes, 18) and this is one of the ways that historians count on winning their readership over to the side of believability.

“The prestige attached to it happened has important ramifications,” says Barthes, which are themselves “worthy of historical investigation. Our civilization has a taste for the realistic effect,” he continues, “as can be seen in the development of specific genres like the realist novel, the private diary, documentary literature, news items […] and especially in the massive development of photography, whose sole distinctive trait (by comparison with drawing) is precisely that it signifies that the event represented has really taken place.” (Barthes, 18)

Barthes mentions the “private diary” as being a genre which is perceived as “realistic.” It is worth noting that several of Ernaux’s more recent books were written in ‘diary’ fashion: Journal du dehors (1995) « Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit » (1997), La vie extérieure (2001) and L’occupation (2002). As Ernaux matures as a writer and continues to wrestle with the problem of believability, it seems this is one of the modalities she has used to ‘tame’ her fiction.

Barthes also brings back the concept of photography to the discussion. Once again, it brings to mind the photographs Ernaux uses in framing La honte. Barthes, in Camera Lucida, contrasts discourse with photography. “Discourse,” he says, “combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most often ‘chimeras.’ Contrary to these imitations, in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there.” (Camera Lucida, 76) Quite possibly, Ernaux felt that the addition of
descriptions of photographs brought one more layer of historicity and thus believability to *La honte.*
As we have already mentioned, Annie Ernaux feels strongly that she has a vocation to witness to women’s experience in her writing. In *L’événement*, she tells us:

Par-delà toutes les raisons sociales et psychologiques que je peux trouver à ce que j’ai vécu, il en est une dont je suis sûre plus que tout : les choses me sont arrivées pour que j’en rende compte. Et 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. (*E*, 124-125)

The notion of witnessing—témoignage—has a legal aspect to it. “De façon générale,” says Martine Delvaux in her essay, “Annie Ernaux: Écrire l’événement,” “on comprend le témoignage comme un discours de vérité—‘je jure de dire la vérité, toute la vérité, rien que la vérité,’ dit le témoin—discours par le biais duquel un sujet tend à faire le récit le plus complet possible de ce qu’il a vécu. Le témoin doit raconter jusqu’au bout.” (Delvaux, 136)

To look at something “jusqu’au bout” is something that Ernaux has professed a desire to do (*cf.* “Je sais maintenant que je suis décidée à aller jusqu’au bout, quoi qu’il arrive…” [*E*, 26] “Si je ne vais pas au bout de la relation de cette expérience…” [*E*, 58]) (Italics mine)

Paradoxically, the very act of witnessing implies that the witness knows something that those listening to the testimony don’t know—a secret,
as it were—otherwise, those listening to this witness wouldn’t need to have him witnessing. “Un savoir impartagé que je suis appelée à révéler,” says Delvaux “[...] ne sera jamais complètement partageable car je ne pourrai jamais tout dire, je ne saurai jamais tout. Ce dont je témoigne, malgré le fait que je suis celle que en témoigne, ou peut-être même justement parce que j’en témoigne, demeure secret, et ce non seulement aux autres mais à moi-même. Tout témoignage, dès lors qu’il est nécessairement énonciation, narration, récit, est appelé non seulement à demeurer dans l’ordre du secret mais à entrer dans celui de la fiction. » (Delvaux 137) (Second set of italics mine.) Certainly, we have seen that Ernaux performs backflips to do all in her power to stay as far away from “la fiction” in her writings as possible. But here, even in the hallowed legal halls of testimony giving, we find the concept of fiction lurking in the wings. It seems rather difficult to get at a true account of anything, no matter how hard we try.

But let’s come back to Ernaux’s desire to “rester au-dessous de la literature” one more time. We know Ernaux rejects the word “fiction” but can she, herself, decide that she doesn’t want to take part in a literary activity with her writings? Is there any other legal consideration that must be entertained?

Jacques Derrida, in his essay, “Devant la loi,” says, “Certains récits n’appartiennent pas à la littérature, par exemple les chroniques historiques ou les relations dont nous avons l’expérience quotidienne.” Maybe Ernaux is safe in her desire to stay out of the literary fold. If her writings are “des chroniques historiques,” as she sometimes implies, she’s safe. And, certainly, one could argue that her body of work relates to “l’expérience
quotidienne.” Derrida says further: “Il y a des fictions, des allégories, des mythes, des symboles ou des paraboles qui n’ont rien de proprement littérale.” (Derrida, 175) But “qu’est-ce qui décide” and “qui en décide ?” he asks. Indeed, “Qui décide, et selon quelles déterminations, de l’appartenance d’un récit à la littérature ?” (Derrida, 175)

This is really the basic question for Ernaux. Who and what about a particular narrative does decide this? For example, can Ernaux, herself, decide that what she writes is not literary just because she doesn’t want it to be—because she’s on a mission to tell the truth? Or is it we, the reading public, or we, the critical public, who decide what her writings are? Or does the status of her writing come down to such a very practical and pedestrian level as under which rubric the bookseller will shelve her books?

