

A Study In The Personal Narratives Of Annie Ernaux's Literary Writings

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Abstract: Annie Ernaux, née Annie Duchesne, (born September 1, 1940, Lillebonne, France), French author known for her lightly fictionalized memoirs, which are written in spare, detached prose. Her work examines her memories, sometimes revisiting events in later works and reconstructing them, thus revealing the artifice of her own genre. Themes include her illegal abortion, her troubled marriage, her mother's decline from Alzheimer's, her love affairs during middle age, and her experience with cancer. Ernaux received the 2022 Nobel Prize for Literature for a body of work that has been described as personal yet universal in its depictions of a woman living in the 20th and 21st centuries. Ernaux was born Annie Duchesne to a working-class family in Lillebonne, France. Her parents later moved to Yvetot, France, where they ran a grocery store and café. They earned just enough to send their only daughter (her sister died before Annie was born) to a private Catholic secondary school. She later recalled that her encounters with the other students, who were largely from middle-class backgrounds, were her first experiences of shame regarding her proletarian parents and upbringing. Duchesne married Philippe Ernaux in the late 1960s and took his name. She became the mother of two sons, and she began teaching French in a secondary school in Annecy, France. The change in her circumstances from a working-class daughter to a married middle-class career woman inspired her first published work, *Les Armoires vides* (1974; *Cleaned Out*). In it, Ernaux describes a fictionalized account of how her education distanced her from her parents as well as the illegal abortion she underwent in 1964, shortly before the procedure was legalized in France. She was awarded the Nobel prize for literature "for the courage and clinical acuity with which she uncovers the roots, estrangements and collective restraints of personal memory". Ernaux was the 17th woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, which has been awarded to 119 writers since the prize was established in 1901.

Key Words: Personal Memory, life experiences, gender, Humiliation, Abortion, Plebeian pride, Philippe, working-class environment, Rouen university, sexual experience, Postwar France

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Objectives:

- To analyse the literary writings of Annie in relation to her sociocultural background
- To emphasize the need to correlate the personal experiences to the broader social milieu
- Highlight the women's problems raised by her as the universal in nature

I. Introduction:

In her writing, Annie Ernaux consistently and from different angles, examines a life marked by strong disparities regarding **gender, language and class**. Her path to authorship was long and arduous. Among her novels are 'A Man's Place', 'A Woman's Story' and 'Years'. Ernaux's work is uncompromising and written in plain language, scraped clean. And when she with great courage and clinical acuity reveals the agony of the experience of class, describing shame, humiliation, jealousy or inability to see who you are, she has achieved something admirable and enduring. Ernaux's books are small, simple, rarely exceeding a hundred pages. In each, she is always asking how she can be sure that her memories are correct. In "A Woman's Story," she talks about her mother's death. Nearly a decade later, in "I Remain in Darkness" (1997), she goes back to that moment and declares her recollection incomplete—she hadn't fully described her mother's long cognitive decline, the terrors of dementia. A consistent voice guides each of these revisitations: a scientific and searching "I." The books are whittled down to an intense core—not a confession but a kind of personal epistemology. In France, they have brought Ernaux fame, prizes, and a number of stylistic descendants.

Ernaux's books are followed by a faithful readership, and are reviewed in most local and national newspapers in France, as well as being the subject of many radio and television interviews and programmes, and a large and growing international academic literature. This site responds to this interest in her work and through its largely bilingual construction attempts to bring her work to the attention of the anglophone world. We provide an extensive bibliography, a short biography, a selection of short texts and essays, some of them unpublished and

available for the first time here in English, and news relating to Ernaux's writing and its reception. Our aim is to collect as much relevant material as possible in one place, but we cannot claim exhaustivity. Do not hesitate to contact us regarding any omissions or errors. The opinions expressed here are those of the contributors to the site, which was developed with Annie Ernaux's support. She also spoke about her mother, who had influenced her reading habits, stating that her "appetite was nurtured by a mother who, between customers in her shop, read a great many novels, and preferred me reading rather than sewing and knitting".

The bit about "clinical acuity" from the Nobel citation is on display in the passage quoted earlier— see how cleverly Ernaux links childhood and old age with the simple but powerful device of human excrement. Also, the shame associated with hiding a turd is tied up with the feelings Ernaux has about her mother in general — it pains her to see this woman (who was once "moving towards the world" as Ernaux writes) behaving like an out-of-control toddler, eating nothing but cream cheese and sugary snacks, soiling her sheets and so on. Later in the book, Ernaux admits to being disoriented and unsure about *I Remain in Darkness* — not least because her mother's last years (in the late 1980s) coincided with the writing of *A Woman's Story*, the book Ernaux wrote about her mother's youth. This is an extraordinary admission of self-doubt for a writer but it also shows the emotional and spiritual limits to which Ernaux pushes the written word.

Early Life and Career: Ernaux was born in Lillebonne in Normandy, France, and grew up in nearby Yvetot, where her parents, Blanche (Dumenil) and Alphonse Duchesne, ran a café and grocery in a working-class part of town. Growing up in a socially divided environment meant Ernaux felt ashamed of the supposedly distasteful aspects of her upbringing, such as the working-class environment of her father's cafe or her mother's shirking of the norms of middle-class housewifery and femininity, which she writes about in *A Frozen Woman*.

