

"ENTRER PAR EFFRACTION":

**READING AND WRITING SUBJECTS
IN ANNIE ERNAUX'S RECENT WORK**

**A thesis written in partial requirement for the degree of
Ph.D. (French) at London Metropolitan University**

Matthew Janes, B.A., M.A.

Research Director: Lyn Thomas, Ph.D.

Submitted 9 November 2010

Revised 28 June 2011

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks first and foremost to my research director, Professor Lyn Thomas, for her patience, and guidance over the past five years. Not only do I have a great deal of respect for Professor Thomas for her professional achievements (and her recent awarding of a Professorship is incredibly well-deserved), but I have always identified very much with her and admired her as an individual. As much as I have enjoyed discussing Annie Ernaux with her over the past few years, I have enjoyed just as much our conversations about our shared interests and experiences. I feel fortunate to have connected so well with someone who has had a profound influence on my intellectual growth.

In addition, my thanks to my examiners, Professor Diana Holmes and Dr Loraine Day. I benefited greatly from their extensive suggestions for revisions to this thesis, and I enjoyed discussing my work with them. In particular, Dr Day provided extensive feedback and challenged me to interrogate many of my ideas in the original submission. I feel that the thesis is much stronger as a result of her very thorough reading of its initial submission.

My thanks also to Dr Howard Davies and Dr John Phillips, who supervised along with Dr. Thomas, and both of whom retired while I was writing this thesis. Their suggestions and comments have been invaluable, and I am particularly thankful for Dr Phillips' generosity toward me immediately preceding his retirement.

My thanks to my colleagues and friends at the Grenfell Campus of Memorial University of Newfoundland, where I have worked since 2004. Since my arrival, I have fallen in love with the campus, its people, and its spirit. Countless colleagues have offered support and encouragement to me throughout my writing, and I am grateful to them all. My thanks in particular to Elizabeth Behrens, who is also my neighbour, for her meticulous reading of the thesis and substantive comments.

My thanks to my partner, Dr Sandra Wright, whose kindness and good nature kept things in perspective for me. Without her patience and reassurance, this process would have been a great deal less enjoyable. I am lucky to have her in my life and to share it with her.

My thanks to my parents, Heidi and Derek Janes, for their unfailing support of me. I am thankful for the adult relationships that I enjoy with them, but most of all, I feel lucky to have come from such a wonderful family.

While I have only spoken to Annie Ernaux once, and even then in the most brief of conversations, I am thankful to her for having made so many wonderful reading moments possible. I argue in this thesis that 'Ernaux' is constructed in various ways by her readers of all stripes based on their exposure to her work and what they have read about the work and its

author. This does, of course, include me. I shall always associate 'Ernaux' with that foggy, grey day in the fall of 2002: I was sitting on the landing while working alone in the Cape Spear lighthouse, reading *'Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit'* for the first time, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. That was when I 'fell' for Annie Ernaux, and I felt that I was writing with her on that rainy day.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Annie Ernaux's four most recent texts – *Se perdre* (2001), *L'Occupation* (2002), *L'Usage de la photo* (2005), and *Les Années* (2008) as well as *L'écriture comme un couteau* (2002) and investigates the past twenty years of Ernaux scholarship. I argue that Ernaux's recent writing, like her earlier work, explores the postmodern notion of the subject as an ongoing process constructed in relation to and with others. I further suggest that Ernaux's recent writing both continues to emphasize reprisal and revision and is increasingly preoccupied with real and imagined reader/author relationships.

In my analysis of Ernaux criticism, I suggest that these often imagined reader/author relationships are also made tangible in Ernaux's relationships with many of her critics. I examine how Ernaux's relationships with her critics have evolved in this later phase of her career, focusing both on how Ernaux plays an increasingly active role in shaping her own critical reception and how both she and her recent works are constructed by critics. In a new analysis of Ernaux's academic reception, I argue that just as Ernaux co-writes her romances with her partners, so, too, does she play a role in constructing her critical reception through her involvement with what I term her academic interpretive community. I suggest that through her involvement in shaping her own reception, Ernaux demystifies objective literary criticism and further enables critics to declare their status as both scholars and fans. I further argue that Ernaux helps shape the language of her own criticism and questions the use of traditional

literary terminology to analyze her work, and I outline some of the ways in which 'Ernaux' and her works have been constructed in critical settings and texts.

Finally, I investigate the manner in which readers of all types discursively construct 'Ernaux.' In order to do so, I embark upon the first analysis of online constructions of Ernaux's work, focusing on the reception of her most recent text, *Les Années*, as well as constructions of 'Ernaux' herself. I develop the idea of Ernaux's discursive space and assess the manner in which the discourse used to construct 'Ernaux' and her work is similar to and different from that employed by professional readers. I further construct discursive categories that reflect the various ways in which 'Ernaux' is constructed not only by devoted fans and detractors (as previous Ernaux scholarship has shown) but also more casual readers, whose voices are, in a contemporary setting, increasingly merged with those of the critics and, indeed, with that of Ernaux herself.

ABBREVIATIONS

LAV	<i>Les Armoires vides</i>
CQDR	<i>Ce qu'ils disent ou rien</i>
LFG	<i>La Femme gelée</i>
LP	<i>La Place</i>
UF	<i>Une Femme</i>
PS	<i>Passion simple</i>
JDD	<i>Journal du dehors</i>
JNS	<i>"Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit"</i>
LH	<i>La Honte</i>
L'E	<i>L'Événement</i>
LVE	<i>La Vie extérieure</i>
SP	<i>Se perdre</i>
L'O	<i>L'Occupation</i>
L'ECUC	<i>L'Écriture comme un couteau</i>
L'UDLP	<i>L'Usage de la photo</i>
LA	<i>Les Années</i>

"[Ernaux's] progressive revisions of the ways in which she classifies her writing indicate her determination to challenge literary elitism, by producing texts which enter the public domain as literature [...] but which routinely question their own status as literature, and which cannot be categorized within existing literary forms. At the same time, perhaps paradoxically, Ernaux continues to carve out a niche for herself in the literary field, albeit one that is won and maintained, in one of her favorite terms, 'par effraction.'"

(Day, 2007, p. 21)

INTRODUCTION

Ernaux's Period of Experimentation: Writing Directions at the Turn of the Century

Upon retiring from the *Centre National d'Education par Distance* in 2000, Annie Ernaux was, theoretically, able to devote significantly more time to her writing career. By this point, Ernaux was already a well-known author, having established a pattern of commercial and critical success. With the publication of her fourth book, *LP*, for which she won the Prix Renaudot in 1984, Ernaux found her own "place" (Motte, 1995, p. 65)¹ by adopting the self-titled *écriture plate*, the first of many terms that the author would devise for her own writing. In works written from *LP* onward, Ernaux would make use of this type of writing, which I shall later discuss at length, to capture in writing significant relationships and events from her life that, as readership studies have

¹ Indeed, Motte's analysis is highly personal, as is, as we shall see in Chapter Three, much criticism of Ernaux. Motte argues that Ernaux's having found her *place* is an indication of meiosis, which Motte explains is both a literary strategy as well as a state of a disease. Motte provides the definition from the *OED* in order to illustrate his point, indicating that meiosis is "[t]he state of a disease in which the symptoms begin to abate." The evolution of Ernaux's work may be read in this pathological perspective as the chronicle of a disease commonly afflicting young writers. After the halting, uneven experiments of [*LAV*, *CQDR*, and *LFG*], Ernaux finds in [*LP*] a 'cure,' a voice of her own that will resonate with assurance and authority in her later texts, and a real sense of *place*" (Motte, 1995, p. 65).

confirmed, are often appropriated by readers.² In short, Ernaux had a form and style that undoubtedly would have continued to satisfy readers. Yet Ernaux's writing project would evolve considerably toward the turn of the century, drawing on aspects of her earlier work. I shall argue throughout this thesis that Ernaux's recent writing both continues to engage with postmodern subjectivity and explores real and imagined author, critic, and reader relationships, identities, and discourses.

The Constructed Self and Other; The Constructed Self and Author

Ernaux's work has consistently questioned the existence of a unified, coherent subjectivity. Ernaux's early works – *LAV*, *CQDR*, and *LFG* – draw attention to the role of writing in reflecting the fragmented nature of the subject in reconstructing particular experiences as well as previous selves. For instance, Anne in *CQDR* acknowledges the distinction between the manner in which she constructs herself in the present and simultaneously re-constructs her self-image from the past, writing that "[Q]ui parle, qui se souvient, Anne de ce moment, ce sont des choses qu'on se dit seulement longtemps après, Anne d'aujourd'hui, autant dire personne" (*CQDR*, p. 89). In this passage, Ernaux acknowledges that the feelings that she recalls having had at the moment of an experience are perhaps instead imagined long after the fact. The constructed self, achieved through writing, replaces "Anne d'aujourd'hui, autant dire personne" and

² Upon the publication of *LA* in 2008, Ernaux commented that with *LP*, "[...]j'ai trouvé ma trajectoire d'écriture. Depuis, il n'y a pas eu de changement majeur, j'ai creusé le même trou" (Interview with Crom, "La mémoire offerte" in *Télérama*, 13 February 2008).

gives the illusion of stability to a fragmented subjectivity. In Ernaux's early works (*LAV*, *LFG*, *CQDR*), writing's ability to map subjectivity is empowering. For instance, in *LFG*, Ernaux revisits her trajectory leading to her current construct and acknowledges the freedom that writing gives her to re-imagine her former selves. In revisiting her adolescence, Ernaux writes in the middle of the narrative that "Je m'écris, je peux faire ce que je veux de moi, me retourner dans n'importe quel sens et me palinodier à l'aise" (*LFG* 63). This passage acknowledges writing's role in constructing the self and the ability of writing not only to re-construct former selves but, whether consciously or unconsciously, to create artistically a former self that never was.

In works from *LP* onward, Ernaux regularly interrupts her texts with metatextual passages that draw the reader's attention to the writing process and underscore the degree to which her subjectivity is constructed in and through others. For instance, in *JDD*, Ernaux writes that she is "traversée par les gens, leur existence, comme une putain" (*JDD*, p. 69). Such self-exploration is also, as Sheringham (2000, p. 189) has argued, in keeping with women's autobiographical writing that tends to focus on the roles of others in self-construction. In Chapter One, I shall argue that Ernaux's recent writing continues to explore the postmodern notion of the subject as an ongoing construct that is rooted in a self/other economy, as posited by Hegel.

In addition, as I shall later discuss, Ernaux indicates an awareness of, and even an encouragement of, readers who appropriate her story and perhaps even her own

subjectivity. For instance, Ernaux writes at the end of *L'E* that she wishes for her existence to be "complètement dissoute dans la vie des autres" (*L'E*, p. 125). Ernaux also writes an essay on her concept of the *je transpersonnel* (1993). I shall argue that Ernaux's more recent work – *SP*, *L'O*, *L'UDLP*, and *LA* - explores the self/author relationship, as the reader often constructs a relationship not only with Ernaux's work but also with 'Ernaux' herself. I shall discuss how Ernaux explores the reader/author relationship in Chapter Four. I shall suggest that in the first three works – *SP*, *L'O*, and *L'UDLP*, Ernaux mirrors the reader/author relationship through the romance and that in her most recent work, *LA*, Ernaux explicitly acknowledges the symbiotic nature of the relationship.

I shall discuss in Chapters Two and Three the unique nature of Ernaux's relationships with her critical readers. I shall argue that Ernaux has been able to influence in several ways the manner in which she and her works have been discursively constructed.

Firstly, Ernaux helps define the terms in which her writing is to be discussed.³ Ernaux has been able to bring forward her own literary terms such as *autosociobiographie* (*L'ECUC*, p. 21), *écriture plate* (*LP*, p. 21), and *autobiographie impersonnelle* (*LA*, p. 240), implying that these terms are "more appropriate" (Hugueny-Léger, 2007, p. 2; 2009, p. 1) for the discussion of her writing; indeed, these terms are now prevalent in academic and press reception of the author's work. While Jellenik (2007, p. 73) suggests that

³ Fell suggests that the fact that Ernaux's texts do not conform to any particular genre indicates that they instead take a hybrid form (2006, p. 21) and writes an interesting account of the question of genre in Ernaux's work, as I shall discuss in Chapter Three.

Ernaux's refusal to accept critical diagnosis and literary terminology perhaps seeks to undermine literary tradition, I shall argue in Chapter Two that Ernaux seeks to author not only her works but also to co-author critical constructions of her work. Secondly, Ernaux has routinely published in academic journals, the domain of the critic, and spoken at universities. Her addresses have included not only analyses of her own works but also the work of other authors, giving her own critical position on their works, which she is well-trained to do as a former teacher of French literature. Ernaux has also provided tremendous access to academic and press critics not only through granting them interviews but also by supplying them with materials such as reader letters and manuscripts. I shall suggest that Ernaux, to some extent, has been able to control her reception and to exert the same tight textual control that can be seen in her earlier writing. Such interventions, I shall argue, allow Ernaux both to monitor and influence the manner in which she is constructed in critical and 'lay' reader circles.

I shall further argue that many academic readings of Ernaux are underpinned by 'fan' readings: academic writers who write about Ernaux are, in many cases, also fans of the author. Hills (2002) refers to this type of writer as "scholar-fans." In addition, the prevalence of references to relationships with critics in Ernaux's recent writing (whether her dislike of attending literary conferences as evidenced in *SP* or her obsession with the partner of her former lover, whom she met because of his having written to Ernaux following the publication of *PS*, in *L'O*), has meant that critics are, arguably, just as likely to find a place for themselves to enter not only into the text but also into an

imagined relationship with the author as a 'lay' reader might do. In this light, I shall suggest that literary critics of Ernaux may have a great deal in common with her 'lay' readers.

Writing on a Contemporary Author: Constructing 'Ernaux' in a Digital World

I shall further argue that the ongoing process of constructing 'Ernaux' is not restricted to the reading process. Instead, it expands beyond a reader's engagement with the text and incorporates involvement with various textual inputs. As a result, writing a thesis on a contemporary French author and her reception in 2011 requires a different breadth of analysis than it did a decade ago. With the advent of a variety of digital and interactive media, the printing and entertainment industries have undergone a radical shift in which consumers of entertainment products have access to texts in a variety of platforms. In the case of television, for instance, due to the proliferation of digital technology, viewers are now able to access films or programmes on demand, resulting in an individual viewing experience that replaces what had previously been group viewings around a common television set. Digital downloads mean that programmes are instantly available and that consumers create their own viewing and listening experiences. In addition, celebrities (including authors) are more accessible, as official websites, celebrity gossip sites, and YouTube allow their everyday movement to be captured and shared. Celebrities are less sheltered and protected from the public eye

just as as their products are no longer restricted to the movie theatre, record shop, or television set.

Similarly, readers can construct their own reading experiences by reading excerpts online as well as by interacting with reviews (written by critics and 'lay' readers alike) or with online fan communities. Consumers have become authors of their own experiences, as they no longer watch entire programs but instead create "programme texts" (Morley in Charpentier, 2006, p. 272). For an author in the twenty-first century, with the release of a book comes a barrage of online reviews, fan discussion, blogging, and – once the author is established – perhaps even an online fan community.⁴

Publishers acknowledge the changing nature of literary reception by embracing a combined media approach, in which authors participate in online discussions and in which books are ordered online. These characteristics complement more traditional book signings and television appearances. This combined media setting has been incorporated by many publishing houses – including Gallimard which, upon the publication of *LA*, established an online presence for Ernaux. As I shall discuss in the final chapter, Ernaux also took on an increased web presence following the publication of *LA*, and this presence played a significant role in constructing the work and, increasingly, 'Ernaux' herself. With the emergence of hypertext and the Internet in general, the author is, as Thomas (2005, p. 185) has suggested in her analysis of letters to Ernaux, celebritized or objectified and made into a star: like celebrities from

⁴ It can also, as Lee (2010, p. 22) has documented, result in fans posing as their favourite author – as has happened in the case of Amélie Nothomb.

television and film, authors become objects of fascination. In the eyes of their fans, their identities are constructed based upon the interplay of their works, their appearances, and the information about them that is readily available online and in the wider media.

In Chapter Five, I shall draw on new media receptions and constructions of 'Ernaux' and argue that 'Ernaux' has many perceived or public lives, none of which she actually lives. I shall investigate the manner in which 'Ernaux' has been discursively constructed by both professional and 'lay' readers in new media settings in order to obtain a wider sense of the discursive space that represents her. Building on previous work by Thomas (1999, 2005) and Charpentier (1994, 1999) as well as by Ernaux herself (1994, 2000), I conduct a study that is not limited to letters written to the author, which have Ernaux herself as an ideal reader. My analysis takes place online, which is a space in which readers of different backgrounds and affinities converge. It is also a space in which social class – and, indeed, identity in general - is often anonymous. This study marks the first foray into research on Ernaux's online constructions and treats such constructions of 'Ernaux' and her works as objects worthy of analysis in their own right.

Defining 'Ernaux'

One of the difficulties in writing about Ernaux and her texts is defining appropriate terms to refer to Ernaux's many identities. Finding a critical vocabulary that is broad enough and that does not incorporate Ernaux's own terms for assessing her work

(particularly as I wish to examine the manner in which such terms have been used to shape reception and analysis) is as difficult and perhaps even as arbitrary as the work of assigning Ernaux's work to a particular genre, which I shall discuss in Chapter Three. Just as complicated, however, is determining which term to use when referring to various constructions of 'Ernaux.' While it is understood that Ernaux's texts are accounts of events from her own life, it would be an injustice to imply that Annie Ernaux, the writer of her texts, and various constructions of her (by critics, journalists, and 'lay' readers) are the same. It is necessary in the first instance, then, to distinguish between Annie Ernaux the person and the 'Ernaux' contained and constructed in her texts - and then to distinguish between these identities and reader constructs thereof.

McIlvanney convincingly argues that in Ernaux's texts, the (inter-textual) narrator connotes rather than denotes the (extra-textual) author (McIlvanney, 2001, p. 7). While I agree with this assessment, I offer different reasons. McIlvanney makes this distinction because it is her belief that to equate author and narrator would amount to confining Ernaux's work to "unnecessary generic constraints" associated with "women's literature." While this is undoubtedly a concern, there is a deliberate and important distinction to be made between Ernaux as she exists in the world, living her private life, and 'Ernaux' as she constructs herself – and is constructed - in her writing, her appearances, and what others write and say about her. This distinction is perhaps symbolized by Ernaux's writing process: her writing is done in a specific part of her home, separated from her normal living space and confined to a certain part of her

day.⁵ Her writing space and time are distinct parts of her life, separated from her private life: writing time, since her retirement from teaching in 2000, is her work time. Similarly, for many readers, their work time might be at a job, and it is distinct from their private lives. So, too, is 'Ernaux' in her texts distinct from her external existence in the world.

For these reasons, when I use the term 'author,' I refer to Annie Ernaux the external person who, for some, is interchangeable with the textual voice. The *je* of Ernaux's texts can simultaneously represent author, narrator, or character,⁶ and, as we shall later see, reader. Ernaux has, however, acknowledged this "transpersonal" nature of her texts through her own comments on her writing (Ernaux, 1993, p. 219-222). The term 'narrator,' by contrast, is a difficult one, as many critics have used this term to imply a separation between Ernaux and her text, although there is often little distinction made between the two in critical analysis of the work. To reflect the

⁵ Ernaux writes most days from 9:30 in the morning until she is fatigued. She does not resume writing after she gives up on a given day, except, of course, in her private journal. This detail, as well as other information about Ernaux's workday, is included in an online interview that took place at Ernaux's home following the release of *LA*. While writing occupies about four hours of her day – it is, she asserts, her *occupation* – it is never far from her mind as she goes about her everyday routine (available online at <http://www.rtl.fr/fiche/782744/ecrivains-a-domicile-annie-ernaux-pour-les-annees.html>, retrieved 1 August 2010).

⁶ Hugueny-Léger (2007, p. 101) suggests, for instance, that Johnson (1999) and Fau (1995) treat the *je* in several of Ernaux's texts as though each text contained the same *je*. I would also argue that Richardson Viti's critical work on Ernaux treats Ernaux's writing as a continuous *bildungsroman*, in which each 'je' has learned lessons from previous works – such as in Richardson Viti's suggestion that in *L'UDLP*, Ernaux has found an equal relationship with Marc Marie that compensates for the more unequal ones with Vilain and S. respectively (Viti, 2006, p. 84). In Chapter Three, I elaborate at length on the manner in which critical readers interchange author and narrator roles with a focus on the manner in which some critics attempt to diagnose Ernaux.

continuous interplay between these voices, I have used the term 'writing subject',⁷ whose voice cannot be isolated from any of its component parts, as it floats above her texts. Writing subject further underscores the process at work during the reading event, as writing implies an action that is ongoing and not restricted to any time referent. Writing in the participial form also emphasizes the *process* of constructing a writing project rather than the finished project itself. In the interest of space, however, I have interchanged the terms 'Ernaux' (in inverted commas) and writing subject throughout this thesis. 'Ernaux' signifies reader and textual constructions of the author, while Ernaux alone represents the external person, Annie Ernaux.

"Entrer par effraction"

I have suggested in this introduction and shall argue throughout this thesis that Ernaux plays an active role in shaping her own reception. I shall argue that Ernaux exerts influence over how her work is interpreted by developing mutually beneficial relationships with her critics, and she is able, to some extent, to shape the media constructions of her work that, in a digital world, increasingly influence readers' interpretations. Ernaux also generally guides the reader in how to read her work using a *mode d'emploi* within her texts themselves (Day, 2007, p. 27), thereby framing the reading experience within her own terms. Thus Ernaux has, in a sense, deprived her

⁷ I am not the first to use this term, although I have not found it to be a specifically defined one that has been widely used to refer to the *je* of Ernaux's texts. In a general sense, Benstock uses the term (1988, p. 16) when differentiating between the *moi* and *je* of autobiography, although Benstock has not written about Ernaux. In Benstock's case, the structure appears to be a noun phrase rather than a name given by Benstock to a specific textual feature or literary device. In his analysis of *UF*, Motte refers to the *je* of the text as the *sujet écrivain* but only does so in one sentence (1995, p. 50).

readers of a pre-determined symbolic order through which many have become accustomed to responding to and engaging with literature in her works and in her media and academic interventions. Appropriately, readers and critics are often frozen in a perpetual mirror stage, and it is Ernaux who symbolically holds that mirror.

Throughout the course of this thesis, I shall also argue that although Ernaux devotes much time and attention to explaining her writing, those explanations are often texts within their own right that are also constructed like her primary texts and, rather than clarify her work, shape and influence critical and 'lay' readings. Ernaux does not use traditional literary terminology to explain her writing but instead engages in relationships with professional and 'lay' readers. In establishing relationships with critics, navigating the media, and engaging with reader-author relationships in her recent writing, Ernaux is able to make the reader feel as though she or he is part of the writing process, but as Jellenik has suggested, Ernaux is never the reader's accomplice (Jellenik, 2007, p. 112 and *LP*, p. 41). Ernaux's recent writing, however, suggests that her work is increasingly preoccupied with exploring reader/author relationships, and the intimacy of the relationship invites the professional or 'lay' reader to "se pose[r] des questions, se retourne[r] sur lui-même. Idéalement, [...] qu'il s'ouvre plus largement au monde" (Day, 2005, p. 229) about reader and writer identities.

"Text is like a piece of music; the act of reading a text is like playing music and listening to it at the same time, and the reader becomes his own interpreter."

(Atwood, 2002, p. 50)

"L'écriture, toute écriture, est, par nature, publique à mes yeux en ce sens que, détachée de la voix, du corps, de la vie même de celui qui la produit, immatérielle, elle est donnée à tous, n'importe qui sachant lire peut se l'approprier. C'est ainsi que je ressens tous mes livres, mais seulement une fois qu'ils sont terminés. Quand je les écris, ils sont aussi secrets que mon journal intime, aussi 'privés' ; la lecture d'une œuvre en cours me paraîtrait une violation. [...] Comme si l'immatérialité, le détachement avec la personne, la vie, n'étaient pas accomplis, ne pouvaient s'accomplir que par la 'totalité' et la fin." (Ernaux in Thumerel, 2004, p. 246)

Chapter One – READER, AUTHOR, SUBJECT: THREE CONSTRUCTS AT PLAY IN ERNAUX'S RECENT WRITING

Introduction

This thesis is concerned on the one hand with Ernaux's recent writing and its explorations of the postmodern self/other model of subjectivity and, on the other, with the reader's construction of the author in a self/author relationship that occurs before, during, and after the reading process. These two premises are both large and require a defined theoretical framework. This chapter presents such a framework in two phases. Firstly, I shall provide an overview of the development of the concept of subjectivity from that of an essentialist, coherent, and unified entity to an ongoing, fragmented construction continuously revisited and revised in social and relational ways. I shall then link this fragmented notion of the subject with contemporary notions of the constructivist nature of the reading process. In this discussion reader/response theories along with Barthes' work on reading and interpretation

allow for the analysis of how reader and authorial subjectivity are constructed throughout and as a result of the reading process.

I Self and Other in Ernaux's Work

The Self/Other Dialectic and Ernaux's Early Work

At the heart of postmodern theory is the argument that there are no universal truths but instead many possible truths that can each be interrogated and called into question (Burr, 2003, p. 29), and two truths that have been called into question are the notion of a coherent, unified self and a coherent, unified author. Whereas Enlightenment ideals identified the individual as the centre of knowledge and the site of reasoned judgment, postmodern theory calls into question the independent existence of that self, claiming instead that it is a construct that is continuously subject to the social influence of others who surround it. It is with the views of the Enlightenment period that I begin the analysis of the developing nature of subjectivity, as it was during this period that the self became a construct in its own right, capable of reasoned thinking and free will.

Arguably, Hegel's reflections on self-consciousness mark the beginning of the postmodern subject (Hall, 2003, p. 51). Hegel's model marks a radical departure from that posited by Descartes, whose notion of the subject was primarily concerned with *consciousness* or the soul rather than the nature of what we might today term the subject. In his *Meditations*, Descartes writes about the relationship between the mind and body, speculating as to how they interact

and impact one another. Descartes' premise assumes that there is a self that is distinct from the physical body (which it inhabits) – and also distinct from the world by which it is surrounded: "[W]e conceive no body but as divisible, while the mind, or soul of man, can be conceived as indivisible; for truly we cannot conceive the moiety of a soul, as we can of the smallest of all bodies, so that we recognize that their natures are not only diverse, but even in a manner contrary" (Descartes, 1901, p. 110). In referring to the mind or soul, Descartes implies that it can exert agency upon the physical body and transcend it. It is this transcendence of the soul or self that would be deconstructed in the years to follow, including in contemporary discussions surrounding the distinction between mind and brain.¹ In the early nineteenth century, Hegel destabilized the notion of the subject as a unified, coherent entity with fixed relationships with the outside world. For Hegel, self-consciousness is an ongoing process in which the individual shapes others and in which the individual is, in turn, shaped by them:

Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or 'recognized.'. [...] Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has

¹ In *Creative Explorations*, Gauntlett draws upon neuroscience to illustrate that 'consciousness' is itself a construct rather than a stable entity. Gauntlett examines the work of Dennett, who in turn calls Descartes' *cogito* model into question (2007, p. 81), just as literary theorists have done. In deconstructing the notion of a transcendental, 'fixed' subjectivity represented by the mind or soul, Gauntlett compares consciousness to the brain's dashboard, suggesting that consciousness represents only the brain's highlights: one can only express that of which one is conscious at a given moment (2007, p. 90). Relatively recent experiments that allow researchers to view areas of activity within the brain have concluded that this consciousness is not always in synch with the motor functions of the brain that once were considered to require conscious decisions, such as the decision to lift a hand or sit down. In other words, there are actions that were long considered conscious that are, in fact, seemingly untriggered by the brain. Such advances in neurological study call into question the notion of a fixed, defined self firmly in control of one's actions on the physical level. Like Proust, some contemporary neuroscientists advocate that the self is based on memory which is, in turn, fragmented and triggered by internal and external cues. Information that constitutes memory, in turn, is generally stored in "like" categories rather than in a linear narrative form. Lehrer's recent publication, *Proust Was a Neuroscientist* (2007, p. 75-95), examines the links between Proust's exploration of the nature of memory as fragmented and based upon the moment of remembering – as well as being influenced by sensory stimulation such as smell or taste – and contemporary ideas about the way in which the brain functions. Specifically, stimulants such as smell or taste activate the hippocampus, which is now considered to be the centre for memory storage.

come *out of itself*. This has a twofold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self. (Hegel, 2003, p. 104)

Self-consciousness, argues Hegel, is inextricable from the construct of the other who, in turn, constructs the self. It is through interactions with others that the subject continuously creates an image of herself or himself. Without the other, then, the subject does not exist. Each exists for and through the other:

This process of self-consciousness in relation to another self-consciousness has [...] been represented as the action of one alone. But this action on the part of the one has itself the double significance of being at once its own action and the action of that other as well [...] The action then has a *double entente* not only in the sense that it is an act done to itself as well as to the other, but also in the sense that the act *simpliciter* is the act of the one as well as of the other regardless of their distinction. (Hegel, 2003, p. 105-6)

The self/other dialectic is not only an interactive process but also one that is never fully resolved. The argument that the subject is constructed in, through, and by interactions with others – and that the identity of others is simultaneously constructed during these same encounters – has also been a dominant one in theories of sociology, such as in Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). For Berger and Luckmann, the world is constructed in a social manner through social experiences, yet people experience the process as though the nature of the world is pre-determined. It is important, however, to acknowledge the extent to which the idea of the self-through-other construct has distinct undertones in Hegel.

This Hegelian idea is still relevant within the study of contemporary French literature, and particularly within the study of autobiography and autofiction. Benstock argues that autobiographical writing reveals “the impossibility of its own dream” (1988, p. 11), as it presumes that there is an external self that is knowable. The autobiographical text alone, presented as a stand-alone narrative of one’s life, is an illusory construct: once written, the text becomes a substitute written other with which the external author can interact and with which readers can engage. Each autobiographical text becomes a work of fiction that covers over the presumed knowledge of the self with which the text had begun. Autobiographical writing falls into the trap of implying that the self (or self-consciousness) is somehow able to be isolated from others – that it has an essence beyond its social existence.

Many of Ernaux’s works focus on self/other relationships. Indeed, as Hugueny-Léger argues in her thesis (2007) and in her monograph (2009), Ernaux “remet en question les frontières entre soi et les autres” (2009, p. 8). Hugueny-Léger devotes considerable attention to this matter and provides an excellent analysis of the relational *je* in Ernaux’s early work (2009, p. 36-68), focusing on the relationships between Ernaux and her parents, romantic interests, and anonymous others. In *LFG*, for instance, Ernaux’s deferred self is the product of uneasy tensions between career expectations of a trained professional *vis-à-vis* those of a bourgeois husband and the manner in which her social and personal circumstances are societally constructed along lines of gender and class, here embodied by a bourgeois husband. *LP* and *UF* are, arguably, as much explorations of Ernaux’s subjectivity in relation to the parent about whom the text is written as they are about the parent in question: as Hutton has argued,

"although *Une femme* ostensibly charts the life of the author's mother, it is Ernaux herself who emerges most powerfully as the text's subject" (Hutton, 1998, p. 231). In the case of *PS*, Ernaux is in a passionate relationship with the foreign lover identified as "A." through whom Ernaux constructs her subjectivity. This all-consuming passion is seemingly directed by the lover, as his presence or absence dictates what Ernaux is or is not willing to do. In this way, Ernaux uses the experience of constructing herself through objectification by another as reflecting the implications of losing oneself to another within the confines of a romantic relationship. This willingness constitutes not only an embracing of sexual liberation, indicating that Ernaux willfully appropriates a lover's discourse as elaborated upon by Barthes (which I shall later discuss in Chapter Four) but also indicates an awareness that one's subjectivity is dependent upon and subject to relationships with the other: the presence and absence of A. not only allows the passion to be constructed (through writing) but also permits Ernaux herself to engage with her own construct of self through her construction of A. As McIlvanney suggests, in Ernaux's writing, "the self is always implicated in the portrayal of the Other, whether that Other takes the form of the narrator's parents, her lover or the everyday men and women she observes in public places" (McIlvanney, 2006, p. 7).

Constructing 'Ernaux' Through Language and Gender

With the questioning of the unity of the subject and the questioning of truth, there naturally follows an interrogation of the very language through which such questions are posed. As Auster (cited in Thomas, 2005, p. 118) writes, "Le langage n'est pas la vérité. Il est notre manière d'exister dans l'univers." Following the rise of the social sciences in the nineteenth

century, psychoanalysis sought to examine the subject scientifically. Lacan, revising Freud, posited that the unconscious is structured like a language in that it is as fragmented and unstable as language itself; furthermore, the unconscious cannot be reproduced anywhere. The repercussions on the criticism of texts are that language used even by writers is not to be trusted. Language used in writing can only act as a substitute for the always split and lacking subject who uses this very language to compensate for this lack. The writer's use of language is always an attempt to compensate for this loss. The unconscious, the repository of human emotions, is largely the product of the subject's early life, when the child realizes its *otherness* from the mother and father. This initial rupture results in a negotiation of identity best represented through the acquisition of language, or entry into the symbolic order.

Lacan likens the negotiation of the individual subject's relationship to the world to the process of acquiring language: the subject is forced to submit to a pre-existing order, symbolized by what Lacan termed the *nom du père*, in which language is acquired by having to submit to a pre-existing order that characterizes language. The relationship between signifier (the word itself) and signified (that to which the word refers) is arbitrary, but assimilation of language reflects the subject's subordination to the world. Following Lacan's model, the infant's mirror stage leads to the subject's recognition that it is distinct from others who surround her or him (Lacan, 1966, p. 92-9). This is a destabilizing event from which one finds it difficult – or, indeed, impossible – to recover. Upon entry into the symbolic order, concretized by the acquisition of language, the subject comes to recognize itself as separate from the world in which it exists. The symbolic order, the establishment of an imperfect relationship with

language, symbolizes the subject accepting its role within the universe by assimilating the language to which it has been exposed. The subject also uses that same language to structure its own existence. The subject is always lacking and seeking the unity that it had thought to enjoy in the imaginary stage. This desire is represented in Lacanian psychoanalysis by partial objects that stand in for the initial lack from which the subject can never recover. This other can never be found, as the unity that the subject had previously enjoyed in the imaginary is no longer possible: once it has recognized its existence as separate from the mother and governed by the existence of a pre-existing symbolic, the subject is forever more a split subject whose unity is lost. The subject might be likened to the contemporary blog – a text which is continuously being written and re-framed in real time, never reaching a conclusion or totality.

Lacan further posits that language is the vehicle through which the subject can gain flawed access to the world and through which the world can access the subject. Because each speech utterance constitutes a lack, using language is a stand-in for an always absent other. If the subject cannot be unified through the use of the language, then the subject might as well use language effectively and create an aesthetically pleasing product with it. Language, in turn, is both borrowed and structured by the speaking subject in a manner similar to how a text is both read and written by a reader. In thinking about Lacan's ideas, then, one might well wonder what the point is of exploring the subject at all if such an exploration is always to reinforce its split nature. In the analysis of texts, however, there is an immediate application: writers writing in the first person are prone to being analyzed as though their texts come to take the

place of the other – in other words, their texts bear witness to a lack. Texts can be read with a view to finding repetitions, interesting word choices, and recurring images.