In order for a book to be classified as part of literature, there are certain conventions that must be met. “Il y a un commencement et une fin à [un] récit,” says Derrida, “dont les bordures ou les limites nous paraissent garanties par un certain nombre de critères établis.” (Derrida, 173) One of these is that the “texte a un auteur” and that there is a difference between “la réalité présumé de l’auteur […] et d’autre part la fiction des personages à l’intérieur du récit.” (Derrida, 174) This last point might seem too obvious to even mention, but upon further inspection, we can readily find instances where authorship is questionable in a literary work. “Il y a et il y a eu des oeuvres dans lesquelles l’auteur ou une multiplicité d’auteurs sont mis en scène comme des personnages sans nous laisser des signes ou des critères rigoureux pour décider entre les deux fonctions.” (Derrida, 174) He gives example of the Conte du Graal, which poses such problems still in
contemporary criticism—completeness or incompleteness of the work, feigned incompleteness of the work, authors worked into the text, pseudonymous nature of authorship, etc.

It seems very difficult to describe exactly what literature is, because each time one comes up with a descriptive feature, like authorship, one can quickly find an “exception to the rule,” as it were.

So, Derrida, in the end, invokes the legal concept of intellectual property to define literature. After all, laws governing plagiarism, reproducibility of original work, and royalty contracts are all the bailiwick of the legal profession. “Elle [la littérature] n’a d’existence et de consistence qu’aux conditions de la loi et elle ne devient ‘littéraire’ qu’à une certaine époque du droit réglant les problèmes de propriété des oeuvres, de l’identité des corpus, de la valeur des signatures, de la différence entre créer, produire et reproduire, etc.” (Derrida, 187)
V. Language

Early in this study, we considered Ernaux’s use and non-use of a protagonist and her use of the first person as the vehicle through which to tell her stories. Another aspect of Ernaux’s writing which is worthy of discussion in the context of why she does what she does is her particular use of language.

As one studies the entire corpus of Ernaux’s work, one comes to appreciate how deceptively rich her language is. In her earlier work especially, and particularly in La place and Une femme, where she describes her parents and their socio-economic backgrounds which she then inherits, Ernaux uses slang and regional phraseology and even patois whose meaning, to a non-native reader, is not always obvious. “Il ne faut pas péter plus haut qu’on l’a.” (P, 59) “Je me suis payée le toupet.” (F, 56)

But it’s not only in her word choice that one finds an injection of richness in her texts. There is a certain Ernalien cadence and repetition to her words which supports the meaning of her prose. Carol Sanders, in her article, “Women’s Writing: The Case of Annie Ernaux” analyzes the opening of her first book, Les armoires vides, where she describes her backstreet abortion:

The loose sentence structure, with its accumulation of phrases, reflects the way in which the author is feeling her way forward, trying out words to describe feelings she has not had before, to see if they fit. Hence also the words exploring strangeness, and lack of
appropriateness (‘bizarre’ ‘juste’ ‘presque’), as well as the accumulation of near synonyms, as the narrator runs through them to find the right one: crocheté, bousillé, colmaté / ça meurt, s’éteint, se noie… (Sanders, 21)

But Ernaux possesses strength not only in the precision with which she uses words but also in the precision with which she fails to use words. Sanders, in the previously mentioned article, goes on to explain how the lack of vocabulary in the arena of having experienced an abortion mirrors the negative nature of the experience itself in which, “much is described only by virtue of what it is not (‘au début, pas facile de marcher’, ‘sans rapport avec les planches anatomiques’, ‘ne pas pouvoir avaler’); at once voicing her own negative feelings (in her French literature class: ‘J’avais rien à dire sur Gide…’) and at the same time making obvious the lack of ‘mots pour le dire’ (‘les mots sont muets’, as she says, on her particular circumstances).” (Sanders, 21)