Her childhood was immersed in working-class culture, popular songs and the romantic novels her mother consumed. But from an early age, she was also an avid reader of "classic" French texts. She then studied literature at Rouen university and went on to teach it at secondary school before becoming a full-time writer in the 1970s. This experience gave Ernaux knowledge of French theories and practices of writing, which is evident in her references to authors such as Honore de Balzac, Marcel Proust and Simone de Beauvoir and her self-reflexive comments on the act of writing. In 1960, she traveled to London, where she worked as an au pair, an experience she would later relate in 2016's *Mémoire de fille* (*A Girl's Story*). Upon returning to France, she studied at the universities of Rouen and then Bordeaux, qualified as a schoolteacher, and earned a higher degree in modern literature in 1971. She worked for a time on a thesis project, unfinished, on Pierre de Marivaux. In the early 1970s, Ernaux taught at a lycée in Bonneville, Haute-Savoie, at the college of Évire in Annecy-le-Vieux, then in Pontoise, before joining the National Centre for Distance Education, where she was employed for 23 years. Ernaux started her literary career in 1974 with *Les Armoires vides* (*Cleaned Out*), an autobiographical novel. In 1984, she won the Renaudot Prize for another of her works *La Place* (*A Man's Place*), an autobiographical narrative focusing on her relationship with her father and her experiences growing up in a small town in France, and her subsequent process of moving into adulthood and away from her parents' place and her class of origin. Early in her career, Ernaux turned from fiction to focus on autobiography. Her work combines historic and individual experiences. She charts her parents' social progression (*La Place*, *La Honte*), her teenage years (*Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*), her marriage (*La Femme gelée*), her passionate affair with an Eastern European man (*Passion simple*), her abortion (*L'Événement*), Alzheimer's disease (*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*), the death of her mother (*Une femme*), and breast cancer (*L'usage de la photo*). Ernaux also wrote *L'écriture comme un couteau* (*Writing as Sharp as a Knife*) with Frédéric-Yves Jeannot.

In 1958 Duchesne left home for the first time to work at a summer camp. She recounted in a later work, ***Mémoire de fille* (2016; *A Girl's Story*)**, that during that summer she had her first sexual experience, an event she described as traumatic and which led her to develop an eating disorder. The same book covered Duchesne's life in the early 1960s, when she lived in London as an au pair and in Rouen, France, where she started a course in primary teacher training. She eventually abandoned this effort and instead earned a degree in literature. About this time Duchesne also wrote her first book, but it was rejected by publishers for being "too ambitious." Annie Ernaux, née Duchesne, was born in 1940 in Lillebonne Normandy. A few years later her parents moved to Yvetot, where they kept a café and grocery shop in a working-class district of the town. She studied at a private Catholic secondary school in Yvetot, encountering girls from more middle-class backgrounds, and experiencing shame of her working-class parents and milieu for the first time. In 1958, at eighteen, she left home for the summer to look after children in a summer camp (*colonie de vacances*). During that summer, living for the first time with a group of people of her own age, she had her first sexual experiences, recounted in her recent work *Mémoire de fille* (*A Girl's Story*). In this same book, she also writes about her stay in London as an au pair in 1960, and her first attempt at Higher Education which took the form of primary teacher training in Rouen. At the end of the book we see Annie returning to Rouen from London to take a degree in literature, having abandoned her primary school teacher training course. She had also already written the first pages of her first, unpublished novel in London.

From the time she could read, books were her companions, and reading was a natural occupation outside of school. This appetite was nurtured by a mother who, between customers in her shop, read a great many novels,

and preferred her reading rather than sewing and knitting. The high cost of books, the suspicion with which they were regarded at religious school, made them even more desirable. Don Quixote, Gulliver's Travels, Jane Eyre, the tales of Grimm and Andersen, David Copperfield, Gone with the Wind, and later Les Misérables, The Grapes of Wrath, Nausea, The Stranger: chance, more than the school's prescriptions, determined her reading skills. By choosing literary studies she elected to remain inside literature, which had become the thing of greatest value, even a way of life that led her to project herself into the novels of Flaubert or Virginia Woolf and literally live them out. "Literature was a sort of continent which I unconsciously set in opposition to my social environment. And I conceived of writing as nothing less than the possibility of transfiguring reality. It was not the rejection of my first novel by two or three publishers – a novel whose sole merit was its attempt to find a new form – which subdued my desire and my pride. It was life situations in which the weight of difference between a woman's existence and that of a man was keenly felt in a society where roles were defined by gender, where contraception was prohibited and termination of pregnancy a crime. Married with two children, a teaching position and full responsibility for household affairs, each day I moved further and further away from writing and my promise to avenge my people. I could not read the parable 'Before the Law' from Kafka's The Trial without seeing the shape of my own destiny: to die without ever having entered the gate made just for me, the book that only I could write."

But that is without taking account of private and historical circumstances. The death of a father who passed away three days after I arrived home on holiday, a job teaching students from working-class backgrounds similar to my own, protest movements everywhere in the world: all these factors brought me back, through byroads that were unforeseen and proximate to the world of my origins, to my 'people', and gave my desire to write a quality of secret and absolute urgency. No more of the illusory 'writing about nothing' of my twenties; now it was a matter of delving into the unspeakable in repressed memory, and bringing light to bear on how my people lived. Of writing to understand the reasons, inside and outside of myself, which had caused me to be distanced from my origins. Nowhere is this uncompromising style more apparent than in Ernaux's account of the illegal abortion she had in 1963 as a student in Rouen. This episode of her life, which first appeared as the short, sharp book *Happening* in France in 1999, was crafted – like much of Ernaux's work – from the diaries she kept at the time. Her family was solidly religious, and Ernaux was the first to attend university. Matter-of-factly she states: "Sex had caught up with me, and I saw the thing growing inside me as a stigma of social failure."

Ernaux later described how she pretended to be working on a Ph.D. thesis while writing *Les Armoires vides* because she feared her husband's ridicule. After the novel was published, he said to her: "If you're capable of writing a book in secret, then you're capable of cheating on me." Ernaux explored her ambivalence toward her marriage as well as her role as a mother in the book *La Femme gelée* (1981; *A Frozen Woman*). This period of her life was later examined in the documentary *Les Années Super 8* (2022; "The Super 8 Years"), which she created with one of her sons, David Ernaux-Briot. The film draws from the videos Philippe Ernaux made of their family between 1972, when he first purchased a Super 8 video camera, and 1981, when she and her husband separated (they divorced in 1984). In the movie Ernaux recalled how, as a young wife and mother, she yearned for the freedom to explore her burgeoning writing career. She recognized that her feelings were shared by thousands of women who struggled everyday to either accept society's expectations or risk feelings of guilt for achieving independence.