Despite Ernaux's frequent resistance to the method (*PS*, p. 31-32, for instance), several critics have analyzed both 'Ernaux' and her texts in psychoanalytic terms, and I survey their analyses in much more detail in Chapter Three. Psychoanalytic analysis applied to the study of literature can often result in a more personal diagnosis of the author rather than interpretation of a text, such as in Doucet's analysis of Ernaux's early works through the perspective of Freud's "Notes Upon a Mystic Writing Pad." Doucet argues that Ernaux's writing represents the moment that her consciousness and the unconsciousness intersect, and their intersection marks the creation of Freud's subject position.² As a writer of first-person texts, Ernaux's constructed identity becomes particularly problematic, as the distinction between external author and writing subject is less explicit. Doucet applies Freud's psychoanalytic perspective to the act of writing when she argues that each Ernaux text represents the author's subject position at a particular moment (Doucet, 1999, p. 16) and that, for Ernaux, a "loss of balance occurs early in life. Subsequent works can be seen as an attempt to reestablish continuity within herself" (Doucet, 1999, p. 27). Furthermore, for Doucet, Ernaux's first three texts represent a "(de)construction of self" (Doucet iii), while a re-appropriation occurs in the middle set of texts (*LP*, *UF*, *PS*, *LH*). The use of the mystic writing pad model captures the psychoanalytic premise that an original lack is at the heart of the split subject, here termed by Doucet as the "loss of balance." Language seeks to repair that initial break. For a writer such

² As illustrated later in this chapter, this term takes up a dual function: for Pearce, "subject position" means taking up a relationship with the text and its characters.

as Ernaux who continually writes and re-writes the self, subsequent texts can be read as a way of attempting to regain unity. Hugueny-Léger (2007, p. 33) makes the interesting argument that rather than treating the self as other, Ernaux's writing constantly navigates the boundaries between self and former self, as Ernaux reflects upon incidents described and progressively re-approaches them. At the key moment in which the writing self intersects with the former self, Ernaux is obliged to write about herself as an other. I want to suggest that through her writing process, Ernaux instead re-constructs her subjectivity *as she imagines it to have existed* principally in relationship to significant others about whom she writes in her work.

A central criticism that one might make against psychoanalysis is that it excludes from the equation questions of class and gender. As I illustrate in Chapter Three, Ernaux has suggested, for instance, that psychoanalysis is not an appropriate hermeneutic for her writing, and McIlvanney (2001, p. 77) states that this may be due to Ernaux's belief that it represents an example of middle class mis-appropriation of working-class experiences. I shall also discuss the debate over the use of psychoanalysis in the analysis of Ernaux's work in Chapter Three. Feminist psychoanalysts such as Karen Horney (1967) called into question the distinctly male perspective upon which such theories are based: it is the father, for instance, who deprives the child of the object of desire (the mother), and intervenes to embody the phallus. The phallus, in turn, represents the symbolic order into which the child enters, the boy entering by way of symbolic castration. This psychoanalytic Oedipal model through which the child accesses language and structures its relationship with the world is, in other words, a self/other relationship developed with the father. The mother plays a role in the infant's recognition of

its separateness from the world, as the maternal body acts as a partial object.³ This entry into the symbolic order thereby accords great importance to the role of the father, who sanctions and symbolizes an access point to pre-constituted language. This model excludes the mother from any significant role. Object-relations psychoanalysts such as Melanie Klein instead argue that it is instead through the mother that identity is navigated and constructed. Nancy Chodorow, in turn, explores the role of mothering and the construction of subjectivity as a self/other relationship between a woman and her mother. Throughout adolescence in particular, Chodorow argues, a girl will alternate between acceptance and rejection of the mother, as the mother represents infantile dependence (Chodorow, 1978, p. 138). In this way, women develop a relational self. As I shall later discuss in Chapter Three, this self/(m)other tension is explored at length in many of Ernaux's works, particularly in *JNS* and *UF*. Thomas and Webb (1999, p. 30) adopt the ideas of Hite (1992) in suggesting that a model of female subjectivity in a self/other dynamic has often resulted in a distinctly *male* exploration of the subject, as women are often depicted as men's other: recent women's writers have attempted, Hite argues, instead to "break out of these narrow and constricting notions of identity" (Hite, 1992, xiv) and, as I suggested in the introduction, Sheringham has argued that feminine autobiographical writing focuses on the role of others in self-construction – as opposed to the male "unified" autobiographical writing (2000, p. 189).

³ Ernaux incorporates this premise of psychoanalysis in *SP*, as she likens her periods of separation from *S.* to that of the "terreur sans nom" or the infant's recognition of both the mother's absence and the infant's separation from the external world (*SP*, p. 224-5).

Further to re-constituting the important role of the mother within the field of psychoanalysis, other feminist writers investigate the process of gendered identity in which female subjectivities are constructed based upon prescribed gender roles imposed upon them by a patriarchal symbolic order. Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote in *Le deuxième sexe* that one is not born a woman but instead becomes one,⁴ thereby arguing in a manner similar to Hite that women act as other to men, and Irigaray, a former associate of Lacan's, builds upon this notion of constructed gender identity in which the woman is man's other (Irigaray, 1985, p. 68-85). Irigaray argues that gender is assigned through language, and within the structure of language, man is subject, just as Freud had written about femininity from a male perspective. In drawing upon Horney, Klein, and Jones, Irigaray further underscores the implications for language, claiming that the patriarchal order into which the speaking subject enters acts as a filter that perpetuates pre-determined structures and social orders. In this way, Irigaray, much like Kristeva, argues that men speak with oneness, in a pre-determined, somewhat institutionalized, male symbolic order, which Lacan terms the symbolic. Further to this point, Irigaray argues that women adopt a more pluralistic relationship to language that is ungoverned by a master signifier. In this light, women cannot be subjugated to a pre-determined symbolic order, symbolized by the phallus, but instead constitute their own relationships to language. For Irigaray, female subjectivity is structured on the basis of a self/other dialectic with the mother: "je te ressemble, tu me ressembles. Je me regarde en toi,

⁴ Roudinesco argues that Beauvoir was one of the first to link psychoanalysis and emancipation and that feminists had largely ignored Freudian ideas during the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, Lacan and Beauvoir corresponded while Beauvoir was writing *Le deuxième sexe*. Beauvoir read an early essay of Lacan's and contacted him with further questions. When she telephoned Lacan to discuss her ideas, Lacan responded that it would take five to six years in order to clarify their discussions. When Beauvoir instead proposed a series of interviews, Lacan declined (Roudinesco, 1990, p. 512).

tu te regardes en moi" (Irigaray, 1979, p. 10), and it is only when women are recognized as desiring subjects (rather than simply recognized for traditional mother/daughter roles) that men and women can be seen as equally autonomous rather than subjugated to a male economy of language. Indeed, as Smith (1987) suggests, women's autobiographical writing has long constituted an "out-of-body" experience, as women have felt obliged to write from the subject position of a man or, I might suggest, from the perspective of imagined unity. In Ernaux's case, Day has suggested (2000a, p. 221) that in writing *UF* and *JNS*, Ernaux creates a dialogue between mother and daughter that had not existed during Ernaux's mother's lifetime, and in doing so, Ernaux "open[s] herself to her mother's existence as a sexual woman in a way she had previously avoided."

My initial suggestion that Ernaux explores her own self-construction through her depictions of others is not new, nor is the suggestion that Ernaux's texts interrogate the limits of the unified male autobiography and tend more toward the relational, feminine model. McIlvanney, for instance, suggests that in Ernaux's work, the self is always implicated in the portrayal of others and further suggests that Ernaux's interest in others is anchored in an interest in the self, as the other promotes greater self-awareness (McIlvanney, 2001, p. 11). Hugueny-Léger suggests (2007, p. 228) that although all Ernaux's works are concerned with the self/other relationship, the *journaux extérieurs* (*JDD* and *LVE*) are most concerned with this idea.⁵ No doubt Ernaux's use of Rousseau in the *exergue* of the work – "Notre vrai moi n'est pas tout entier en nous" –

⁵ As I mentioned in the Introduction, Hugueny-Léger's thesis makes a significant contribution to the discussion of the self/other dynamic within Ernaux's texts. Her thesis draws upon Rimbaud's famous declaration that "Je est un autre," as does Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse* (Barthes, 1973, p. 123).

helps establish this argument. An example of Ernaux's relational model of subjectivity is evidenced by Ernaux's observation of a man on the train whose hands are worn and stained in white from what she speculates is years of work. Ernaux comments: "Etre un intellectuel, c'est cela aussi, n'avoir jamais éprouvé le besoin de se séparer de ses mains énervées ou abîmées par le travail" (*JDD*, p. 44). In writing about the man on the train, Ernaux simultaneously writes about herself: the anonymous man underscores Ernaux's identity as a *transfuge de classe*. This use of the anonymous other in order to construct a relational self may also remind the reader of the final passage of *LP* (p. 113-114) in which the author encounters a young cashier who had once been her student. As Thomas suggests (2005, p. 38-9), Ernaux's father had transported her between cultures, and through writing, they are linked, the young cashier plays a similar role: like the young woman, Ernaux also earns her living by using her hands, albeit in a much different way. Ernaux constructs a former self based upon encounters with others in relational ways. Ernaux acknowledges this relational self in one of her many intertextual references in *JDD*:

D'autres fois, j'ai retrouvé des gestes et des phrases de ma mère dans une femme attendant à la caisse du supermarché. C'est donc au-dehors, dans les passagers du métro ou du R.E.R., les gens qui empruntent l'escalator des Galeries Lafayette et d'Auchan, qu'est déposée mon existence passée. Dans des individus anonymes qui ne soupçonnent pas qu'ils détiennent une part de mon histoire, dans des visages, des corps, que je ne revois jamais. Sans doute suis-je moi-même, dans la foule des rues et des magasins, porteuse de la vie des autres. (*JDD*, p. 106-7)

In writing about others, Ernaux not only constructs them but also finds fragments of herself in those constructions. For Ernaux, this dialectic constantly at work in her writing is summed up by the impossibility of separating "un moi profond d'un moi social. Et il est vrai que je ne pense

jamais 'moi et le monde' mais 'moi dans le monde'" (Ernaux in Fell & Welch, 2009, p. 13). The interpretation of Ernaux's use of language as reflecting a fundamentally fragmented yet relational subject is abundant, although Ernaux criticism has long struggled with determining the extent to which Ernaux's writing is representative of gender issues as opposed to those of class. I shall explore this question at length also in Chapter Three. Within Ernaux's world at all times, however, are her readers, who also play a role in constructing 'Ernaux.' It is to the role of these readers in the construction of 'Ernaux' that I shall now turn.

II Imagining 'Ernaux'

The Author Is Dead; Long Live Her Construct

In the first part of the chapter, I argued that the subject is imbued in the other and gave evidence of the manner in which Ernaux explores this dynamic in her early work. In this portion of the chapter, I shall argue that we, in turn, are inextricably imbued in 'Ernaux' or our constructions of her. Just as postmodern thought questions the notion of an essentialist self as well as the relationship between language and reality, so, too, have authors been questioned as the source of all meaning of their texts. When Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault appeared on the literary scene in the 1960s, the author was challenged as being the unified and unquestioned source of understanding of text who could provide a central and unquestionable meaning to a given text written by her or his pen. Instead, the task falls to the reader, much like the subject, to construct the meaning of the work based on individual interaction with the

text. In short, the unity of the author underwent the same assault during this period as the subject has been undergoing for quite some time.

Barthes' *La Mort de l'auteur* questions the role of the author as the source of meaning. In this significant essay first presented in 1967, Barthes cautions against using the text as a passageway into the consciousness – or unconscious – of an author, as to do so would be to constrict the interpretation of the work. The reading process in this model, Barthes argues, would amount to the reader simply guessing an author's intent. Rather than adopting the Kantian model of the book as an intellectual unit that constructs the status of an author, Barthes suggests that the text that the author produces is rewritten with every reading and is born simultaneously at the moment it is read (or re-read). The author is dismissed as the ultimate authority source, echoing Nietzsche's questioning of the master signifier, or source of meaning, and the reader is assigned the task of providing that meaning instead through engagement of her or his own subjectivity with the text. Texts, like individual signifiers, do not have precise signifieds: the text has no fixed meaning assigned by a higher power. Barthes illustrates this point in *S/Z*, in which he analyzes Balzac's *Sarrasine*, declaring that the text is a "galaxy of signifiers" (Barthes, 1970, p. 9) rather than signifieds. In this argument, Barthes echoes Derrida's criticism of Rousseau: Derrida suggests that writing refuses a pre-determination of meaning, arguing that signifiers constantly defer such definitive, transcendental meaning (Derrida, 1967, p. 42-64). In short, the text is just as lost as its author.

Foucault, in turn, examined the authorial construct in his essay *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?* by analyzing the notion of the author as a construction of the reader. Arguing that the author is a function of discourse, Foucault implies that it is the text that creates its author. In tracing the history of the role of an author in the reception and interpretation of texts, Foucault concludes that the author plays a role in legitimizing a text, therefore creating a power dynamic: writing by a certain author, for instance, might be seen as more legitimate than another, thereby seemingly equipping the reader of such a text with more intellectual capital. However, this image of the author is created by readers themselves, some of whom produce their own writing on authors. This construction of the author is a part of the reading process, but the construction of the author is as much a result of self-examination as it is based on known biographical information about the external author. Foucault argues:

[...] these aspects of an individual, which we designate as an author (or which comprise an individual as an author), are projections, in terms always more or less psychological, of our way of handling texts: in the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice. (Foucault, 1970, p. 125)

In this ongoing process, the reader is actively engaged: she or he projects her or himself upon the text. The image of the external author legitimizes the text and provides agency. The author-function is increasingly linked to questions of literary classification and authenticity, as authorship is a relatively recent concern within the field of textual study and carries with it the extra-textual baggage that is often the result of a published author's work.

The reader, like the musician, is both the consumer of the text and an interpreter who helps concretize it anew during each performance or reading event. The author, or composer,

becomes a ghostly echo who is both revealed and re-constructed in the playing or reading process. Imagining the author is further complicated in autobiographical writing. Barthes, in particular, questions the extent to which autobiographical texts can reveal their author. In writing about writing, Barthes playfully explores the extent to which the autobiographical project can be trusted in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975). Robbe-Grillet further questions the reliability of the autobiographical text in his later work, *Le miroir qui revient* (1985). In reading these works, the reader becomes alert to the fact that the narrative voice is not all-knowing and omniscient but is instead perpetually engaged in a process of self-interrogation and self-construction.

Reader-Response

Reader-response theory emerged in the 1970s drawing on the work of formalists, structuralists, and phenomenologists. If theories that I have examined thus far looked to deconstruct the author and the text as unified wholes, then reader-response theory can be said to demystify the myth of the unified reader, or audience, of a work. The reader, like the text, is a constant process, and it is for this reason that one might interchange the terms reader and reading subject. Rather than determining the meaning of a text by examining the work as a whole within the context of the period during which it was written, as advocated in the model of the hermeneutic circle by Ingarden in *The Literary Work of Art* (1931), Iser considers the reader as having the liberty to construct her or his own meaning within the text. The reader does so by inserting her or his own ideas into the text. Iser describes reading a text as an event

or process, complete with starts, stops, and re-readings rather than as an activity spent in isolation from the everyday surroundings that can interrupt the reading process and, naturally, affect it. Building on Frye's notion of the independence of the critic from the artist, in which the author brings words and the reader brings meaning to the text (1957, p. 5), Iser went a step further in *The Act of Reading* in stating that the reader communicates with the text through the author's use of gaps (Iser, 1978, p. 168).⁶ These gaps function as access points to the text that allow the reader to find a place within the work and to engage with it. In constituting meaning, Iser argues, the reader is also "constituting himself" (Iser, 1978, p. 151). By inserting herself or himself into the text, the reader is impelled to her or his own construct of self:

[...] reading, as the activation of spontaneity, plays a not unimportant part in the process of 'becoming conscious.' For this spontaneity is activated against the background of existing consciousness, the marginal situation of which during the reading process serves only to bring to consciousness this same spontaneity, which has been aroused and given form on different terms from those shaping the original consciousness. (Iser, 1978, p. 159)

The text provides the opportunity for the reader to engage in self-exploration in a spontaneous way, activated by the reading event that allows the unconscious to become conscious. During the reading event, the reader's "wandering viewpoint" (Iser, 1978, p. 116) allows the reader to evoke images from her or his past experiences in order to interpret the text. This act of "image-building" (Iser, 1978, p. 140) allows the reader to see the world as an object and achieve a deeper understanding after the completion of the reading process. While engaged in image-

⁶ The term 'gap' has also been used within the context of Marxist literary criticism. Eagleton summarizes the work of Machery as follows: "It is in the significant *silences* of a text, in its gaps and absences that the presence of the ideology can be most positively felt. It is these silences which the critic must make 'speak.'" The implication here is that 'gaps' refers to much more than the physical space on the page. 'Gaps' signifies here all that a text does not say" (Eagleton, 1976, p. 34).

building, the reader views the world as an object exterior to the work. The reading process allows the reader to view the world in a fresher light, or awakening, at the end of the reading process. During and after the reading process, the world, and the reader's relationship to it, can be re-assessed.

The process of image-building is nevertheless firmly controlled by the author, and Iser posits that some readers are better able to pick up on the signs than others. Iser argues that throughout the writing process, an implied reader who is able to "embod[y] all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect" (Iser, 1978, p. 34) is constructed by the author. The real reader, in turn, may or may not conform to the role of ideal reader. In this way, Iser argues that reading can be all-inclusive in that readers from varying backgrounds might be able to interpret and appropriate a text. This perspective on the ideal reader is similar to the model posited by Booth,⁷ in which the reader constructs the author of the work based on the values that she or he is able to detect throughout the text. Booth suggests (1963, p. 71) that it is ultimately in accepting or rejecting these (I would suggest imagined) values that readers determine their response to a text. Iser allows the reader to be selective, and the reader is able to succeed to varying degrees in interpreting a text. Iser affirms this role in *The Range of Interpretation* when he explores Schleiermacher's hermeneutics and the notion of divination in grasping the individuality of the author and classifying her or him through the text (Iser, 2000, p. 51).

⁷ Booth also uses the term implied author in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and, similarly to Foucault, argued that the reader will construct the author throughout the reading process. Booth is, however, most concerned with how the reader constructs the author's set of beliefs and values through the text, arguing that "we infer him as an ideal, literary, created version of the real man; he is the sum of his own choices" (Booth, 1963, p. 74-5).

Iser further asserts that the relationship between text and reader is dialectical, as the text also compels the reader to achieve a greater understanding of self, which Iser terms the significance of the work (Iser, 1978, p. 151). The significance of the text is a bold step forward in that the text is given a role to play in the construction of readerly subjectivity, although it is the author's hand that firmly guides the reader along the way, as it is the text that enables this exploration. If the author loses authority, argues Iser, the author is nevertheless the architect that supplies the reader with the framework in which her or his exploration of subjectivity is to take place. Clearly, for Iser, although the reader has been empowered, the author is by no means dead.

I want to suggest that Ernaux's use of gaps in her work facilitates reader appropriation.

Ernaux's texts began to make use of gaps with *LP*, and these gaps continue to appear in all *textes concertés*. The texts are, at times, interrupted with large blank spaces, usually followed by a short sentence. While Thomas argues that the gaps in the text convey the fragmentary nature of memory and identity (Thomas, 2005, p. 6), I want to add that the minimalist nature of some passages in Ernaux's texts places increased importance upon the choice of words, and the gaps that separate these passages may also intensify the openings through which the reader can add her or his own marginalia. For the critical or academic reader, these gaps may allow her or him to establish a link between the text and a particular theoretical approach based on previous readings, as I shall discuss in the next chapter. Further to Iser's argument, however, for the 'lay' reader, the gaps may well play a self-referential function. Gaps may also

open up a connection with a deeply personal experience that allows the reader to appropriate the text. The gaps function as a point of entry for the reader so that the experiences described become those not only of Ernaux but also those of Iser's reading subject, as she or he may reflect upon similar experiences and emotions and then appropriate the language of the text in order to concretize them. For instance, despite the fact that Ernaux documents distinctly feminine experiences in her writing, Ernaux has been told by some men that they identify with them (Thomas, 1999, p. 128), while still other men have said that they did not know that women also undergo similar experiences (McIlvanney, 2001, p. 65). The gaps and their role in permitting entrance into the text allow the reading experience to be one of engagement and construction rather than purely of consumption. The role of gaps is so important in her work that Ernaux confessed that *L'O* was published largely as a result of the fact that the lack of gaps in the initial publication of the text in *Le Monde* detracted significantly from the finished work. Ernaux also addressed the need to re-publish *L'O* as a separate text in an interview with Fort:

Les blancs me paraissent essentiels et il y en avait dans le texte que j'avais donné au *Monde* cet été, qui ont tous été supprimés sans qu'on me demande mon avis à la publication! Je dois dire que ma frustration et ma colère ont été telles que j'ai aussitôt décidé de réclamer une publication sous la forme du livre pour le printemps. Les blancs sont des plages, des espaces qui s'ouvrent dans une écriture que je sens moi-même comme très dense, à la limite de la violence. (Fort, 2002, p. 990)

Ernaux also told this story in her correspondence with Jeannet (*L'ECUC*, p. 128) and repeated it at the Ernaux conference in 2008. It is clear that for Ernaux, the silences and spaces are significant. While they may be deliberately placed by the author, however, the manner in which they are used is left in the hands of the reader, and Ernaux has not made pronouncements as to how she wishes these gaps to be interpreted. Rather, she has insisted

only on the importance of their presence. I shall further explore Ernaux's use of gaps in her recent writing in Chapter Four.

Jauss, Iser's colleague at the Konstanz School of Literary Studies, further deconstructed the notion of a rigid, author-based interpretation of the text in his analysis of the role of literary history in the reading event. Indeed, there are many links between the work of Iser and Jauss, as they wrote in close physical proximity and during the same period of time.⁸ Jauss, like Iser, contends in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982) that no text is read in a vacuum. Rather, readers have a background against which texts are read. As advocated by Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, just as history cannot be reduced to a positivist, historical objectivist set of facts, neither can a text be reduced to a prescriptive and irreducible meaning. As such, Jauss questioned the *status quo* of literary hermeneutics. Jauss was, for instance, interested in investigating how literary canons are formed rather than in an analysis of the canon itself. Such investigation requires an analysis of how meaning and significance are constructed by readers in various contexts. For each reader, there are previous readings as well as other experiences brought to the text.⁹ This interaction of text with experience is termed the literary event, and it is the literary experience on the part of the reader, critic, or author that mediates the coherence of literature as an event (Jauss, 1982, p. 22). Meanings of a text, argues Jauss, are not frozen in time, but they shift based on the environment in which texts are read and the

⁸ It should also be mentioned that in outlining theories that have been of interest to her, Ernaux specifically points out those of Jauss (*L'ECUC*, p. 91).

⁹ Jauss points out that this thesis is a central premise of Picon's *Introduction à une esthétique de la littérature* (Jauss, 1982, p. 196).

exposure that the reading subject has to other literature. The meaning is also the result of interaction between different historical periods:

It makes no difference whether the conventionally accepted answer of a text has been given explicitly, ambivalently, or indeterminately by the author himself; or whether it is an interpretation of the work that first arose at its reception. The question implied in the answer presented by the work of art [...] is now set within a changed horizon of aesthetic experience, and so is no longer asked as it was originally by the past text, but is the result of an interaction between present and past. (Jauss, 1982, p. 69)

In seemingly liberating the author of responsibility, Jauss, like Iser, nevertheless asserts that some interpretations are more valid than others and that the text contains within it clues to the most appropriate interpretation.

Jauss, like Iser, is also concerned with the problematic nature of literary history and the interpretation of past texts in present contexts. In explaining how one is to understand literature from the past, Jauss explains that the reader can best understand the text if "one foregrounds it against those works that the author explicitly or implicitly presupposed his contemporary audience to know" (Jauss, 1982, p. 28). For Jauss, while there is a preferable meaning contained somewhere in the text, the meaning may well change with time. Jauss terms this interpretation of the text, the only manner in which the reader can access the text, in fact, its "concretization," a term credited to Vodička, a Prague structuralist, and it refers to the picture of the work in the consciousness of those "for whom the work is an esthetic object" (Jauss, 1982, p. 73). One might well wonder exactly who determines whether a concretization is accepted – presumably, it falls into the lap of the critic who will have a superior ability to assess it. Instead of having recourse to the all-knowing author, then, acceptable

interpretations are to be determined by privileged readers only. For the reading subject, the literary event acts more as an opportunity for her or him to expand what Jauss terms a "horizon of expectations," which suggests the possibility of a continuous development of literary experience that the reading subject can acquire through exposure to literature: reading allows for an expansion in horizon, as a negation of familiar experiences is possible based on new readings, and the change in horizon is a criterion for assessing the aesthetic value of a text (Iser, 1982, p. 25).

Jauss, like Iser, presents a workable model for explaining how Ernaux successfully avoids classification yet remains popular: Ernaux is able to write works that relate directly to her readers and then expand the readerly experience by symbolically expanding literary horizons. Thomas' study of readers' letters to the author (Thomas, 1999, Chapter 5 and Thomas, 2005, Chapter VI) makes use of Sara Mills' concept of authentic realism, in which Mills argues that readers seek some correspondence between their own lives and that recounted in the literary text and further asserts that it is the level of authenticity by which the texts are judged. Ernaux both empowers her readers and limits their power to control fully the reception of the work. I would argue that Ernaux's writing is not only concerned with rigid reader identification with the work – which would amount to projection – but also with expanding the limits and horizons of their expectations by challenging readers to engage with their own self-constructions. In so doing, Ernaux not only allows herself to be appropriated and re-constructed by her readers but also facilitates a sense of community in which other readers may experience the same constructive process – ostensibly of discovery, but perhaps best described as parallel processes

of self-construction. Many of these tendencies continue to present themselves in reader engagement with Ernaux's work, and I shall discuss these tendencies and others in Chapter Five. At this point, it is to the notions of community and self-construction and their relationships with the reading experience that I shall now turn.

Interpretive Communities

Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?* arguably goes a stage further in liberating the reader from authorial oversight and attempts to remove the authority of the critic or privileged reader. Instead of constructing preferred meanings to be found within the text, Fish considers literature as being a kinetic notion meant to be questioned and re-evaluated with each reading of a text. Like Iser, Fish characterizes reading as an event, and it is the experience itself of reading that constitutes meaning: text is the catalyst that permits the construction of a text that exists independently of the words on the page. In Fish's model, the reader is given more power than that advocated by Iser and Jauss who, to a large extent, see the reader as a decoder for a scrambled text. For Fish, the reader is responsible for producing her or his meaning of a text during the reading event, as the text does not contain embedded answers. This interpretation, argues Fish, is what creates intention (Fish, 1980, p. 163). Each interpreting event - a class discussion, a conference presentation, or a solitary reading - represents an interpretation of the text. In this way, the truth of a text is merely a construct (Fish, 1980, p. 140).

If this model seems somewhat conducive to interpretive anarchy, Fish finds a suitable replacement for the author or critic as the site of meaning production in communities of readers. Fish posits the model of the interpretive community as the unit in which there can be consensus achieved as to how a text is to be interpreted. Within an interpretive community, interpretive strategies and interpretive acts allow a text to be written. This set of learned acts and strategies gives the text its structure. At the time that Fish wrote, interpretive communities could already take many forms – a reading group, a university seminar, or even a fan club of a particular author, for instance. In Fish's model, interaction with a community of other readers allows the text to have a meaning constructed that reflects a wider variety of views. It would be natural, then, that interpretive communities occasionally be at odds with each other – perhaps even calling each other superficial (Fish, 1980, p. 171), but the model of the interpretive community permits multiple interpretations without specifying any interpretation as being more valuable than another.

While perhaps the most liberated of reader-response theorists, Fish might be criticized for making the text itself almost irrelevant. Once it has been read, the text can be re-constructed with few points of reference. The text is concretized anew with each discussion. It is also unclear how the relationship between the interpretive community and the individual reader is established. Because reading is often a private and solitary affair, not all readers have recourse to others reading the same text. Yet this model of the interpretive community is an important concept when discussing Ernaux's work. Nowhere, perhaps, is the notion of a community more evident than in the realm of critics' published work, but in a contemporary context, it is

all the more tangible in the online forum. I shall return to each of these important issues in Chapter Five.

Pearce's Role of Feeling

Pearce's view of the interaction between reader and text is a less theoretically oriented and more lyrical model of textual interpretation or literary hermeneutics than those already examined. Pearce further deconstructs the notion of a unified reading of a text as a static event quietly executed in isolation. Pearce criticizes Iser, Jauss, and Fish, as she believes that the relationship that they have established between reader and text necessitates a "respectable" reader with discrimination, power and literary capital, and this reader's only role is to connect the dots that the author has drawn (Pearce, 1997, p. 10). As such, the models negate the important role of feeling during the reading process. Pearce's model is designed to be inclusive of any reader. She counters previous models firstly by advancing the argument that readers do not interact with the text in isolation and away from their everyday lives. Instead, the text constitutes a part of their social lives, and the reader brings experiences and emotions to the reading of the text that are beyond the scope of literature. Readers embark upon a relationship with the text, and in reading, they seek a role for themselves in it. Readers are thereby able to inscribe fragments of their lives into the text while simultaneously inscribing the text into their lives: readers write, and are written by, the text. As a result, readers can adopt what Pearce terms "subject positions" that can change upon different readings of a text: while the characters and story of a text are forever condemned to repeat

themselves, the “ghostly reader” (Pearce, 1997, p. 24) can drift from one viewpoint to another – as a ghost, however, the reader is forever invisible and free to enter and leave the text at will.

Pearce argues that the relationship that a reader establishes during the reading process is with interpretation itself instead of with the text: in adopting Barthes’ vocabulary from *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*, as I shall do in Chapter Four, Pearce advocates a *ménage-à-trois* dynamic in which the reader must adopt a subject position in order to enter the text (Pearce, 1997, p. 131). The subject position enables the creation of a textual other through whom the reader participates in, and writes, the text. What interests Pearce is the nature of this relationship and the interplay that the interaction between reader and text has upon the structuring of the author function (1997, p. 105) and the creation of interpretive communities.¹⁰ While the text sets the framework for this relationship, the reader chooses to what extent she or he will participate during each reading event (Pearce, 1997, p. 49). In characterizing the relationship between text and reader as a dialogic one, Pearce argues that the text positions the reader as much as the reader positions the text. As in Barthes’ model of the romance, the reader initially falls in love with the scene (in Pearce, 1997, p. 85); identifies an other to whom she or he is attracted; engages in the act of subject positioning; and, finally, suffers possible anxiety, frustration, jealousy, or disappointment. Throughout this chain of sufferings, the reader may have recourse to writing or editing of the text in order to deal with displeasure with the text. At times, the reader will wait for the author to appear – that is, the author as she or he has been imagined in the eyes of the reader– but, of course, this author never does appear.

¹⁰ For Pearce, Fish’s interpretive community becomes a text itself: it is the relationship with the interpretive community itself that constitutes the formation of meaning (Pearce, 1997, p. 213).

This romantic model is, as I shall argue, present in three of Ernaux's recent texts – *SP*, *L'O*, and *L'UDLP* – and I shall further discuss the importance of this relationship model in Chapter Four.

Removing the Degrees of Separation

Miller, to whose work I shall again refer in Chapter Two, argues that that the reader removes the degrees of separation between herself or himself and the writing subject of the autobiographical text. During the reading process, Miller suggests that there is tension between "what is on the page and what is in [the reader's head]: your 'you' becomes the text" (Miller, 2002, p. 12). Miller argues that since Barthes declared that the author is dead and has been replaced by the reader, the reader finds herself or himself at a loss: instead of looking for a story in a text, readers look instead to find the now absent provider of meaning. In constructing the author and simultaneously removing degrees of separation between herself or himself and that author, the reader is able to find a more interesting life:

Other people's memories help give you back your life, reshape your story, restart the memory process. "Your life story is only as good as the last memoir you read." And my memoir is also about you. (Miller, 2002, p. 26)¹¹

In Ernaux's case, there is a particular awareness of the power that she has at her disposal. In her correspondence with Jeannet, Ernaux describes her awareness of this process, which she terms *transsubstantiation*, further explaining that:

¹¹ In a letter that Ernaux writes to Miller, Ernaux says that the writer is like a "bearer of signs, signs that are also, like sandwich boards, advertisements to be read by others, who themselves are bearers of signs" (Miller, 2002, p. 114).

Je sens, je sais, qu'au moment même où j'écris, ce n'est pas *ma* jalousie qui est dans le texte, mais *de la* jalousie, c'est-à-dire quelque chose d'immatériel, de sensible et d'intelligible que les autres pourront peut-être s'approprier. Mais cette transsubstantiation ne s'opère pas d'elle-même, elle est produite par l'écriture, la manière d'écrire, non en miroir du moi mais comme la recherche d'une vérité hors de soi. (*L'ECUC*, p. 113)

Upon publication, the work no longer belongs to the author, and the text becomes more than her own life's story: the texts allow the reader to take up a position in relation to the *je* and are, by extension, constructed by it. Ernaux is particularly aware of her function as a site of textual production and meaning-making. Indeed, just as Ernaux realizes at the moment of writing that the experiences are no longer hers but instead those of many, it is at the moment of reading that the rigid boundaries between reader and author are removed and that the reader discovers her or his own fragmentation, and the reader further discovers the manner in which she or he has become inextricably linked with 'Ernaux.'

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the postmodern notion of the constructed subject finds parallels in the constructed relationship between author and reader. All these constructs – subject, author, and reader – are simultaneously at play before, during, and after the reading process, and all three are actualized and later concretized by the common ground of the text. In the chapters that follow, I shall draw on these core theorists in order to show the mutual dependence of these constructs upon each other. I shall further argue that critical and 'lay' readers alike construct their own texts that are departures from – and not copies of – Ernaux's

published works through their own relationships with Ernaux's writing and with their own particular 'Ernaux.'

"Wanting to meet an author because you like his work is like wanting to meet a duck because you like pâté."
(Atwood, 2002, p. 35)

"Ma distanciation ne suppose pas une neutralité."
(Ernaux in Charpentier, 1999, p. 403)

Chapter 2 – ERNAUX'S ACADEMIC INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

Introduction

Day has argued that Ernaux's involvement with the interpretation of her texts (through her metatextual comments, appearances on television, interviews with journalists, and general willingness to discuss her work with readers) has meant that she has a "clear sense of the parameters within which she wishes to see her work interpreted and does everything in her power to direct the way in which her works will be read" (Day, 2007, p. 28). Similarly, Charpentier suggests (1994, p. 63-75) that Ernaux has developed a number of strategies that are designed to counteract attacks on her work and to shape its reception. Substantial work has already been done on the popular reception of Ernaux's texts, yet academic criticism has yet to be assessed in its entirety in order to determine dominant trends of discourse and analysis (Thomas, 2005, p. 222), and this chapter aims to fill this gap. In this chapter, I shall focus specifically on the relationship between the author and her academic literary critics.

Ernaux represents a challenge to the traditional author/critic relationship. In the first instance, Ernaux has helped shape her reception through her own participation in the critical process. In

addition, I shall demonstrate how many critics have exhibited evidence of a mutually beneficial relationship with Ernaux. While such authorial participation in interviews is not unusual in the realm of author/critic relationships, what is slightly more unusual is Ernaux's direct participation in the critical process through intervention in the established academic interpretive community in which a number of critics have carved out particular niches and areas of analysis. Ernaux has become a member of her own interpretive community, actively commenting on the manner in which her works are, could, or should be received. In addition to interviews with critics, for instance, the author participates regularly at academic and literary conferences. Ernaux's participation in the critical interpretive community will be assessed in concert with her own attitudes toward her critics as expressed in her written work, often published in literary journals and conference proceedings.

I Ernaux and Her Critics: The Establishment of an Academic Interpretive Community

Surveying the Community

Publications on Ernaux began to emerge increasingly toward the turn of the twenty-first century, although many of the published studies analyze works that were written many years earlier. To date, eight full-length books have been written on Ernaux in a period of sixteen years (Fernandez-Recatala 1994, Tondeur 1996, Thomas 1999 and 2005, McIlvanney 2001, Day 2007, Dugast-Portes 2008, and Hugueny-Léger 2009) in addition to five books on Ernaux and other authors (Bacholle 1998 on Ernaux, Kristof, and Belghoul; Jellenik 2007 on Ernaux, Duras, and Redonnet; Willging 2007 on Ernaux, Duras, Ernaux, Sarraute, and Hébert; and Saigal 2000

on Ernaux, Hyvrard, Chawaf, and Ernaux; Kemp 2010 on Ernaux, Quignard, Darrieussecq, Echenoz, and Modiano). Ernaux's texts have also been the subject of two international conferences (2002 in Arras, France and 2008 in Toronto, Canada). Conference proceedings have been published on both these academic conferences (Thumerel 2004 and Villani 2009), each containing several articles on Ernaux's work as well as an introduction by Ernaux herself. At the time of writing, approximately 130 scholarly articles have been written on Ernaux, published in a wide range of refereed journals. Gallimard has also released *dossiers d'étude* to accompany Ernaux's work, thereby diluting the authorial voice with that of the critic.¹ While there is no official website devoted to Ernaux's work, there is a website maintained by Fabrice Thumerel, an Ernaux critic, which includes a substantial section devoted to Ernaux entitled "Dossier Annie Ernaux." There is also a modest web presence on the Gallimard website. I shall later discuss both in Chapter Five.