If we go one level deeper—into the metaphorical meaning of the vocabulary used in the psychodrama which is the abortion experience—we find a symbolic understanding of the experience. Michèle Bacholle-Boškovič, in “Confessions d’une femme pudique: Annie Ernaux” helps our understanding of the sub-stratum of the text. Julia Kristeva, she says, in Pouvoirs de l’horreur, classifies “souillures” into two types: “le sang menstruel et les excréments.” “L’excrément et ses équivalents (pourriture, infection, maladie, cadavre, etc.),” says Kristeva, “représentent le danger venu de l’extérieur de l’identité : le moi menacé par du non-moi.” (Kristeva, 86) But, says Bacholle,
Bien qu’elle ne mentionne pas l’embryon, celui-ci peut facilement être ajouté à la liste ; dans le récit d’Ernaux, il est la “chose” qui l’infecte et qui finira en cadavre, le non-moi venu de l’extérieur (le monde dominant, auquel son géniteur appartient) qui menace le moi de la narratrice, jeune fille qui, bien qu’en passe de rejoindre la bourgeoisie, demeure liée au monde originel. L’expulser, c’est préserver, voire nettoyer le monde originel. (Bacholle, 104)

It’s what every young unmarried woman who deals with an unwanted pregnancy knows: the baby inside her is the black spot on her lily-white bosom which transforms her overnight, in the eyes of family and community, from a state of grace to a state of sin and separation. It’s the scarlet letter of Hester Prynne. “La souillure en ce cas est la fille et sa grossesse-excrément,” Bacholle tells us, “qui menace le monde originel (même si elle n’est jamais révélée aux parents), et son évacuation purifie le milieu originel, familial et le réhabilite.” (Bacholle, 105) (Italics mine) And I would add that the purification is able to take place completely only if the pregnancy is not revealed to the parents, family and community. After all, if the pregnancy is revealed, there might not be the stigma of an unmarried mother to have to contend with in the community, but certainly, the illusion of the young woman’s virginity is forever shattered and, if there is an abortion, there is the murder issue to deal with as well.

It’s because of all these subtleties of experience and meaning that Ernaux wishes to confront the subject of abortion head-on. “Ernaux souhaite [à] rompre le silence autour de l’avortement et l’inscrire dans l’histoire,” says Delvaux. (Delvaux, 132) The irony of the situation is that, now that we have a law legalizing abortion, nobody talks about it as the drama that it is still and was, even more, before the laws were in place. “Depuis 1975 et la
loi Veil,” says Ernaux in her interview with Catherine Argand, “on tend à faire de l’avortement un acte strictement médical. On se moque de ce que pense la femme, de ce qu’elle ressent. [...] Aucun livre signé par une femme de vingt-cinq ou trente ans et qui parlerait de l’IVG n’a été publié ces dernières années. » (Argand, 39-40)

Ernaux adds that representational art is also lacking in its depiction of women’s experiences of this type. “C’est par milliards et dans le monde entier que des avortements eurent lieu. Pendant des siècles les femmes ont dû passer par ce genre d’épreuve sans que personne n’en soit ému, ne l’écrive, ne le peigne. Je n’ai jamais vu un seul tableau représentant un avortement. Dans les musées, vous pouvez voir des guerres, des scènes de torture, d’exécution, mais ça, non. » (Argand, 40) (Italics mine)

Note that Ernaux uses the word “ça” at the end of the interview above to resume the whole concept of abortion and all the attached unsavoriness of the subject. It’s almost as if the vagueness of this pronoun is at once an attempt to elevate the subject matter of abortion into a realm even more horrifying that those specifically mentioned and also an attempt to show that it is a subject that has been neither pictorially nor verbally rendered—therefore, it has no name and we cannot talk about it.

We see Ernaux using the word “ça” frequently in the books where she talks of her sexual pubescence. “Unable to speak in the bourgeois society to which she aspires,” says Warren Johnson in “The Dialogic Self: Language and Identity in Annie Ernaux,” “of the erotic matters that form her major preoccupations—[…] severe restrictions reduce one’s vocabulary to such euphemisms as ça (sexual organ), comme ça (sexually mature) and faire ça
(have intercourse).” (Johnson, 302) Johnson seems to argue *a fortiori* that such euphemisms do not advance the cause of women to be understood by their male counterparts. “The ideal of transparent language,” says Johnson, “would be a way paradoxically of making opaque [sic] and stable a woman’s self that men wish would remain on the surface.” (Johnson, 302) But, while Johnson may think he’s looking out for women’s best interests, I would say that he’s missing the whole point. The fact is that little girls and little boys are socialized very differently about many subjects—and nowhere is this more evident than in the realm of sexual knowledge. Using vague terminology with the word *ça* at every turn to describe anything vaguely sexual in a young girl’s world, even if not ideal for that girl’s sophistication and knowledge of her world, would be an absolutely accurate report of ‘how things really were’ for her at that time in her world. And I believe that is the sort of thing that Ernaux is out to do.