The years that followed saw her married with two sons, qualifying as a secondary school teacher in two competitive examinations, the *Capès* and the still more prestigious *agrégation*, and teaching French in a secondary school in Annecy, Haute Savoie. One of her rare returns to Normandy coincided with her father's final illness and death in 1967. In 1974 Annie Ernaux published her first book, *Cleaned Out*, a fictionalized account of the illegal abortion she underwent in 1964, and her move from working-class to middle-class culture through education. In 1977 the family moved to Cergy-Pontoise, a new town in the Paris region. Ernaux eventually left secondary school teaching and took up a post at the Cned, Centre for Distance Education. She won both literary acclaim in the form of the *Prix Renaudot*, and a large readership with the publication of her account of her father's life, *A Man's Place* in 1983. After her divorce in the early 1980s, Ernaux remained in her house in Cergy, where she lives to this day. In 2000 she retired from her teaching post, and devoted herself to writing, and in 2008 published *The Years*, considered by many to be her crowning achievement in terms both of its content and innovative form, intertwining personal and collective history over six decades. The success of this work was recognized by the award of the *Marguerite Duras* and the *François Mauriac* prizes, and the English translation shortlisted for the *Man Booker* prize International.

A young woman has her first sexual experience. She is pleased to be desired by someone. She does not feel humiliated. But, later, she is mocked, tormented by others who believe that she has debased herself. Those whom she thought of as her friends now treat her like nothing. She feels shame. Is the shame hers? Or is it a reflection of what is expected of her? "To go all the way to the end of '58 means agreeing to the demolition of all the interpretations I've assembled over the years," Annie Ernaux writes in "A Girl's Story" (*Seven Stories*), published in French in 2016, and now in English, translated by Alison L. Strayer. The book is an account of a sexual encounter Ernaux had as a teen-ager, and it is both a reconstruction of events and a deconstruction of

feelings. The emotional history, she hopes, will be the most personal one, the truest one. The challenge of being a historian, however, is knowing whether what she felt—and what she still feels—really comes from within. The book circles around the summer of 1958, when eighteen-year-old Annie is working as a camp counsellor in northern France, in a town she calls “S.” She is sheltered and naïve; aside from a trip to Lourdes with her father, she has barely left home. At camp, she develops a crush on a man she calls H. He looks like Marlon Brando: “She doesn’t care that the other female counselors murmur to each other that he’s all brawn, no brains.” She thinks of him as “the Archangel.” This pastiche of images and insights can seem like a haphazard swirl, but it is, Ernaux’s books suggest, the only authentic way to twine the personal and the historical. In “A Girl’s Story,” Ernaux finds herself toggling between the understandings she has reached in her seventies and the confusions she endured as a teen-ager. Just ten years after she left camp, the country was overtaken by the sexual revolution. Sexuality became something to celebrate, not something to hide. This both does and doesn’t matter: Ten years is a very short time in the greater scheme of History, but immense when life is just beginning. It represents thousands of days and hours over which the meaning of things that one has experienced remains unchanged, shameful.

What draws her to H is a need to be seen. No one has ever looked at her with such a “heavy gaze.” They dance at a counsellors’ party. “Seduction” is not the right word for what happens next. But Ernaux doesn’t give these events a single name. Instead, she describes, as clearly as she can, how she follows H to her room, how “she feels his sex prod at her belly through her jeans. . . . There is no difference between what she does and what happens to her.” Soon, “a thick jet of sperm explodes in her face, gushing all the way into her nostrils.” The precision of this language doesn’t necessarily evoke pleasure, but Annie is consumed by emotion, desperate for H and the possibility of his desire. Reading this book in 2020, one is tempted to think of these gaps and tricks of memory in terms of trauma—the kind of trauma that keeps women from giving, or getting, a full account of their own lives. Completion, we’re told, is a necessary condition for truth. “Don’t tell us the story of your life, it’s full of holes,” the other counsellors like to say. Her peers dig up her letters and read them out loud to one another. They drag her to H’s door. The teen-age Ernaux does not realize what is happening. It is only later that she perceives the effects of this “verbal hegemony.” When someone writes “Long live whores” on her mirror in toothpaste, these words begin to shape how she sees herself. And it isn’t so easy to look away from the mirrors that society creates for us. When Ernaux leaves the camp, she develops bulimia, and her period stops. “I could not imagine there was a name for my behavior. . . . I thought of it as a moral failing. I don’t believe I linked it to H.” Of course, our recollections aren’t continuous, and you can’t always get “inside,” no matter how many angles you try. The difficulty of interiority is perhaps one reason that Ernaux, both as a girl and as an adult, can’t help but turn to those around her for cues. As readers, we lose access to “the girl of S,” often at the moments when we need it most. Instead, Ernaux begins to discuss the reactions of the other counsellors: I will have to present another list that includes the coarse taunts, the hooting and jeering, the insults passed off as jokes, whereby the male counselors made her an object of scorn and derision, they whose verbal hegemony went unquestioned and was even admired by the female counselors. In typical Ernaux fashion, she reads over her old diary to compare what she still remembers with what she experienced at the time:

Annie Ernaux, left, and Audrey Diwan photographed in Paris by Ed Alcock for the Observer New Review. ‘It plunged me back to waiting for a period’: Annie Ernaux and Audrey Diwan on abortion film *Happening*. The sense of shame, of the intransigent hierarchy of society, abounds in her brilliant scrutiny of her father’s life, *A Man’s Place*, first published in 1983. Ernaux’s father died two months after she passed her teaching exams. (She would go on to teach in schools and university, from 1977-2000, alongside writing books.) *A Man’s Place* is very much part of what Ernaux calls the “lived dimension of history” – it is dispassionate about the life of a working-class man of his time, a struggling grocer with minimal education: “no lyrical reminiscences, no triumphant displays of irony,” she warns us. Similarly, her brief, electric, *I Remain in Darkness*, about her mother’s dementia and subsequent death, with Ernaux by now divorced and middle-aged, is – while neutrally and starkly written – saturated throughout with a daughter’s grief.

Central to her work is an awareness that the most intimate moments of life are always governed by the circumstances in which they occur—that probing the personal will also involve investigating the historical. This is clearest in “*Happening*” (2000), an account of an abortion Ernaux had in 1963. Early in the book, she describes going to see an acquaintance who is known as an activist for greater access to birth control. He tries to sleep with her. Then he tells her that he can’t help her. After she has travelled to Paris to obtain the abortion, she hears that “a woman who lived round the corner would do it for three hundred francs. . . . Now that I no longer needed them, suddenly, views of abortionists were springing up left, right, and center.” By the time Ernaux published the book, abortion had been legalized. But a victory in legislation does not make disclosure any easier. “When a new law abolishing discrimination is passed, former victims tend to remain silent on the grounds that ‘now it’s all over,’ ” she writes. “So what went on is surrounded by the same veil of secrecy as before.”