Ernaux has also been the object of study by many students, usually within the disciplines of French literature or gender studies. There are currently twenty known completed doctoral theses written on Ernaux, of which six have been written on Ernaux alone (Hugueny-Léger 2007, Kuhl 2001, Charpentier 1999, Doucet 1999, Fau 1998, Whittaker 1996), while the vast majority link Ernaux with another writer, usually Duras, Beauvoir, Sarraute, or Redonnet: Boyer 2007 on Ernaux and Leiris; Sartiaux 2007 on Ernaux, Angot, and Detambel; Jellenik 2006 on Ernaux, Duras, and Redonnet; Joseph 2006 on Ernaux, Jacob, Leduc, and Théoret; Huffmann

¹ Savean, M-F. *La place et Une femme d'Annie Ernaux*. Paris: Gallimard, 1997; Fort, P. L. *Dossier: La place*. Paris: Gallimard, 1997; Fort, P-L *Une femme (réed)*, Paris: Gallimard, 2002; Fell, Alison S. *Ernaux: La Place and La Honte*. London: Grant & Cutler, 2006.

2002 on Ernaux and Duras; Rawson 2001 on various writers from Flaubert to Ernaux; Cant 2000 on Ernaux, Modiano, and Pennac; Chossat 2000 on Ernaux, Redonnet, Bâ, and Jellon; Smith 2000 on Ernaux and Redonnet; Willging 2000 on Ernaux, Duras, and Sarraute; Fell 2000 on Ernaux, Beauvoir, and Leduc; Bacholle 1998 on Ernaux, Kristof, and Belghoul; Cotille-Foley 1998 on Ernaux, Marie de France, and Maryse Condé; Hartlaub 1998 on a variety of writers from Laclos to Ernaux; and McIlvanney 1994 on Ernaux and Etcherelli. Of these doctoral theses, four have resulted in the publication of monographs - Hugueny-Léger 2009, Jellenik 2006, McIlvanney 2001, Bacholle 1998 - while material from others has appeared in journal articles. In addition, countless Masters' theses and honours dissertations have been written on Ernaux in many languages.

As mentioned, Ernaux criticism has grown as her popularity has increased. It is interesting to note that it is only once Ernaux was well-established and an award-winning author that scholarly reception began to present itself in a meaningful way, with the first scholarly article appearing in 1990, after five texts had already been published.² In addition, it is only recently that Ernaux's work has become the object of much published academic work in France, as most of the early criticism came from anglophone academics or francophone academics working outside of France (Fell & Welch, 2009, p. 1). Indeed, Hugueny-Léger suggests (2009, p. 6) that French academics became increasingly interested in Ernaux's work following the 2002 conference in Arras (which I shall later discuss). Many critics who wrote on Ernaux when she was still establishing herself have continued to comment regularly on Ernaux's work.

² The first academic article was Day's "Class, Sexuality, and Subjectivity in Annie Ernaux's *Les armoires vides*," published in 1990, and it focused on a text that was at that time already sixteen years old.

Within this community, some critics have carved out distinctive areas of criticism for themselves within Ernaux scholarship, although they are not necessarily confined to them. These critics form an academic interpretive community, to use Fish's term, which is a more tangible community than the community of fellow readers to which many of Ernaux's readers have expressed they feel they belong (Charpentier, 1999, p. 125). This group includes Michèle Bacholle-Boskovic (who has written primarily on the concept of the *double-bind* and who has published four articles and one book on the author), Lorraine Day (who has written from psychoanalytic/feminist perspectives on desire and language, whose publications include seven articles and one book), Barbara Havercroft (who has published three articles from a feminist perspective and has also written on trauma theory), Lyn Thomas (who has written largely on reception, class, and gender, and whose publications include four articles and two books), Fabrice Thumerel (who has focused on the terms through which one might define Ernaux's work – in particular, the *autosociobiographie*, whose publications include one book, one special issue of a journal, and a portion of a website devoted to the author), Claire-Lise Tondeur (who did much of the early critical work on Ernaux focusing on classification of Ernaux's work and whose publications include eight articles and one book), Philippe Vilain (who has written on the motif and language of sexuality in Ernaux's work in addition to his relationship with the author, and whose publications include one book and five articles), Elizabeth Richardson Viti (who has published seven primarily comparative articles), and Élise Hugueny-Léger (who has written, to date, on reader/author relationships and paratext, and whose publications so far include three articles and one book). It must be pointed out that each member of the academic interpretive community has not restricted herself or himself to

the area(s) mentioned above, and to limit each academic's contributions to Ernaux scholarship would indeed be reductionist – much in the same way that it would be reductionist to reduce Ernaux's writing to a particular genre. Because the community is not simply imagined but exists through language and interaction, its politics and dynamics need to be examined. In particular, Ernaux's involvement as a member of her own interpretive community merits close investigation. It is to the nature of the relationship between the author and her critic, and, by extension, between the critic and the work, to which I shall now turn in my analysis.

Scholar-Fans, Criticism, and Truth

If studies on the reception of Ernaux's work among readers indicate that some view the text as gateway to a relationship with the author, as we shall see in Chapter Five, in the case of the critic, it would appear that some seek a relationship with the author in much the same way. A personal relationship with authors and their text is one that many readers seek to deny, especially academic writers claiming to evaluate and assess texts from an objective critical standpoint (Pearce, 1997, p. 195). Given Ernaux's background, it is possible that some critics might view Ernaux as a potential peer in the critical process. In addition, an author participating in studies of her work by critics gains a certain amount of influence over the content of published work. For an author who has declared herself to be private ("Je fais très peu de signatures et de rencontres," as Ernaux explains in her online chat on 17 April 2008), developing relationships with the critics may allow her to preserve an image reserved for the reading public, as Goffman (1959) would advocate. For the critic, often an academic needing

to publish in order to establish a career and obtain promotion within the academy, a personal connection with a prominent author can be considered a tremendous advantage. For the author and critic, then, the relationship is wrought with power dynamics and projected identities. I want to suggest that in the case of the academic reader, Ernaux presents a case in point of the narrow boundaries that separate what one might normally consider a scholarly writer and a fan writer. In particular, Ernaux has enabled critics to unmask the normally well-guarded personal attachment to the author's work, thereby calling into question the neutrality of the critical work.

In *Fan Cultures*, Matt Hills assesses the relationship between fans and scholars of a given object of fandom or analysis, arguing that critical attitude toward fandom has created distrust on the part of the fans toward the scholars who write about them. Specifically, fans can view the supposed neutral position from which the scholar writes as condescending. Hills notes that many critics treat fans as an imagined other, whose language and behavior are distinct from that of the scholar who writes about them. Such a view implies that the scholar is able to write about the object of fandom in a neutral manner, free from personal attachment toward it or appropriation of its contents, as if she or he were not also part of that fandom. Hills rejects the notion of this neutral academic writing, suggesting instead that academia is bound by its own imagined subjectivity (Hills, 2002, p. 3), which normalizes an academic's own particular theoretical viewpoint and assigns the radical behavior of fans to otherness. In other words, the supposedly neutral viewpoint from which the academic writes negates the academic's emotional reaction or feelings toward the object of fandom. Hill's argument is inspired by

Dyer's *Stars* (1979), in which Dyer argues that celebrities can be read as texts that can be interpreted.³ Hill extends this idea when he suggests that the desire to contact a celebrity indicates a desire to enter into that text. In this light, the celebrity herself or himself is likened to a text which, as has been put forward by Pearce, Jauss, Iser, and Barthes, can be entered by their readers. Dyer's idea relates back to Barthes' original claim that texts do not provide access to their authors but instead reveal more about their readers: celebrities, then, exert the same self-reflexive role that Barthes believed that texts themselves play. As Ernaux's texts are read by her readers, her interviews are viewed on television, her critics respond to her work, and her fans participate in online engagement with the author and her works, 'Ernaux' is constructed by both fans and scholars. Rather than distinguish between fan discourse toward an object of fandom and critical discourse toward it, Hills suggests that academic writing often intersects with discourses of fandom.

Within academic writing, Hills likens an academic's affinity to a particular theoretical framework (for instance, an allegiance to Lacanian psychoanalysis, to Bourdieu, or to feminism) as revealing a form of fandom: the choice of theory is akin to a critic's own individual faith, or a belief system through which the critic mediates the relationship with the object of analysis. Hills further removes the degree of separation between fans and scholars in devising the terms "scholar-fans" and "fan-scholars," in which the first word in the combination indicates the primary signifier through which one defines one's identity, thereby signifying

³ Indeed, Thomas (2005, p. 185) references Dyer's work in her analysis of reader letters to Ernaux: many employed language that Dyer argues would be used in addressing Hollywood celebrities.

how a scholarly viewpoint is informed by a fan viewpoint just as a fan viewpoint is influenced by the language of scholarship.

The extent to which Ernaux's critics can be considered scholar-fans or fan-scholars is, of course, difficult to assess without having the opportunity to question each individual member of the interpretive community. In addition, these identities can develop and change over time. If Villani's introduction to the proceedings of the 2008 Ernaux conference in Toronto is any indication, however, one is led to believe that there is significant overlap between the two identities. In describing the atmosphere of the most recent Ernaux conference, Villani writes:

Nous étions donc rassemblés à Toronto, mot amérindien qui signifie 'lieu de rencontres', pour témoigner de notre admiration, de notre appréciation de ce que l'auteure nous offrait avec son oeuvre et avec sa présence, du don de soi, du don de l'oeuvre, témoigner de cette générosité à nous, les privilégiés, aux lettres françaises, aux humanités en général. (Villani, 2009, p. 12)

In his comments, Villani uses language that one might associate with a fan convention or with a religious gathering (perhaps a literary pilgrimage) in establishing his image of an academic conference. The conference was, for Villani, an opportunity for scholars not only to exchange ideas about the author's work but also to share their appreciation of the work with others in attendance and with the author herself. This implies an aspect of fandom, embedded with more scholarly language suggesting that Ernaux's work is a gift to French literature and the humanities in general. The two discourses reflect not only the split identity between academic and fan discourse but also Ernaux's double identity as both an author and critic.

Like Hills, Barthes also argues that authors and critics have much in common. Barthes deconstructs the classical model of the author/critic relationship, in which the author's text is objectively assessed by an objective scholar in order to produce meaning. Barthes rejects this model, which he believes is intended to make the (at times dead) author speak (Barthes, 1966, p. 30). Such a model, Barthes suggests, neglects the underlying postmodern premise that the critic, just like the author, is fragmented and not a solid whole. The critic cannot, therefore, stand in neutral judgment of the author's work. Instead, Barthes argues that in writing about a work, much like the author, the critic is embarking upon her or his own individual relationship with language (Barthes, 1966, p. 35): Barthes argues that the language of the critic, which floats above the work, represents the critic's relationship with the world and, as such, is a discourse that transforms texts rather than elucidate it. Through language, the critic constructs a relationship with the work just as she or he would use language to construct a relationship with the world. Rather than enlightening the reader as to an author's desired meaning, the critic's writing can be said to illustrate a psychoanalytic lack, as in Lacan's model. Critical language represents the absent subjectivity of its scriptor that only a relationship with language can fill:

La critique classique forme la croyance naïve que le sujet est un 'plein' et que les rapports du sujet et du langage sont ceux d'un contenu et d'une expression. Le recours au discours symbolique conduit, semble-t-il, à une croyance inverse: le sujet n'est pas une plénitude individuelle qu'on a le droit ou non d'évacuer dans le langage (selon le 'genre' de littérature que l'on choisit), mais au contraire un vide autour duquel l'écrivain tresse une parole infiniment transformée (insérée dans une chaîne de transformation), en sorte que toute écriture *qui ne ment pas* désigne, non les attributs intérieurs du sujet, mais son absence. (Barthes, 1966, p. 70)

In writing about an author's work, then, the critic can be said to appropriate the language of the work in question in order to construct a text that takes the place of the critic's own elusive subjectivity, which language represents. Critical work represents desire for one's own language (Barthes, 1966, p. 40). It does not reveal the truth of an author's work but instead creates a transformed, new language that is an engagement with a textual other. This process is not unlike the Hegelian dialectic, in which the text takes on the role of the other. The new critical discourse is as much a function of the critic's relationship with the work, revealed as it is through appropriation of the work's language, as it is an analysis of the object of fandom. Rather than providing clarity and meaning, critical work simply provides more language to be assessed.⁴

Following from Barthes' ideas about critical relationship to the work studied, Ernaux's work provides a language through which critics can reflect their own absent subjectivities through the vehicle of a theoretical framework that is at least somewhat personal in choice. In the case of Ernaux, it is apparent that critics appropriate Ernaux's texts in order to construct themselves much like 'lay' readers, as revealed in a discursive category entitled "La lecture comme construction du moi" - detected in letters written to Ernaux (Thomas, 2005, p. 200-214). Specifically, some critics divulge the manner in which Ernaux's words seemingly tell their own stories (after all, Ernaux has an academic background – although the appropriations are by no means limited to this aspect of Ernaux's writing) or their desire to engage with Ernaux at the

⁴ In making this claim, I recognize that my criticism of Ernaux criticism is itself an engagement with language that underscores my own fragmented subjectivity that my reader will construct based on my relationship with Ernaux's work and its criticism.

level of language. In the introduction to her second book on Ernaux, for instance, Thomas writes:

Dans mon cas, le fait d'avoir pu consacrer, depuis 1991, une partie de mon travail à l'écriture d'Annie Ernaux a intensifié cette expérience de reconnaissance et d'identification. Comme beaucoup de lecteurs, j'ai parfois l'impression de voir le monde avec le regard d'Annie Ernaux. Il m'arrive de me demander comment elle verrait ou comment elle écrirait une scène dont je suis témoin dans le métro londonien. Ce livre est donc le résultat non seulement d'une recherche universitaire mais aussi d'une 'occupation,' 'au double sens du terme' (*L'O*, p. 14). (Thomas, 2005, p. 15)

In this passage, Thomas not only indicates her appropriation of the author's work within her daily life but also indicates the appropriation of the author's language within her own critical analysis. Indeed, the final chapter of the work is about the extent to which working on and reading Ernaux has become a personal matter and not strictly a professional one. Thomas and Day (2003, p. 98-104) also discuss the extent to which Ernaux's writing "complemented both their own engagement with second-wave feminism and proved a successful addition to the 'women's writing' courses they devised for undergraduates" (Fell & Welch, 2009, p. 1). In Maureen Berger's Masters' thesis on Ernaux, "Writing au-dessous de la littérature," written at the University of Ohio in 2004, Berger dedicates her thesis "...to everyone who knows what Annie is writing about...", thereby implying that Berger "knows" what Ernaux is writing precisely because it is Berger's story that is being told – and this appropriation perhaps explains Berger's use of the author's first rather than her last name.

Other critics demonstrate the connections that they have made with Ernaux throughout the course of their work. In her article on *L'UDLP*, Martine Delvaux (2006) dedicates the article to

Ernaux, writing "A Annie Ernaux qui m'a conviée à jeter un regard d'abord intime sur *L'usage de la photo*," thereby demonstrating to the reader that she has a seemingly personal relationship with the author and that it was Ernaux who encouraged Delvaux to read the book. Day writes in her acknowledgements (2007) that "Annie Ernaux deserves special thanks for her interest and unfailing support since I first met her in 1987," thereby demonstrating to her reader her long-standing relationship with the author. Ernaux is portrayed as supportive of Day's project, thereby implying that the relationship is not simply one of researcher and object of study but also one of emotional engagement and long-standing encouragement. Charpentier, in her *remerciements* before her thesis, underscores that the neutrality of her work was often difficult, as she remarks:

[I]es discussions toujours passionnées que son œuvre suscitent, les résistances qu'elle porte au jour, l'émotion qu'elle permet à ses lecteurs d'exprimer suffisent sans doute pour témoigner de son intérêt. L'observation sociologique d'une trajectoire vise à déconcerter les impressions premières de manière souvent inattendue.

In a message to Ernaux, Charpentier adds that "Je souhaite qu'elle accueille positivement les quelques réflexions et les échos que son travail a suscités chez moi." Ernaux's interest and, most significantly, support and emotional engagement with her critics underscore the particularly personal nature of the relationship between the critics and the author, as it is clear that in several cases, the author has a personal connection with critics. Ernaux critics are, increasingly, likely to declare openly their admiration of the author and the often reciprocal nature of that relationship. This also includes Hugueny-Léger, who writes in her *remerciements* to her book that Ernaux "a été non seulement une source d'inspiration, mais également d'informations et d'encouragements dans laquelle je n'ai cessé de puiser." Hugueny-Léger,

who similarly suggests that Ernaux's writing facilitates a personal response from critics and challenges the strict separation between the critical and the personal (Hugueny-Léger, 2009, p. 147-154), also declares that she was not only inspired by Ernaux's work but was also assisted greatly in her writing by Ernaux herself.⁵ There is, in short, less pretention of neutrality in much critical work on Ernaux, and Ernaux scholars are relatively open to admitting their double identity as scholar-fans. Ernaux and her critics can be seen as being in the common *jeu* of interrogating and constructing language, which Barthes posits as the ostensible subject of critical discourse.

The second part of Hills' argument – that of academics using particular theoretical standpoints as faiths through which they read their texts – can also be revealed in Ernaux criticism. For example, Thomas finds particular resonance in the theme of the *transfuge de classe* within a Bourdieuan framework⁶ (about which Thomas has written in the first person within a different context in Charpentier, 2006, p. 93-107). In relaying her own narrative of *embourgeoisement* in the final chapter of her work, Thomas draws comparisons between her own trajectory from a working class background to the halls of Oxford. Thomas writes that in reading Ernaux, she is

⁵ Hugueny-Léger also references Miller's article (1998) on *JDD* in which Miller writes, "I'm thinking these things on the bus, having just started revising this article on Annie Ernaux. And I'm looking at my fellow travelers with what I hope is her curiosity" (Miller in Hugueny-Léger, 2009, p. 178)

⁶ Jellenik (2007, p. 87-8) also analyzes this recurrent theme within Ernaux's work and summarizes that an individual migrating from a dominated group into the dominant group must acquire the appropriate cultural capital of the dominant group while simultaneously abandoning people of the dominated class, referred to by Bourdieu in *State Nobility* as *embourgeoisement*. In Jellenik's case, however, this use of Bourdieu seemingly serves only to provide a vehicle through which a text can be analyzed. Other critics have made use of Bourdieu as a theoretical framework in their analysis of Ernaux without declaring any personal affinity to the theory. Examples include Charpentier's thesis, which adopts a Bourdieuan framework in much of its analysis, as does Ernaux herself in an interview with Charpentier in 2002 (p. 159-75). Cruickshank has criticized Ernaux for failing to use her writing as an 'arme de combat' because she fails to point out the social inequalities specifically in her *journaux extimes*, *LVE* and *JDD* (in Fell & Welch, 2009, p. 92).

able not only to identify with her owing to shared experiences but also to imagine a constructed self by appropriating Ernaux's language. For Thomas, this appropriation takes place along thematic lines: "A travers mon étude de son écriture, j'explore de façon indirecte cette identité première et les processus émotionnels impliquées dans le passage d'une classe sociale à une autre, qui est le thème dominant de ma propre vie ainsi que celui des textes d'Annie Ernaux" (Thomas, 2005, p. 280). Thomas' analysis and personal revelations suggest that critics' choices of theoretical frameworks are often based not only on their training but, like faith itself, are often personal matters. Hugueny-Léger similarly suggests that the intimate nature of Ernaux's texts encourages this type of positioning, and, indeed, Hugueny-Léger cites the review of Thomas' *Annie Ernaux, à la première personne* in *Le Monde* on 11 February 2005, whose author (Christiane Rousseau) claims that the most interesting part of Thomas' work was the final chapter written in the first person (Hugueny-Léger, 2009, p. 151).

Thomas (2005, p. 85-89, 111-114) also uses Bourdieu in an analysis of the oppressive nature of adopting bourgeois values, drawing on Bourdieu's work on *le goût légitime* and *illégitime*, and arguing that for Ernaux, writing must have a legitimate status without betraying culture or origin. Similarly, for Day (who also draws extensively on Bourdieu as well as Winnicott and Tomkins [2007, p. 89-110]), the dynamics of shame and desire are not only of scholarly interest to her, but they also act as both a motivator for her own writing and as a device through which she connects to Ernaux's work.⁷ Critics have also undertaken comparative studies between Ernaux's work and that of Bourdieu in order to examine intersection points. Ernaux

⁷ Day further writes (2007, p. 43) of her fascination with the final pages of *LH*, revealing that it is a book that she has "metaphorically never put down."

commented on the comparisons herself (2005, p. 343-7) and has also written at length on the effect that Bourdieu has had in shaping her world view and her writing in addition to having an effect on how she analyzes her own texts (Day, 2007, p. 241). One might be predisposed to believe that for Ernaux, Bourdieu represents a faith, as well.⁸ Arguably, Ernaux's affinity for Bourdieu could play a role in the appropriation of that theoretical framework by critics, as to adopt it allows the critic to use her or his faith and also appropriate language that Ernaux has also used.⁹ I am not trying to suggest that personal revelations about connection to the work in any way diminish the criticism that a critic produces, but rather, like Miller's work written in the first person, to which I referred in Chapter One and upon which Hugueny-Léger also draws (2009, p. 151), critics of Ernaux are more prone to revealing the personal motivation behind their analysis, and in this light, the idea of objective critical analysis is partially destroyed. Hills might well argue that some critics of Ernaux are simply making transparent what most critics do anyway – that is, they declare the extent to which not only Ernaux's work has an effect on their lives but also the particular theoretical lens through which the works are read. Ernaux's work is able to allow critics to embrace and declare both the scholar and fan aspects of their identity.

⁸ Ernaux confesses that her "livre culte" is, in fact, Bourdieu's *La distinction* in an interview with *Lire* (available online at http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/questionnaire-de-proust-annie-ernaux_811221.html, retrieved 1 August 2010).

⁹ Fell argues, for instance, that Ernaux's reading of Bourdieu played a central role in her writing from *LP* onward, as Ernaux felt compelled to question the social order as it had been constructed around her. Fell suggests that Bourdieu gave Ernaux the vocabulary necessary to discuss socially constructed relations. Fell made this argument at a 2009 conference on Ernaux. A digital recording is available online at <http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/archive/2009/03/contemporary-women's-writing-in-french/>, retrieved 1 August 2010. I shall discuss this conference again in the final chapter.

While the tendency for critics to declare openly their faith in a particular theory or their fan-like behavior toward an author is not in vogue even in the contemporary academy, this trend is slowly changing within some domains. In describing her experience at an academic conference on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, for instance, Burr explores the tension between fan and academic identities that were manifested as well as “the ways in which individuals managed their fan and academic identities”: intriguingly, Burr suggests that the balancing between what is traditionally (in its patriarchal form) viewed as academic, or reasoned, discourse - and fan, or passionate, discourse is not unlike the binary that is traditionally seen as at the heart of notions of masculinity and femininity (Burr, 2005, p. 375-380). These managed identities are explored not only through questions of discourse (to which I shall return in the final chapter) but also through the behavior of academics in the case of Ernaux throughout the conference itself (to which I shall return later in this chapter). Yet with the emergence of more online media and the demystification of the critical process (which I shall also explore in Chapter Five), it is easier to detect personal affinities and theoretical allegiances owing to the speed with which critical work can be obtained and individual CVs, Facebook pages, and web pages accessed by readers. The matter becomes even more complicated when language of the critic and the critical voice of the author intersect (whether in person or in writing), which they often do in Ernaux’s case. It is to these points of intersection that I shall now turn.

II Ernaux's Presence in the Academic Interpretive Community

Ernaux and Academic Conferences

Ernaux's attitude toward critics can be difficult to gauge, as it is seemingly contradictory. If one were to use written texts as a barometer, there is a seeming dismissal of the role of the critic and her or his work – for instance, in *SP*, Ernaux declares that “Moi seule, je peux éclairer ma vie, non les critiques” (*SP*, p. 99),³⁰ and she also laments having to attend conferences, wishing that she could insult those who come to listen to her speak at a public literary event:

Hier, pour la première fois, envie d'insulter les gens venus là, au Centre culturel, pour m'écouter. Leur dire: “Qu'est-ce que vous attendez? Que venez-vous faire ici? La messe culturelle? Bande de cons, y a rien à voir et je n'écris pas pour vous, vieilles mémés cultivées de Suède. (*SP*, p. 154)

If one is to accept that *SP* is, indeed, Ernaux's diary from the period in question, then it is clear that, at least in this particular context (in which Ernaux was perhaps more preoccupied with her passion with S.), Ernaux views the conference setting as pretentious and attended by those who consider themselves cultured. An additional example is found in a journal extract published online by permission of the author on Thumerel's website, where Ernaux laments having to attend a literary conference:

18 heures 30. Conférence au Théâtre 95, alors que j'ai sommeil, le moral est au plus bas, que mes idées sont floues (antibios à hautes doses contre l'infection dentaire). Deux

³⁰ Ernaux has explained that her private diary will be published after her death (Hugueny-Léger, 2007, p. 296), and the publication of those documents will, undoubtedly, provide interesting revelations on Ernaux's various perspectives toward academic criticism throughout her lifetime.

heures horribles à traverser. Comment les gens peuvent-ils aller à des conférences?

Moi ça m'ennuie tellement! Savoir, savoir, tellement.¹¹

Within this context, Ernaux is once again distracted – this time, however, by her fatigue and a dental infection. Significantly, Ernaux juxtaposes the academic with the everyday occurrence of complications from dental work. Such an intersection in discourse is in keeping with Ernaux's tendency not to regard literature as any more significant than more popular entertainment sources, such as when Ernaux juxtaposes Proust and popular music in *LVE* (Thomas, 2005, p. 115). The academic discourse is in no way privileged above that of the everyday.¹² It would be unfair and misleading to suggest that Ernaux's dental work or her intense passionate relationship, as revealed in these quotations, indicate a consistently negative attitude toward literary or academic conferences. What is clear, though, is that Ernaux does not privilege the conference setting and does not, as Villani's remarks would suggest, see it as a pilgrimage or religious event: indeed, Ernaux mocks such a perception. In juxtaposing passion or dental work with the literary conference, Ernaux makes it clear that all three occupy the same amount of her mental energies. Ernaux's willingness to publish such comments, knowing that they would undoubtedly be read by her critics, also indicates a willingness potentially to provoke her critical readers.

¹¹ <http://www.libr-critique.com/>, retrieved 1 August 2010.

¹² Along a similar line, Ernaux explains to Charpentier that her attitude toward the interpretation of literature underwent a significant change when she started teaching students who were not specializing in literature. Ernaux explains that "Je date de mon premier poste de prof, dans des sections techniques, la modification de ma vision des choses et de la littérature. Une sorte de retour au réel, dont le discours esthétique et abstrait de l'université m'avait éloignée. Dans la classe, imaginée/comme un lieu pur, où la beauté des textes devait s'imposer à tous, les différences culturelles et sociales crevaient les yeux" (Charpentier, 1999, p. 70-1).

Removing the Ivory Tower Curtain: The Ernaux Academic Conference

Because the nature of Ernaux's writing project is highly personal, it is easy to imagine how undergoing the critical gaze can become uncomfortable for an author, especially as Ernaux has admitted to despising going on television and generally making public appearances, noting that Gallimard does not often oblige her to engage in public appearances (Charpentier, 1999, p. 126). Nevertheless, Ernaux has explained that she learns much from reading critics, including at both conferences (in Thumerel, 2004, p. 10), referring especially to meanings of her work of which she was unaware. Following the end of the Arras conference in 2002, Ernaux explained her attitude toward the conference in a follow-up interview with Thumerel for his website:

Je pense que la réception critique de mon travail sera modifiée justement dans la mesure où celui-ci apparaît comme tel, à la fois un et complexe, et non plus réductible, par exemple, à la littérature de confession ou à l'autofiction.¹³

From this quotation, it is clear that while Ernaux is well-versed in literary criticism and the manner in which literature is interpreted, Ernaux takes critical interpretations in stride.

Because Ernaux has been present at two conferences held on her work, academics have had the opportunity to interact with her at two major international conferences on her work.

Ernaux is aware of the power dynamics at play when the author plays a part in her interpretive community and of the difficulty in assessing the extent to which they play a role. Of her experience at the 2002 conference, Ernaux writes the following in her introductory remarks to the proceedings:

¹³ <http://www.t-pas-net.com/libr-critique/?p=772>, retrieved 1 August 2010

Quand Fabrice Thumerel est venu me parler du colloque qu'il voulait organiser autour de mon travail, je lui ai donné d'emblée mon accord de participation. [...] Certes, je me suis demandé si ma présence n'était pas susceptible de gêner la liberté des communications et des débats. Les modalités prévues par mon intervention – parler après chaque intervenant – n'allaient-elles pas m'instituer malgré moi en prof-juge? Deux dangers, la cérémonie ou le tribunal... Il me semble que les deux ont été évités à Arras. (Thumerel, 2004, p. 8)

Normally, these power dynamics in academic circles remain undocumented, although as we shall see, it is becoming increasingly possible to document them given the role that convergent media now play in academic conferences. Ernaux participated fully at the two conferences, listening to all papers given and participating in all social functions. If the passage above is any indication, Ernaux accords as much attention to the interactions and atmosphere of the conference as she does to the ideas presented. Clearly, the question of authorial intimidation weighed on the mind of Ernaux preceding the first conference and, for Ernaux, academic neutrality is not a foregone conclusion but instead a delicate balance that must be sought – or else one might well risk either the *cérémonie* (much like the *messe culturelle* to which she refers in *SP*) or the *tribunal*.

In this portion of the chapter, I shall, to some extent, raise the curtain on the academic conference, which I attended, by commenting on my own observations. Of course, my observations are subject to my own subjective experience as a participant in the conference and on my own 'faith.' I shall attempt to maintain as neutral a stance as possible, although academic neutrality is largely an imperfect construct. At the 2008 conference, I deliberately

kept a low profile – and, in particular, I did not seek to speak directly with Ernaux¹⁴ - as I was interested in observing the interactions between critics among themselves and with the author.

Like many literature conferences, nearly all attendees came in order to present a paper. There were a total of 26 participants besides the author herself. Of these participants, 23 were women, with 18 ranked academics and 8 graduate students. Participants ranged from those who were well-seasoned in their Ernaux analysis and members of the academic interpretive community (Thomas, Day, Havercroft, Viti, Bacholle-Boskovic, Ionescu, Hugueny-Léger) to those who were making their first appearance (notably, a large portion of the graduate students). For the first two days, the conference started at 9:00 a.m. and ended the working portion by 5:00 p.m.. On both of these days, there was a lunch that the group ate together. At the conclusions of the first and second days, there was a reception and a dinner respectively. Panel sessions were generally grouped in three presentations, following which there would be an open discussion. In all cases, the discussions appeared to be engaging, interesting, and inclusive of most all participants in the conference. Individual sessions were grouped together by theme or by work. As for Ernaux's interjections into the academic discourse, most striking about the conference was the degree to which she was interactive and animated in her participation as a member of the community that was constructed. The author sat in the front row during all presentations along with two members of the Ernaux academic interpretive community. Ernaux was attentive to each presenter and took notes. During each discussion

¹⁴ I did, however, help Ernaux with an uncooperative camera – the same one, she claims, as was used to take some photographs for *L'UDLP*.

period that typically followed three to four speakers, Ernaux did not hesitate to intervene (asking "Est-ce que je peux intervenir?" before doing so) to signal an agreement with a paper, a correction (on what Ernaux usually termed factual points but which could easily be considered matters of opinion), or a disagreement, and on one occasion assertively so.

While this openness implies that there is willingness to become objectified by undergoing the critical gaze, it is clear that if Ernaux is to be subject to it, she also wishes to participate actively as a fellow critic in the exchange of ideas that follows, thereby regaining authorial agency. It may also be reasonable to surmise that Ernaux views academic conferences from a performative standpoint, in which she projects the image of herself as she would imagine that her critics would like to see it presented.³⁵ As in Barthes' critical model, the stand-in subject in these encounters is language itself, which becomes the object of interrogation. This intervention into the critical discourse might seem to be a reasonable exchange for Ernaux's willingness to participate in her own criticism. By participating in critical discourse, Ernaux also provides some star power to the field. This star power goes beyond the participation of the author in the exchange of ideas during the conference itself. The extent to which the author was seen as a star by her critics was evidenced by the fact that many critics in attendance, especially those more junior in their careers, sought the author to discuss their own work and ideas and also actively sought out the author's private e-mail address for correspondence. Having read much of the literature on Ernaux already and being familiar with the degree to which Ernaux has made herself accessible to the critics (an important point to which I shall

³⁵ Similarly, Vilain writes of the manner in which he observed Ernaux act gracefully toward her detractors and 'fans' at book signings (Vilain, 1997, p. 91).

return), communicating with Ernaux thor might well have been seen as a pathway to a future published article. In addition, Ernaux often appeared enthusiastic about the projects that critics were taking on and frequently offered advice and suggestions, offered to discuss projects later in private, or offered to correspond by e-mail following the conference.¹⁶ Having the participation of an author who recently published one of the best-selling texts (LA had just been published three months before) in France is, after all, quite a coup. For Ernaux, this involvement allows her to be continuously aware of what is being written about her work and affords opportunities to weigh in on this interpretation. It is to this important aspect of Ernaux's involvement that I shall now turn.

Ernaux's Invasion of the Critical Field

Ernaux's involvement in her own criticism goes beyond in-person contact with critics, as she has also been directly involved in the publication of others' critical works on her texts. Ernaux has willingly participated in a number of interviews that have been subsequently published in scholarly journals, thereby providing access to herself as a writer to some critics. Of the scholarly articles written on Ernaux's work by critics, eight of them are published interviews: Laacher, *Politix*, 1991; Tondeur, *French Review*, 1995 – interview took place 4 June 1993; Vilain,

¹⁶ Ernaux is not the only author to seek out junior academics and to investigate their work. For instance, since 2003, Luce Irigaray has been holding an annual summer seminar for PhD students studying her work. Participants are selected by Irigaray herself. Participants spend a week on campus, present their papers to Irigaray and other students, and have the opportunity to be taught by Irigaray toward the end of the conference (Irigaray & Green, 2008). In this way, Irigaray is able to monitor the ongoing work of PhD students so as both to know how her work is being used and to be able, to some extent, to help shape its reception. The prestige of being chosen by Irigaray would, undoubtedly, seem quite a coup for a junior academic or graduate student.

LittéRéalité, 1997; Bacholle, *Sites*, 1998; Boehringer,³⁷ *Dalhousie French Studies*, 1999; Fort, *French Review*, 2003; Day, *Romance Studies*, 2005 – interview took place 21 Feb 2001; Fell, *French Studies*, 2009. Two interviews with Ernaux appear in the proceedings of the 2002 conference (one with a sociologist and another with the conference organizer). The publication of these interviews in what are for the most part highly established peer-reviewed journals underscores the author's active role in the critical process. In some cases, the interviews accorded by the author give evidence of informal relationships between Ernaux and her critics. In the case of one interview (Tondeur, 1995b), the interviewer addresses the author using the pronoun *tu* instead of *vous*, thereby indicating a degree of familiarity and informality with Ernaux. The decision to use this pronoun in the published version of the interview would seem to indicate a willingness on the part of Tondeur to expose the nature of the relationship just as other critics, as I have argued, reveal their connections with the author in their own critical texts. Such an informal reference early in Ernaux scholarship may have helped set the tone for a more informal critical relationship. Like many who would follow, Tondeur's interview with Ernaux allowed the author to expound upon what she felt were the goals of her writing, an activity that Ernaux has spent considerable time doing since becoming a published author.