Later on in his essay, Johnson shows his frustration with the turn Ernaux’s prose takes after the ‘écriture plate’ she achieves in her middle period with *La place* (for which she tellingly won the Renaudot Prix) and *Une femme*, for example. In *Passion simple* (1991), which “would seem to mark Anne’s [sic] liberation […] as […] she is now separated from her husband, […]” he says that “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.” (Johnson, 304) “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,” Johnson says of himself, “the uses she makes of her liberty seem disappointing.” Johnson compares the subject matter and narrative style of *Passion simple* to Anne’s 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.*” (Johnson, 305) (Italics mine)

Here again, I think Johnson misses the entire point of the story Ernaux writes and the way she writes it. He is accurate in his description of the story and the language and even the “narrator’s voluntary abandonment of a sense of purpose.” What he misses is the reason for Ernaux’s madness. Ernaux is not trying to get an award for having grown as a writer and as a human being and having emancipated herself from male domination in her life and in her writing once and for all. She is simply trying to tell a story. And this story, paradoxically, is almost more objectionable than the most objectionable of Ernaux’s stories. If writing about abortion is courageous and well-sanctioned in the halls of the forward-thinking cadre of the politically correct, telling the story of a supposedly intelligent, emancipated woman in the throes of a seemingly uncontrollable, all-consuming obsessive love affair certainly isn’t. But, nonetheless, that is the story that Ernaux has chosen to tell with *Passion simple*.

Johnson says that his 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,” he says, “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...’ (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.” (Johnson, 305) Johnson seems upset that Ernaux as author/narrator would stoop to the level of ersatz sentimentality. But isn’t that just how it happens? What else would explain the success of popular lovesongs and ballads? Rather than compromising the authenticity of her passion, I think these sappy details lend credence to her report of the passion. Ernaux is simply describing what life is like when one is absolutely overtaken by an uncontrollable force. Maybe Johnson has never been in an obsessive love affair.

“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,” Johnson says in his scathing summation of Passion simple, “Anne [sic] 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.” I guess the telling of what is, when the is isn’t what people are comfortable with, is what Ernaux would call “quelque chose de très dangereux.” (Argand, 39)
Conclusion

Annie Ernaux, herself, rejects the terms fiction and literature for her work because of the overtones of falsehood attached to these words, preferring, as we have seen, to liken her work to “something in-between literature, sociology and history” because those terms would seem a guarantee of truth for the reader. But, in taking a closer look at those para-literary disciplines, we have discovered problems associated with veracity in those fields as well. We have also discovered that, in the end, it is the legal field which decides what is and what is not literature, not the author herself. And it is perhaps we, the reading and analyzing public, who decide the finer points of naming and classifying what it is that we’re reading.

Warren Johnson, in his essay, “The Dialogic Self: Language and Identity in Annie Ernaux” calls the corpus of Ernaux’s work a “multi-volume fictionalized autobiography.” (Johnson, 298) Fabrice Poyet, in his “‘La Place’, d’Annie Ernaux—Pour une définition du rapport entre la forme et le lectorat” says that Ernaux “construit une autobiographie de la plus belle espèce.” Commendation aside, as we have already discussed in this study, it seems inaccurate to pigeonhole the body of Ernaux’s work with a single descriptor.

Carol Sanders, in “Women’s Writing: The Case of Annie Ernaux” says that “if her (Ernaux’s) early work is fictionalized autobiography, she is aiming in her later novels at a new form which combines social history with authorial reflexion, alongside its autobiographical and fictional elements—
That’s a mouthful—but, aside from the loathed word “novels” (cf. “romans,” p. 4 of this study), these qualifiers seem precise enough to approach an accurate description of Ernaux’s work.

We have also discussed Ernaux’s writing methodology and we have discovered that there are several shifts in style along the way—from the disuse of a named protagonist to the quasi-Bourdiesian approach in her middle period.