In the 1980s Ernaux probed the lives and deaths of her parents in two separate volumes, *La Place* (1983; *A Man’s Place*) and *Une Femme* (1987; *A Woman’s Story*). The former delves into the life of an early 20th-century working-class man with minimal education. It received great acclaim, earning her the Prix Renaudot, the

French literary prize for an outstanding original novel, as well as a larger readership in France. *Une Femme* recounts how Ernaux's mother became a shell of her former self as her Alzheimer disease progressed. She also considers the differences between an early-20th-century woman and a later one, especially in regard to sex. For Ernaux's mother, chastity was prized above all else. Ernaux, who witnessed the protests of May 1968, wherein students in Paris demanded a less patriarchal society, feels the promise of sexual freedom, and with it, the loss of shame. In subsequent decades Ernaux published such works as *Passion simple* (1991; *A Simple Passion*), a bestseller in France that describes the obsessive affair she had with a married diplomat, years after her own marriage had ended. It was lauded for its finesse in skirting the usual clichés of illicit love affairs and for uncovering the tensions between what an individual wants and what he or she settles for. She also wrote with Marc Marie about her experience with cancer in *L'Usage de la photo* (2005; "The Uses of Photography").

There's a fair bit of feminism in this idea. Ernaux often refers to Simone de Beauvoir, whose "Second Sex" sought to show how a woman's choices, decisions, and even thoughts were molded by economic and social conditions. These conditions create a kind of corridor through which one's life passes. "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman," de Beauvoir wrote. One way to read Ernaux's book is as an attempt to understand that opaque, painful, essential process of "becoming." (Ernaux sent her first book to de Beauvoir, and also her second. De Beauvoir wrote to say that she preferred the first.) Where de Beauvoir describes the process in theory, Ernaux renders it in visceral detail: the food that she eats, the food she purges, the sight of blood in her underwear. She does this most successfully in her 2008 book, "The Years," a kind of hybrid memoir of postwar France. It moves chronologically from the Second World War until the beginning of the twenty-first century, but the scope and the point of view of the story are always changing. Here is a description of the end of the war, and here is an account of a teen-age girl's first experiences masturbating. Here is the rise of the Internet, where "we could research the symptoms of throat cancer, recipes for moussaka, the age of Catherine Deneuve, the weather in Osaka . . . buy anything from white mice and revolvers to Viagra and dildos." And here, just a few pages later, is an intimate story of watching one's children have children of their own. One of the most subtle and beautiful aspects of *The Years* is watching how the writer's own worldview evolves with age. This is a uniquely thorny problem to solve as a writer for a number of reasons, beginning with this: evolution is always observer-relative. Chronicling moral growth isn't as easily achieved as notching a growing child's height on the kitchen door every March. It is particularly difficult to do so without coming across as a sad sap or as a self-loathing misanthrope.

In 1988, the award-winning French writer Annie Ernaux went on a junket to Soviet Russia. On the last day of the tour, in Leningrad, she began an affair with a married Russian diplomat from the Soviet embassy in France. He was 35; she was 48. When they returned to Paris they kept it up. *Getting Lost* (now published in translation) is the unaltered, original journal that Ernaux wrote during their 18 months together. This was a period of her life when she admits to being lethargic from sex and thus useless for work ("Intense desire keeps me from working"). Yet this affair has produced not one but two books. *Simple Passion*, her novel-like memoir of the same fling, is probably her best-known work (along with *The Years*, her masterpiece, an artistic retelling of postwar French history as experienced by a woman). Like Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary, Ernaux's affair should be counted as one of the great liaisons of literature. She writes honest, deeply felt books while the others were pioneers of what, post-Ferrante, we now call the "invention of women". Her subversion is not simply the subversion of gender – a woman writing about her own affair, which was historically the dominion of men – but her sexual frankness, which has a way of making such elaborate inventions seem needless. The romance was driven, on Ernaux's part, by a pursuit of perfection; throughout she sought to recreate – for one last time – the first night in Leningrad again and again. For the Russian, Ernaux was a famous writer and the best sex of his life. She was forbidden to contact him at the embassy and so *Getting Lost* was written in the day while waiting for him to call. Often silence from him is inferred as the end. "That's it," she writes every two entries, "it's over." A constant terror of being dumped both destroys Ernaux every day and then remakes her. She is on her knees from the first page, in the throes of a lust she wants to cultivate and grow. You feel as if her heart is in your hands. She goes to boring social events; she goes to film screenings at the embassy; she goes abroad on press trips. She desires him everywhere: at every hour of the day, in every country she visits. She buys herself new clothes; she runs errands for him ("I'm both mother and whore"). She has vivid sex dreams. But in the back of her head, there is always the anticipation of the phone call.

The Russian has no physical presence in Paris, except when he's in Ernaux's bed. He is a man whose entire personality could be summed up thus: "He fucks. He drinks vodka. He talks about Stalin." When he gets dressed he lists, garment by garment, the names of every brand he's wearing. So not much of a communist then! His presence is more psychological, felt abundantly at the mention of the word "call". Almost all the entries have that word. "Why doesn't he call?" The quality that distinguishes Ernaux's writing on sex from others in her milieu is the total absence of shame. Desire in her brings forth more desire, the impulse of death, happiness, and even past trauma, like her abortion, but never humiliation. Reading her is to thoroughly purge yourself of the notion that shame could be a possible outcome of wanting sex. *Getting Lost* also has some of the most explicit descriptions of oral sex that I have read. And to think it was written 32 years ago. *Simple Passion* was a cleverly

crafted memoir; *Getting Lost* is a large chunk of her life and the more interesting version of the affair. Ernaux intends it to be a love story from the beginning, but it's not. Instead, it's a study of a woman at her peak desire. In the future, I suspect the book will become a kind of totem for lovers: a manual to help them find their centre when, like Ernaux, they are lost in love.