It is also worth noting that one of the critics with whom Ernaux did two interviews, Philippe Vilain, is also one of her former love interests. Vilain and Ernaux were involved in a relationship

³⁷ In the case of the article by Boehringer, the *dialogue transatlantique* is through e-mail, thereby diluting the boundary between the author of the text and the subject of the interview. Both would appear to be co-writers, as is the case in Ernaux's book co-written with Jeannet.

for four years, beginning shortly after the relationship described in *PS* and *SP* had ended (in November 1992). The details of this relationship have been well-documented and widely publicized, as both Ernaux and Vilain have written about it. Vilain has played a relatively small role in Ernaux's books (when compared to either the man known as A. or S., or Marc Marie). However, Vilain is the man about whom Annie Ernaux wrote *Fragments autour de Philippe V.*, a short text describing the mixing of Ernaux's menstrual blood and Vilain's sperm, published in *L'infini*, and he is also the person to whom *LH* is dedicated.¹⁸ Vilain, for his part, has been an important participant in the reception of Ernaux's text but perhaps even more so in the creation of her public image. Vilain published two interviews with Ernaux and two further articles on her in addition to a manuscript on his relationship with Ernaux entitled *L'étreinte*. The text was published by Gallimard, the same publisher used by Ernaux herself, and it was also published in the series *L'infini*, the same series in which *Fragments autour de Philippe V.* was published. It is a first-person account of Vilain's relationship with "A. E."¹⁹ The text deals specifically with Vilain's experience in the relationship with a focus on the jealousy that he felt and demonstrated toward the material traces of "A." (of *PS*) left behind in Ernaux's home. In Vilain's text, there are recurring echoes of the narrative of *PS*: Vilain uses quotations from Ernaux's text (separated in italics). Vilain details the manner in which his own relationship with Ernaux mirrors that described in *PS*. In *L'étreinte*, Vilain becomes initiated into Ernaux's intimate space, including her writing space. The two meet when Vilain corresponds regularly with Ernaux after he had read *PS* and develop a relationship from that point on, and I would

¹⁸ Hugueny-Léger indicates in her thesis that *L'O* was written about Vilain's new love interest (Hugueny-Léger, 2007, p. 86). In my correspondence with Hugueny-Léger, she revealed that Ernaux provided this information to her through their e-mail exchanges (Hugueny-Léger to Janes, 27 July 2009).

¹⁹ Although "A. E." is used throughout the text, the specific references to Ernaux's texts – as well as Vilain's interviews on his work – leave little doubt that the woman in question is Ernaux.

argue that Vilain here makes real a reader's imagined and desired relationship with Ernaux.

Concretizing the reader/author relationship through writing helped set the stage for a powerful theme in Ernaux's more recent writing that I shall further discuss in Chapter Four.

The relationship between Vilain and Ernaux has been previously commented upon by some critics. Hugueny-Léger argues that Vilain represents the interchanges between text, author, narrator, and critic (Hugueny-Léger, 2007, p. 86). I also made a similar comment about S.'s role in *SP*, arguing that S. represents the spectrum of possible readers, each of whom is, to some extent, trained by the author: as S. learns to make love in a way that pleases both Ernaux and himself, so, too, does the reader learn to read in a way that both gives her or him pleasure and, to some extent, actualizes the ideal reader for Ernaux (in my unpublished Masters' dissertation, 2004). Ernaux's relationship with Vilain also mirrors the mutually beneficial nature of the relationships that Ernaux enjoys with some critics: the relationship is often pleasurable for both and has productive results. It would not be unreasonable to imagine that Vilain benefited from his proximity to the author or that having access to Ernaux helpful to his career,²⁰ especially when one considers that *L'étreinte* was published in 1997 with the approval and assistance of Ernaux (Charpentier, 1999, p. 149). In addition, the text was published quickly following the end of the relationship, indicating that it might well have been written at least in part while it was ongoing. For Ernaux, being a participant in the publication of a book

²⁰ Vilain has continued to write as an academic, including a text entitled *La Dernière année* (1999), written about the end of his father's life. Unsurprisingly, the text mirrors closely the styles of *LP* and *UF*. More recently, Vilain has published *Défense de Narcisse* (2005), a text that defends autofiction. In his text, he somewhat ambiguously devotes a section to Ernaux's writing. He is, perhaps, an example of someone who has transferred from a fan-scholar to a scholar-fan, in that his relationship to Ernaux's work began as a fan relationship, but he subsequently wrote about Ernaux's work from a scholarly perspective. Yet one identity is inevitably influenced by the other, as in the case of other Ernaux critics.

detailing the relationship allows her a certain amount of control over the contents of that text. Vilain would no doubt be receptive to Ernaux's feedback. For Ernaux, the publication of *L'étreinte* also allows her to re-claim some of the attention that Alain Gérard gained upon the publication of *Madame, c'est à vous que j'écris* in 1995, a text that had been marketed as a response to PS. Ernaux played no role in its shaping. Gérard wrote *Madame, c'est à vous que j'écris* and marketed it as a male response to PS ("Pas si simple! Réponse à Annie Ernaux," the cover reads). Gérard was, to a degree, successful in that many readers confess in letters to Ernaux that they believe that the text constituted a response from A. (Charpentier, 1999, p. 148). The text received only modest attention among the academic interpretive community.²¹ As a result, *L'étreinte* could, instead, be read as a more legitimate male response from a man who did, in fact, share a similar story with the author, as opposed to Gérard's fictionalized response. In granting permission to Vilain to publish his account of his relationship with her, Ernaux is thereby able to influence the male response to her texts and further reclaim some control over her public image. In return for having sanctioned the publication of Vilain's account, Ernaux is able to renege on her promise to Vilain (in *L'étreinte*, 1997, p. 97) not to publish the extract from her journal chronicling her relationship with the man referred to as A., which had provoked significant jealousy on Vilain's part, which undoubtedly contributed to the four-year delay in the publication of *SP*. In short, while Vilain, on the surface, might appear to have written in a spiteful or mimetic way,²² his voice is largely filtered through Ernaux's

²¹ For instance, Viti (2001, p. 458-475) argues that in *Madame, c'est à vous que j'écris*, Gérard wishes to subvert the sexual economy that had established the woman as dominant in *SP*. In this way, the male figure re-asserts the dominant role, as he is able to have the last word through Gérard.

²² As we shall later see, charges of mimesis were also levelled at Marc Marie following the publication of *L'UDLP*.

collaboration and assistance during the publication process, as evidenced by her sanctioning of the publication and her participation in interviews with Vilain.

In addition, Ernaux has been a participant in helping shape critical response to her works in academic articles written by critics other than Vilain. While it would be impossible for Ernaux to exert an influence on every article written on her works, several works have cited Ernaux's participation in the writing process. In addition to published interviews, several journal articles and books cite having interviewed the author in the process of preparing the manuscript (Bacholle-Boskovic 1998 and 2003, Boehringer 1999 – interview took place in 1998 in Paris, Day 1990 – interview took place 6 July 1990, McIlvanney 1998 – interview took place 23 Sept 1993, Scatton-Tessier 2005 – interview took place 26 Apr 1997, Thomas 2005 – interview took place in 1997), while others thank the author for having provided feedback (Jordan 2007). Others indicate correspondence via e-mail or through letters (Day 1990, Day 1999, Day 2000,²³ Marrone 1994, McIlvanney 2001). In some cases, it is mentioned that some of the interviews took place in Ernaux's home, thereby indicating that the academic has been received in the author's private domestic space (Day 1987 [unpublished], 2005)²⁴ in addition to many of her print media interviews, as we shall see in Chapter Five. This tendency to conduct interviews in her private space allows Ernaux to work on home ground, thereby placing the interviewer in the role of *invité(e)*, while the author gives the impression to the critic that she has revealed an intimate space. Ernaux also made herself extensively available to a graduate student

²³ Along a similar line, Day thanks Ernaux for having loaned her own copy of Charpentier's 1999 thesis to her throughout the course of her research (Day, 2007, p. 240).

²⁴ Scatton-Tessier (2005, p. 135-8) interestingly argues that from *PS* to *JDD*, the author portrays her home as a way of protecting herself, as it enables isolation and that, in many cases, the manner in which her home is treated is the same way as her body is treated.

completing her doctoral dissertation, having granted her three separate interviews at a café in Paris throughout the writing process (Charpentier, 1999) as well as to another through e-mail correspondence and an interview in her home (Hugueny-Léger, 2007). While it is impossible to determine the degree to which the writer of a given article was influenced by her or his proximity to the author, it is undeniable that the authorial voice was present in some way during the writing process and had had the opportunity to comment on the research project as it unfolded. In addition, a photograph of Ernaux's childhood home appears on the cover of McIlvanney's 2001 monograph, and a photograph of Ernaux and her mother appears on the cover of the 2004 conference proceedings published by Thumerel.

The frequency of interviews is supplemented by the fact that Ernaux has published journal articles herself, thereby taking up a position within the territory of the critic.²⁵ I shall assess here three of Ernaux's most significant contributions with a view to discussing the manner in which Ernaux shapes her reception. Ernaux published an *homage* to Simone de Beauvoir in the scholarly journal *Simone de Beauvoir Studies* ("Le 'Fil conducteur' qui me relie à Beauvoir"), placing her writing within the domain of the critic rather than in the newspaper, as was the case with her *homage* to Bourdieu.²⁶ Ernaux has also published two articles on the reception of her work in *La Faute à Rousseau*.²⁷ Ernaux's publication within the refereed journal setting

²⁵ In addition, Ernaux also wrote her own entry in the *Le Dictionnaire: Littérature française contemporaine* (Ed. Jérôme Garcin, 1988, p. 177-83).

²⁶ "Bourdieu, le chagrin," *Le Monde*, 6 February 2002: 1.

²⁷ "Lectures de *Passion simple*," (June 1994): 27-9 and "Comment *L'Événement* a été reçu par lectrices et lecteurs" (24 June 2000): 33-5.

places her next to the critics who also write about her work and, therefore, further calls into question the differences in discourse and status.²⁸

These articles address her motivation behind writing and touch on aspects of reception of her works. The first of these articles, "Vers un je transpersonnel," published in 1993 in *Autofictions et cie*, addresses directly the question of classifying Ernaux's works written up to that point (*LAV*, *CQDR*, *LP*, *UF*) within a particular genre. This early submission is a bold intervention into Ernaux's own critical response that allows the authorial voice to prevent her work from being restricted to analysis by those working within the realm of autofictional writing. Instead, the author invites multiple approaches, thereby maximizing her potential critical readership.

Ernaux's second intervention into the published critical domain comes in the form of a written version, entitled "Sur l'écriture," of a talk given at York University in October 1997 during a speaking tour of Canada. Ernaux revised her presentation and published it in January 2003. Informally written, the article outlines Ernaux's motivation for her writing. In surveying her first six works (*LAV*, *CQDR*, *LFG*, *LP*, *UF*, *PS*), Ernaux follows the trajectory of her motivations for writing and the influences played by her personal life and profession. Ernaux links her texts together, showing how her attitudes about writing have changed throughout her writing career and encouraging, perhaps, the critical tendency to view her writing career as a progressive one, which is a trend that I shall examine in Chapter Three. The informal nature of

²⁸ Ernaux has made other contributions to literary journals in addition to those that I analyze above. Ernaux's other contributions include "Littérature et politique" *Nouvelles nouvelles* 15 (1989): 100-3; "Quelque chose entre l'histoire, la sociologie, et la littérature" *La Quinzaine littéraire* 532 (1989): 13; "Insatisfaction" *Nouvelles nouvelles* (1988): 12-6; "Vocation?" *La faute à Rousseau* 20 (1999): 33-5. In addition, Ernaux has published her thoughts on her writing in newspapers and reviews, including "L'Écrivain en terrain miné" *Le Monde*, 23 March 1985: 21; "Une sensibilité humaine" *L'Humanité* 2 February 1993; "Tout livre est un acte" *Europe* (1994): 18-24.

the article mirrors the author's wish for her writing to be accessible and relevant to all readers. For instance, throughout the text, the use of *ça* reflects the informal nature of her presentation. The author surely is conscious of the informal language used, and part of the reason for the informality of this article might well be the informal nature of her presentation. The inclusion of the introductory line "J'ai beaucoup de plaisir à être parmi vous et à pouvoir tacher d'exprimer pourquoi au fond j'écris, comment j'essaie de le faire" (Ernaux, 2003, p. 9) re-contextualizes the reader of the article as a member of the audience attending Ernaux's seminar. Ernaux has thereby removed a part of the privilege that had been given to those in attendance by sharing her remarks with readers. The inclusion of questions asked following the presentation also allows the reader to feel as though she or he had been present during the presentation. This article, like the others, constitutes an intervention in the reception on the author's behalf that, although it appears in an academic journal, is free of many of the characteristics that permeate that type of writing. Significantly, however, the article may also be read as a lecture introducing students to her work, some of whom have perhaps not read much of it. These perhaps future critics can thereby be indoctrinated by adopting Ernaux's viewpoint on her own writing. As for the *charmant jeune homme* from *SP* or for the young academic, Ernaux's presence can be a powerful one for students. Finally, the summer 2009 edition of *Nottingham French Studies*, edited by Fell and Welch, is entirely devoted to Ernaux. Like the two conference proceedings, Ernaux is given first word in this publication, as it begins with an interview with the author and is followed by her essay entitled "Raisons d'écrire," originally published following the death of Bourdieu. This collection of essays is largely composed of comparative analyses between Ernaux and other writers, some of which are new

work and others which have previously appeared. The volume declares Ernaux the “socio-ethnographer of contemporary France,” thereby bestowing another label upon an author who already has no shortage of them. The inclusion of an interview with Ernaux at the beginning of the volume once again affords Ernaux the opportunity to frame the analysis and also gives some star power to the volume.

Ernaux Shaping the Language of Criticism

As I mentioned in the first part of this chapter, Ernaux further invaded the critical domain by co-writing a book that both analyzes her previous texts in a genetic fashion and further explores her writing project on – and in – her own terms. *L’ECUC*, published in 2003, is the only text written by Ernaux not to have been published by Gallimard. Because the text could also be read as an essay on writing itself, it has generally escaped being the subject of critical analysis for other critics. Instead, it is most often cited as part of the analysis of another work. Its format is different from Ernaux’s other works in that it is a printed version of e-mail correspondence between Ernaux and Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, a fellow author. The e-mails consist of a series of questions ostensibly about writing itself. Jeannet, who has published similar correspondence texts with other authors (Butor 2000, Cixous 2005, and Gyron 2006), asked Ernaux the questions in an initial e-mail message. Ernaux would respond, though not always immediately, at various lengths, and take the opportunity to expand upon the question in order to explain her own writing. There are no follow-up responses from Jeannet based on Ernaux’s answer to a given question. In the introduction that Ernaux writes to this work, she

states that although she would take her time before replying, she did little proofreading, as she might when preparing one of her own books.

While many of the thoughts on writing that Ernaux shares in this text can be found in her writing elsewhere, *L'ECUC* provides a great more detail on her attitude toward writing in addition to genetic information on how some of her texts were written. Reading *L'ECUC* places the critic in an interesting position: because the author has published the text as part of her collection of books, it could be considered as an object for analysis in its own right. The text, to a certain extent, also does the work of the critic for her or him. In this text, Ernaux explains the terms and vocabulary that she considers acceptable in the analysis of literature. Ernaux begins by explaining her relationship to the critical process and identifies what types of literary criticism she finds to be relevant. In the first instance, Ernaux signifies her resistance to accepting any of the traditional, established terms used in analyzing literature. In refusing to use many conventional literary terms, Ernaux is resisting entry into the literary symbolic order. In order to signify this resistance, Ernaux begins by questioning the meaning of the word "literature," stating outright that she is not able to define the term despite having been a writer and teacher for a number of years (*L'ECUC*, p. 29).²⁹ In discussing her own writing and collection of works, Ernaux similarly indicates her preference for employing vocabulary associated with manual labour rather than more conventional literary terms: instead of *oeuvre*, which implies a closed, finished process, Ernaux prefers to use the verbal structure *faire des*

²⁹ Ernaux's questioning of traditional terminology, of course, extends beyond *L'ECUC*. For instance, Ernaux has also questioned the use of the term *humanités*, stating that "Le terme humanité, je voudrais bien savoir ce qu'il recouvre vraiment, et s'il n'y a pas derrière une forme de nostalgie pour l'enseignement traditionnel que ma génération a reçue" (from online chat, 17 April 2008). As I shall later discuss in Chapter Five, Ernaux's attitude toward these matters appears to have changed in more recent years.

livres. (*L'ECUC*, p. 15). The term also implies a working-class, factory-like atmosphere, thereby painting the image of the author as working class. The use of these working-class terms is underscored by the author's use of the word *chantier* (*L'ECUC*, p. 48) to represent the labor-intensive process of writing a book. Similarly, Ernaux prefers the terms *écriture* and *écrire* to the term *écrivain* (*L'ECUC*, p. 16). Instead of addressing the genre of a work, Ernaux prefers to discuss its *forme* (*L'ECUC*, p. 57). Similarly, the constricting term *roman*, in adopting Jauss' language, "ne fait pas partie de mon horizon" (*L'ECUC*, p. 55). In a similar vein, Ernaux underscores a resistance toward the classification of her texts. It is not the responsibility of the author, Ernaux claims, to determine the form (or genre) to which a text belongs. Instead, this task is assigned to the critics who "doivent déterminer des courants, classer, qui travaillent sur pièces, comparent, etc" (*L'ECUC*, p. 35). That being said, Ernaux does signify some specific categories that she resists. Ernaux rejects her texts being classified as *récits autobiographiques* (*L'ECUC*, p. 21), *autofiction* (*L'ECUC*, p. 25), or women's writing (93). Ernaux does, however, accept the label of minimalism (*L'ECUC*, p. 35).³⁰ While recognizing the role of the critic in categorizing works, Ernaux has firm beliefs surrounding those forms to which she does not belong. For Ernaux, the most relevant criticism is genetic criticism, which would allow the critic to discover more about Ernaux's writing process (*L'ECUC*, p. 140). Tracing the writing process used by the author would, in a way, allow a re-investigation into the time spent

³⁰ Ernaux accepts this label for her texts from *LP* on in an interview with Vilain (1997c, p. 145). Critics have bestowed this label upon the author, including Douzou, who suggests that Ernaux's texts do not seek conclusions but rather a collection of images at a given moment (in Thumerel, 2004, p. 88). Romanowski argues that preservation is an important aspect of Ernaux's project, highlighting in particular the minimalist approach – which avoids any semblance of pre-determined stylistics – as a way of ensuring preservation (2002, p. 103). Vilain, for his part, argues that the minimalist approach used by Ernaux is a reflection of the "economies" made by Ernaux's parents during her childhood (Vilain, 1998, p. 71).

writing.³¹ In the aim of facilitating genetic criticism of her work, Ernaux provides much information that would be part of such criticism in outlining her writing practices, including pen colours and word processing preferences.

Long before she wrote *L'ECUC*, however, Ernaux was already shaping the interpretation and reception of her work by creating her own literary terminology to explain her writing. The use of her own terminology not only allows Ernaux to control the reception of her work to a certain extent but also underscores Ernaux's refusal to accept traditional critical terms in the analysis of her work. Charpentier suggests (1999, p. 127) that Ernaux's refusal to acknowledge or accept literary conventions and instead use her own indicates her desire not to alienate an audience so as to increase potential readership by avoiding any labeling of her work. Hugueny-Léger has argued (2007, p. 2) that Ernaux has invented what she views as "more appropriate" terminology for criticism of her work that critics will either accept or reject, and Ernaux often introduces such vocabulary within her primary texts and in interviews following the publication of her works. Examples of Ernaux inventing her own terminology include *écriture plate*, *autosociobiographie*, and *autobiographie impersonnelle*. These terms are used not only by Ernaux in the discussion of her work – both in the works themselves and in Ernaux's comments about them – but also in critical work. The prevalence of Ernaux's own language in critical work on Ernaux will be a central issue that I shall address in the next chapter.

Conclusion

³¹ Ernaux's own preoccupation with chronicling the time spent writing is underscored by her habit of writing dates on her drafts as she proceeds with a writing project. This will be explored further in Chapter Five.

The engagement that Ernaux has exhibited with her critics, having provided them with close personal access in the form of interviews and more informal meetings, access to manuscripts, access to readers' letters, as well as Ernaux's own participation in her critical response, has set her apart from many contemporaries. The relationship that has evolved between Ernaux and her critics can only be seen as mutually beneficial. I have shown that for some critics, Ernaux texts become a personal affair, as critics engage with Ernaux's language and construct their own relationships to it through their own critical faiths. An academically neutral reading of Ernaux is thereby rendered extremely difficult, as critical subjectivity comes to play a role in the selection of appropriate theory, and the critic's relationship with the language of Ernaux's work – and, ultimately, the critic's relationship with her or his own language – plays a role in the analysis of Ernaux's work. In Ernaux's case, scholarly identities also sometimes overlap with fan identities. Furthermore, Ernaux's own (meta)writing about her relationship with her critics and the direct involvement with the critical reception of her texts present an interesting case in which traditional literary conventions are no longer in place.

This aspect of Ernaux criticism is, perhaps, its most distinctive aspect: even those trained to remove their own subjectivity from the reading and analyzing process – as if such removal were possible – have been moved to admit their admiration for Ernaux's texts. If one is to accept Barthes' thesis, the author may be dead, the critical reader that takes that author's place is, in all likelihood, a fan. Just as 'Ernaux' is constructed, like a celebrity, by fans, so, too, do academics construct 'Ernaux' in a marriage of their own discourse and that of the author.

This intersection of the critical reader with the author, reflected in the critical work, in turn reflects the reader/author dynamic that figures prominently in Ernaux's recent writing. In the next chapter, I shall turn my attention to the specific ways in which critics have, in response, imagined and constructed both Ernaux's works and 'Ernaux' herself and the degree to which Ernaux has played a role in these constructions.

"Le critique, lui, n'a pas de certitude. Il ne se sent pas justifié. Il n'a aucun droit particulier à s'exprimer, il prend une liberté exorbitante en s'attaquant à un créateur. Mais c'est justement de liberté qu'il s'agit, dans ce monde de la prédestination artistique, où tout semble être comme cela devait être. Cette incertitude, qui est une absence de fondement stable, ne signifie pas absence de valeurs. Se passer des valeurs de vérité, de beauté, se passer d'éthique serait humainement suicidaire. La disparition des valeurs laisse le champ libre aux marchands."

(Jourde, 2008)¹

"Je n'ai aucun désir de 'faire du social' coûte que coûte, de demeurer conforme à la représentation que l'on a de mon travail. C'est aux critiques et aux chercheurs de mesurer l'évolution éventuelle de ce dernier."

(Ernaux in Fell & Welch, 2009, p. 6)

Chapter 3 – CRITICAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF 'ERNAUX' AND HER WORKS

Introduction

In this chapter, I shall survey how Ernaux's works have been constructed by her academic critics. I shall begin by discussing the question of Ernaux's work belonging to a particular literary genre, which is a recurring topic within Ernaux criticism. Ernaux's work does not readily fit into any but instead, as Ernaux has suggested, evades classification altogether (Day, 2007, p. 19; Hugueny-Léger. 2009, p. 2).² In addition, because Ernaux's work has consistently been read as autobiographical, a reading that has been encouraged by Ernaux as well as by the placement of Ernaux's works by Gallimard in autobiography sections in book stores

¹ <http://www.t-pas-net.com/libr-critique/?p=1089>, retrieved 1 August 2010.

² Day continues her analysis with her own interesting account of how Ernaux's writing has been classified within different disciplines or genres of writing and how some critics have pointed out the experimental nature of the writing project (Day, 2007, p. 19-24).

(Charpentier, 1999, 121),³ there is a tendency to treat her texts as a gateway to the author. As such, reading each Ernaux text is, for many readers, a way to add more to her or his construction of 'Ernaux.' I shall suggest in this chapter that critics also engage in this practice. I shall then examine how Ernaux's corpus has been constructed by grouping texts together before moving to a discussion of Ernaux's own vocabulary to describe her writing as well as that of the critics. I shall further present my own grouping for Ernaux's recent writing and suggest ways in which it builds upon and departs from critical constructions of her earlier works.

I Choosing a Genre and Method of Analysis for Ernaux

Despite Ernaux's interventions in critical constructions of her own work, Ernaux's writing also continues to be constructed in more traditional literary terms. I shall firstly discuss some of the ways in which Ernaux's texts have been constructed by critics within pre-existing literary categories and genres. Such categorization is, of course, difficult in Ernaux's case (Fell, 2006, p. 21-37) and for any author. Indeed, Genette argues that to know a genre, its history must have already been written (1986, p. 36), and Derrida similarly explains that to restrict a text to a genre is to impose a limit upon its interpretation:

Dès qu'on entend le mot 'genre,' dès qu'il paraît, dès qu'on tente de le poser, une limite se dessine. Et quand une limite vient à s'assigner, la norme et l'interdit ne se font pas

³ It should be pointed out, however, that Ernaux was obliged to say that *LFG* was autobiographical following its release (Tondeur, 1995, p. 70), although the author finds the term embarrassing (*L'ECUC*, p. 11). Ernaux's subsequent work has been presumed to be equally autobiographical, and Ernaux confides to Charpentier that Gallimard placed her texts within the "mémoires, récits autobiographiques" section beginning with *LP* (Charpentier, 1999, p. 121), thereby encouraging this presumption.

entendre: 'il faut,' 'il ne faut pas,' dit le genre, le mot 'genre,' la figure, la voix ou la loi du genre. (Derrida, 1986, p. 256)

Because Ernaux is, at the time of writing, still a living author, she and her contemporaries have not yet been categorized and contextualized. Thomas & Webb (1999, p. 43-4) argue that because Ernaux (like Marie Cardinal) uses "direct, unadorned language," the effect is troubling, thereby resulting in an ambivalent response from the literary establishment. Critics who attempt to classify Ernaux's texts within a particular genre very quickly run into problems. Day argues that there is "a very real sense in which Ernaux's texts evade classification" (2005, p. 224) and that her place in the literary field is won, as the title of this thesis suggests, "par effraction."⁴ While asserting that Ernaux wishes to control the reception of her texts through extended commentary upon the release of each text (in Thumerel, 2004, p. 240), Charpentier argues that Ernaux constitutes a threat to critics who have, since the first text, attempted to pigeonhole and diagnose a set of texts that refuse to be trapped and limited within boundaries. Even more frustrating, perhaps, is that despite the fact that Ernaux helps shape the critical constructions of her work, she does not explicitly state that she creates her own genre of writing, commenting in her online chat that "Je n'ai jamais inventé une forme *à priori*." Creating her own form, as Romanowski has suggested, would create a new set of rules to which her future texts would be expected to conform (Romanowski, 2002, p. 112). Indeed, Hutton has argued that finding a discrete category for Ernaux is impossible (Hutton, 1998, p. 242). Despite Ernaux's tendency to avoid labeling, however, much critical attention has been devoted to the question of what label, if any, is appropriate for her writing.

⁴Ernaux has used this term countless times in various interviews (as referenced by Charpentier in Thumerel, 2004, p. 226).

Ernaux as a Feminist Writer

Ernaux's relationship with feminism is a complex one both because her writing has evolved and because feminism itself has undergone many developments over the same period of time. Indeed, many feminist writers (such as Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva) might well be considered Ernaux's contemporaries. As a result, feminist readings of Ernaux's work depend heavily on the feminist theoretical framework adopted. In addition, within Ernaux scholarship, much critical debate has centered on the degree to which Ernaux seemingly privileges issues of social class over gender as well as the degree to which the two concepts intersect and overlap. I shall assess each of these points in turn.

Beginning with early Ernaux criticism, feminist readings of Ernaux's work are imbued with discussions of the degree to which issues of gender are balanced with those of social class. Arguably, feminist criticism initially brought significant attention to Ernaux's work (Thomas, 2006, p. 159). In the first feminist intervention on Ernaux's work, Day commented that *LAV* [...] may be seen to provide a useful corrective to the tendency, in popular feminism, to privilege sexuality over other aspects of social relations. [...] [I]f the novel enhances the reader's sensitivity to the multi-faceted nature of social oppression, and her capacity to resist the pervasive influence of oppressive ideologies of class and gender, then its value to feminism seems clear. (Day, 1990, p. 52-53)

Tondeur, in turn, suggests that for Ernaux, "belonging to a sex which did not have a voice is less important than coming from a class which has never had the right to speak" (Tondeur, 1996, p. 8), and Tondeur argues that Ernaux's identity as a woman is secondary to that of a member of her social class. Ernaux more recently reaffirmed her desire to privilege social class over gender in an interview with Fort, in which she states "la détermination de l'origine sociale et de la place sociale sont plus importants que l'individuation sexuée. Même si celle-ci compte. Mais je mettrais en premier le social" (Fort, 2003, p. 987). In more recent criticism, social class is also situated within the construction of gender. Thomas (2006, p. 163) has suggested that the intersectionality of gender and class is at the heart of Ernaux's work: while her primary focus is on class-based oppression, gender is never removed from the equation and, indeed, Ernaux's writing "opens up new literary forms, and addresses 'the discursive, material, and cultural differences that make up the being and becoming of women' (Kavka, 2001, p. xiii, quoted in Lewis, 2005)" (Thomas, 2006, p. 167). In short, Ernaux does not privilege issues of gender over those of class, as the two are inextricably linked within her work. This tension between issues of class and gender highlights the manner in which the two concepts intersect with each other in Ernaux's works.

Other feminist criticism has been harsher both on Ernaux's works and, by extension, on Ernaux herself. In particular, Day points out that other feminist critics were disturbed by *PS* due to "the submission of Ernaux's narrators to what might appear to be masochistic sexual desires"

(2007, p. 31).⁵ For some critics, a protagonist must adopt a feminist agenda, as I suggested is the case in Irigaray's work, in order for the work to be considered truly feminist. In drawing upon Hite's argument (see Chapter One, p. 24-5) that contemporary female writers should avoid the construction of the feminine as an other, as is the case in *écriture féminine*, Marrone argues that *PS* presents a "confused feminine subjectivity" and that Ernaux's refusal to explain or justify her passion in the work reflects her "subconscious guilt" for presenting many stereotypical female characteristics, but Marrone adds that the text reflects the difficulties that breaking from this tradition entails (Marrone, 1994, p. 82-5). Marrone further argues that *PS*, much like *LP*, marks a turning point for Ernaux, in this case away from the political and toward the personal and feminist. Marrone bases her model of feminist writing on Chodorow and makes the argument that Ernaux defines herself more through her relationships with others than male autobiographical writers, who, as we saw in Chapter One, are more centered on an all-knowing self. Boehringer (2000) makes a similar argument in comparing Ernaux's autobiographical text with Rousseau's *Confessions*, which Boehringer argues is more centered on the *moi* than Ernaux's texts. Similarly, Viti sees Ernaux's most controversial text, *PS*, as correcting the gender balance in previous works: while Ernaux is a desiring female subject actively constructing her romance and living it on her own terms and in her own home, A. is "reduced to pure desire" (Viti, 2000, p. 154), playing the role of sexual object in their

⁵ *PS* is not the only text to experience such criticism. For instance, Charpentier points out that *LFG* was embraced by many feminist movements upon publication, while other feminist groups saw *LFG* as "not feminist enough" (Charpentier, 1999, p. 72). McIlvanney argues that Ernaux's writing, in general, is reflective of a split-self that the female autobiography encourages – a public (written) and private (external) persona, suggesting that this split-self is furthered by and may result from the fact that women may feel that they are not worthy of autobiography (McIlvanney, 2001, p. 4). Similarly, Cruickshank (in Fell & Welch, 2009, p. 80-93) takes Ernaux to task by suggesting that *JDD* and *LVE* incite women "to perform in accordance with market-driven stereotypes" (2009, p. 92).

encounters and in Ernaux's sexual fantasies. Viti further argues that in Vilain's *L'étreinte*, Ernaux is clearly in control of the sexual encounters, again with a younger man, rather than the reverse, as she is once again in *L'UDLP*, although this time in a healthier relationship (Viti, 2006, p. 81-4).

For some critics, then, Ernaux does feminism a disservice due to the manner in which her writing subject at times conforms to patriarchal values instead of challenging them. What is consistent among the positive and negative critical constructions of Ernaux's work is the tendency to judge 'Ernaux' rather than the work. If the text fails to conform to a particular version of feminism, the fault is to be found in Ernaux's guilt or inability to find a more balanced relationship with a man. Ernaux, in turn, has commented at length on feminist reception of her work and on feminism in general. She has consistently questioned the meaning of the term, arguing that it carries many connotations and has different significance for different readers. As a result, while Ernaux does not reject being labeled a feminist, she has largely rejected being restricted to the label (Fort, 2003, p. 986; Thomas, 2005, p. 224-5). In moments of debate, she has also stated that she does not believe that there is such a thing as feminism (Charpentier, 1999, p. 145), implying that the term itself oversimplifies a complex group of philosophies. During this speaking tour, Ernaux had been attacked as being anti-feminist by faculty of a gender studies department in Boston. Similarly, on a similar speaking tour in the United Kingdom, Holmes documents that Ernaux strongly rejected the assertion that there is a "significance of gender in both the theme and form of [her] writing" (Holmes, 1996, p. 298).

I want to suggest that Ernaux's refusal to be restricted to the label reflects the fact that Ernaux has expressed reluctance to embrace the entire body of work that constitutes feminism. For this reason, Ernaux has never privileged a feminist reading. This position is underscored by her refusal to publish her works with a feminist publishing house (Charpentier, 1999, p. 127). In the second instance, I would argue that Ernaux does not restrict herself to this label – or, as we shall see, any other label - so as not to pre-judge the reading experience, which allows her to write for as wide a readership as possible. While Ernaux does not set out to write particularly feminist texts, this does not mean that her works cannot be appropriated as such from a variety of perspectives. Ernaux stated in 1977 following the publication of *LFG* that she would consider herself an "écrivain féministe sans penser à vouloir écrire féministe" (in Charpentier, 1999, p. 123), thereby suggesting that it is not up to her to determine whether a text is feminist or not, as such a responsibility falls to the lot of readers and their horizon of experience and expectations from which they read. A particular depiction of women is not part of Ernaux's project as a writer, nor is it part of the writing process. For example, in an interview with Boehringer, Ernaux responds somewhat coldly to the question of how Ernaux seeks to portray women in her works:

Ma visée en écrivant n'est pas spécialement de mettre en scène des femmes ou des hommes, mais de creuser, de mettre au jour, des expériences vécues par moi. Une femme, donc, est la voix, parfois complètement le sujet (*La femme gelée*) des livres. [...] Ma représentation des femmes n'existe pas *en soi*. [...] Ensuite, c'est la différence de classe sociale sensible dans le corps féminin qui m'a le plus intéressée, je crois. (Je dis "je crois", parce que ce ne sont pas des choses auxquelles je pense en écrivant.) (Boehringer, 1999, p. 165)

Ernaux articulates here that she does not actively consider the manner in which female characters are portrayed during the writing process. It is up to readers to choose whether Ernaux's texts can be considered feminist according to their own interpretations of the term, and it is not a question to which Ernaux appears to devote a great deal of attention. This can perhaps be evidenced by Ernaux's response to a comment made by Marie in *L'UDLP* in which he tells Ernaux that she is the most feminist woman with whom he has been in a relationship. Ernaux responds by saying that "je ne sais pas ce que c'est de ne pas être féministe, ni comment se comportent avec les hommes les femmes qu'ils ne songent pas à qualifier de féministes" (*L'UDLP*, p. 121). In stating that she does not know what it means *not* to be feminist, Ernaux suggests that she could not fathom being anything but a feminist but that she does not *consciously* speak in feminist discourse. Instead, as Hugueny-Léger has suggested, for Ernaux, feminism "a été acquis dès le plus jeune âge et [...] est une composante naturelle de l'identité de l'auteure."⁶

In spite of not privileging feminist interpretations of her texts, Ernaux admits to softening her views on feminism due to the sexist ways in which readers responded to *PS* (Thumerel, 2004, p. 9; Fell & Welch, 2009, p. 2). It is Ernaux's contention that comments that were made about her text following the publication of *PS* would not have been made had she been a male author (Dugast-Portes, 2008, p. 99), yet she has continuously rejected being labeled alongside any of her contemporaries. For instance, Ernaux has resisted being classified within the label *écriture*

⁶ Some critics consider Ernaux's work to be reflective of universal female experiences, despite the fact that, as I shall later point out, many male readers also identify with the works. For Havercroft, for instance, the "je transpersonnel" of Ernaux's texts speaks for women in similar situations (in Thumerel, 2004, p. 136), particularly in *L'E*. Jordan makes a similar point (2007, p. 135) when she argues that Ernaux writes her texts from a feminist perspective "on behalf of all."

féminine because there is no equivalent *écriture masculine* (L'ECUC, p. 98) and rejects any "écriture féminine spécifique" (Charpentier, 1999, p. 66). In an interview with Vilain in 1997, Ernaux explains that "[l]e féminisme comme lutte pour l'égalité des droits entre les hommes et les femmes, conditions de vie, responsabilités, rôles identiques ou partagés est toujours au cœur de mes préoccupations" (Vilain, 1997c, p. 70), indicating that she supports equality among men and women and seeks to deconstruct the model in which women are depicted as men's Other, as espoused by Beauvoir, as opposed to the *écriture féminine* model in which it is the differences in gender that are celebrated, as in the work of Cixous or Irigaray.⁷ Indeed, I would argue that Ernaux's project seeks to make the feminine experience just as mainstream as the male experience. A case in point is *LA*, which Ernaux explains by arguing that "[l]a plupart du temps, les livres qui relèvent de l'histoire sont écrits à l'universel masculin. Les années, ce serait plutôt une tentative de l'universel féminin" (interview with Janicot, *Muze*, March 2008).