But, aside from all the discussion as to the proper terminology for what it is that Annie Ernaux writes and all the discussion as to how she writes it and how that form changes over time in the body of her work, we can be assured that there is an over-arching raison d’être for having written anything at all, which the author shares with us: “Je suis venue au monde pour cela, pour dire ce qui m’est arrivé. […] C’est difficile, c’est lourd, mais c’est un devoir. Mon devoir.” (Entretien in Panorama, mai 1988 as reported by Nathalie Crom in “Annie Ernaux, Écrire la Vérité,” 166) She also says: “En écrivant, […] je commet[s] un acte politique. […] J’agi[s] sur le monde.” (Argand, 41)

In whatever modality she appropriates, we can be sure that Ernaux is honest in trying to get to the kernel of whatever it is that she’s writing about. In “Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit,” the author recounts a conversation with one of her friends upon the death of her mother: “[Elle] m’a dit qu’on ne peut transcrire directement ce qu’on sent, il faut un détour,” she says. But Annie doesn’t agree: “Je ne sais pas.” (MN, 108-109)
do it. Her work embodies that very basic concept of literature which, according to Kristeva, is “le codage ultime de nos crises, de nos apocalypses les plus intimes et les plus graves.” (Pouvoirs, 246) And, she has been able to do this because she’s not afraid to write books that “ensuite […] rendent le regard d’autrui insoutenable.” (H, 140)

In closing, I would like to relate a story that Ernaux shares in her book, L’écriture comme un couteau:


(Italics mine)

For me, this story perfectly encapsulates the journey that Ernaux leads us to embark upon with her writing. In the beginning of this study, I mentioned that Ernaux aims to write in the ellipsis, or the space where there is a gap in published literature. But it’s not just any gap. The gap she wants to explore is that place in life which is so uncomfortable that we would just as soon fast-forward through the experience so as not to have to feel the pain.

The “gap” is the “temps d’effroi” she’s referring to “[qui] n’a pas de fin.” Ernaux wants us to stop in that gap and explore what’s there. Ernaux has appropriated herself the job of putting in the “longues piques”—by way
of the words she uses in the stories she tells—in order to usher us into that uncomfortable place which “dure interminablement.”

But Ernaux doesn’t want to take us there gratuitously. “Au bout du compte,” she says, which might also be “au bout du conte,” “la femme ressort de la boîte, intacte.” There is a notion of survival after having explored the time “in the gap.”

Carol Sander’s notion of Ernaux’s writing as ‘ethnobiography’ or ‘autoethnography’ is, she says, “said by some to be characteristic of contemporary women writers.” (Sanders, 22-23) She sends us to Françoise Lionnet’s Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-portraiture for clarification.

In discussing Édouard Glissant’s “métissage” of “cultural forms through the simultaneous revalorization of oral traditions and re-evaluation of Western concepts,” Sanders says that contemporary writers and critics have come to the realization that “opacity and obscurity are necessarily the precious ingredients of all authentic communication.” (Lionnet, 4) (Italics mine)

“Since history and memory have to be reclaimed either in the absence of hard copy or in full acknowledgment of the ideological distortions that have colored whatever written documents and archival materials do exist,” Lionnet says, “contemporary women writers especially have been interested in reappropriating the past so as to transform our understanding of ourselves. Their voices echo the submerged or repressed values of our cultures. They rewrite the ‘feminine’ by showing the arbitrary nature of the images and values which Western culture constructs, distorts, and encodes as inferior by
feminizing them.” It is beyond the scope of this study to fit Annie Ernaux into such a movement of “contemporary women writers,” though it would be a study well worth undertaking.

It certainly would seem that Ernaux’s desire for writing “au-dessous de la littérature” is a desire synonymous with Lionnet’s description of “authentic communication.” It would also seem that Ernaux would agree with Édouard Glissant in *Le Discours antillais*, as reported by Lionnet, regarding the necessity of the opacity and obscurity which are necessary to that communication—not because of what Ernaux says she wants to write but, paradoxically, by telling us over and over in her writings how difficult it is to get to what she wants to write:

There is an obscure residue of something unexpressed deep within every spoken word, however far we may push our meaning and however hard we may try to weigh our acts [il est au fond de toute parole […] la matière obscure d’un informulé]. (Lionnet, 4)
APPENDIX A:

CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF WORKS by ANNIE ERNAUX
and ABBREVIATIONS

- *Les armoires vides (AV)*—1974
- *Ce qu’ils disent ou rien (CQD)*—1977
- *La femme gelée (FG)*—1981
- *La place (P)*—1983
- *Une femme (F)*—1987
- *Passion simple (PS)*—1991
- *Journal du dehors (J)*—1995
- *La honte (H)*—1997
- « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit » (MN)*—1997
- *L’événement (E)*—2000
- *Se perdre (SeP)*—2001
- *La vie extérieure (V)*—2001
- *L’occupation (O)*—2002
- *L’écriture comme un couteau (ECC)*—2003
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