In 2000, Ernaux retired from teaching and focused primarily on her writing. Ernaux's masterpiece is often considered to be *Les Années* (2008; *The Years*), a personal and collective history of postwar France. It garnered Ernaux the Marguerite Duras and the François Mauriac prizes. The English translation (2019) was also shortlisted for the Man Booker prize and earned her a larger international audience. Passion and grief often exist side by side. Ernaux's twin books *Simple Passion* – the story of her affair with a younger, married Soviet attaché in Paris in the months before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and her most recently published English translation, *Getting Lost*, the diary of that affair, are incendiary works which remind us how close we are in life to death – whether it be morally, physically, existentially. Margaret Drabble has commented that “Ernaux has inherited de Beauvoir's role of chronicler to a generation” – now the great chronicler has been justly rewarded with the greatest of literature prizes. (*The Guardian*, 06-10-2022) Ernaux's long career includes 24 published books and a number of essays and short stories. Her work has been adapted to several award-winning films, including *L'Événement* (2021; *Happening*), which won the Golden Lion at the 2021 Venice Film Festival. In announcing Ernaux's Nobel Prize, the Swedish Academy lauded the “courage and clinical acuity with which she uncovers the roots, estrangements and collective restraints of personal memory.”

Ernaux is an unusual memoirist: she distrusts her memory. She writes in the first person, and then abruptly switches and speaks about herself from a distance, calling past selves “the girl of '58” or “the girl of S.” At times, it seems as though she were looking at herself in an old photograph or a scene in a movie. She tells us when she is getting lost in the story, and where her memory goes blank. Ernaux does not so much reveal the past—she does not pretend to have any authoritative access to it—as unpack it. “What is the point of writing,” she says, “if not to unearth things?” In this attempt at unearthing, her prose combines the spare and the unsparing. She seems desperate to put it all on the page: period blood, abortions, contraceptive pills, dirty underwear, erections, and semen. But Ernaux's writing is rubbed down, simple, almost clinical in its exactness. From the vantage of adulthood, she Googles and questions, she revisits old haunts and reads old letters, as if she were a detective cracking an unsolvable case: the mystery of her own past. But none of this investigation is done, one senses, with the expectation of ever truly settling on a truth. “I am not trying to remember,” she writes. “I am trying to be inside. . . . To be there at that very instant, without spilling over into the before or after. To be in the pure immanence of a moment.”

In writing, no choice is self-evident. But those who, as immigrants, no longer speak their parents' language, and those who, as class defectors, no longer have quite the same language, think and express themselves with other words, face additional hurdles. A dilemma. They indeed feel the difficulty, even the impossibility of writing in the acquired, dominant language, which they have mastered and admire in works of literature, anything that relates to their world of origin, that first world made up of sensations and words describing daily life, work, one's place in society. On the one hand is the language in which they learned to name things, with its brutality and silences, for example that of the intimate exchange between a mother and a son in the very beautiful text by Albert Camus, ‘*Between Yes and No*’. On the other hand are the models of admired, internalized works which made that first world open out and to which they feel indebted for their elevation; which they sometimes even considered their true homeland. Mine included Flaubert, Proust, Virginia Woolf. None of them, when I went back to writing, were of any help to me. I had to break with ‘writing well’ and beautiful sentences – the very kind I taught my students to write – to root out, display and understand the rift running through me. What came to me spontaneously was the clamour of a language which conveyed anger and derision, even crudeness; a language of excess, insurgent, often used by the humiliated and offended as their only response to the memory of others' contempt, of shame and shame at feeling shame.

Social life is not really the plane where one seeks truth. But when it comes to life and language, we know that the social aspect is more predominant. Truth-telling is difficult, and comes with a compromise. In life, we are always in the present. Truth is something that cannot be achieved through the media. It can only be seen through distance, with respect to time. Thus, writing becomes a means where I seek not truth, but what's real. It becomes a place to express that real for myself. How can one reflect on life without also reflecting on writing? Without wondering whether writing reinforces or disrupts the accepted, interiorized representations of beings and things? With its violence and derision, did insurgent writing not reflect the attitude of the dominated? When the reader was culturally privileged, he maintained the same imposing and condescending outlook on a character in a book as he would in real life. Therefore, originally, it was to elude this kind of gaze which, when directed at my father whose story I was going to tell, would have been unbearable and, I felt, a betrayal, that, starting with my fourth book, I adopted a neutral, objective kind of writing, ‘flat’ in the sense that it contained neither metaphors nor signs of emotion. The violence was no longer displayed; it came from the facts themselves and not the writing. Finding

the words that contain both reality and the sensation provided by reality would become, and remain to this day, my ongoing concern in writing, no matter what the subject.

Ernaux's most famous book, *The Years*, shortlisted for the 2019 Man Booker International, begins with a list of opinions, memories, movies, impressions. Something ether-like is supposed to emerge from this—what exactly? No one knows. It could even be a droning sense of boredom. It could be affection for the plumbing simplicity of her language. It could be the smudged outline of a being. Smudged but an outline, nonetheless. When the art critic Peter Schjeldahl, who passed away recently, wrote “The Art of Dying”, his personal essay after being diagnosed with lung cancer’s creeping, almost-certain stamp of death, he confessed: “Memory is a liar. It is a heap of dog-eared... incessantly revised fictions.” His piece, like Ernaux’s stretched essays, is a collection of these lying memories, of images, impressions, ideas, including regarding criticism, that he is still stained by. There is no cumulative story emerging, only bursts of life. If you want to plot the essay to see its skeleton, you would be looking at an amoebic throbbing mass. It is, after all, a piece-by-piece putting together of a puzzle that was never meant to be or feel complete. It is a gesture that makes clear the limitations of the personal essay as a format. It refuses to tell a story.