Ernaux's Uneasy Relationship with Autofiction

Despite the fact that Ernaux's texts contain stories from her own life, she has refused to be considered a strictly autobiographical writer, arguing that she had been "presque obligée par les gens qui me parlaient de reconnaître que ce n'était plus un roman mais une autobiographie" (Tondeur, 1995b, p. 38). As Day has argued (1999, p. 91) in her analysis of *CQDR*, the text not only foreshadows a subsequent rejection of fiction but also suggests the extent to which not

⁷ As I indicated in Chapter One, Day (2002a) makes an interesting link between Ernaux's writing project in *UF*, *PS*, and *JNS* and the work of Irigaray.

only Ernaux's writing but all writing is autobiographical at some level. Because Ernaux's early writing contained some fictionalized elements, she has also frequently been labelled an autofictional writer,⁸ most recently by Penrod (in Villani, 2009, p. 139), who classified *LAV*, *LFG*, *LP*, *UF*, *JNS*, *L'E* as autofiction. Viti (2002) labels *PS* and *SP* as autofiction. Olivier (2002) emphasizes Ernaux's rejection of the autofiction label and also partially accredits the assigning of the label to Ernaux as reflective of the prevalence of exploring sexual identity as a common link among contemporary female writers. While the genre is, on the surface, a seemingly appropriate one for Ernaux, it is rejected by Ernaux in part because at different points she argues that her work does not contain fiction (although, as I earlier argued, Ernaux's statements on this matter often contradict each other). Ernaux also argues that "[l]a réalité d'une enfance, ce n'est pas la somme des images et des impressions que l'on a conservées et auxquelles va donner sens et cohérence le discours de l'autobiographie de type 'romanesque' issue des *Confessions* de Rousseau, et que pratique d'ailleurs aussi l'autofiction" (Vilain, 1997a, p. 147). Ernaux's project is not to embellish her life so as to create a work of art but instead to reflect her life experiences, she suggests, without embellishment.

Ernaux re-iterates her rejection of autofiction in her critical intervention, *Sur l'écriture*, stating that her *je* "[...] ne constitue pas un moyen de me construire une identité à travers un texte, de m'autofictionner, mais de saisir, dans mon expérience, les signes d'une réalité familiale, sociale, ou passionnelle" (in Thumerel, 2004, p. 19). Ernaux's refusal of autofiction is often presented in concert with her recurring statements that her writing is research-oriented and

⁸ This question is a central one that has featured prominently not only within academic reception but also in the press reception of Ernaux's works. I shall return to this important point in Chapter Five.

somehow more objective than writers of autofiction. Ironically, autofiction is more recent than Ernaux's writing career, as the term was created by Doubrovsky in 1977, three years after the publication of *LAV*. Many writers who are contemporaries of Ernaux have been classified within this genre, especially twenty-first century female writers. Perhaps due to the prominence of other autofiction writers, popular media continue to classify Ernaux within this genre of writing, as I shall discuss at further length in Chapter Five. Due to the large number of authors who are included in the category (including Millet and Angot), it is also perhaps a desire to evade comparative work with contemporary writers that has helped motivate Ernaux's staunch refusal of this label, although, as Hugueny-Léger suggests (2009, p. 146), Ernaux simultaneously rejects the term and seemingly invites its use by using it in her own writing (*L'O*, p. 21) and by publishing in *Autofictions & Cie*. Finally, as I shall demonstrate in Chapter Five, much of the publicity surrounding the publication of *L'UDLP* concerned autofiction and Ernaux's place within the genre.

Ernaux and Other Writers

While Ernaux has commented that she admires the work of some of her contemporaries (as Hugueny-Léger, 2009, p. 73 has suggested – as well as Ernaux herself in her online chat), she also mentions in her introduction to the proceedings of the Arras conference in 2002 (Thumerel, 2004, p. 4) that she resists all literary comparisons between her own work and that

of others, and she states that she feels close to no other writer.⁹ Ernaux also, however, acknowledges that it is natural that her work “soit rapproché de celui d’autres écrivains et artistes, surtout contemporains” (Fell & Welch, 2009, p. 8). Yet Ernaux deliberately avoids comparisons between her work and that of others largely by avoiding the literary scene (Tondeur, 1996, p. 154). In conversations with Charpentier, Ernaux reveals that one of the main reasons that she has remained with Gallimard since her first publication is because she feels protected by the company: Ernaux can have her manuscript published with minimal changes, and she is not required to do extensive book signings (Charpentier, 1999, p. 126). Along a similar line, Simonet-Tenant highlights Ernaux’s tendency to avoid literary references in her works¹⁰ (in Thumerel, 2004, p. 51), which Ernaux’s literary capital would permit her easily to do.

The work of linking her writing to that of others is instead left in the hands of readers and critics who, Ernaux writes in *L’ECUC* (p. 35), are responsible for this type of work. Charpentier’s work has drawn on Bourdieu’s notion of *lectores*, or an expert reader, who “lit, commente, déchiffre un discours déjà produit, dont il tient son auctoritas” (in Thumerel, 2004, p. 228). Charpentier suggests that critics are often frustrated with Ernaux, as she cannot be assimilated with another particular author or literary movement. The result, Charpentier suggests, is comparative anarchy, as Ernaux is:

[...]fréquemment assimilée aux auteurs réalistes – voire même – à son grand dam – naturalistes; de même, les comparaisons/filiations avec d’autres romanciers, multiples

⁹Hugueny-Léger further undertakes an interesting analysis of other writers’ influence on Ernaux and also undertakes a study of literary references in *PS* and *SP* (2009, p. 71-80).

¹⁰ The exception is *SP*, which Hugueny-Léger (2008, p. 37) has noted contains over sixty literary references.

et erratiques, trahissent la confusion et l'embarras des critiques (parfois leur agacement). (Charpentier in Thumerel, 2004, p. 228)

I would agree with Charpentier's argument and suggest that, furthermore, the choice of comparison for an academic critic may also lie in that critic's 'faith' or area of expertise. To that end, it is worthwhile to investigate some of the academic comparative work that has been undertaken in Ernaux's recent writing.¹¹ My comments here are somewhat unavoidably reductive, as my aim is simply to construct a sense of the breadth of comparisons used in constructing 'Ernaux' and her work. I shall revisit this issue again in Chapter Five when I discuss the role of literary comparisons in the construction and success of *LA* in 2008.

While comparisons with other twentieth century authors are most prevalent, there are comparisons with writers of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth century writers. Comparisons with Proust have been made by Viti (2004), Doucet (1999), and Thomas (2008). Boehringer (1999) and Hugueny-Léger (2007, 2009), in turn, use Rousseau and Rimbaud respectively in discussions of the relational self. McIlvanney (1998, p. 264) situates Ernaux's writing within the tradition of realism, likening Ernaux's writing project to Balzac's *La comédie humaine*. With respect to more recent twentieth century writers, I outlined the prevalence of comparative literature studies within the realm of graduate student study in Chapter Two, and

¹¹ It should be mentioned that the first full-length book on Ernaux is, essentially, a comparative literature study. Fernandez-Recatala explores dominant themes in each of the works and legitimizes their use through referring to canonical texts. Fernandez-Recatala's apparent objective is to legitimize Ernaux's texts by finding links between Ernaux's texts and the works of Flaubert, Breton, Proust, and others. Fernandez-Recatala identifies passages from other literary works that demonstrate similar conflicts or themes to those in Ernaux's text, and sometimes even suggests that Ernaux should read them. In an analysis of *LP*, for instance, at one point in the text, Fernandez-Recatala suggests that Ernaux should recite an extract from Aragon's *Roman inachevé* (Fernandez-Recatala, 1994, p. 118) as a way of elucidating the shame that she felt toward her father.

a number of theses have been written comparing Ernaux to Duras, Redonnet, Sarraute, and Beauvoir. Many of the comparative studies focus particularly on the manner in which gender is constructed and assigned in the works. Beauvoir appears to be the most popular choice among these authors for comparative study (for instance, McIlvanney's book reads Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe* against Ernaux's works; Boehringer (2003) reads *JNS* against *Une mort très douce*; Viti reads Beauvoir's diaries against *PS* and *SP*; and one of the topics of discussion at the CWWF conference in 2009 was the similarities between Beauvoir's autobiographical project and that of Ernaux). Duras has been compared to Ernaux in an analysis of how both use gaps (Tondeur, 1996, p. 145) as well as identity construction by women (Marrone, 1994, p. 82), and Sarraute's *Tropismes* has been used in comparison to *JDD* in that both "immortalize what could have been no more than forgettable stacatto instances of urban life on the move" in Paris (Lancaster, 2000, p. 400). Tondeur (1996) also compares *SP* to Camus' *L'étranger*, just as Olivier compares the opening lines of *JNS* to those of the same work (Olivier, 2002, p. 399). Many comparisons have also been made with the work of Barthes. The most popular comparison is between Ernaux's writing and *Le degré zero de l'écriture*, as Olivier (2002, p. 405-407) and Romanowski (2002) have situated Ernaux's writing within Barthes' model in *L'écriture et le silence* and, in particular, his *écriture blanche*, which Barthes has summarized as seeking to "dépasser la littérature en se confiant à une sorte de langue basique, également éloignée des langages vivants et du langage littéraire proprement dit" (in Olivier, 2002, p. 406). Ernaux also states herself in *L'ECUC* that some critics find that her work contains *écriture blanche* (p. 35). Bacholle-Boskovic has argued that there are links to be found between *PS* and *Fragments d'un*

discours amoureux (1996, p. 128), which is an argument that I have also made elsewhere (Janes, 2004).

Comparisons have also been made to other contemporary women's writers, particularly Millet, Angot, and Laurens (Olivier, 2002, p. 392-393; Bozon 2005, p. 6-21), and such comparisons focus on the prominent role of feminine sexuality in autobiographical feminine writing. In assessing placement within the French feminist canon, Ernaux has, for instance, been compared to Cardinal (Marrone, 1994, p. 82; Thomas & Webb, 1999). Similarly, in discussions of ageing and elderly or palliative care, comparisons have been made between Ernaux's texts, particularly *UF* and *JNS*, and Nothomb and Hennezel (Wassenaar, 2002, p. 91-102) as well as Détambel's *Un long séjour* (Tondeur 1999, p. 127-132). Finally, later criticism focusing on the use of photography Ernaux has invited comparisons to other works incorporating photography. In her analysis of *L'UDLP*, Delvaux (2006) makes brief mention of the photography of Didi-Huberman and Henric, while Jordan (2007) and other critics (especially in the proceedings of the Toronto conference, 2009) make reference to visual art theory by Laurens, NDiaye, Mitchell, Calle, Tillman, and Gonzalez-Torres. Fell (in Fell & Welch, 2009) and Jordan (2007) make comparisons between *L'UDLP* and the work of Susan Sontag, and both Fell (2009) and Miller (2002, p. 83-94) make comparisons between Ernaux's work and the photography of Jo Spence from the perspective of medical/cancer narratives. Finally, Havercroft (in Villani, 2009, p. 127-137) compares the photos in *L'UDLP* to the work of Smith and Watson, who adopt the notion of the "rumpled bed of autobiography" (originally proposed by Donnell) as an effective comparison for the recent explosion of women's autobiographical

writing: the bed, like the text, represents a site “on which discursive, intellectual, and political practices can be remade” (in Villani, 2009, p. 128).

It is clear from the above that the comparisons made between Ernaux and other writers are widespread. The comparisons often reflect the critic’s previous work or, in the case of graduate thesis, the material that has been studied. In many cases, similar content in the writing of others – for instance, the autobiographical nature of Beauvoir’s project, including her journals; the sexual content in Millet’s work; or Mersault’s feelings of alienation as a result of his mother’s death in Camus’ *L’Étranger* – have resulted in critics making comparisons between Ernaux and other writers. In this sense, ‘Ernaux’ functions as a device through which critics – or, as Charpentier, via Bourdieu, suggests, *lectores* - can construct a relationship with the canon of French literature, thereby demonstrating their own literary capital and legitimacy in the field. As the reception of *LA* shows, press and academic critics have continued to construct Ernaux through the works of others. Ernaux, in turn, demonstrates her own awareness of her contemporaries and is able to predict the critical comparisons to be made and through which her writing will, in turn, be constructed.

Ernaux in the Patient’s Chair

A writer of personal literature might reasonably expect to be made the object of analysis by critics. Because of the autobiographical nature of Ernaux’s texts, readers can be tempted not simply to read each text in isolation but instead to read one text in concert with another in order not only to construct her but also to provide imagined therapy to Ernaux. Similarly,

some critics use autobiographical details of Ernaux's life revealed in one text to elucidate a passage from another. Ernaux's texts are thereby treated as a single, ongoing text rather than as a series of independent pieces of writing.¹² As an example, Bacholle-Boskovic undertakes a re-investigation of *LAV*, *CQDR*, and *LP* in order to "comprendre et se mettre en position de recevoir le geste paternel," a reference to Ernaux's father's violent act toward her mother. The action was, Bacholle-Boskovic suggests, initially repressed in earlier works and pushed aside only to be, finally, confronted in *LH* (Bacholle-Boskovic, 2003, p. 92-98). Bacholle-Boskovic later suggests that Ernaux re-visits a conversation with a priest following her abortion that had originally been described in *LAV* twenty-one years later in *L'E* because "quelque chose n'a pas été réglé" (Bacholle-Boskovic, 2003, p. 99). Similarly, as I suggested in Chapter One, Doucet analyzes Ernaux's early works through the perspective of Freud's "Notes Upon a Mystic Writing Pad." Doucet argues that Ernaux's writing represents the moment that her consciousness and the unconsciousness intersect and that each Ernaux text represents Ernaux's subject position at a particular moment (Doucet, 1999, p. 16). Doucet argues that "for Ernaux, the loss of balance occurs early in life. Subsequent works can be seen as an attempt to reestablish continuity within herself" (Doucet, 1999, p. 27). Ernaux's first three texts represent a "(de)construction of self" (Doucet, 1999, p. iii), while a re-appropriation occurs in the middle set of texts (*LP*, *UF*, *PS*, *LH*). The use of the mystic writing pad model captures the psychoanalytic premise that an original lack is at the heart of the split subject, here termed by Doucet the "loss of balance" with language used to repair that initial break. 'Ernaux' becomes a persona based on the interplay between the texts that the reader can diagnose. Each text

¹² Bacholle-Boskovic (2000, p. 28) and Tondeur (1996, p. 15) have similarly argued that Ernaux's texts reflect the development of the author.

read is similar to a therapy session, in which stories are revisited and told slightly differently, in a manner not unlike that of the story told by a patient to critical psychotherapist.

In constructing 'Ernaux' in and between texts, some critics have argued that it is instead Ernaux who negotiates language in order to come to terms with the event itself. As I suggested earlier, some critics have argued that Ernaux's *écriture plate* (which I shall discuss in more detail in the final section of this chapter) plays a therapeutic role in solving social problems: for Vilain (1998, p. 69), for instance, *écriture plate* allows Ernaux to write of the dominated in the language of the dominant. Tondeur (1999) develops the notion of Ernaux's writing as *scriptotherapy*, using *JNS* as a model for analysis. In her analysis, Tondeur posits that writing about her mother's disintegrating physical and mental condition allows Ernaux to assume an empowered position of political agency. Drawing on Henke's *Shattered Subjects* and Grosz's *Volatile Bodies*, Tondeur argues that Ernaux's autobiographical text allows her to reinvent herself following a traumatic loss through the relationship adopted with previous Ernaux texts (1996, p. 130). Havercroft, in turn, draws on the trauma theory of Caruth, Gaulejac, and Brown, positing that finding a language for the event allows the victim to become the subject of her or his own discourse surrounding the event as well as of the traumatic event itself (Havercroft, 2005, p. 123). Ernaux's willingness to place the story into the public sphere indicates a coming to terms with language, a struggle underscored by the fact that Ernaux had to abandon the manuscript of *LH* for a four-month period. Havercroft argues that *LH* allows for a re-configuration of the event that has both therapeutic and ethical ramifications (Havercroft, 2005, p. 131), underscored by metatextual comments that highlight Ernaux's uneasiness in

writing about the traumatic incident. Wilging (2001) pursued a similar argument in her analysis of *LH*, adopting a genetic approach, the exclusion of the traumatic incident in other texts, and trauma theory itself in her analysis. In using the theories of van der Kolk and van der Hart, Wilging asserts that returning to a traumatic memory is often necessary in order to complete it. To that end, Wilging asserts that in creating a “verbal narrative out of her wordless memories” Ernaux hopes to “[...]accomplish the work her mind was unable to at the moment of the scene’s occurrence, which is to assign meaning to her impressions so that they may be integrated into the coherent store of past impressions that make up her life-story” (Wilging, 2001, p. 89) For Wilging, too, Ernaux’s writing project is a continuous narrative (Wilging, 2001, p. 102), and the set of texts acts as a series of therapeutic sessions: each text will continue to play a therapeutic role for the author, as the assignment of language to traumatic memories will allow Ernaux to engage with inner conflicts. Similarly, at a CWWF conference in 2009,¹³ Holmes suggests that the totality of *LA* represents, in a sense, Ernaux’s capacity to “let go” of experiences that she had previously struggled to write.

In this light, the reader may construct herself or himself in the role of therapist with ‘Ernaux’ as a seemingly willing participant in the role of patient. Alternatively, the confessional nature of Ernaux’s project may also portray her in the role of confessor to the priestly reader. The theme of confession has been prevalent throughout Ernaux criticism, especially in more recent years. Catholic undertones in particular have been acknowledged (Vilain, 1997c,¹⁴ Merleau, 2004).

¹³ <http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/archive/2009/03/contemporary-women's-writing-in-french/>, retrieved 1 August 2010.

¹⁴ In his interview with her, Ernaux points out the importance of her Catholic upbringing in her writing.

Bacholle-Boskovic has done extensive work on the confessional motif within Ernaux's work. In analyzing *PS*, Bacholle-Boskovic likens the text to a confession that only the death of her mother has allowed her to write (1996) and later argues that Ernaux's writing project has followed three steps (what she terms the "parcours littéraire ernalien"): at first, the texts reflect the language of origin, then "objectively" record signs of the past, and then move on to the ability to confess and reveal secrets (2003, p. 91-92). Fort, in turn, has developed the intriguing theme of resurrection within Ernaux's texts: writing *UF* has enabled the (textual) resurrection of Ernaux's mother, and in an interview, Ernaux agrees with this interpretation (Fort, 2008, p. 194).³⁵ Merleau outlines Catholic undertones in Ernaux's work and suggests that in re-telling stories, Ernaux is both 'confessing' and providing further proof to assert the validity of her previous texts, and Merleau also asserts that the reader did not request such proof (Merleau, 2004, p. 80).

Ernaux's romantic relationships do not escape academic therapy either. With respect both to "A." and "S." of *PS* and *SP*, the relationships in which they were involved have been commented upon within the realm of some of the feminist reception outlined above. For Marrone, Freud's concept of negation sheds light upon Ernaux's "repeated denials" that Ernaux's protagonist in *PS* is fashioned "into a 'traditional' female posture in many respects" (Marrone, 1994, p. 82-3). It is worth outlining the contributions of Viti in this area, as she has analyzed what she views as the general pattern of Ernaux's relationships and its recurrence

³⁵ Ernaux has also pointed out that she found this work by Fort to be the most profound and interesting that she had read when asked by Thumerel to comment on critical response to her work (<http://www.libr-critique.com/>, retrieved 1 August 2010).

throughout the texts. Viti argues that in both *PS* and *SP*, the male is reduced to object status (2002), indicating that Ernaux has achieved an identity that she can accept, and this acceptance explains the confessional style of *PS*, Viti suggests (2000). A few years later, however, Viti contradicted this analysis upon placing *PS* and *SP* in context with *Fragments autour de Philippe V.*, written about Vilain, and *L'UDLP*. Viti argues in her 2006 article that while Ernaux repeats a similar story (role playing games, trips to Venice, and waiting) with all three men – A./S., Vilain, and Marc Marie, Ernaux plays a different role in each: while Ernaux is co-subject with Marie, she had previously been the subject (dominant) with Vilain and the object (dominated) with A./S. (Viti, 2006, p. 86). The happy ending in her most recent publication suggests a coming-to-terms with one's identity, and Viti has determined that Ernaux has, finally, found herself a healthy relationship. Other critics are more harsh toward Ernaux's choice of partners, such as Johnson, who laments that in *PS*, Ernaux makes little use of the liberty that she has gained since, as of *LFG*, Ernaux had "become someone" following the publication of that text and in her relationship with A. in *PS*, squanders that freedom (Johnson, 1999, p. 312). Merleau suggests that Ernaux's desire to re-tell the story of her relationship in *SP* indicates that her "wounds are not healed" and that Ernaux becomes increasingly aware of the manner in which she repeats similar patterns in her relationships with men (Merleau, 2004, p. 70-1). Day argues that in *PS*, Ernaux's love affair with A. represents a natural stage in the grieving process following the loss of her mother, as the capacity to cathect a new object signals recovery and an ability to "move on" (Day, 2000b, p. 219). Romanowski similarly suggests that the subject of sexual passion was one that could only be written about following the death of Ernaux's mother (2002, p. 99). While it is not unusual to

comment upon literature in adopting theoretical standpoints that lend themselves to therapy settings (particularly psychoanalytic theory), what is striking in Ernaux's case is the tendency of some critics to analyze the texts and Ernaux herself in personal terms.

Self and Mother

As I suggested in the first chapter, several critics have pointed out that the 'narrator' of Ernaux's texts constructs the writing subject through Ernaux's relationships with others, and one of the most critically explored relationships in this corpus is the relationship between Ernaux and her mother (notably by Day, 2000; 2007, p. 128-134-145; Meyer, 2002, p. p. 33-40; Ionescu, 2001; McIlvanney, 2001, p. 40-66; Wilging, 2007, p. 73-113). Tondeur also suggests that this complicated mother/daughter relationship is the most important relationship in post-modern women's writing (Tondeur, 1996, p. 90). Within Ernaux's work, more critical attention has been focused on Ernaux's identity construction with the mother figure than on the father.¹⁶ Thomas (2005, p. 130-1) points out that at many points, Ernaux's *voix* is fused with those of others, resulting in a *moi relationnel*. Hutton argues that in writing about her mother in *UF*, Ernaux attempts to preserve a former self as she existed in relationship to her mother. In developing her argument, Hutton draws on the relational self, using Chodorow's assertion that women tend to define themselves in relationship to their mother, even in adulthood (1998, p. 232). Fell argues that *UF* attempts to flesh out this relationship, but the project ultimately fails because of the manner in which Ernaux's own self-image is challenged and disturbed by confrontation with her mother's ageing body (2000, p. 176). As her mother ages and becomes

¹⁶ I see this tendency as ironic because of the status of *LP* as one of Ernaux's most renowned text to date.

increasingly incapacitated, medical discourse is inscribed upon the mother's body. Thomas has also suggested (2005, p. 136) that Ernaux's rejection of her mother's aged body implies a shame of her own body due in large part to this fusion of identity and, for this reason, Ernaux has recourse to men in order to replace this loss. In writing *UF*, argues Fell, Ernaux wishes to restore her mother's dignity, social standing, and voice. The mother's body is the site upon and from which Ernaux will write her mother as a social subject. In an analysis of *JNS*, Day examines the role of the mother's body and sexual immodesty exhibited at the advanced stages of Alzheimers (in contrast to the sexual repression and pride that characterized her during Ernaux's youth) as creating a "surge of cross-identification" between the two women (Day, 2007, p. 123-129), and it is through her mother's ageing body that the connection is made between the woman that Ernaux was and who she will become. In assessing Ernaux's literary representation of both parents, Day draws on Winnicott and suggests that in distinguishing herself or himself from the primary caretaker, the child mentally destroys the image of the parental figure. In doing so, the child learns to distinguish herself or himself from the parent, as the child realizes that the parent exists independently. In this model, there is a combination of love and destruction, and Day convincingly argues that in much of Ernaux's work, Ernaux seeks to represent her parents distinctly in her own terms (Day, 2007, p. 141).

For her part, Meyer argues that *UF* allows Ernaux to recognize the bond between herself and her mother – "as if they are one" (Meyer, 2002, p. 37), reflecting one of the closing lines of Ernaux's text, "Maintenant, tout est lié" (*UF*, p. 103). The text investigates a traumatic loss and allows a textual fusion with Ernaux's mother. Meyer further argues that this fusion is later

disturbed by the publication of *JNS* (Meyer, 2002, p. 38). Day develops the intriguing notion of Ernaux engaging in a dialogue with her internal mother and draws on *UF*, *JNS*, and *PS* in order to explain her model. Day posits that Ernaux uses her sexual identity as a method to dissociate herself from her mother: because she sees her future inscribed on her mother's body, engaging in sexual pleasure allows Ernaux to compensate and to take up the sexual role that her mother never could because of her economic and social circumstances (Day, 2000, p. 215).¹⁷ Finally, some critics have highlighted the importance of the mother/daughter relationship in constructing a distinctly feminine subjectivity (Marrone 1994, Tondeur 1996, Boehringer 2003),¹⁸ making *UF* a text as much about Ernaux as it is about her mother (as in Hutton, 1998). The recurrence of this relationship between Ernaux and her mother is pronounced within Ernaux criticism, but it must be pointed out that this recurrence only reflects the frequent mentions of Ernaux's mother within her works. Indeed, the relational self, as often presented throughout Ernaux's earlier writing through the relationship with her mother, prepares the reader for the revisionist self at work in Ernaux's recent writing, in which reprisal and revision play central roles.

¹⁷ It would be interesting to hear Ernaux's reaction to these theories, as Thomas (2005, p. 71) has pointed out that Ernaux rejects psychological interpretations of passion.

¹⁸ Mall argues that the metatextual comments in *UF* address the role of the mother in shaping "the narrator's" identity (2005).

II Constructing Ernaux's Corpus

Grouping Texts

Ernaux's texts have generally been divided into three groups based either on their genetic process or on the degree to which critics argue that they reflect Ernaux's growth as a person or as a writer. The first group is referred to as *textes concertés* (Thumerel, 2004, p. 17) and consists of *LAV*, *CQDR*, *LFG*, *LP*, *UF*, *PS*, *LH*, *L'E*, *L'O*, *L'UDLP*, and *LA*. The second group is composed of an extract from Ernaux's *journal intime*, *SP*, even though this text could also be grouped with extracts from Ernaux's intimate diary that appear online and to which I referred in the last chapter. Finally, two ethnographical texts, referred to as *journaux extimes* (or *extérieurs*), make up the third and final group. The texts in this group are *JDD* and *LVE*, which are published versions of journals that Ernaux kept specifically to observe others and, as such, are different from Ernaux's intimate diary. Another text in Ernaux's earlier corpus, *JNS*, does not fit rigidly into any category, as it is the result of a specific writing project: the text is the product of a journal that Ernaux kept during the period of her mother's illness.

The other method of grouping texts, to which I shall now devote more space, presents Ernaux's work as an ongoing process that reflects both Ernaux's changing ideas about writing and her own personal growth and development. For example, Garvey suggests that "[a] trajectory can be drawn across the work of Annie Ernaux which traces the gradual striptease of her texts as she pulls away the clutter of fiction to reveal an ever more minimalist and frank prose"

(Garvey, 2008, p. 75). This schema is largely chronological, although three texts stand out from the others – *JNS*, *LVE*, and *JDD*. It is significant that this grouping of texts and much of what has been written about it have been influenced by Ernaux's own comments on her works, and in my discussion of the three groups of texts, I shall highlight the role that Ernaux's own comments about her writing have played in shaping some of the criticism.

Group 1 - LAV, CQDR, LFG: Dissatisfaction with Fiction and the Novel

The first group of texts is usually made up of either two or three texts. Ernaux's first two texts, *LAV* and *CQDR*, belong to this initial group, as they most closely resemble the *roman*, by Ernaux's own admission (Ernaux, 2003, p. 11; Thomas, 2005, p. 21). While Ernaux stated that there is "jamais une once de fiction" in her work,¹⁹ her earlier interviews reveal this not to be the case. In her interview with Tondeur, Ernaux admits to having fictionalized some elements of these works, explaining, for instance, that certain words expressed by her father in *LAV* were never pronounced by her real father, noting particularly the line "On aurait été plus heureux si elle n'avait pas fait d'études" (Tondeur, 1995b, p. 39). *LFG* represents the first transitional text (McIlvanney, 2001, p. 87), as there is a distinctive movement from the fictional to the autobiographical, to the point that Ernaux felt obliged to indicate that *LFG* was an autobiographical work upon its publication (Tondeur, 1996, p. 138), even though some details were fictionalized (Charpentier, 1999, p. 121). Ernaux states in an interview with Boehringer

¹⁹ <http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/20080222/3454/en-video-annie-ernaux-ou-sont-passees-nos-esperances>, retrieved 1 August 2010.

that in *LFG*, "il y a un 'je' transitoire, qui n'appartient plus tout à fait au fictionnel" (1999, p. 166).²⁰ McIlvanney suggests that *LFG* also introduces a particularly self-reflexive element to Ernaux's texts, as the "narrator" possesses "both an insider's perspective on working-class culture as well as the outsider detachment of a class migrant, a combination which results in a self-reflexive analysis of familiar subject matter" (McIlvanney 2001, p. 11).

Ernaux's first two texts may also reflect a writing subject that cannot find the words to reflect any concept of reality, implying that the writer might, at the time of writing, have believed such mimesis possible. Ernaux has also explained that she was afraid of losing her reader before the end of the story in these three texts (Charpentier, 1999, p. 117). As Day has suggested, the title of *CQDR* underscores the central role of language in shaping subjectivity (Day, 2007, p. 76). To some extent, then, language is a form of rebellion and revelation. In Day's view, the first three semi-fictional texts "prepare the ground for the formal and generic development of Ernaux's writing in subsequent years" and set the stage for an "ethno-autobiographical voice and direct mode of address that characterize works after [*LP*]" (Day, 2007, p. 90). It is to this development that I shall now turn.

²⁰ Interestingly, for Day, however, *CQDR* represents a transitional text: while Ernaux terms this text the only one that could be termed a *roman*, *CQDR* facilitates the rejection of fiction and the adoption of ethno-autobiographical voice starting with *LP* (Day, 1999, p. 91).

Group 2 - JDD and LVE: Finding the Self in the Other

Ernaux wrote *JDD* and *LVE* over extended periods of time - 1985-1992 for *JDD* and 1992-1999 for *LVE*. While these texts could also be considered *textes concertés* (*L'ECUC*, p. 23), critics have generally labeled this group of works *journaux extimes*. In contrast to other *textes concertés*, however, these texts are written nearly immediately after the incidents described in the passages. Like identity itself, the shifts in perspective are frequent and sudden. The texts are considered ethnographies by some critics²¹ and are to do with finding the self through the observation of others. Ionescu, for instance, argues that in observing others, Ernaux "ne fait qu'enclencher la quête de sa propre subjectivité, en persistant le discours ethnologique" (Ionescu, 2001, p. 936). In committing observations to writing by capturing signs witnessed in her everyday travels in public places, Ernaux not only preserves incidents that would otherwise have been lost but constantly re-writes her own subjectivity: by capturing observations, Ernaux not only saves them but also, through writing, saves fragments of herself. In this way, Ernaux both accords importance to the everyday and further documents former selves. Drawing on Sheringham's notion of cultural memory operating through bodily experience, Tierney argues that the boundaries that separate Ernaux from another within *JDD* "are softened by the ripples that go 'through us' and our responses to the surrounding environment are cast as simultaneously sensual, emotional, and cognitive" (Tierney, 2006, p. 117).²² Thomas argues

²¹ Baisnée considers the ethnographic texts as exposing the inherent weakness of the genre, as both *JDD* and *LVE* demonstrate that it is impossible to adopt the neutrality that ethnography requires (Baisnée, 2002). Ernaux also considers *JDD* an *ethnotexte*. (Charpentier, 1999, p. 150)

²² Ernaux further explains in an interview in *L'Humanité* following the publication of *JDD* that "[i]l n'y a pas 'moi' et les 'autres', les autres sont aussi nous, et nous dans les autres. [...] Quand je suis dehors, ma personne est néantisée. Je n'existe pas. Je suis traversée par les autres, par les gens et leur existence, j'ai vraiment cette

that although the fragments of the journals describe outside life, the text could also be considered a *journal de l'intérieur* through the questioning of separation between self and others, internal life and exterior social reality, and that these questions provide the link between all the fragments in *JDD* (Thomas, 2005, p. 48). Baisnée (2002, p. 177-186) uses Ricoeur's dual models of identity – through self-reflexivity and awareness – to develop her argument in an intriguing way, arguing that Ernaux's work represents an "anti-diary." Lancaster (2000b) follows Baisnée's argument in asserting not only that *JDD* represents finding the self through others but also that *JDD* represents an embracing worldview and maturing of interests for Ernaux, as previous self-absorption is abandoned. Ionescu has argued that it is especially in Ernaux's *journaux extérieurs* or *extimes* that the self/other dynamic is at play: "Annie Ernaux établit un rapport intéressant entre le Même et l'Autre: l'Autre s'avère être le dépositaire d'une partie de notre propre histoire, tout comme le Même détient une partie de l'histoire de l'Autre" (Ionescu, 2001, p. 936), as Ernaux suggests in the closing lines of *JDD* (p. 106). Baisnée (2002, p. 177-187) and Hugueny-Léger (2007, p. 228) make similar suggestions.

Group 3 - LP UF, PS, LH, L'E: Constructing Ernaux's 'Place'

The most significant change in Ernaux's writing project to date, however, came with the publication of *LP* in 1984. The publication of this text signifies for critics Ernaux's rejection of the novel, and Ernaux argued at the time that the novel is a "genre faux car il est vraiment

impression d'être moi-même un lieu de passage" (Interview with Magali Jauffret and Alain Bascoulergue, 22 April 1993). In Ernaux's more recent writing, there is a realization that this *néantisation* extends beyond experiences in public places and extends to more intimate spaces.

d'essence bourgeoise" (interview in *Revolution*, No. 260, 22 February 1985 and cited in Oliver, 2002, p. 398). Ernaux claims instead to have sought from that point on to adopt the most objective writing possible and to reject the values of bourgeois literature (Vilain, 1997c, p. 68). In an e-mail to Hugueny-Léger, Ernaux explains that "*La Place* est le livre le plus important pour ma vie [...] qui engagera d'autres choix par la suite, refus de toute fiction, recherches d'autres formes à l'intérieur de l'autobiographie" (Hugueny-Léger, 2009, p. 132). Several texts that follow – *UF*, *PS*, *LH*, *L'E*, *L'O*, *L'UDLP*, and *LA*²³ were generally written as a *projet d'écriture* over a period of time and edited before publication. In the case of *PS*,²⁴ the final text existed originally as a folder called *Passion pour S.* written from 1989-1990, whereas *L'O* was written as a series of pages in a folder called *occupation* from 2000-2001. In each case, the finished text is the result of a project that, in many cases, took an extensive period to complete.²⁵

It is also at this point in her career that Ernaux begins to invent literary terms to describe her writing, the first of which is *écriture plate*. In this group, labelled Ernaux's *textes concertés*, Ernaux's split subject between her life at home and her more bourgeois academic setting (in early works, at school and in later works, in the literary scene and in her marriage) is reflected through language: competing discourses filter early works, while *LP* presents the *écriture plate* as the distillation of the two. In *LP*, because Ernaux is unable to create a character out of her father, she creates this new literary form (Vilain, 1997a, p. 143). *Écriture plate* professes to capture and record signs as collected by a writer/ethnologist hybrid scriptor while removing

²³ I am presuming that *LA* will be grouped into this category, as no critic has yet pronounced that a 'new era' in Ernaux writing has arrived, although such a pronouncement is not impossible.

²⁴ Thomas suggests that *PS* also marks a turning point for Ernaux (2005, p. 43), as Ernaux leaves behind the town in which she spent her childhood – and, indeed, her childhood itself – and concentrates on her private adult life.

²⁵ The exception is *UF*, which was written in approximately ten months (McIlvanney, 1998, p. 248).

any semblance of emotion or value judgment. The writing is “sec et minimaliste, ce qui contribue à l'impression d'objectivité” (McIlvanney, 1998, p. 259). *Écriture plate* is, in the first instance, developed in Ernaux's metatextual passages, which are a feature of Ernaux's works from *LP* to the present (Day, 2007, p. 26). In a metatextual comment in *LP* (p. 21), Ernaux explains that this type of writing was originally used by her when writing letters to her parents. Ernaux has stated (*L'ECUC*, p. 14) that the use of *écriture plate* allows her to present lived experience of reality from an objective viewpoint, capturing signs and gestures without trace of emotion. Ernaux states that she writes all works after *LFG* in a manner described as “concrète, objective” (*L'ECUC*, p. 16).²⁶

Ernaux's *écriture plate* is also political in that it plays a role in helping to shape the reception of her work. In answer to the question “L'expression 'écriture plate' est-elle de vous?”, Ernaux responds “Oui. Je l'ai écrite dans *La Place*. Et tout le monde s'est jeté dessus. 'Si elle le dit'...[rires]” (Tallon, cited in Hugueny-Léger, 2009, p. 145).²⁷ In creating *écriture plate*, then, Ernaux not only shapes her own literary terminology but also helps shape criticism of her work, as critics can further define and develop the term in their own critical work. Many have done so. For Tondeur, the use of *écriture plate* is linked to identity struggle: when competing discourses intersect, *écriture plate* is a way of ensuring that one is not privileged over the other, thereby legitimizing both (Tondeur, 1996, p. 149). For Thomas, Ernaux's writing, especially her *écriture plate*, allows tight textual control over memory, thereby transforming the individual

²⁶ Ernaux further requested that the fiction label be removed from her texts beginning with *LP* (McIlvanney, 2001, p. 3).

²⁷ Hugueny-Léger further suggests that critics' appropriation of Ernaux's vocabulary is an example of the “interchangeabilité des positions entre soi et les autres” (Hugueny-Léger, 2009, p. 145), as critic and author exchange places.

into the general and is a way for Ernaux to become subject rather than the object of the gaze (Thomas, 2005, p. 103-111). Day argues (2007, p. 120) that the *écriture plate* is, instead, a literary device rather than a distinct genre that Ernaux has created.). Baisnée (2002, p. 177-186) argues that Ernaux's *journaux extimes* constitute a step beyond the *écriture plate*: the *journal extime* is an acknowledgement that the *écriture plate* constitutes an impossible neutral position.

Similarly, *autosociobiographie* is a *forme* presented by Ernaux (Charpentier, 1999, p. 130), which Thomas (2005, p. 22) argues could signify the creation of a new genre. As with *écriture plate*, the term has been the subject of critical analysis. Thumerel devotes considerable space to the idea in a special issue of *L'école des lettres* in 2003. Thumerel had previously argued that Ernaux's autosociobiographical writing indicates a resurgence of autobiographical writing but in a new and exciting form (Thumerel, 2002, p. 83-101). Thumerel suggests that Ernaux's texts reject the premise of capturing a "totalisation de soi dans un/discours cohérent [...]" (Thumerel, 2003, p. 9-10) and suggests instead that the *autosociobiographie* is an assembly of signs that find a form of truth, and that truth exists only within the text itself. It is through the revision of the text and the selection of words, and the minimalist qualities exhibited by the text, that the text is easily appropriated by readers. In short, the *autosociobiographie* seemingly does the impossible: it combines the supposed neutrality of sociology and mixes it with the untrustworthy autobiography. To say that the *autosociobiographie* is a problematic term is putting it mildly. The term might be viewed, as Day has argued in the case of *écriture plate*, as a literary device unique to Ernaux's project.

This set of texts is also characterized by the use of italics to distinguish words from childhood from the main body of the text. This italicization can be said to underscore the otherness of Ernaux's parents and, by extension, of a former self. While Fau argues that the social problems experienced by Ernaux are mirrored by the difficulty in efficient use of language and that writing allows Ernaux to regain the lost language of childhood and to unify it with her more bourgeois language, thereby having "solved" her language problem (Fau, 1995, p. 511), McIlvanney is not quite as convinced: she argues that the use of italics to separate parents' language from her own turns those words into "museum pieces" for the bourgeois reader to examine (McIlvanney, 2001, p. 98). This tension between youth and adulthood as reflected through language is further analyzed by Bacholle-Boskovic, for whom Ernaux's school career and adoption of its new language(s) represent a secondary mirror stage or a second entry into the symbolic order, in which a new language is acquired: that language, representative of the *monde dominant* or *intellectuel* enters into conflict with the *monde dominé* or *populaire*, thereby reflecting a *double moi* – a *moi présent* and a *moi passé* (Bacholle-Boskovic, 2000, p. 32-43). Thomas compares this tension of navigating language by declaring that finding a *voix* is perceived as being as difficult as finding the *voie* in life (Thomas, 2005, p. 124). In short, the use of italics constantly reminds the reader of the constructed nature of subjectivity, reflected through the attention that italics draw to the heteroglossia of language.

I have already mentioned Ernaux's use of metatextual passages. In order to conclude this section, I would like to revisit their function. Some critics have suggested that the supposed

neutrality of Ernaux's writing is called into question by metatextual passages. These metatextual comments are self-reflexive on the part of the author, often explaining the process of writing, and critics have argued that they have several purposes. For some critics, the comments indicate Ernaux's shortcomings as an author. Motte (1995, p. 65) argues, for instance, that the frequency of the metatextual comments and their references to the writing process highlight that *LP* is as much about Ernaux's own literary apprenticeship as it is about her father's life. Jellenik similarly argues that in *LP*, metatextual comments underscore that Ernaux is really writing about writing itself instead of describing "reality" (Jellenik, 2007, p. 108). Mall further suggests that the metatextual comments underscore the subjective nature of Ernaux's text and undercut Ernaux's claims of objectivity (Mall, 1995, p. 50; Hugueny-Léger, 2009, p. 133). McIlvanney, in turn, asserts that the interjection of metatextual comments betrays the neutrality and objectivity that the text claims to present: the metatextual comments are used to convince the reader of the representative nature of the story being told and also indicate an awareness of a judging other, thereby allowing Ernaux to control reader response by presenting her authorial intent within the work itself (McIlvanney, 2001, p. 93, p. 119-120). Other critics argue that the metatextual comments play a direct and forceful role in the reception of the texts. Charpentier (1999, p. 686), and Day (2007, p. 27) suggest that the metatextual comments encourage readers to adopt a specific subject position, and, indeed, Ernaux comments to Charpentier, in reference to her metatextual passages, that "[c]'est vrai qu'à l'intérieur de mes livres, je donne le mode d'emploi" (Charpentier, 1999, p. 686, and also cited in Day, 2007, p. 27). Thomas (2005, p. 166) instead argues that Ernaux constructs her reader through the metatextual passages, as the reader is absent during the process. This

model of the reader-author dynamic would appear to resemble Iser's implied reader, defined as a construct on the part of the author, whose code matches the author's, as discussed in Chapter One.

I would agree that the metatextual passages undercut Ernaux's claims that her works are objective, coherent accounts of events and further suggest that they challenge the definitive nature of the text. For instance, in *UF*, Ernaux refuses to revisit her father's story because she had already told it in *LP* and asserts that there is "aucun autre récit possible, avec d'autres mots, un autre ordre de phrases" (*UF*, p. 73) other than that contained in *LP*. At the same time, Ernaux comments on the difficulty of writing her mother's story and explains that "j'essaie d'écrire 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" (*UF*, p. 62). Earlier in the text, Ernaux writes :

Je passe beaucoup de temps à m'interroger sur l'ordre des choses à dire, le choix et l'agencement des mots, comme s'il existait un ordre idéal, seul capable de rendre une vérité concernant ma mère – mais je ne sais pas en quoi elle consiste – et rien d'autre ne compte pour moi, au moment où j'écris, que la découverte de cet ordre-là. (*UF*, p. 43-44)

The interruptions within the text by these metatextual comments continuously draw readers' attention to the fact that the text being read is only one of many possible constructions, and similar metatextual comments throughout Ernaux's works suggest that the text is only one possible version of the story. I shall now argue that this questioning of definitiveness is made more explicit in Ernaux's recent writing.

Group 3(a): JNS, SP, L'O, L'UDLP, LA

Beginning with *JNS*, Ernaux begins a period of experimentation. Ernaux has acknowledged that *JNS* is different from all books that she had previously written and confessed in an interview with Thomas that her renown in 1997 allowed her the freedom to feel as though she could experiment with the form, structure, and content of her writing (Thomas, 2005, p. 55), and, as I argued earlier, *SP* might well have been published in that same year (1997) if it had not been for Vilain's demands.²⁸ *JNS* is a *journal des visites* written from 1983-1986 while Ernaux's mother was suffering from Alzheimer's disease.²⁹ Publishing a second version of her mother's story reflects Ernaux's belief that "l'unicité, la cohérence auxquelles aboutit une oeuvre [...] doivent être mises en danger toutes les fois que c'est possible" (*JNS*, p. 12).³⁰ *JNS* thereby disturbs the coherence of *UF*, which sought to find the "perfect words to 'replace' the mother" (Meyer, 2002, p. 36). Ernaux also writes in *SP* that "j'ai cru atteindre en écrivant *Une femme* la perfection de l'écriture" (*SP*, p. 22) but later writes "La fin de mes livres, sauf *La place* et *Une femme*, a été souvent insipide, inutile, rupture de l'écriture plutôt que conclusion, fin" (*SP*, p. 273). In publishing *JNS*, however, the finality of the text is more overtly demystified (*L'ECUC*, p. 38), and the "ordre idéal" (*UF*, p. 43) is rejected. The re-visiting of an earlier Ernaux text also highlights the fundamentally fragmented nature of subjectivity itself and "denies the

²⁸ In this thesis, however, I have chosen not to engage in close textual analysis of *JNS*, as this text, unlike more recent work, has been widely commented upon by critics (Boehringer, 1999, p. 155-163; Day, 2000, p. 150-171; Day, 2007, p. 123-127; Fell, 2002, p. 67-69; Thomas, 1999, p. 254-7).

²⁹ Ernaux further reveals that the opening pages of both *JNS* and *UF* were originally written in her *journal intime*. (*L'ECUC*, p. 48; Fort, 2003, p. 985)

³⁰ If one is to take Vilain's account as truthful, *JNS* was not without some last-minute editing. In *L'étreinte* (p. 97), Vilain claims that he demanded that Ernaux censor passages of the text before publication, obliging her to remove all sexual allusions to the man with whom she was involved at the time and to change his initial from P. to A. and threatening to leave her if she did not do so.

possibility of invoking a coherent or unified self in language" (Fell, 2002, p. 61). This is not the first time, however, that a text was revisited through intertextuality and that the definitive nature of previous works was called into question. For instance, McIlvanney suggests in addition that *LH*, which reveals the source of shame for Ernaux, encourages readers to reassess previous works, thereby calling into question the need for a "fixed portrait" (McIlvanney, 2001, p. 120-121). Hugueny-Léger also suggests (2009, p. 15) that Ernaux's portrait of her father in *LH* both completes and, at times, contradicts that contained in *LP*. I shall argue in the next chapter, however, that Ernaux more overtly and intensely explores this revisionist form of writing in her recent work.

Furthermore, I shall argue that Ernaux increasingly explores the reader/author dynamic in recent texts. In a comment to Bacholle-Boskovic, Ernaux highlights her awareness of the manner in which she invites appropriation of her texts, such as her choice of the title *Une femme* instead of "ma mère" (Bacholle-Boskovic, 1998, p. 143). As Hutton suggests in writing about *UF*, "Ernaux, whose identity is indissolubly linked to that of her mother, and to her own and her mother's class, is brought forth from the text as a living subject by another subjectivity – that of the reader" (Hutton, 1998, p. 243). While Tondeur suggests (2000, p. 135) that after having written texts about significant figures in her life in early works, reflected in my Groups 1, 2, and 3 above, Ernaux begins to write about the outside world in subsequent works,³¹ I would argue that the writing subject in Ernaux's recent work is increasingly preoccupied with

³¹ Ernaux states in her series of e-mail exchanges with McIlvanney that *LH* is part of the "seconde période" of her writing, in which her texts "sont moins autobiographiques que auto-socio-biographiques, [...] des 'explorations' ou il s'agit [...] de perdre [le 'moi'] dans une réalité plus vaste, une culture, une condition, une douleur" (*L'ECUC*, p. 21-22).

Ernaux's role as a writer and her relationship with her readers. Rather than literally coming to terms with traumatic events in her writing, and having left behind a life in which she constructs herself through various others that assign her a specific role (for instance, that of mother, wife, daughter), it is Ernaux's identity as a writer that is at the heart of her preoccupations. In Chapter Four, I shall further examine how Ernaux's recent writing has facilitated and encouraged not only a relationship between readers and her works but also between readers and 'Ernaux' herself, and I shall argue that Ernaux explores the reader/author relationship in more deliberate and provocative ways than in earlier work.

"Écrire son histoire, c'est essayer de se construire, bien plus qu'essayer de se connaître."
(Lejeune, 1971, p. 84).

"[...] il y avait un bonheur plus grand encore – dans ce cas ici, du moins – que
d'écrire sur soi, c'était d'écrire sur quelqu'un d'autre."

-extract from Ernaux's *journal intime*, written following the publication of
Ernaux's article on Bourdieu in 2002 (in *Tra-jectoires*, Vol. 3, 2006, p. 149)

Chapter 4 - THE READING SUBJECT/READING THE SUBJECT IN ERNAUX'S RECENT WRITING

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I placed Ernaux's texts from *JNS* onward within a category of their own. I shall now further substantiate this argument by suggesting, in the first instance, that Ernaux's more recent writing continues its engagement with revisionism and reprise. In addition, I shall argue that Ernaux's recent work explores the reader/author relationship in a way that, in the cases of *SP*, *L'O*, and *L'UDLP*, portrays the relationship in a romantic light and, in the case of *LA*, reflects the interdependent nature of reader and author subjectivities. I shall examine the construction of reader and author relationships in Ernaux's recent work as well as the links between these relationships and Ernaux's continued interrogation of postmodern subjectivity.

Readers' Love Affairs with 'Ernaux' and/or Her Work

In the first chapter, I surveyed how Pearce draws on Barthes in her ideas about the reader/author relationship. While Pearce develops some interesting links between Barthes and the reading process with respect to the romantic novel, I shall examine in this chapter Ernaux's unique relationship with her readers. By adopting Barthes' ideas about love and reading, I shall argue that Ernaux constructs a romantic relationship with her readers in *SP*, *L'O*, and *L'UDLP*. Day has argued (2007, p. 15-6) that reading and writing are desiring activities that are driven by passion for meaning that are oriented toward an absent other. In the case of reading Ernaux's work, the pleasure that the reading experience produces can, for some readers, transcend the reading moments and transform itself into a (usually imagined) relationship between Ernaux and her readers. The relationship between Ernaux and her loyal readers in these three texts might then be likened to a love story, as Barthes explores in *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (1977), suggesting that one cannot write the self because it is imbued in the other (Barthes, 1977, p. 114).¹ In the same way, Ernaux's reader is imbued with the author (by way of her texts).

While reading, readers may, as Thomas argues (2005, p. 16), adopt a subject position within the text. This subject position is developed through a relationship with a textual other. Similarly, in "Identification," Barthes writes of his experience during the reading

¹ Barthes writes: "Je ne puis *m'écrire*. Quel est ce moi qui s'écrit? Au fur et à mesure qu'il entrerait dans l'écriture, l'écriture le dégonflerait, le rendrait vain; il se produirait une dégradation progressive, dans laquelle l'image de l'autre serait, elle aussi, peu à peu entraînée [...]" (Barthes, 1977, p. 114)

of Werther. While Werther identifies himself with a madman, Barthes, in turn, identifies with Werther:

Dans la théorie de la littérature, la 'projection' (du lecteur dans le personnage), aujourd'hui n'a plus cours: elle est néanmoins le registre propre des lectures imaginaires: lisant un roman d'amour, c'est peu dire que je me projette; je colle à l'image de l'amoureux (de l'amoureuse), enfermé avec cette image dans la clôture même du livre (chacun sait que ces romans se lisent en état de secession, de réclusion, d'absence et de volupté: aux cabinets). (Barthes, 1977, p. 155)

Rather than identify with the character of the work, Barthes identifies with the author.

This projection is a constructive activity occurring during an often solitary reading process during which the reader creates the image of the author. This constructed image of the author, in turn, is the result of an interaction between reader self-consciousness and textual identification, as in Iser's "image-building" (1978, p. 140). At the same time, however, it is not possible for the reader to know the author. In "Inconnaissable," Barthes explains, " 'Je n'arrive pas à te connaître' veut dire: 'Je ne saurai jamais ce que tu penses vraiment de moi.' Je ne puis te déchiffrer, parce que je ne sais comment tu me déchiffres" (Barthes, 1977, p. 161). Just as in a romantic relationship, in which a partner cannot know what the other thinks of her or him, a similar dynamic is also at work in the reader/Ernaux relationship: the reader can never *know* the author, or more specifically, the reader will never know what Ernaux thinks of her or his own stories. In this light, the reader/Ernaux relationship will, at times, mimic Barthes' description of the romance. In *Le plaisir du texte*, Barthes more explicitly situates the reader/author relationship within the context of this romance economy:

Comme institution, l'auteur est mort: sa personne civile, passionnelle, biographique, a disparu; dépossédée, elle n'exerce plus sur son oeuvre la formidable paternité dont l'histoire littéraire, l'enseignement, l'opinion avaient à charge d'établir et de renouveler le récit: mais dans le texte, d'une certaine façon, je *désire* l'auteur: j'ai besoin de sa figure (qui n'est ni sa représentation, ni sa projection), comme il a besoin de la mienne (sauf à 'babiller'). (Barthes, 1973, p. 39)

While dismissing the author as source of meaning, Barthes argues that the author fulfills a stand-in role upon which the reader can construct an image of that author that fulfills her or his desire. It is in the act of imagining that the reader can fall in love with the author.

In spite of this sense of connection with the author, the author herself or himself remains elusive. The desire about which Barthes writes might in part help to explain the reader response to much of Ernaux's work, as letters from readers have, at times, indicated that the reader seeks the author (an important point to which I shall return in Chapter Five): it is instead the authorial *construct* that the reader seeks. In addition, the relationship becomes increasingly problematic when one considers that Ernaux's subjectivity is also textually fragmented and, as I shall argue in this chapter, this notion is one that continues to be prevalent in Ernaux's recent writing.

*Se perdre (2001)**Deferred Meaning, Deferred 'Ernaux'*

SP is presented as the intimate diary kept by Ernaux throughout a period in which she was involved in a passionate relationship with an anonymous Russian diplomat.² While a previous version of this relationship is captured in *PS*, a text written nine years earlier, the introduction to *SP* indicates that the text will present a different truth from that found in *PS* because *SP* was written at the time of the encounters with S., while *PS* was afforded the luxury of retrospect. In this light, *SP* is similar to *JNS*. Ernaux explains in the introduction:

Je me suis aperçue qu'il y avait dans ces pages une 'vérité' autre que celle contenue dans *Passion simple*. Quelque chose de cru et de noir, sans salut, quelque chose de l'*oblation*. J'ai pensé que cela aussi devait être porté au jour.

As I suggested in the previous chapter, the questioning of the existence of truths (through Ernaux's use of inverted commas around *vérité*) reflects the subject in process, who is constantly re-writing her or his story in order to achieve an ongoing sense of identity. Similarly, Ernaux comments that the events of 1958, a seminal year in her life, were "mal transposée" in *CQDR*, and that she would add a line to *UF* if she had the

² Ernaux has stated that her *journal intime*, while private, will most likely be published posthumously following her death (Huguency-Léger, 2007, p. 287). That said, as mentioned in Chapter Two, Ernaux has also published two extracts of her journal elsewhere – the first page of her journal was published in *Un journal à soi* (Ed. Lejeune and Bogaert, 2003); the period 24 January to 19 February 2002 was published in *Tra-jectoires 3* (Ed. Nauroy, 2006); and, as referenced in Chapter Two, the period 6 May to 30 November 2005 was published in the "Dossier Annie Ernaux" section of Thumerel's website (www.libr-critique.com, retrieved 1 August 2010).

opportunity to do so (*SP*, p. 51). These references to previous works explicitly deconstruct the notion that they are definitive works. The rejection of the idea of a definitive text is initially reflected not only through the intertextuality between *PS* and *SP* (as well as with Ernaux's other works) but also in Ernaux's recurrent observations on the unsatisfying nature of the traditional journal format that she has adopted in *SP*:

Il faudrait deux colonnes à ce journal. L'une pour l'écriture immédiate, l'autre pour l'interprétation, quelques semaines après. Une large colonne, celle-ci, car je pourrais interpréter plusieurs fois. (*SP*, p. 109)

In the entry above, Ernaux's comment can be read as a reference to the constant deferral of meaning in the reading and writing processes and the impossibility of reducing the subject to language. For Ernaux, re-reading an intimate diary after several years allowed for a re-visiting of a former construction of subjectivity that was, at the time, largely based upon a relationship with S., the other in relation to whom the subject constructs herself throughout the course of that period of time. Indeed, in her correspondence with Hugueny-Léger (2007, p. 34), Ernaux explains that the delay in publishing *SP* was largely due to the fact that she wished to see herself as an other. That subject as it existed at the time of writing of that journal in turn no longer exists when the text is re-read: instead, 'Ernaux' is re-constructed during the re-reading process. 'Ernaux' is re-born with each re-reading, and this rebirth is mirrored in *SP* by each new encounter between Ernaux and S., the foreign lover. With each encounter, there is fresh perspective that calls into question previous constructs of self.

The Catastrophe

As Thomas suggests (2005, p. 130-1), there are many instances in Ernaux's texts in which Ernaux's voice is fused with that of the other: Ernaux's voice is linked with an *autre signifiant*, which is a powerful motif in Ernaux's writing. Day has commented that coupled with childhood, sexuality is a central component in the constitution of subjectivity in Ernaux's writing (Day, 2007, p. 21), and I want to suggest that, in this light, *SP* can indeed be read as a parallel to Barthes' *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*. In the context of *SP*, the subject is paralyzed and seemingly unable to function on her own. Barthes describes this trajectory as the *catastrophe*, in which the subject comes to the realization that she or he is the victim of his or her own image-repertoire, a set of images that the lover has established of the loved object. Barthes posits that it is the images of the loved object with which one falls in love rather than with the individual herself or himself, and these images are as much a reflection of one's own subjectivity as of those of the other. The catastrophe, then, occurs when the lover realizes that "je me suis projeté dans l'autre avec une telle force que, lorsqu'il me manque, je ne puis me rattraper, me récupérer: je suis perdu, à jamais" (Barthes, 1977, p. 60). Both subject and object are constructed in the *catastrophe*, in which the desiring subject is inextricable from the desired other, around whom one constructs oneself.

Within *SP*, the presence or absence of S. is the master signifier around which Ernaux's textual subjectivity is constructed. Ernaux recognizes this fragmented structure of her subjectivity following an evening spent with S.:

Comme toutes les soirées où il est venu, je ne dors pas, je suis encore dans sa peau, dans ses gestes d'homme. Aujourd'hui, je serai entre deux eaux, entre la fusion et le retour en moi. Et toujours l'émergence de certains moments, au milieu de l'ensemble que constitue la soirée. (*SP*, p. 52)

The catastrophe as outlined in the passage above identifies Ernaux's subjectivity as constructed with two conflicting elements - romantic images of fusion with S., in which she is effaced ("dans sa peau") and the solitude that follows his departure, in which the encounters are re-imagined. Ernaux revisits and rewrites scenes during the period following a romantic encounter, revisiting the role that she played in it. The "retour en moi" following the evening is still filled with images of fusion: Ernaux is imbued with the other long after the evening has finished.

The fusion of self and other begins with an initial scene. Following the preface, the text opens with a passage outlining three specific scenes that Ernaux cannot efface:

Trois scènes se détachent. Le soir (dimanche) dans sa chambre, lorsque nous étions assis l'un près de l'autre, à nous toucher [...] F. est dehors, ou presque, la porte est ouverte, et il me semble que S. et moi nous jetons l'un contre l'autre, que la porte se referme (qui ?), nous sommes dans l'entrée, mon dos contre le mur éteint et allume la lumière. [...] Second moment, lundi après-midi. Quand j'ai fini de faire ma valise, il frappe à la porte de ma chambre. Dans l'entrée, nous nous caressons. Il me désire tellement que je m'agenouille et je le fais jouir

avec la bouche, longuement. [...] Dernier moment, dans le train de nuit, pour Moscou. [...] Et tout cela s'est passé à Leningrad. (*SP*, p. 17-18)

Throughout the text that follows this introductory section, Ernaux makes reference to the seemingly perfect beginning of her relationship with S. (*SP*, p. 40). These scenes become mythical and overarching elements of the text. In writing about an initial scene as the starting point for a love story, Barthes explains that in recreating this initial scene, the subject goes through the following process:

[L]orsque je 'revois la scène du rapt, je crée rétrospectivement un hasard: cette scène en a la magnificence: je ne cesse de m'étonner d'avoir eu cette chance: rencontrer ce qui va à mon désir; ou d'avoir pris ce risque énorme: m'asservir d'un coup à une image inconnue (et toute la scène reconstruite opéra comme le montage somptueux d'une ignorance). (Barthes, 1977, p. 229)

This revisiting and rewriting of scenes is the point of reference for the subject throughout a relationship, often creating blind spots that allow the subject to see past what could be shortcomings in the other. In their initial encounter in Leningrad, it is S.'s desire that permeates the revisited descriptions of those early scenes, and throughout the text, it is the consistent search for affirmation of this desire that drives both the construction of S. as well as Ernaux's own self-image.

As the character S. is one about whom the reader knows little, his function becomes that of an object onto which Ernaux projects her own desire to be desired, constantly seeking to recreate the initial scene as it has become consecrated and subsequently rewritten. Just as Ernaux acknowledges that her own older texts (in this case, *PS*) are

not master narratives of a set of events, so, too, does Ernaux acknowledge the manner in which the narratives of her romances, over time, must be deconstructed:

Une fois de plus, j'évoque Leningrad. Retrouver la joie d'alors, la sensation d'alors. Mais il était encore pour moi insignifiant, au sens premier, un homme que je désirais pour un soir, uniquement. Toute la valeur que j'attache à cette nuit de Leningrad vient des autres soirs et des après-midi, des dizaines de fois où nous avons fait l'amour, et mieux que cette nuit-là. (*SP*, p. 192)

Here, Ernaux attempts to separate the initial scene from the current state of her relationship, and it is from this point in the text that she slowly begins to distinguish between S. as he exists in the external world and S. as she has constructed him through re-imagining scenes. In reconstituting the scene in the above passage, Ernaux has rewritten it by stating that S., at the time, was insignificant, even though Ernaux's earlier work (*PS*) gives evidence that the desire was continuous and sustained over a period of time. This desire was motivated, in part, by a fascination with his Soviet cultural background and the fact that S. had also been a *transfuge de classe* in that he had transitioned from an underprivileged upbringing in the Soviet Union into the diplomatic circles of Europe. The anonymity of S. is perhaps the result of this self-reflexivity that he triggers in Ernaux.³ His relative unimportance as a character is revealed by the lack of details provided about him: readers are only made aware of the nature of his work, his age in relation to Ernaux, his ethnicity, and his marital status. Information about S. provided in the text is, generally, self-referential, as Ernaux occasionally makes comparisons between her relationship with him and her

³ Bacholle-Bosković suggests that in *PS*, A.'s role is to act as a double of Ernaux's "moi passé," as he reminds Ernaux of the world from which she had come (Bacholle-Bosković, 2000, p. 58).

relationship with her ex-husband (*SP*, p. 23, 50). A preliminary passage in the introduction of the text also outlines the self-reflexive role that S. plays:

Je n'ai jamais rien su de ses activités qui, officiellement, étaient d'ordre culturel. Je m'étonne aujourd'hui de ne pas lui avoir posé plus de questions. Je ne saurai jamais non plus ce que j'ai été pour lui. Son désir de moi est la seule chose dont je suis certaine. [...] Je préférerais qu'il accepte, même s'il ne le comprend pas, d'avoir été durant des mois, à son insu, ce principe, merveilleux et terrifiant, de désir, de mort et d'écriture. (*SP*, p. 16)

In reflecting upon the period of time during which she was romantically linked to S., Ernaux later acknowledges the role that he played in her own exploration of subjectivity and self-concept at a significant period of her life. S. functions as a site upon which Ernaux simultaneously projects her desire and history.

In drawing upon Winnicott's statement that "le regard de l'autre fait vivre" Day writes that the other's look "engenders shame as we discover ourselves as objects of others' consciousness [...] Through sexual desire, we try to possess the other's freedom" (Day, 2007, p. 53). Throughout the text, S.'s gaze is sought. In the case of S., Ernaux's awareness of his cultural background, in which he would have been deprived of many of the freedoms that she herself possesses, places her in the interesting position of providing some of that freedom in the form of material goods. Ernaux's own freedom is symbolized by the ability and desire to seek out a younger man with whom she can carry out the relationship and whose presence and absence allow her to construct a story on her own terms and in her own words. The desire to write a story about the

relationship might be argued to mirror Ernaux's desire to have S. return her gaze as well as to be (co-)author of S.'s greatest romance:

Il n'est rien de plus impossible à imaginer que le désir, le sentiment de l'Autre. Et pourtant, il n'y a que cela de beau. Je ne rêve que de cette perfection-là, sans être encore sûre de l'atteindre : être la 'dernière femme', celle qui efface les autres, dans son attention, sa science de son corps à lui [...] (*SP*, p. 70)

In seeking the return of the gaze as it had been captured in early encounters, Ernaux is able to preserve an image of herself as it had originally been formulated during the scene to which she clings throughout the text and which comes to be signified by S.'s desire.

In early encounters, however, this recognition does not occur. The encounters often take place in the dark (*SP*, p. 19):

Que signifie depuis le début, Leningrad, le désir de faire l'amour dans le noir ? Il ferme aussi toujours les yeux. Sauf quand je lui caresse le sexe avec ma bouche, il se soulève pour voir, si je lève les yeux, il détourne les siens aussitôt.

(*SP*, p. 92-3)

In this passage, S. acts as the passive recipient of Ernaux's sexual advances. He avoids eye contact with her while still accepting her role as provider of pleasure. Ernaux declares that her function is largely to be a provider of pleasure to S., and Ernaux freely and willfully takes on this role. S.'s desire to make love in the dark and to turn away in order not to meet Ernaux's gaze might be said to reflect his disinterest in recognizing Ernaux's subjectivity. Ernaux, in turn, *imagines* S.'s face – he has “un autre visage, si proche, si évident, comme un double” (*SP*, p. 29). Ernaux initially perceives S. as

remaining somewhat detached, much like a reader who maintains reservations during the reading process:

Quand ai-je rêvé qu'il enlevait ses chaussettes pour faire l'amour? Le sens de ce rêve est clair : je suis sûre qu'il a une autre femme (laquelle supporterait qu'il garde ses chaussettes !!) (SP, p. 189)

The socks worn by S. represent his unwillingness to be absorbed by an other during the sexual act. They are a reminder that S. is, in fact, other, and that sexual fusion is a physical and temporary one. Within the economy of their sexual relationship, Ernaux is the most experienced while S. follows her lead. In this new dynamic in which Ernaux has trained S., Ernaux dominates, and at the same time, S. is more willing to follow her sexual lead – such as by giving pleasure in addition to receiving it (SP, p. 42) and by using erotic words as Ernaux does (SP, p. 52). In training S. – she ponders whether she is his “initiatrice” (SP, p. 32) - she explains that she is eventually able to find the “rythme commun absolu” (SP, p. 172) with him. Within this rhythm, I shall argue that Ernaux and S. are able to *write* their sexual and romantic relationship together.

Constructing S., Constructing 'Ernaux'

If S.'s willing participation in the sexual act allows Ernaux symbolically to write future encounters with S., I now want to suggest that the reader's willingness to read Ernaux's work and participate in a reading process mirrors S.'s function: just as S. gives permission to Ernaux to continue to write, the reader who recognizes and validates a work gives the author permission to continue writing (by buying her work, writing to

the author, and recommending the work to others, for instance). Just as Ernaux's texts demonstrate language's inability to reflect a story in a definitive way, the text also calls into question the capacity for the desiring reader to reduce Ernaux herself to language – or the reader's ability to know Ernaux. A reader's relationship with 'Ernaux' is reframed as an activity in which both reader and author construct each other – without ever contacting each other. The reader constructs 'Ernaux' through reading not only *SP* but also by comparing it to *PS* and to other Ernaux works. This process takes place removed from concrete existence and time, reflected in the title of the work, *Se perdre*, which is an infinitive verb that does not refer to a particular tense. This process is mirrored by the way in which Ernaux, too, also textually constructs herself. In Ernaux's words, the text is less mediated and is written "en [se] fichant du regard des autres" (as written in an e-mail to Day, cited in Day, 2007, p. 171). For the reader, 'Ernaux' is constructed as her texts are read, and the reader may construct a relationship with the author, just as Ernaux, through writing, enters into an artistic construction of her own life. As Ernaux constructs her relationship with S., so, too, does the reader construct one with 'Ernaux' in between and during readings. I shall now turn to the particular nature in which this occurs throughout the work.

Ernaux seeks unity and perfection in this sexual relationship, a unity not unlike that which she strives to achieve in writing: "Je fais l'amour avec ce même désir de perfection que dans l'écriture" (*SP*, p. 37). Sexual fusion also represents a partial loss of identity, as part of the body is given over to an other. In the same way, in publishing a

work, the author becomes fused with the reader. In *SP*, Ernaux achieves the ability to lose herself (or *se perdre*) – “même mon corps absorbe l'autre corps” (*SP*, p. 28) at the height of passion, during which inhibitions are relaxed and normal subjective barriers are relaxed. As Day has pointed out (2007, p. 224-227), within a Freudian and Winnicottian economy, the moment following orgasm represents the return of desire: for Freud, this moment is linked to the death drive (or the desire to restore lost unity), and Winnicott terms it “the temporary annihilation of the subjective object created through desire” (in Day, 2009, p. 156). In an interview with Day shortly after the publication of *SP*, Ernaux explains:

Maintenant, il y a une autre partie de mon unité, de mon identité, qui n'a rien à voir avec cette honte et qui m'apparaît comme la permanence heureuse de l'être: l'orgasme, pour une fille de quatorze ans, de dix-huit ans, une femme de trente, une femme de soixante, c'est toujours pareil, avec plus ou moins d'intensité on le sait, mais cela reste pour moi le fondement de l'identité. (Day, 2005, p. 228)

The orgasm is, then, the moment at which the subject is immediately separated from the object, as she or he undergoes an inner, personal experience. It is, ironically, both an affirmation of self and a product of fusion. The climax of the sexual act reaffirms the fragmented and fragile nature of subjectivity as well as its temporary, fleeting nature. In seeking perfection and unity in a sexual economy, Ernaux is mirroring her desire for (temporary and fragmented) perfection in writing, achieved when her work is shaped and enjoyed by readers who, in turn, lose themselves.