It was necessary for me to continue to say ‘I’. In literary use, the first person – the one through which we exist, in most languages, from the moment we know how to speak until death – is often considered narcissistic when referring to the author rather than an ‘I’ presented as fictitious. It is worth remembering that the ‘I’, hitherto the privilege of nobles recounting feats of arms in memoirs, was in France a democratic conquest of the eighteenth century, the affirmation of the equality of individuals and the right to be the subject of their story, as claimed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in this first preamble to the *Confessions*: ‘And let no one object that, being a man of the people, I have nothing to say that deserves the attention of readers. In whatever obscurity I may have lived, if I thought more and better than the Kings, the story of my soul is more interesting than that of theirs.’ Very quickly too, it seemed self-evident – to the point that I could not imagine any other way to start – to anchor the story of the rift in my social being in the situation that had been mine as a student, a revolting situation to which the French state still condemned women, the need to seek out clandestine terminations at the hands of backstreet abortionists. And I wanted to describe everything that had happened to my girl’s body; the discovery of pleasure, periods. And so, without being aware of it at the time, that first book, published in 1974, mapped out the realm in which I would situate my writing, a realm both social and feminist. Avenging my people and avenging my sex would, from that time on, be one and the same thing.

It was not this plebeian pride that motivated me (although, having said that...), but the desire to use the ‘I’ – a form both masculine and feminine – as an exploratory tool that captures sensations: those which memory has buried, those which the world around us keeps on giving, everywhere and all the time. The prerequisite of sensation has for me become both the guide and guarantee of the authenticity of my research. But to what end? Not to tell the story of my life nor free myself of its secrets but to decipher a lived situation, an event, a romantic relationship, and thereby reveal something that only writing can bring into being and perhaps pass on to the consciousness and memories of others. Who could say that love, pain and mourning, shame, are not universal? Victor Hugo wrote: ‘Not one of us has the honour of living a life that is only his own.’ But as all things are lived inexorably in the individual mode – ‘it is to me this is happening’ – they can only be read in the same way if the ‘I’ of the book becomes transparent, in a sense, and the ‘I’ of the reader comes to occupy it. If this ‘I’, to put it another way, becomes transpersonal.

We see it today in the revolt of women who have found the words to disrupt male power and who have risen up, as in Iran, against its most archaic form. Writing in a democratic country, however, I continue to wonder about the place women occupy in the literary field. They have not yet gained legitimacy as producers of written works. There are men in the world, including the Western intellectual spheres, for whom books written by women simply do not exist; they never cite them. The recognition of my work by the Swedish Academy is a sign of hope for all female writers. This is how I conceived my commitment to writing, which does not consist of writing ‘for’ a category of readers, but in writing ‘from’ my experience as a woman and an immigrant of the interior; and from my longer and longer memory of the years I have lived, and from the present, an endless provider of the images and words of others. This commitment through which I pledge myself in writing is supported by the belief, which has become a certainty, that a book can contribute to change in private life, help to shatter the loneliness of experiences endured and repressed, and enable beings to reimagine themselves. When the unspeakable is brought to light, it is political. In the bringing to light of the social unspeakable, of those internalized power relations linked to class and/or race, and gender too, felt only by the people who directly experience their impact, the possibility of individual but also collective emancipation emerges. To decipher the real world by stripping it of the visions and values that language, all language, carries within it is to upend its established order, upset its hierarchies.

These links are what Ernaux, as a writer, has always been after. In the sixty years and twenty books since the summer of 1958, she has been devoted to a single task: the excavation of her own life. “I would go so far as to judge my previous books as vague approximations” of reality, Ernaux writes in “A Girl’s Story.” In one, she

describes a love affair; in another, the relationship between her parents. Throughout, the contours of her story stay the same—a childhood in Normandy as the daughter of two grocers, the shame of her lower-class upbringing, the clash of these origins with her later literary successes. Her mother “knew all the household tips that lessened the strain of poverty. This knowledge . . . stops at my generation. I am only the archivist,” she writes in her 1988 book, “A Woman’s Story.” To convey my predicament, I never resorted to descriptive terms or expressions such as “I’m expecting,” “pregnant” or “pregnancy.” They endorsed a future event that would never materialize. There was no point naming something that I was planning to get rid of. In my diary I would write, “it” or “that thing,” only once “pregnant.” Writing from a very different future, she is struck by her own “euphemisms and understatements.” The pages of a diary are, ostensibly, the safest, most honest record of a self—and yet even here Ernaux sees her internal narrative being shaped by external pressures, such as laws. Her most private experiences, she sees, were not really her own at all.

In her Speech at the Nobel Prize ceremony, she described how the events shaped her ideas for writing “Where to begin? I have asked myself this question dozens of times, gazing at a blank page. As if I needed to find the one, the only sentence that would give me entry into the writing of the book and remove all doubts in one fell swoop – a sort of key. Today, as I confront a situation which, the initial stupor having passed – ‘is it really me this is happening to?’ – my imagination represents in a way that instills a growing terror, I am overwhelmed by the same necessity. Finding the sentence that will give me the freedom and the firmness to speak without trembling in this place to which you have invited me this evening. To find that sentence, I don’t have to look very far. It instantly appears. In all its clarity and violence. Lapidary. Irrefutable. Written in my diary sixty years ago. ‘I will write to avenge my people, j’écirai pour venger ma race’. It echoed Rimbaud’s cry: ‘I am of an inferior race for all eternity.’ I was twenty-two, studying literature in a provincial faculty with the daughters and sons of the local bourgeoisie, for the most part. I proudly and naively believed that writing books, becoming a writer, as the last in a line of landless labourers, factory workers and shopkeepers, people despised for their manners, their accent, their lack of education, would be enough to redress the social injustice linked to social class at birth. That an individual victory could erase centuries of domination and poverty, an illusion that school had already fostered in me by dint of my academic success. How could my personal achievement have redeemed any of the humiliations and offenses suffered? That’s not a question I ever asked myself. I had a few excuses.”

“By granting me the highest literary distinction that can be, a bright light is being shone on work that consists of writing and personal research carried out in solitude and doubt. This light does not dazzle me. I do not regard as an individual victory the Nobel prize that has been awarded to me. It is neither from pride nor modesty that I see it, in some sense, as a collective victory. I share the pride of it with those who, in one way or another, hope for greater freedom, equality and dignity for all humans, regardless of their sex or gender, the colour of their skin, and their culture; and with those who think of future generations, of safeguarding an Earth where a profit-hungry few make life increasingly unliveable for all populations. If I look back on the promise made at twenty to avenge my people, I cannot say whether I have carried it out. It was from this promise, and from my forebears, hardworking men and women inured to tasks that caused them to die early, that I received enough strength and anger to have the desire and ambition to give them a place in literature, amid this ensemble of voices which, from very early on, accompanied me, giving me access to other worlds and other ways of being, including that of rebelling against and wanting to change it, in order to inscribe my voice as a woman and a social defector in what still presents itself as a space of emancipation, literature.” (Translated by Alison L. Strayer).