Significantly, Ernaux describes S.'s role as allowing Ernaux to *imagine* the perfect love scene rather than experience it:

Constamment, je revois la première fois de Leningrad, le geste qui a tout déclenché, comme un coup de couteau déclenche l'horreur. Quoi, ici, en fait, le bonheur, certes, mais aussi le malheur. Je joue aussi toutes les scènes érotiques à venir. Quand cela cessera, c'est que je n'aurai plus besoin de lui. (SP, p. 155-6)

Once again, a reference is made to the initial scene, recognizing it as a source of both pleasure and horror, as each future encounter is compared to it. Memories of the initial scene in Leningrad create a master narrative, and so long as sexual encounters with S. continue, she has permission to imagine and write more. It is the waiting that Ernaux enjoys, as even the presence of one of her children annoys her because it prevents her from waiting for S. (SP, p. 51). Throughout the text, Ernaux becomes conscious of the manner in which she has constructed – or written - S. during these periods of waiting and the distinction between S. as a construct and his existence in the external world (for instance, she writes about the "*souvenir imaginaire de son enfance*" that has been made available to her on page 243). The realization of this construction reflects the manner in which readers may, in turn, construct 'Ernaux.' The process of realization that this image has been created and the necessity of its demise is described by Barthes as the period of mourning:

Dans le deuil réel, c'est l'épreuve de réalité qui me montre que l'objet aimé a cessé d'exister. Dans le deuil amoureux, l'objet n'est ni mort, ni éloigné. C'est moi qui décide que son image doit mourir (et cette mort, j'irai peut-être jusqu'à la lui cacher). Tout le temps que durera ce deuil étrange, il me faudra donc subir

deux malheurs contraires: souffrir de ce que l'autre soit présent [...] et m'attrister de ce qu'il soit mort [...]. (Barthes, 1977, p. 124)

The image of S. begins its deconstruction when Ernaux attempts to question her reconstructions of the initial scene. Ironically, it is at this point that S. begins to recognize Ernaux's subjectivity – for instance, he begins to meet her gaze during sex (*SP*, p. 225), underscoring his own subjectivity that is distinct from Ernaux's construction of him:

Il a fallu que le goût de savoir, c'est-a-dire celui de la destruction, survienne comme un vieux démon, je lui dis: 'Ya tebya lioubliou.' [Je t'aime.] Il me répond en russe, je ne comprends pas, lui fais répéter: 'Seulement Macha?' – Oui.' Alors je réponds: 'C'est pourquoi je te quitterai. Mais tu n'auras pas de chagrin, parce que tu es fort.' Il répond encore: 'Oui.' C'était le moment du départ. Ces paroles que d'autres ne viennent pas recouvrir – sauf 'Je t'appellerai la semaine prochaine, tu es là?' – me détruisent. [...] Me dire que j'ai perdu un an et de l'argent pour un homme qui me demande s'il peut prendre le paquet de Marlboro ouvert, sur la table. (*SP*, p. 223)

This exchange signals Ernaux's recognition of the disjunction between her construction of S. and his existence in the world. Ernaux begins to see more clearly their lack of common interests, the similarities between the loss of her mother and the loss of S. (*SP*, p. 287, 331), and the role that her own writing has played in making S. into a mythical and, ultimately, textual character. In the same way, the reader also becomes aware of the differences between herself or himself and 'Ernaux.' Different readers will, to varying degrees, come to differentiate between Ernaux and her textual construct. Only in time can the nature of that construction be fully revealed - in this case, through re-integration with a text written as the relationship was taking place, and the lost construct is then mourned. The reader re-constructs 'Ernaux' with each reading and re-

creates the relationship with her with each reading, just as Barthes does with Werther. Ernaux connects these two processes of mourning - that in which E. recognizes the distinction between S. as she *imagines* him and the manner in which he exists in the world as well as that in which the reader recognizes the distinction between 'Ernaux' as she is imagined and Ernaux as she exists in the outside world - directly in the text, as she culminates her relationship with S. by having sex with him one final time on the desk in her study (*SP*, p. 232), thereby symbolically linking S. with her writing project in a physical way:

Soir. Ce qu'il y a de terrible, c'est qu'autrefois je cherchais un homme pour me 'stabiliser', avoir une fraternité. Maintenant, je le cherche uniquement pour l'amour, c'est-à-dire ce qui ressemble le plus à l'écriture, pour la perte de moi-même, l'expérience du vide comblé. (*SP*, p. 371)

In creating an image of S. and subsequently recognizing its constructed nature, Ernaux also becomes increasingly conscious of the constructed nature of her own subjectivity and the manner in which she actively writes it through her relationships.

The Elusive Present

In addition to exploring the constructed nature of one's subjectivity, *SP* can also be read as an exploration of time itself. As with subjectivity, the construction of time is also linked to the act of writing. In *SP*, the immortalization of moments spent with S. underscores the manner in which *SP* suggests, on several occasions, that the present is itself a construct:

Onze heures quarante, hier, il appelle quand j'étais en train de lire *Le Monde* au soleil. Qu'est-ce que le présent ? Toute la soirée, la nuit, à me le demander. Ce présent-là, maintenant, est tout entier présent/futur. Ce soir, il sera présent/passé, l'horreur. De penser à ce dernier donne à celui que je vis maintenant, là, toute son intensité. (*SP*, p. 240)

In this light, *SP* can also be read as an exploration of the elusiveness of the present, exposing it as a constructed tense rather than one that exists in the external world.

Ricoeur interrogates the *aporias* of time in terms of its phenomenological and cosmological senses. Here Ernaux is concerned on the one hand with the manner in which time is, as Ricoeur would suggest, entrusted to narrative and, on the other, the manner in which the present is, itself, elusive. For Ernaux in *SP*, I want to suggest that the present consists of two other tenses fused together to create an illusion of present – the recent past (what she has just done) and the future anterior (what she will have done). Ernaux documents in this excerpt the construction of her present as an interplay between past and future, thereby calling into question how it can be defined other than through its own Other. In my Masters' thesis on Ernaux's work, I argued that Ernaux created a tense called the *anticiprésent* (Janes, 2004, p. 114): Ernaux goes beyond the reconstruction of the past by calling into question the very notion of a present, suggesting that instead of *capturing* the present, her writing constructs it.⁴ Writing can be used to capture fragments of an existence. For the subject, existence will, inevitably, become an existence that *was*. Because the external present is continuously elusive, words take the place of a present that never really was:

⁴ Joseph (in Villani, p. 261-269) draws on Barthes' "Attente" in *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* but argues that Ernaux makes sense of the passage of time by dating her experiences in her diary. Ernaux's habit of dating not only her journal but also her writing, is a point to which I shall later return.

Les mots qui se sont déposés sur le papier pour saisir des pensées, des sensations à un moment donné ont pour moi un caractère aussi irréversible que le temps : ils sont le temps lui-même. (*SP*, p. 15)

When Ernaux and S. are engaged in an encounter, that period evades the present tense, and the encounters take place in a new tense that escapes classification. It is a time that is ultimately lost through the reconstruction or rewriting process. Ernaux refers to the time during which S. is present as the "ordre de la passion" (*SP*, p. 56) during which the external world is absent.⁵ The romance consists of a series of encounters which allow Ernaux to rewrite it and, subsequently, imagine future encounters. S.'s presence reinforces his future absence, while his absence highlights the necessity of imagining the next encounter. It is the waiting and anticipation that provide Ernaux with the most pleasure, as it is during this time period that Ernaux can construct both S. and the relationship itself.

This period of time functions in a manner similar to the time during which a writer is writing a text intensively: external voices and forces are removed so that attention is focused entirely on creating the text, in a process that Sarraute outlines in her short text *L'usage de la parole* (1980), in which the solitude and silence required for writing are explored. Each encounter gives Ernaux permission to construct future encounters:

Je vis dans deux temps, l'un sans r.v., douloureux, l'autre – comme aujourd'hui – sans pensée, dans la stupeur du désir qui va se réaliser et qui n'est jamais aussi bien réalisé que je le pensais. Mais hier soir, je pleurais de bonheur de savoir qu'il ne m'abandonnait pas tout à fait [...] (*SP*, p. 204)

⁵ Marrone (1994) refers to this concept in *PS* as "passion tense."

The above passage suggests that the construction of a future encounter is perhaps more pleasurable than the actual encounter that subsequently takes place. The anticipation, therefore, is more sought after than the present, and that anticipation simultaneously rewrites the past. S.'s role is, like the role of the reader, largely to give this license to write. The *bonheur*⁶ that is achieved through this construction of the past can be likened to the sense of satisfaction that the completion of a text provides for the writer and reader alike: a series of writing and reading sessions during which time becomes elusive and during which new arguments and positions were attempted allowed the writer to create a final text. The time during which that process occurred is lost forever, and the only proof that the process occurred is the final written text that was written throughout that lost period of time. During the reading process, the reader once again brings that time back to life.

L'occupation (2002)

L'O, much like *SP*, is an interrogation of a previously published work, but unlike *SP*, which re-visits a text published by Ernaux, *L'O* calls into question Vilain's work, *L'étreinte*, which I discussed in Chapter Two. While Ernaux does not explicitly state in the text that the work is about Vilain and his new lover, Ernaux confirmed the identity of the former lover in question in her correspondence with Hugueny-Léger (2007, p.

⁶ Indeed, Viti, in "Annie Ernaux et la maison du Bonheur" (in Villani, 2009, p. 253-259), draws on Jules Renard's quote that "Si l'on battissait la maison du Bonheur, la plus grande pièce serait la salle d'attente" and argues that waiting and anticipation play prominent roles in Ernaux's writing.

86). While the circumstances of the story are different - Ernaux's work focuses on the period following the end of the relationship, while Vilain focuses on the relationship itself – Ernaux provides a text that contains her perspective on a relationship about which she had only previously written in *Fragments autour de Philippe V. L'O* not only calls into question a previous text but also presented itself in two forms: it was originally published in *Le Monde* before its publication as a book in its own right. One of Ernaux's shortest texts, *L'O* is a documentation of an attempt to reconstruct her subjectivity following the end of a relationship. The text begins by exploring Ernaux's initial process of substitution, as Ernaux replaces her former lover with a constructed image of that former lover's new partner in order, in turn, to construct her own self-image. Ernaux continues to follow this process until the elusive woman's new role is, ultimately, replaced by the writing process itself in a bold statement on the role of Ernaux's occupation as a writer in her own construction of subjectivity.

Making Sure the Author is Dead

Like many Ernaux texts, this one also begins with a commentary on the writing process that serves as a guide for reading. At the beginning of the text, Ernaux expresses a desire to dispense with herself as an object for analysis within the text: Ernaux does not wish to be reduced to an object for an analysis in the eyes of her readers. The first page emphasizes a desire for self-effacement in favor of a writing subject free from comparison to the external author:

J'ai toujours voulu écrire comme si je devais être absente à la parution du texte.

Écrire comme si je devais mourir, qu'il n'y ait plus de juges. (*L'O*, p. 11)

This opening passage addresses the problematic relationship that an author often has with an autobiographical text and that, as we shall see in the next chapter, has frequently been constructed in the case of Ernaux: readers often pass judgment on the living author based on a first-person narrator's account of historical events. In this case, there is a desire to write a text that would only be read after the death of its author, although Ernaux acknowledges that it is "une illusion, peut-être, de croire que la vérité ne puisse advenir qu'en fonction de la mort" (*L'O*, p. 11). Ernaux implies that 'truth' can be found before the death of the author, which, in turn, reinforces the insignificance of the author in the interpretation of her texts: in stating that she wishes not to be judged for her work and in stating that it is nevertheless possible for 'truth' to be found before an author dies, Ernaux underscores that readers should not reduce texts to their authors: truth is to be found in the interpretation and not by consulting a living author. In publishing a personal account before her death, Ernaux perhaps constructs her readers by implying that she seeks readers who are able to find a truth that is contained within it without deferring to the external author.

The Subject, W., the 'New Woman,' and the Space Between

Like *SP*, *L'O* explores the notion of the subject as existing in relationship to another.

Yet the structure is more nuanced in this text: on the one hand, following the end of the relationship, as in *SP*, Ernaux explores the difficult task of re-configuring subjectivity

following the loss of the other through whom it was largely constructed. On the other hand, in a recurring motif, Ernaux writes about the idea of being replaced within the relationship. Much as Ernaux is troubled by the notion that she might be replaced by her granddaughter in LA and that she herself was the replacement for her younger sister,⁷ Ernaux is ill at ease with the idea that she has been replaced by another woman in this relationship. Following the end of the relationship, Ernaux is no longer able to construct her subjectivity in relationship to W., the former lover. Instead, the nameless new woman has taken Ernaux's place, and Ernaux's reaction is to remove the degrees of separation between this new woman and herself so as to determine how W. *imagines* this new woman and, by extension, how W. imagined Ernaux herself.

On an initial level, the relationship can be assessed within a romance economy. In

L'être et le néant, Sartre explains:

Dans l'Amour, au contraire, l'amant veut être 'tout au monde' pour l'aimé: cela signifie qu'il se range du côté du monde; il est ce qui résume et symbolise le monde, et il est un *ceci* qui enveloppe tous les autres 'ceci,' il est et accepte d'être *objet*. (Sartre, 1943, p. 435)

Following the end of the relationship, Ernaux seeks to identify which 'this' (or *ceci*) she is not. To do so, Ernaux seeks information about the woman who has replaced her.

Ernaux constructs the identity of her former lover's new partner despite the absence of specific details:

⁷ Boyer writes an interesting article on Ernaux and the "enfant de remplacement" (in Villani, 2009, p. 81-93). In addition, Ernaux's most recent text, *L'autre fille*, deals with this important idea.

Il me semblait que *mettre un nom* sur cette femme m'aurait permis de me figurer, d'après ce qu'éveillent toujours un mot et des sonorités, un type de personnalité, de posséder intérieurement – fut-elle complètement fausse – une image d'elle. (*L'O*, p. 29)

Naming the elusive woman would allow Ernaux to put an end to seeing the new woman everywhere – including in all female teachers, whom she now hates despite being one herself (*L'O*, p. 17) - notably a woman at an academic conference at which Ernaux is a speaker (*L'O*, p. 64). When meeting with W., she asks questions about his new partner that he does not wish to answer:

La fonction d'échange et de communication qu'on attribue généralement au langage était passée au second plan, remplacée par celle de signifier et de signifier qu'une chose, son amour à lui pour elle ou pour moi. (*L'O*, p. 56)

No longer able to communicate with her former lover without creating a subtext linking herself to W.'s new partner, Ernaux becomes increasingly aware that the construction of her own subjectivity has become inextricably linked to W.'s perceptions of the elusive new woman, and Ernaux is, in a sense, now lost, as in *SP*.

On an initial level, then, the existence of the other woman is seen by Ernaux as a negation of her own subjectivity. In constructing the other woman in her mind, Ernaux is, in fact, engaging with her own self-construct.⁸ The negation of selfhood described by Ernaux also finds echoes in Sartre's *L'être et le néant*, in which Sartre equates falling in love to giving up one's freedom (Sartre, 1943, p. 433). Ironically, the reader learns that it is the refusal of the abandonment of freedom that was the turning point in the

⁸ Perhaps fittingly, the film adaptation of *L'O* is entitled "*L'Autre*" (preview available online at <http://video.voila.fr/video/iLyROafJXNt.html>, retrieved 1 August 2010).

relationship between Ernaux and W. The relationship with W. lasted six years, and it was Ernaux who left the relationship owing to W.'s pressure to move in together and to share a domestic space. Ernaux likens accepting such a proposal to giving up her liberty, explaining that the relationship ended "[a]utant par lassitude que par incapacité à échanger ma liberté, regagnée après dix-huit ans de mariage pour une vie commune qu'il désirait depuis le début" (*L'O*, p. 13). The end of the relationship occurs when Ernaux no longer willingly gives up her freedom.

In seeing the elusive other woman in the faces of many anonymous women in the métro, Ernaux projects her former self-construction onto that of others. In a scene taking place in the *métro*, the setting of some of Ernaux's most destabilizing writing scenes, Ernaux imagines the elusive woman taking a train:

Dans le métro, n'importe quelle femme dans la quarantaine portant un sac de cours était 'elle', et la regarder une souffrance. Je ressentais l'indifférence qu'elle manifestait généralement plus ou moins vif, décidé, qu'elle avait pour se lever de la banquette et descendre à une station – dont je notais mentalement le nom aussitôt – comme une néantisation de ma personne(...) (*L'O*, p. 17)

The tension between self and other is never fully resolved, but Ernaux identifies the source of her suffering through an eventual complete separation from the former lover, thereby obliging herself to attempt to construct an *être-pour-soi* rather than *être-pour-autrui*. This realization comes about after a prolonged period during which Ernaux wrestles with the loss of her former identity. In an early passage of the text, she outlines the relationship between herself and the woman who now takes her place:

Dans le film intérieur que je me déroule habituellement – la figuration de moments agréables à venir, une sortie, des vacances, un dîner d'anniversaire – toute cette auto-fiction permanente anticipant le plaisir dans une vie normale était remplacée par des images jaillies du dehors qui me vrillaient la poitrine. Je n'étais même plus le sujet de mes rêveries. Je n'étais même plus le sujet de mes représentations. J'étais le squat d'une femme que je n'avais jamais vue. (*L'O*, p. 21)

In this passage, it is not the time with her former lover that she misses but rather the ability to imagine future encounters with him: as with S., it is the anticipation of a future encounter that provides the most pleasure. Separation from W., as from S., has robbed Ernaux of a gift that he had offered – the freedom to imagine, or to write, future encounters and, by extension, herself. In an attempt to recapture her seemingly secure former sense of self, Ernaux escapes by trying on new clothing for her next meeting with W., explaining to the reader that “[s]on regard imaginaire me rendait à moi-même” (*L'O*, p. 21). Trying on clothes in front of the mirror, under W.'s imaginary gaze, acts as a bridging substitute.

A dual rupture ensues following the end of a prolonged period of projected identity. Ernaux telephones W. in the middle of the night and tells him that she no longer wishes to see him. She then proceeds to pray and masturbate. The first action, that of telephoning W., reflects her decision to abandon a former construction of subjectivity by symbolically removing the other through whom she had constructed herself. The dual actions of praying and masturbating in order to help her sleep confirm this decision:

J'ai cherché et récité les prières de mon enfance, attendant sans doute d'elles le même effet qu'alors : la grâce ou l'apaisement. Dans le même but, je me suis fait jouir. (*L'O*, p. 70)

In reciting prayers, Ernaux enters into an imagined dialogue. She is thereby able to assume both the subjective and objective roles in the exchange – in other words, she is able to write the encounter. Similarly, the act of masturbating signifies a sexual independence – and, therefore, the reclaiming of an independent body. Here, too, Ernaux constructs an other in an imagined sexual encounter. In removing any real, living participant from these two actions, Ernaux symbolically rejects a construction of self premised on relationship with another in favor of a reflexive construction based on past experiences. This process is then concretized when, in the final passage of the text, Ernaux returns to what had previously been shared spaces – those places in Venice that she had visited with W. – and re-appropriates them as her own, thereby symbolically rejecting a former construction of self based on a relationship with an other.

Writing: The Transcendental Signified

In the passages above, it might appear to my reader that I am suggesting that *L'O* follows a path toward enlightenment and that I believe that Ernaux follows a path to recovery. This is, in fact, not the case. Instead, Ernaux's text explores the tension between self and other and suggests that ultimately only writing allows one to explore

the borders. In writing, Ernaux is able to navigate prior self-constructions. As usual with Ernaux's texts, in *L'O*, links are made between self-construction and writing:

Mon premier geste en m'éveillant était de saisir son sexe dressé par le sommeil et de rester ainsi, comme agrippée à une branche. Je pensais, 'tant que je tiens cela, je ne suis pas perdue dans le monde.' (...) Il est maintenant dans le lit d'une autre femme. Peut-être fait-elle le même geste, de tendre la main et de saisir le sexe. Pendant des mois, j'ai vu cette main et j'avais l'impression que c'était la mienne. (*L'O*, p. 11-12)

It is apparent from this passage that the relationship is one that Ernaux ultimately writes. This passage echoes the opening image of *L'UDLP*, which also links male genitalia with writing. The action of holding W.'s genitals with her hand is a writing image.⁹ In writing that she imagines the hand of the other woman where her hand had once been, Ernaux is suggesting that it is now the other woman who is writing Ernaux's subjectivity. However, instead of authoring Ernaux's subjectivity, the new woman symbolically removes the pen from Ernaux's hands. In the pages that form *L'O*, Ernaux symbolically takes back the pen and re-claims that authorship.

By writing on an indifferent page, previous self-constructions are explored. Ernaux writes that despite the fact that some readers might read the text as an exercise

⁹ Such an image is also undoubtedly a playful image that attempts to subvert a masculine unitary writing economy. In her engagement with Freud, Irigaray calls into question the oneness of patriarchal, male discourse (symbolized by the penis) as opposed to the otherness of feminine discourse (symbolized by the clitoris, which Freud describes as an inferior penis) in which women are situated outside their own representation. Irigaray subverts this economy, describing the woman as sexually independent (Irigaray, 1992, p. 29). In *L'O*, however, as well as in *L'UDLP*, Ernaux appropriates the penis in a writing image, thereby underscoring the manner in which Ernaux possesses authorial subjectivity in the work. Ernaux's writing imagery of male genitalia also contradicts Cixous' thesis (1975) that women must write about other women. In adopting a masculine writing image, Ernaux symbolically rejects once again a particular feminist perspective and appropriates the male unity in her writing, in keeping with Ernaux's tendency not to adopt a particular standpoint in her writing.

"dévoyé de l'intelligence" (*L'O*, p. 41), the activity of self-construction is one that is distinctively writerly. Ernaux explains the function of writing as it relates to the current project:

J[e] vois plutôt sa fonction poétique, la même qui est à l'œuvre dans la littérature, la religion, et la paranoïa. J'écris d'ailleurs la jalousie comme je la vivais, en traquant et accumulant les désirs, les sensations et les actes qui ont été les miens en cette période. C'est la seule façon pour moi de donner une matérialité à cette obsession. Et je crains toujours de laisser échapper quelque chose d'essentiel. L'écriture, en somme, comme une jalousie du réel. (*L'O*, p. 41-2)

It is writing, then, that comes to take the role of the other in Ernaux's self-construction. The blank page allows an investigation of previous constructions in order to investigate the constructed borders between self and other. For those readers who claim that Ernaux's work tells their own stories (a trend that I shall document in the next chapter), Ernaux's profession becomes important. If *L'O* consists of a search for a truth, then in *L'O*, this truth is to be found when the contents are appropriated by readers who also feel as though they need to re-claim the subjective role in their own lives. Ernaux demonstrates that she has survived but also, to some extent, effaced herself, just as she has felt effaced by the new woman: "Cette transubstantiation du corps des femmes que je rencontrais en corps de l'autre femme s'opérait continuellement: je la voyais partout" (*L'O*, p. 18). What Ernaux writes can, in turn, be appropriated by readers in an act of transubstantiation, as Ernaux has, in a sense, effaced herself in order to make room for the reader to appropriate the text. In this light, Ernaux's *occupation*, that of a

writer, plays the roles of both exploring and reflecting her fragmented subjectivity and, furthermore, of effacing it when her text is re-appropriated by reading subjects.

L'Usage de la photo (2005)

L'UDLP is the first of Ernaux's works to be co-authored, as both Ernaux and her then partner, Marc Marie, are listed as co-authors. As such, this text marks the first time that Ernaux dilutes –and indicates a willingness to dilute – her authorial voice, although separate passages allow for each author to retain individual writing identities.¹⁰ The text contains a series of photos taken shortly after the authors make love – sometimes nearly immediately after and sometimes the following day. In this text, the photographs are not only described but are also reproduced in black-and-white form.¹¹ The frames capture both authors' clothing and Ernaux's intimate domestic spaces, thereby offering a glimpse into the private life of the author. This text represents the first time in which photographs have been on display within Ernaux's work, although photographs had been described many times before and have played significant functions within several texts.¹² Each photograph is chosen and then framed by two

¹⁰ Jellenik suggests that the use of multiple voices in *L'UDLP* prepares the reader for the universal voice that is to be presented in *LA* (in Villani, 2009, p. 239).

¹¹ Ernaux revealed in 2008 that she would have liked the photographs to have been published in colour, but financial concerns on the part of the publisher prevented it. Colour would, of course, add another dimension to the text.

¹² Fell (2006, p. 30-36) undertakes an analysis of the use of photography in Ernaux's work up to *L'O*. The photograph has played a role in previous Ernaux works. Fort (2005) and Thomas (2005, p. 54) consider the use of the photograph in *LH*, in which there are two photographs – one taken before the June 1952 incident and another after – and argue that by seeing oneself as other in the photographs, the photographs confirm the fragmentation of that self through the dissociation from and identification with the image.

writers' texts. Furthermore, the photos do not contain images of Ernaux or Marie. Rather, each photo is accompanied by two texts, one of which has been written by Ernaux and the other by Marie. I shall argue that in the same manner that the viewer of the photograph constructs the scenes that might have preceded the taking of the photograph, the reader also constructs her or his image of 'Ernaux.'

Filtering the Process

A preliminary section written by Ernaux outlines the process of writing of the text and also, as in many such passages in her texts, sets guidelines for the reading process for the text as a whole. Ernaux explains that the idea of photographing scenes taken after lovemaking came to both writers as a way of increasing intimacy. Ernaux explains that Marie would take photographs of dispersed clothing after lovemaking, and some days later, Ernaux and Marie would look at the photographs together. They would then select certain photographs about which they would write short passages – allegedly independently rather than in consultation with each other.¹³ However, it is important that the photos selected for inclusion in the published book are ultimately chosen and approved by both writers in conversation with each other, thereby calling into question the degree to which the writing passages might be considered completely independent. The two accompanying texts, in turn, can significantly impact a reader's

¹³ It is questionable whether this is in fact the case, as at best, Marie could be accused of mimesis: for instance, both writers include lists of songs. It is curious that both authors would independently choose to write such a list (*L'UDLP*, p. 101, p. 124).

appropriation of the photo, thereby censoring them and protecting those whose space is exposed.

The Elusive Author and Her Construct

Jordan advocates in her analysis of *L'UDLP* that the photographs challenge the reader's pact with Ernaux: in allowing the reader to view photos of her private, domestic space, the reader is encouraged to question her or his pact with Ernaux, as the reader is re-positioned as a "consumer of intimacy" (Jordan, 2007, p. 127). Jordan has further argued that *L'UDLP* is not simply a story about a relationship and an illness but, self-reflexively, is also about the *process* by which the stories are written and photographed (Jordan, 2007, p. 135). Along a similar line, Cotille Foley has argued that the cover of the text, which contains an image of clothes strewn across a kitchen floor, suggests to the reader that the book's content contains sexuality (Cotille Foley, 2008, p. 446). There is, however, no graphic sexual content in the work, and the encounters that precede the photographs are barely mentioned in accompanying texts. Instead, the encounters are to be *imagined* by the reader. Similarly, instead of revealing the external author and reducing her to object status in a photograph, as one might expect a first-person book containing photographs and text, the photographs invite the reader to construct the authors. The work is reflective of two simultaneous constructive processes – Ernaux's and Marie's reconstruction of the events preceding photographs

and the reader's construction of the authors. I shall discuss each of these processes in turn.

The manner in which such construction takes place requires a theoretical framework that accounts for multiple constructions of the photographs and the authors. The exploration of photographs and their purported function in this text mirrors Barthes' text about photography, *La chambre claire*.²⁴ A thesis in Barthes' text is that a photograph transforms the subject whose photo is being taken into the object of the gaze (Barthes, 1980, p. 13), yet at the moment of being photographed, the subject enters into a neutral existence during which it becomes an object – similar to being embalmed – and, once the image has been created, she or he has been objectified and now exists elsewhere. Ernaux, however, resists becoming the object of the photographs in the text by both not appearing in the photographs and by re-gaining authorial subjectivity in the form of accompanying texts. As Jordan suggests (2007, p. 129), in this text, Ernaux's readers are re-situated into the role of voyeurs; yet, there is precious little to see. Instead, the scenes captured are scenes as they would have been viewed by Ernaux rather than revealed as a scene that includes her. This desire to avoid becoming the object of the gaze might mirror the function of the *écriture plate* found in

²⁴ Undoubtedly, Ernaux was aware of the comparisons to be drawn between her text and that of Barthes. In addition to both texts exploring photography, *La chambre claire* was the last text that Barthes published shortly before his death, and Ernaux wonders at several points in *L'UDLP* whether this text might well be her last, owing to her recent diagnosis of breast cancer. It should also be mentioned that other critics have drawn links between Barthes' seminal work and *L'UDLP*, notably Jordan (2007), Romeral Rosel (in Villani, 2009, p. 95-106), and Day (in Villani, 2009, p. 150).

other Ernaux texts, which Thomas has argued is a strategy used by the author to remain subject of – rather than object of – the gaze (Thomas, 2005, p. 111).

Photographing the clothing exactly as it had been scattered is also an important aspect of the project, as the scattering of the clothing underscores the fragmented nature of subjectivity:

Changer de place un escarpin ou un tee-shirt aurait constitué une faute – aussi impossible, pour moi, que modifier l'ordre des mots dans mon journal intime -, une façon d'attenter à la réalité de notre acte amoureux. (*L'UDLP*, p. 10)

The photograph of scattered clothing is a metaphor for the scattered construction of self, and photographing the scattered clothing allows Ernaux to re-construct herself using these fragments, just as maintaining the original word order in a personal journal allows Ernaux to re-construct herself in *SP*. The photograph, then, plays a role similar to the journal in *SP*: both capture traces of an event and allows it to be reconstructed, and I would agree with Fell that these photographs serve as "traces of lost presences" (in Fell & Welch, 2009, p. 76), or Barthes' "ça-a-été" (1980, p. 148). *L'UDLP* captures what would otherwise be seemingly inconsequential fragments of a lived existence – including two different hotel rooms that Ernaux and Marie occupied (*L'UDLP* p. 35, p. 119). Here, a location that might never be seen again is framed so as to facilitate the reconstruction process. Ernaux can then re-situate herself within those details. Indeed, *L'UDLP* constitutes an assembly of former self-constructions, as Ernaux suggests toward the end of the text when she symbolically takes a photograph of all the photographs together:

J'ai étalé toutes les photos sur la table du séjour. [...] Sans réfléchir j'ai pris une photo de l'ensemble. Peut-être pour me donner l'illusion de saisir une totalité. Celle de notre histoire. Mais elle n'est pas là. Dans quelques années, ces photos ne diront peut-être plus rien à l'un et à l'autre, juste des témoignages sur la mode des chaussures au début des années 2000. (*L'UDLP*, p. 150-1)

The photograph of the group of photographs reflects the writing project known as *L'UDLP*. The text presents a series of fragments that, together, reflect who the subject has been for a period of time. With each viewing or re-reading, the subject is re-constructed. The photographs do not contain the subject's story but instead allow it to be re-written.

This process, in turn, the manner in which readers may construct 'Ernaux' using textual fragments. While readers construct 'Ernaux' based on her works and media appearances, in the photographs, they construct her image based on scattered clothing. The construction is activated by trigger points in the photograph. Barthes describes two central features of the photograph, the *punctum* and the *studium*, that provide vocabulary with which to assess the manner in which viewers respond to photographs. The first, the *punctum*, is the element that stimulates the interest of the viewer (or, in this case, reader), and is defined by Barthes as "ce hasard qui, en elle, *me pointe* (mais aussi me meurtrit, me poigne)" (Barthes, 1980, p. 49). In the photographs that make up *L'UDLP*, a particular item of clothing or of the setting may stand out to the reader and allow her or him to construct an image of the author. As an example, the cover of the original Gallimard release of the text contains the image from the

"Trois millions de seins" (*L'UDLP*, p. 81) chapter of the text. This image, colored on the cover, shows articles of clothing scattered on the kitchen floor. While most garments appear intertwined, the image includes a purple-colored bra that stands out from the other garments in part due to the contrast in colour that it provides: the other garments are dark blue and folded in such a way that one cannot clearly be distinguished from another. The purple bra at the forefront of the image is, however, an item that might well stand out from the others in the image. Its inclusion in the image, as well as the selection of that particular image for the cover, is the *punctum* for some readers, as it intrigues them. It is through the *punctum*, I would argue, that the reader begins to form an image of 'Ernaux.' For some, the bra as *punctum* for the image may reinforce readers' perceptions that Ernaux is obsessed with sexuality, a charge leveled against her by some critics and readers alike, as we shall see in Chapter Five. For other readers, this *punctum* acts as an assertion of sexual identity: although Ernaux is undergoing a significant medical treatment for breast cancer, the purple bra indicates retention of sexuality in spite of that diagnosis and the medical punishment that results from it. It is the spectator that chooses her or his own *punctum*, although within the text, the reader is led by authors, and the bra is only one of the possibilities. As Ernaux writes, "le plus haut degré de réalité ne sera atteint que si ces photos écrites se changent en d'autres scènes dans la mémoire ou l'imagination des lecteurs" (*L'UDLP*, p. 13).

This process of constructing 'Ernaux' is mirrored within the text. In one passage, Ernaux describes helping Marie remove the belongings of his recently deceased mother from

her home. Having viewed Marie's mother's belongings just as his mother would have viewed them herself, Ernaux feels as though she has met this recently deceased person, as she has constructed her using these personal belongings:

Maintenant, j'ai l'impression qu'à force de trier et rassembler dans des cartons, aux côtés de M., les choses qui appartenaient à sa mère, ses livres de cuisine et de jardinage, l'œuvre de l'écrivain qu'elle aimait entre tous, Colette, son linge de maison, ses fournitures de couture et de dessin, sans l'avoir jamais rencontrée je l'ai tout de même connue. Et que, phénomène plus troublant, elle aussi m'a connue. (*L'UDLP*, p. 73)

The process through which Ernaux comes to feel as though she has known Marie's mother is similar to the process that the reader undergoes when constructing the author: the scattered clothing that form part of the photographs constitute instruments used in construction of 'Ernaux', just as the assembly of Marie's mother's clothing and other personal effects – including, significantly, her book collection – allows for Ernaux's construction of her. Despite the death of Marie's mother, the belongings can create an image of the deceased subject just as readers interact with the fragments that Ernaux provides in the photographs and texts. Similarly, when Ernaux writes that she feels as though Marie's mother has also known her, in viewing Ernaux's clothing, readers may also feel as though they know Ernaux.

As in *SP*, Ernaux links the activities of writing and sexuality in *L'UDLP*. Ernaux describes a photograph as follows:

Le sexe de profil est en érection. La lumière du flash éclaire les veines et fait briller une goutte de sperme au bout du gland, comme une perle. L'ombre du

sexe dressé se projette sur les livres de la bibliothèque qui occupe toute la partie droite de la photo. On peut lire les noms d'auteurs et les titres écrits en gros caractères [...] (*L'UDLP*, p. 15)

The description of this photograph links the impressive collection of texts amassed by Ernaux in her private library with the genitals of her partner by framing them in the same photograph. In describing the photograph, Marie's genitals are accorded vivid description, while the books visible in the background are simply listed. One might also well imagine that the genitals are in better focus than the books. The books also remind the reader that Ernaux possesses an impressive intellectual capital and invite the subtext that she is, herself, a renowned author whose name could have been included with the list of authors. Writing space is intertwined with intimate space, as one becomes the other throughout the course of the text (*L'UDLP*, p. 67): the genitals of her partner and the canon of texts that form part of the author's literary horizon have an intersection point. Both sexual and literary identities play equally important roles in self-construction. The linking of these two processes is further made explicit by using Marie's genitals in constructing a writing image:

La première apparition du sexe de l'autre, le dévoilement de ce qui était jusque-là inconnu, a quelque chose d'inouï. C'est avec *cela* que l'on va vivre, faire notre histoire. Ou pas. (*L'UDLP*, p. 16)

As in *L'O*, the image of the penis in the photograph as described in the text is a writing image. Ernaux again appropriates the language of male autobiographical writing:

"Quand c'est moi qui prends la photo, la manipulation, le réglage du zoom est une excitation particulière, comme si j'avais un sexe masculin – je crois que beaucoup de femmes éprouvent cette sensation" (*L'UDLP*, p. 91).