It is almost impossible to consolidate knowledge and memory into one. “Must I, as of now, move back and forth between one historical vision and another, between 1958 and 2014? I dream of a sentence that would contain them both, seamlessly, by way of a new syntax,” she writes. But a story that is fully continuous, a story without gaps, escapes her. At the end of the book, Ernaux describes visiting the camp a few years after working there. It should be a moment of closure. But she looks around and sees only gray walls and empty gardens. The location does not speak to her. It seems, she writes, “less familiar than I had thought.” Instead, it is she who feels the urge to speak. Returning to the camp, she writes, is a “kind of propitiatory gesture” that allows her to see her memories as inspiration rather than as a source of shame. It is after this visit that she begins to write—that she begins, step by step, to move toward an elusive whole. These links are what Ernaux, as a writer, has always been after. In the sixty years and twenty books since the summer of 1958, she has been devoted to a single task: the excavation of her own life. “I would go so far as to judge my previous books as vague approximations” of reality, Ernaux writes in “A Girl’s Story.” In one, she describes a love affair; in another, the relationship between her parents. Throughout, the contours of her story stay the same—a childhood in Normandy as the daughter of two grocers, the shame of her lower-class upbringing, the clash of these origins with her later literary successes. Her mother “knew all the household tips that lessened the strain of poverty. This knowledge . . . stops at my generation. I am only the archivist,” she writes in her 1988 book, “A Woman’s Story.”

But I do not confuse the political action of literary writing, subject to its reception by the reader, with the positions I feel compelled to take with respect to events, conflicts and ideas. I grew up as part of the post-war generation, following World War II, when writers and intellectuals positioned themselves in relation to French

politics and became involved in social struggles as a matter of course. Today, it is impossible to say whether things would have turned out differently had they not spoken out and committed themselves. In today's world, where the multiplicity of information sources and the speed at which images flash past condition a form of indifference, to focus on one's art is a temptation. But, meanwhile, in Europe, an ideology of withdrawal and closure is on the rise, still concealed by the violence of an imperialist war waged by the dictator at the head of Russia, and steadily gaining ground in hitherto democratic countries. Founded on the exclusion of foreigners and immigrants, the abandonment of the economically weak, the surveillance of women's bodies, this ideology requires a duty of extreme vigilance, for me and all those for whom the value of a human being is always and everywhere the same.

Her works overall have received the French language prize and the Marguerite Yourcenar prize, as well as publication of her almost complete works to date in the Quarto edition by Gallimard in 2011 (Ernaux is the first woman writer to be published in this series in her lifetime). In 2014 she was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Cergy-Pontoise. In October 2022, she was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature "for the courage and clinical acuity with which she uncovers the roots, estrangements and collective restraints of personal memory". Since the publication of her first book, *Cleaned Out*, in 1974, Annie Ernaux's writing has continued to explore not only her own life experience but also that of her generation, her parents, women, anonymous others encountered in public space, the forgotten. The main themes threaded through her work over more than four decades are: the body and sexuality; intimate relationships; social inequality and the experience of changing class through education; time and memory; and the overarching question of how to write these life experiences. In Ernaux's work the most personal, the most intimate experiences – whether of grieving, classed shame, nascent sexuality, passion, illegal abortion, illness, or the perception of time – are always understood as shared by others, and reflective of the social, political and cultural context in which they occur.

Having published three autobiographical novels (*Cleaned Out*, *What they say goes* and *The Frozen Woman*), Ernaux turned away from fiction with the publication of *A Man's Place*. In this process she has invented narrative forms that constitute new directions in life writing: autosociobiographical texts, such as *A Man's Place*, *A Woman's Story* and *Shame* explore her own life and that of her parents, but also the social milieu in which those lives evolved, while the collective autobiography, *The Years*, covers the social and cultural history of France since her birth in 1940 to 2007. Ernaux has also published diary extracts ('I remain in Darkness', *Getting Lost*) and 'diaries of the outside', where she describes her encounters with others in public spaces such as supermarkets, trains and the Paris metro (*Exteriors*, *Things Seen*, 'Look at the Pretty Lights Darling' / 'Regarde les lumières, mon amour*'). She focuses on the process of writing in her notes on work in progress ('The Dark Workshop' / *L'Atelier noir**), a dialogue with another writer ('Writing sharp as a knife' / *L'Écriture comme un couteau*, with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet*), and memoirs that link the description of intense personal experiences with reflections on writing (*Simple Passion*, *Happening*, *The Possession*, *A Girl's Story*, 'The Young man' / *Le Jeune homme**). Two works, 'The Uses of Photography' / *L'Usage de la photo** and 'Writing Life' / *Écrire la vie** explore the relationship between writing and photographic representations of the past, while in 'The Other Daughter' / *L'Autre fille** Ernaux writes a letter to the sister who died before her birth. Finally, Ernaux has published discussions of her relationship with the significant places of her life ('Where I belong' / *Le Vrai lieu**; 'Return to Yvetot' / *Retour à Yvetot**) (see the *Places* section of this site).

For once, the rumours have proved true. Annie Ernaux, the 82-year-old French writer, who for the last couple of years has been touted as a favourite, has been announced as the winner of the 2022 Nobel prize for literature – only the 17th woman out of 119 laureates in the award's history. The Swedish Academy is famous for its secrecy and its often apparently obscure choices. The October announcement frequently has journalists and editors frantically Googling that year's recipient – and perhaps a decade ago, Annie Ernaux might have received the same treatment. But, while her work has been well known and well received in France since the 1970s, and published in English translation from 1991, it is only since around 2019, when *The Years*, her monumental work of fiction-memoir was shortlisted for the International Booker prize, that Ernaux has made a big impact on the anglophone world. *The Years* covers six decades of social and personal history, from Ernaux's working-class childhood in wartime and postwar Normandy – where she was born in 1940 – through the 1968 student uprisings, initial joy and later disillusionment during the long presidency of François Mitterand in the 1980s and 90s and on into the new millennium. It spans politics, literature, music, television, education, marriage, divorce, advertisements, popular slogans – all recounted through a narrator who never once uses the word "I". The book, which ends in 2006, was celebrated in France as a modern *In Search of Lost Time*. In terms of prose style, however, Ernaux has little in common with the more flamboyant Proust – her writing is more austere, the sensuality more analytical. Her work as a whole is reflective, intimate – but also impersonal and detached. The Nobel committee described her oeuvre on Thursday as "uncompromising and written in plain language, scraped clean."

Her books in translation, often no thicker than a thimble, are narrations of time, to "put the world in order", "to salvage part of our lives, to understand but first, to salvage"—with language, with memory, and with a looming ghost of doubt over that very language, those very memories. They scald you as you burn through them

over a night. Moments of raw wounding. Have you ever loved someone, and knowing they do not love you the same way, continued loving them, continued the lunacy, the indignity, the longing, because it seemed easier than to not? Then, pour over this line from *Simple Passion*, which thrums with Ernaux's love for a married man that was returned only with erratic lust: "It was all infinite emptiness, except when we were together making love. And even then I dreaded the moments to come, when he would be gone. I experienced pleasure like a future pain." While writers like Karl Ove Knausgaard, Joan Didion, Tove Ditlevsen, Manto, Farah Bashir, and Chloé Cooper Jones have pursued something vastly original within this genre, a stink keeps rearing its head. The allure of the personal story has multiplied since the algorithmic joys of social media required us, pleaded with us to centre our point of view, our irony, our charm, our beauty. To reach within, first, and perform without, after. A trust in the self as true and consummate. This deluge, this glut of the personal essay, with writers cooing out for our attention by selling their wounds in the marketplace of ideas, does it not cause a snoozing, a tiredness, a yawn? To cut through this blistering ennui, this distrust of the self, like Ernaux does, and to be recognised for it by the most celebrated literary award, is testament to both author and award. That the personal essay, despite its worn-out glamour, is literary chic. And that Ernaux's personal essays, that reach back to the 1970s, whose journey has been fraught with frigid fears and warm embraces, which short-circuit any criticism by theorising the form and creating the tenets of criticism itself, are unlike any other.

"Literary truth" is a phrase often thrown around, for something that can be felt but never described, like walking into a room, staring at a stranger and thinking, "I do not like you" or "I think we belong together". The moment we try to define what this "literary truth" is, we create boundaries around the idea, walls that create an inside and an outside. But the fact of the matter is, literary truth is a vibe. You get it. Or you do not. If you do not, if the words you read feel sticky and grossly disingenuous, pretentious and needlessly performative—even these words, my words—then that is that. Literary truth is an intuitive lunging of the body towards a text. Ernaux, often but not always, made my body coil towards her words, her wounds. What is it about the way she remembers and the way she writes what she remembers?

Most of Ernaux's writings are non-fictional and depict the life experiences of a French woman born in 1940, as much as an experience of Frenchness across genders, social classes and generations. Yet, despite being situated in a specific time, space and in personal experience, critics and readers have often commented on the universal reach of her works. Annie Ernaux's writings have gained increasing international attention in recent years, especially since the English translation of *Les Années* (*The Years*), seen by many as her masterwork, was published in 2017 and shortlisted for the International Booker Prize in 2019. The global reach of her works culminated in the award of the 2022 Nobel Prize in Literature 'for the courage and clinical acuity with which she uncovers the roots, estrangements and collective restraints of personal memory'. This prestigious prize, that she was the first French female writer to receive, anchored her status as a major 20th and 21st-century author and instantly brought her global fame – she was for instance the guest of honour at the New Delhi world book fair in 2023.

From her first book *Cleaned Out* in 1973, Ernaux's work has been closely informed by her own life experiences. She has continued to surprise and inspire readers with coverage of daring topics and her innovative approach to genres. Her body of work includes discussions on the act and art of writing, texts incorporating personal photographs, intimate and public diaries, and life-writing that refuses to be contained by categories. Her literary approach typically incorporates self-reflexive remarks where she comments on the challenges she faces in turning lived experiences into literary form. It is that openness and sense of writer-reader intimacy that partly explains her popularity. Her courage in exploring and exploding generic expectations is also reflected in the content of her work. She writes about a range of taboo subjects including her backstreet abortion (*Cleaned Out* and *Happening*, which was recently made into a film), sexual intimacy and issues of consent, breast cancer and her dead sister (*L'Autre Fille*). Like many of the women prizewinners who have preceded her, including Toni Morrison and Alice Munro, Ernaux has spent her writing life giving voice to the experiences of those who remain under- or unrepresented in literature. This award will allow these voices to ring out all the more clearly. Reading Ernaux, one gets the impression she thinks with her eyes, with her touch. She's aware of and alert to the material and sensuous nature of thinking. That distinguishes her from the overtly mentalist thinkers of the self (including thinkers from France). She is a writing self, who distinguishes that self with clarity from the self that lives a life. Life is one thing, writing another. Ernaux lives the contradictions in that mysterious encounter between pen and paper. Writing balances the imbalances of life. In this interview, she explains her craft and some of the central themes of her writing, bringing to light hitherto unexplored corners of her work. Ernaux is one of those writers whose best works incorporate techniques and rhythms from both fiction and non-fiction, thereby occupying a hybrid space in the reader's imagination. This sort of hybridity is more commonly attributed to US writers from the 90s onwards, like William T. Vollmann or David Foster Wallace (or more recently, Ben Lerner), but Ernaux has been doing it since the 80s, at the very least. And of late, she has perfected the method. "Writers like Ernaux inspire a very personal brand of devotion precisely because she mines so much of her personal life. The resultant books end up more 'universal' than the best efforts of just about everybody else. Years ago, while in the throes of

a personal loss, I read and re-read Joan Didion's 'grief memoirs' (*The Year of Magical Thinking and Blue Nights*) as well as other books along those lines, including Sonali Deraniyagala's *Wave*. It helped me significantly, I can say with no hesitation. Annie Ernaux is that kind of writer. To avoid putting too fine a point on things, she makes you feel less alone; surely one of literature's great objectives." (Outlook, 2022)

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