Re-Appropriating Music and Space

The *usage* of photography is complimented by the re-appropriation of music and place within the work. Music has been a recurring motif in Ernaux writing, often functioning as a device that democratizes: Ernaux writes that in *PS*, for instance, *Autant en emporte le vent*, *Phèdre*, and songs by Piaf “sont aussi décisifs que le complexe d’Oedipe” (*L’ECUC*, p. 18), a comment that, as I suggested in Chapter Three, reflects Ernaux’s general rejection of psychoanalytic theory as a way of interpreting her work.³⁵ Within *L’UDLP*, music simultaneously writes and re-writes the relationship: while the unchanged song remains constant during and after an event, the listing of songs that reflect the period, like photographs, re-constructs that period. Listening to a song on a future occasion makes the listener acutely aware of the passage of time. As in Atwood’s citation (2002, p. 50), upon which I drew in Chapter One, the text comes to work as a piece of music, played and listened to at the same time, in which the listener is also the interpreter: in recalling the music listed, past self-constructions are both evoked and re-written. The listener is transported to a time when both existed and never existed:

Il suffit que j’entende l’une d’entre elles par hasard, dans un centre commercial, un salon de coiffure, pour me retrouver transportée, non dans un jour précis, mais dans une durée où les variations du ciel et de la température, la diversité des événements du monde, la répétition des parcours et des actes quotidiens,

³⁵ Hugueny-Léger provides an analysis of the intertextual function of popular music within Ernaux’s work (2009, p. 103-105).

du petit déjeuner à l'attente sur le quai du métro, se sont fondus, comme dans un roman, en une longue et unique journée, froide ou brûlante, sombre ou lumineuse, colorée d'une seule sensation, celle de bonheur ou de malheur. Aucune photo ne rend la durée. Elle enferme dans l'instant.

(*L'UDLP*, p. 101-102)

Where the photographs capture moments, the selection of music provides a narration for the periods in question, just as the accompanying texts do for the photographs. As Thomas points out (2008, p. 104), while within a Proustian economy, sensory input such as smell, sound, and taste confirms the authenticity of the self, for Ernaux, they serve to remind her of her fragmentation.

The re-appropriation of objects and spaces also figures prominently in the text.

Locations that played significant roles in Ernaux's past are re-dedicated through writing.¹⁶ In the section entitled "Dans le bureau, 5 avril" in which Ernaux's writing space (perhaps her most intimate space) is photographed, Marie describes a sexual encounter that took place there. Marie captures the encounter as follows:

Néanmoins ce soir-là, le soir de la photo, j'ai éprouvé du plaisir à ce qu'elle oublie pour un temps ce pour quoi elle est socialement reconnue, et à baptiser – ce qu'elle a peut-être fait avant moi – cet espace sacralisé, à y poser mes fesses nues, à assister au spectacle de nos bras, de nos cuisses dévastant cet espace, faisant provisoirement table rase de ce qui, sur le moment, n'avait plus aucune valeur. (*L'UDLP*, p. 67)

¹⁶ Lis makes a similar observation of Ernaux's *journaux intimes* in his article "Ethnologie de soi-même ou postumanisme? Le cas d'Annie Ernaux" by suggesting that those texts can be likened to Lucien's proposal in *A la recherche du temps perdu* by Proust that a story be written chronicling a place rather than the people who inhabit it (in Thumerel, 2004, p. 92).

In this passage, rather than being presented as a place of work, Ernaux's writing space becomes the site of passion. As I earlier suggested, the writing space is also re-appropriated in a similar manner in *SP* when the final encounter with S. also takes place on the desk where Ernaux's texts were written, at Ernaux's request – "On a fait l'amour sur mon bureau (c'est moi qui l'ai voulu) pour la première fois et la dernière" (*SP*, p. 232). The writing space has remained constant throughout Ernaux's career as an established author – yet it has been re-appropriated in order to serve a function that is beyond the horizon of many readers' expectations. For loyal Ernaux readers, Ernaux's desk, upon which their favorite texts may well have been written, has twice been re-contextualized in different erotic encounters. For Ernaux, the surroundings are already familiar, and the space is re-appropriated within the romantic economy of the text.

As another example, Ernaux recounts the purchase of the bed that she now shares with Marie. He is not the first person with whom she has shared the intimate space, as the bed was purchased while she was still living with her husband. Ernaux writes that "Quand il est arrivé, on ne faisait plus l'amour depuis cinq mois et on s'est séparés trois ans après. Je l'ai gardé. C'est le lit de la photo" (*L'UDLP*, p. 130). The bed has been an element of Ernaux's intimate space for an extended period of time and has been a constant presence throughout different relationships, while only writing, like a stain, can reveal its prior history. In revealing the bed in unmade form (*L'UDLP*, p. 128), the bed is portrayed as revealing its own story. Havercroft (in Villani, 2009, p. 127-137) draws on the intriguing notion of the "rumpled bed" of autobiography, arguing that

Ernaux opts for this experimental writing project (symbolized by the unmade bed) rather than the more traditional 'made' bed of autobiography.³⁷ As such, the text and the photograph give voice to the unmade bed that reveals the imprints of its occupants (*L'UDLP*, p. 131). Similarly, Ernaux explains her belief that her home, in which she has lived for over thirty years, is able to tell its own story – "les maisons gardent la mémoire de ce qui s'y est passé" (*L'UDLP*, p. 72), although the implication is that its voice is through the medium of Ernaux herself. Marie makes other references to spaces that are re-appropriated throughout the course of the relationship, including the barbeque area outside Ernaux's home – "je n'ai pas eu le sentiment d'utiliser les lieux, mais de leur donner une deuxième naissance [...]" (*L'UDLP*, p. 67) as well as a visit to the home in which Ernaux grew up, now for sale – "quelque part, nous pouvions désormais nous sentir sur un pied d'égalité" (*L'UDLP*, p. 95). In both examples, spaces are appropriated by Marie in order to find a place for himself within the setting and, on a larger scale, to negotiate a writing space in territory that had formerly been familiar only to Ernaux's readers. Readers, in turn, share in the reappropriation of those fragments of Ernaux's home that they are able to see in the photographs and, like Marie, might well feel as though they, too, negotiate a place in Ernaux's home.

³⁷ Havercroft further argues that the unmade bed motif is drawn on an exhibit by British artists Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson in which unmade beds covered with cigarettes, condoms, and other 'cast aside' objects draw attention to the absent subjects of the photographs and the "traces présentes."

In telling her story through the objects that have played a part in it, Ernaux is, symbolically, staining that object, as writing constitutes the method by which the stain of an event may be preserved:

Je m'aperçois que je suis fascinée par les photos comme je le suis depuis mon enfance par les taches de sang, de sperme, d'urine, déposées sur les draps ou les vieux matelas jetés sur les trottoirs [...] Les taches les plus matérielles, organiques. Je me rends compte que j'attends la même chose de l'écriture. Je voudrais que les mots soient comme des tâches auxquelles on ne parvient pas à s'arracher. (*L'UDLP*, p. 74)

The stain is portrayed as a concrete manifestation that makes the link between the instability of interior life and the reality of the material world (*L'E*, p. 37), and Jordan (2007, p. 131-3) suggests that stains function as material traces that bear witness to past realities. Within the economy of *L'UDLP*, Fell suggests that the stains can be seen as a metaphor for the text, in which both are "marks that your eye is (uncomfortably) drawn to, and which cannot be effaced" (in Fell & Welch, 2009, p. 78). Writing might be said to be the act of continuously re-making that stain.¹⁸ This process can be likened to a passage in the text outlining an experience shared by Ernaux and Marie on a visit to the cemetery in which Marie's grandparents are buried:

Il a essayé de balayer la neige avec ses mains pour voir le nom mais elle était gelée. J'ai cherché ce que nous avions sur nous susceptible de dégager la glace. Le plus efficace aurait été d'uriner dessus mais c'était une chose difficile à accepter de faire. (*L'UDLP*, p. 110)

¹⁸ Miller (2002, p. 197-212) provides a particularly interesting overview of the role of the stain in Ernaux's writing.

In this passage, Ernaux suggests urinating on the tombstone in order to see the text engraved on it – in this case, the names of Marie's grandparents. In doing so, the text underneath would be revealed but would also be disturbed and filtered by the writer, just as the photographs in this work are filtered by Ernaux's and Marie's texts and, in turn, by the reader's appropriations of the photograph. The ice covering the headstone serves to represent the seemingly frozen condition of the text before it is unfrozen by readers. Readers symbolically, in turn, leave their own mark upon the work during the reading process.

Literary Immortality

While Delvaux (2006), Fell (in Fell & Welch, 2009), and Jordan (2007) have argued that Ernaux frequently associates photographs of the abandoned clothes with death, I want to suggest that the viewing of these photographs and the reading of the texts allow for the continuous rebirth of captured moments and of 'Ernaux' herself. This possibility for rebirth is juxtaposed with the undertones outlining the constant threat of death that permeate the work. The prominent role of Ernaux's ongoing chemotherapy, described in unflinching detail, underscores the fragile barriers between life and death. In the face of a life-threatening diagnosis, the construction of a desiring and desired subjectivity is still possible, bold in sexuality and purpose rather than resigned and reflective upon the past. As Jordan suggests (Jordan, 2007, p. 137), Marie's presence provides evidence of her desirability in the face of cancer, thereby constituting a bold empowerment against

the possibility of death. Similarly, Fell argues that the photographs suggest that Ernaux is “deliberately constructing that self as a living and desiring body” (in Fell & Welch, 2009, p. 75) in juxtaposition with the body seen as object of the medical gaze. *L’UDLP* gives evidence of Ernaux’s determination to live an emboldened existence in the face of cancer, and there is awareness that the text itself will transcend Ernaux’s own physical existence. In choosing not to publish pictures of herself but instead fragments of her clothing and textual commentary, *L’UDLP* is a work in which ‘Ernaux’ can be re-constructed rather than objectified through her writing following her death, whenever that should occur. As Ernaux’s photographs and texts are re-read, ‘Ernaux’ is constantly reborn. Such immortality reflects a manner of transcending temporality, underscored by Ernaux’s closing lines that outline her “[f]ascination qui est plus que jamais pour moi celle du temps” (*L’UDLP*, p. 151).

Fittingly, then, Ernaux’s final non-photographed image in the work is entitled *Naissance*. The *naissance* does not only refer to the likening of the image to that of childbirth but also to the subject’s perpetual reinvention. Each relationship with a man allows for a new construction that does not negate previous ones but rather interacts with it:

Je nous revois un dimanche de février, quinze jours après mon opération, à Trouville. [...] J’étais accroupie sur M., sa tête entre mes cuisses, comme s’il sortait de mon ventre. J’ai pensé à ce moment-là qu’il aurait fallu une photo. J’avais le titre, *Naissance*. (*L’UDLP*, p. 151)

With Marie, Ernaux is able to embolden her subjectivity by engaging in a relationship in spite of serious disease, and Ernaux is recognized as a desired and desiring subject despite the medical discourse that has been inscribed upon her and the physical manifestations of her treatment. In terms of the reader/writer dynamic, however, the fact that Ernaux has, for the first time, shared her writing space with a partner and written on the same series of photographs symbolizes the relationship that Ernaux has adopted with readers: Marie, the co-writer, has shared Ernaux's writing space, and many readers, in turn, adopt his role as Ernaux's co-writer. The text is a bold statement on the powerful and enduring reader/author relationship that has been constructed throughout Ernaux's writing career.

Les Années (2008)

LA is presented as a text that summarises Ernaux's life from her earliest years to the present. It is also a cumulative text of Ernaux's writing career in that it revisits narrative threads of many of Ernaux's previous works. That said, *LA* is also an experimental text in its own right. In my discussion of this most recent Ernaux text,¹⁹ I shall focus both upon its revisionist elements, as the text revisits both stories and literary devices from earlier works, and upon the more experimental aspects of *LA* that mark departures from earlier work. In particular, I shall discuss the important role of the metatextual passages in *LA* as well as the significance of Ernaux's decision to write a text that

¹⁹ Since the initial submission of this thesis, *L'autre fille* was published in March 2011. This text will not figure into my analysis in this final chapter as it was published following my submission date.

focuses on a collective, shared history as much as Ernaux's own personal story. I shall argue that this intensification of Ernaux's engagement with the collective, already implicit in earlier work and particularly prevalent in her *journaux extimes*, marks an important development in the reader/author relationship within Ernaux's corpus, as it signifies a departure from the romance economy in the other 21st century works discussed so far in this chapter toward an explicit acknowledgement of the more generally symbiotic nature of the self/author dynamic in Ernaux's corpus. In addition, while Hugueny-Léger suggests that in *LA*, Ernaux seeks to "fabriquer de l'indéfini à partir du défini, de brouiller les frontières entre soi et les autres, entre le moi intime et le moi collectif, entre le dedans et le dehors" (2009, p. 14-15), I would argue that Ernaux's shift from texts that are predominantly personal (and use the pronoun *je*), which I have discussed thus far in this chapter, toward the collective (a text that uses, instead, *elle*, *on*, and *nous*) also indicates Ernaux's confidence in her ability to speak for a generation whose years she documents. Finally, I shall conclude with a discussion of Ernaux's comments in *LA* concerning the role of the writer in a contemporary setting and their implications upon contemporary studies of reader and author identities.

A Hybrid Text: Revisiting Previous Works, Revisiting Previous Selves

Like other Ernaux works discussed so far in this chapter, *LA* revisits previous Ernaux texts by revising events recounted in those works. In the case of *LA*, the stories of all Ernaux's previous works are reprised in some form. Because *LA* is presented as a text

that surveys Ernaux's life from her earliest years until the present, the stories of earlier works are woven together through a narrative thread. References to stories recounted in other Ernaux works allow the loyal Ernaux reader to recognize a narrative and re-engage with previous readings. Through this intertextuality,²⁰ Ernaux also draws attention to the manner in which her own self-construction is, in retrospect, different from those in previous works, and in particular, the changing roles of others in Ernaux's self construction become apparent. As an example, in describing her relationship with B., or the *charmant jeune homme* (Vilain) of *SP*, Ernaux writes in *LA*:

[...] l'élément principal de leur relation, en ce qui la concerne, n'est pas sexuel: ce garçon lui sert à revivre ce qu'elle n'aurait jamais cru revivre un jour [...] Ce n'est plus pour de vrai et en même temps c'est cette répétition qui donne de la réalité à sa jeunesse, aux premières expériences, aux 'premières fois' qui, dans la stupeur de leur irruption, n'avaient pas de sens. (*LA*, p. 203)

In describing Vilain in retrospect, Ernaux is able to deconstruct his significance in her life. As I suggested earlier in my analysis of *SP*, the *charmant jeune homme*, in *SP* plays a self-reflexive role for Ernaux: in *SP*, Ernaux is convinced that Vilain is only interested in her because of her status as a writer (*SP*, p. 360), whereas in *LA*, his function is instead to allow Ernaux to regain her youth. Her subsequent explanation of the end of the relationship and her later jealousy of his new partner (*LA*, p. 233-4) re-construct both Vilain and her relationship with him (earlier recounted in *L'O*) by placing the events within the context of Ernaux's retirement, breast cancer, and announcement of the

²⁰ There is, of course, much intertextuality in other texts besides *LA*, as I have discussed. For instance, *LA* was also referred to in *SP* when Ernaux writes that she wishes to "écrire comme je le désire un livre plus vaste à partir de début 89" (*SP*, p. 48), although this intertextual reference was not evident until the publication of *LA*. In addition, Ernaux also refers to having written the first lines of *LH* in *SP* (*SP*, p. 374-5), and writes about her desire to write a *roman S.* (*SP*, p. 273), which would later become *PS*.

arrival of her first grandchild. For the reader, the revisionist analysis of the relationship could also potentially reframe the reading of an earlier text and future rereadings. In a similar revisionist way, S. of *SP* (or, indeed, A. of *PS*) is reduced to one brief mention in *LA* (p. 176), whereas two entire works had previously been devoted to Ernaux's relationship with him. He is, however, recontextualized in several pages devoted to Ernaux's fascination (and, indeed, that of French society in general) with the rise of the USSR (*LA*, p. 168-172) that immediately precede that one mention of S.. The relationship is thereby contextualized within shared cultural and historical history, and it is implied that Ernaux's fascination with S. was largely a product of her fascination with his culture. Finally, Marc Marie is similarly contextualized as someone who offers to Ernaux "l'occasion de triompher de la mort par l'amour et l'érotisme" (*LA*, p. 234) within the broader context of Ernaux's breast cancer and retirement. No doubt because *LA* was completed not long after *L'UDLP* (the latter was published less than three years before *LA*), the construction of Marc Marie and his role in Ernaux's own self-construction do not present many differences. These three central figures in Ernaux's writing, all of whom were depicted in earlier works discussed in this chapter, are re-constructed in *LA* within a broader context. Their reconfigured roles in Ernaux's self-construction reflect the ongoing process of subjectivity. By extension, readers are also invited to re-investigate their own ideas about the manner in which they have constructed 'Ernaux,' in the same way in which Ernaux has constantly interrogated her self-construction through her writing.

Reprising and Revising Devices

In addition to revisiting stories told in her earlier works, Ernaux reprises many devices and techniques from those earlier works and builds upon them. I would like to suggest that perhaps Ernaux had to write her earlier works in order to make *LA* possible. For example, *LA* uses descriptions of photographs that were also central features of *LP* and *LH*. In addition, Ernaux has borrowed from the format of *L'UDLP* in that the work is written in response to photographs, but in *LA*, the pictures are not seen but only described. In this way, greater weight is placed on language, and in *LA*, the images are constructed by the reader. The photographs and short films that are described in *LA* serve as *déclencheurs* that motivate the writing and give the work an overarching structure. In addition, by incorporating Ernaux's observations of strangers, Ernaux has borrowed from the *journaux extimes*, *LVE* and *JDD*. In highlighting highly personal reactions to significant public events and in describing the texture of her daily life at different stages, Ernaux makes use of the material normally found in a *journal intime*. Yet by weaving the strands together into one completed and polished text, Ernaux has produced a *texte concerté* complete with occasional interruptions to the flow of the text with a list of items or short phrases.

There are more innovative features in *LA*, however, that build upon devices used in earlier Ernaux works and revise them. Like earlier works, *LA* contains metatextual passages. In *LA*, however, these metatextual passages are not written in the present

tense, interrupting the flow of the text and addressing the reader, but instead in the future tense, describing a book that is yet to be written. Throughout the text, Ernaux refers to the project as one that she feels compelled to complete.²¹ Initially as a young parent, the project is one to which Ernaux cannot devote much attention. During the intensely solitary moments of parenthood, Ernaux imagines the construction of the project and wonders what it might contain (*LA*, p. 99). Upon her fortieth birthday, Ernaux becomes increasingly conscious of time passing and feels as though the book is beginning to write itself (*LA*, p. 143). Finally, following her divorce, the departure of her children from home, and the death of her mother, Ernaux begins to imagine the form of the project as a "roman-total" similar to *Une vie* by Maupassant (*LA*, p. 158), and then later as similar to the writing project of Proust, in which "multiples images d'elle" are unified through text (*LA*, p. 179-80). Finally, just before the millennium and one year before her retirement, Ernaux repeats her desire to finish her writing project "sur une femme ayant vécu de 1940 à aujourd'hui [...] sans doute influencée par Proust [...]" (*LA*, p. 204). It is no surprise, then, that many critical reviews commented upon the similarities between Proust's writing project and *LA*, as I shall demonstrate in Chapter Five. As Ernaux's self-construction changes, so, too, does her image of the writing

²¹ Interestingly, while *LA* was published in 2008, its genesis dates back to 1985. Although Ernaux wrote the first words of the prologue in 1985, the project was made all the more urgent in 2000 when Ernaux faced retirement.²² On his website,²³ Thumerel explains that Ernaux had long considered the text that would eventually become *LH* – which Ernaux initially entitled "projet 52" – as her "début du grand projet" (as Ernaux wrote in her *journal d'écriture* on 6 November 1995). While *LH* was completed in 1997, *LA* was completed thirteen years later. Ernaux's difficulty in writing her *projet total* arises, as she explains in her *journal d'écriture* in 1998, "du fait d'être entre deux chaises, soit le récit historique, objectif, soit l'autobiographie, qui ne rend pas compte, selon moi, de l'époque" (Ernaux, 2001, p. 25). The project was once again accelerated in 2002 when Ernaux was diagnosed with breast cancer.

project that she will undertake. As such, Ernaux influences the reading of *LA* not by instructing her reader on how to read the work, as is the case in other works assessed so far, but instead by explaining the evolution of the work within the text itself and suggesting the other works to which it could be compared. Significantly, however, in describing Ernaux's changing ideas about the project to be written, Ernaux again also reflects her changing constructions of herself. By involving the reader in her changing ideas about the manner in which she will write her book, Ernaux makes the reader feel as though she or he has participated in the evolution of the work along with her and, by extension, feel as though she or he is also part of Ernaux's self-construction and, in a sense, a co-writer.

As I have mentioned, like *L'UDLP*, *LA* makes use of fourteen photographs as well as two short videos as anchoring devices. Ernaux has added a further anchoring device in *LA*. At regular intervals, the text describes a family meal during a given decade. The first meal described in the 1940s reflects the preoccupation with discussing the recently ended war (*LA*, p. 22). In this meal, Ernaux is an observer, rarely participating in adult discourse. Subsequent meals in the 1950s (*LA*, p. 58) reflect the alienation that she feels in relation to her family as an adolescent and later as a student who has embarked upon higher education. In the 1960s (*LA*, p. 95), Ernaux has become a young married woman who has imposed upon her the task of receiving in-laws and is increasingly preoccupied with creating an image of a happy, competent young couple. Ernaux's self-image is increasingly dependent upon the perceptions of others. In the 1970s (*LA*,

p. 134) and 1980s (*LA*, p. 151), the topics of discussion during meals undergo a considerable change largely due to growing children at the meal table, and these topics change, as does the role of each participant within the discourse. The ritual of the meal as a constant, represented by the white cloth, silver, and meat (*LA*, p. 191) is juxtaposed with ongoing subjectivity. The consistency of the family meal in the face of continuously advancing time forms a measuring device through which changes in the construction of the self can be measured.²²

As in *L'UDLP*, then, writing about photographs taken in the past allows Ernaux to engage with herself as an other. More specifically, however, the photographs described in *LA* instead allow her to re-engage with former self-constructions as they existed when the photograph was taken, as the passage of time has allowed for a fresh analysis of the photograph. Perhaps even more significantly in *LA*, however, are the many non-photographic images described in the work, particularly at the beginning (*LA*, p. 11-19) and end (*LA*, p. 241-242). Ernaux uses these images out of context in order to accentuate that the text is an assembly of constructs linked through writing rather than a coherent whole. Ernaux explains in one of her metatextual passages:

Elle voudrait réunir ces multiples images d'elle, séparées, désaccordées, par le fil d'un récit, celui de son existence, depuis sa naissance pendant la Deuxième Guerre mondiale jusqu'à aujourd'hui. [...] (*LA*, p. 179)

²² The recurrence of meat within the ritual of the family meal reminds the loyal Ernaux reader of the passage from *JDD*, in which Ernaux writes that buying meat becomes "un rite consacrant la nourriture convivale lourde de sang, la famille, le bonheur répété des dimanches autour de la table" (*JDD*, p. 41).

Because there is no definitive narrative that would link all the images together, her writing project can only collect the changing constructs of self. By presenting the text as a collection of images linked through writing, Ernaux mirrors one of the final images of *L'UDLP*, in which Ernaux takes a photograph of the entire collection of photographs "[p]eut-être pour me donner l'illusion de saisir une totalité" (*L'UDLP*, p. 150). As in the action of photographing photographs, rather than providing unity, *LA* assembles signs and gives an illusion of totality. The closing line, "Sauver quelque chose du temps où l'on ne sera plus jamais" (*LA*, p. 242) is a ghostly echo of the opening line, "Toutes les images disparaîtront" (*LA*, p. 11), suggesting that the written text is able to provide a certain immortality to these images and fragments that have characterized a "durée qui constitue son passage sur la terre à une époque donnée" (*LA*, p. 238). The list of fragments reminds the reader that the text aims to preserve rather than enlighten and reflects the manner in which subjectivity is an ongoing constructive process. The list of images that Ernaux wishes to capture, and through which she constructs herself, might well be endless. At the end of the text, there are fourteen blank pages - perhaps an invitation to the reader then to add to the list of lost images that she or he wishes to capture, thereby continuing the list that is begun in the text, or perhaps a symbolic suggestion that more images are still to come in a life not yet complete.²³

²³ Ernaux commented at a conference in Toronto (May, 2008) that these pages were not left deliberately, yet many readers had asked her whether this had been, in fact, an opportunity for readers to write their own history. The fact that this space was not requested by the author does not, of course, prevent the reader from choosing to use it as she or he wishes.

Toward the Collective and a Text for a Generation

LA demonstrates that Ernaux's previous works give only a partial impression of significant events in her life, as there were other political, social, and historical events that were not included in those previous works. In incorporating them into *LA*, Ernaux produces a text that is, arguably, more impersonal than previous works. The recognition of shared memories that provide a background for the personal again allows the reader to take up a subject position in relationship to Ernaux's account of that experience. The entry points for the reader within this project, however, might well vary. For the ghostly reader, to adopt Pearce's term that I discussed in Chapter One, a French reader of a similar age to Ernaux (or a reader familiar with French history) might find a point of entry in the recognition of historical events or trends described by Ernaux. While Ernaux's texts have always invited reader appropriation, the inclusion of social, cultural, and historical events from Ernaux's lived experience widen the scope of the text and allow entry points for readers.²⁴

As in Ernaux's other works discussed so far, Ernaux provides guidance to her reader on the goals of her project and, by extension, how the book is to be read. Significantly, unlike previous works, however, in *LA*, the guide to reading is found at the end of the text rather than at the beginning. Within those pages (*LA*, p. 234-7), Ernaux expresses

²⁴ Ernaux stated in an interview in 2010 to *L'Express* that she felt that *LA* allowed her to touch readers she had not touched in previous works (available online at http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xcr8ko_annie-ernaux-les-70s-ont-ete-pour-m_creation, retrieved 1 August 2010).

her desire not only to write her own story but also to situate her personal story within the wider context of a collective, shared French history. Her inclusion of external events has implications for the self/author dynamic present in the work. While in previous works, she has indicated her desire for readers to appropriate her work, in *LA*, Ernaux acknowledges that she, in turn, tells a story that is not hers alone, as her subjectivity is constructed not only by her personal experiences with others but is also shaped by social, political, and gender discourses. While as in previous works, readers who have undergone similar experiences may appropriate Ernaux's story as their own, Ernaux acknowledges that by writing about herself, she simultaneously writes about her readers:

Elle ne regardera en elle-même que pour y retrouver le monde, la mémoire et l'imaginaire des jours passés du monde, saisir le changement des idées, des croyances et de la sensibilité, la transformation des personnes et du sujet, qu'elle a connus et qui ne sont rien, peut-être, auprès de ceux qu'auront connus sa petite-fille et tous les vivants en 2070. (*LA*, p. 239)

Rather than recognizing that her readers to see themselves in her, in *LA*, Ernaux recognizes that her story is not simply hers alone but, in many ways, that of a generation. Such recognition is a significant change in Ernaux's corpus, as an intensification of the collective aspect of her writing signifies not only that Ernaux is undertaking a significant historical project but also that she now has the status that enables her to claim that she speaks for a generation. In order to acknowledge the shared narrative that she hopes to write, Ernaux moves away from the intimate or romantic relationship with her readers. Instead, she refutes appropriation of her *je* and

instead makes use of the pronouns *elle* and *on* throughout the work. The use of *on* arguably makes the text easier to appropriate, while the *elle* is less personal. In addition, Ernaux's most recent label for her work, the "autobiographie impersonnelle" (LA, p. 240), reinforces this desire for a less personal reading, and, as I shall demonstrate in Chapter Five, this label has permeated the critical and 'lay' response to the work. This shift in Ernaux's writing, along with the size and magnitude of the volume, challenge the manner in which 'Ernaux' has been constructed by critics and, as I shall further argue in Chapter Five, signifies Ernaux's desire to carve out a place within the literary canon, and her confidence in her ability to do so. These important changes in Ernaux's corpus lead to a number of questions concerning the manner in which 'Ernaux' is constructed within literary circles, and these constructions of 'Ernaux' will be examined in the next chapter.

Writing in a Digital Age

Toward the end of LA, Ernaux makes several comments about the emergence of technology and its invasion of everyday life. Welch has suggested that LA explores a world in which "the social fabric, social relations, and therefore personal identity are increasingly, and yet often imperceptibly, permeated and shaped by technology" (in Fell & Welch, 2009, p. 58). Ernaux suggests that contemporary technology over saturates the present: for instance, digital pictures are constantly taken and information is immediately accessible (LA, p. 223). Because the passage on

contemporary technology immediately precedes Ernaux's passage on the form and purpose of her book, these comments concerning contemporary technology are juxtaposed with Ernaux's discussion of the merit of her writing project in her guide to reading, as discussed above. Implicit in this juxtaposition is the contrast between the manner in which more recent texting and image capturing (such as on Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and other websites) replace what Ernaux presents as the thoughtful process that is involved with writing.

Ernaux argues that with the prevalence of digital technology, each image loses its significance due to an overabundance of readily available images for consumption:

On n'arrêtait pas de vouloir le 'sauvegarder' en une frénésie de photos et de films visibles sur-le-champ. Des centaines d'images dispersées aux quatre coins des amitiés, dans un nouvel usage social, transférées et archivées dans des dossiers – qu'on ouvrait rarement – sur l'ordinateur. [...] Avec le numérique on épuisait la réalité. (*LA*, p. 223)

Ernaux suggests that an oversaturation of images and text results in the subject becoming further diluted. Instead of consuming the images in a passive way, Ernaux explains that she wishes to describe them and to link them together through language.²⁵ If *L'UDLP* might be said to reflect contemporary social networking sites such as Facebook that allow users to post photographs and comment upon them, *LA* constitutes a commentary on the significance of each individual photograph in the

²⁵ Ernaux's comments may remind the reader of her thoughts in *SP* on Beauvoir's desire to videotape her entire life: "Comme c'est étrange que cette femme, avec tout ce qu'elle a dit sur l'être, la liberté, ait eu ce désir, plat, nul, car filmer, enregistrer tous les actes d'une vie, les paroles, sûrement serait révélation de quelque chose, vraiment pas de tout. Pour expliquer une vie, il faudrait aussi avoir toutes les influences, les lectures, et encore quelque chose se dérobe, qui n'est pas exposable" (*SP*, p. 354).

construction of subjectivity. By not reproducing the images in *LA*, Ernaux instead places the importance on the language used to describe the photographs, thereby highlighting the self-reflexive functions that the photographs play.²⁶ While Ernaux's grandchild, whose image (pictured with Ernaux) is described at the end of the text, might well grow up "Tweeting" her life from one day to the next and posting images of herself for her friends, Ernaux suggests that the collective result would be an accumulation of present moments with no attempt to connect them to overarching emotional experiences or shared histories.

Such a dilution is related to Ernaux's comment that contemporary society is increasingly focused on the present, with little reflection on the fact that the present, too, will quickly become the past. This obsession with the present is, Ernaux, argues, linked to the preoccupation with technology: where technology fails, *LA* posits, is in capturing the *profondeur* of time, such as yellowed paper or underlined sentences by a mystery reader in a library book (*LA*, p. 223), and Ernaux suggests in media interviews that capturing shared time is what links her story to that of many of her readers.²⁷ While the search for lost time is, in a sense, made redundant by the web – Ernaux writes that "[l]e clic sautillant et rapide de la souris sur l'écran était la mesure du temps" (*LA*, p. 223) - this distillation of lost time requires no real reflection, and much significance of the past is thereby removed. The past, in other words, can be re-connected instantly

²⁶ Further to this point, Ernaux explains that she did not print the photographs because they would have interrupted in the text with what she terms an "individualité forte." (Available online at <http://www.gallimard.fr/catalog/html/clip/A77922/index.htm>, retrieved 1 August 2010).

²⁷ Ernaux makes this comment in an interview with Olivier Barrot at <http://www.ina.fr/art-et-culture/litterature/video/3577128001/annie-ernaux-les-annees.fr.html>, retrieved 1 August 2010.

with the present in digital form, but the instantaneous nature of the tasks' completions is inherently false and reductionist, as there is no room for writerly imagination. E-mails, blogs, and chat functions are written using informal language and more closely resemble in-person conversation. The language of blogs, in particular, is "neuve et brutale" (*LA*, p. 222). Instant communication thereby reduces the necessity of the work involved in a writing project – the careful selection of words and the choice of signs and fragments to include.

Significantly, however, Ernaux's reluctance to embrace technology is in contrast with a new generation of readership that is increasingly accustomed to more "on demand" text and media. Ernaux's comments here must be considered in light of more recent online presences of authors and their work. In the Chapter which follows, I shall survey Ernaux's presence both in the media and online following the publication of *LA*, and in particular, I shall focus on the manner in which 'Ernaux' has been constructed textually by professional and 'lay' readers following the publication of her most recent text. I would like to suggest that while Ernaux's comments on technology reflect her thoughts on the importance of writing, they also reflect a reluctance to participate in a discourse that is increasingly overpowering and over which she has very little control. This can be reflected not only by Ernaux's comments in *LA* but also by Ernaux's only online chat to date, which took place in 2008, during which she mentions that she has no online presence and that she does very few public appearances (see Appendix). At the beginning of Ernaux's writing career, relationships with readers were developed largely

by readers to imagined 'Ernaux' before, during, and after their reading processes and, in some cases, were constructed through written correspondence with her. A consequence of contemporary technology has been that 'lay' readers and consumers can construct famous others online without the sanction or knowledge of the subject. Most extraordinarily of all, this can be done by a participant who has not necessarily read some or any of Ernaux's work. In writing *LA*, then, Ernaux produces her *livre total* that she hopes will take her place following her death and provide her literary immortality in an era in which readers are increasingly preoccupied with the present.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that there are echoes of the reader/author relationship and, more specifically, of the manner in which readers construct 'Ernaux' in the author's recent work and that these relational models build upon Ernaux's exploration of postmodern subjectivity that has characterized her work. I have suggested that this self/author relationship is mirrored in most recent work through Ernaux's model of self-construction in relationship to others. I suggested throughout the chapter that 'Ernaux' is constructed in a romance economy in *SP* (through S.), *L'O* (through Vilain), and *L'UDLP* (through Marie). I have further suggested that these self/other constructs mirror the self/author construct at work before, during, and after the reading process. In my discussion of *SP*, I examined the manner in which the relationship between Ernaux and S. can be read as a metaphor for the relationship between reader and

author. In my analysis of *L'O*, I surveyed the manner in which the 'new woman' plays a role in the *transubstantiation* of subjectivity from author to reader. In my engagement with *L'UDLP*, I argued that the construction of 'Ernaux' through photographs of clothing fragments mirrors the reader's potential construction of 'Ernaux' through textual fragments. Finally, in my assessment of *LA*, I suggested that Ernaux re-visits reader constructs of both herself and her work (established in previous readings). I have further suggested that Ernaux moves away from the romantic model and toward a more universal voice, in which there is a symbiotic relationship between author and reader. Within *LA*, Ernaux acknowledges not only the manner in which readers construct themselves through Ernaux but also the manner in which her story is constructed by those who shared many common experiences. In addition, the prominent roles of characters who are linked to writing in the works underscore the important role of reader/author relationships in Ernaux's texts.

This chapter has focused on the manner in which Ernaux explores the reader/author relationship in her recent writing and her awareness of the manner in which readers construct her. What remains to be assessed are real and tangible constructions of 'Ernaux,' which include texts written by others on both the work and the author in a new venue for literary analysis, the online forum. An investigation of such extra-textual engagement with Ernaux's work will illustrate the manners in which 'lay' readers and critics alike go about constructing 'Ernaux,' and it is to such an assessment that I shall turn in the final chapter.

"[N]ovels could be called thought experiments. You invent people, you put them in hypothetical situations, and decide how they will react. The 'proof' of the experiment is if their behaviour seems interesting, plausible, revealing about human nature. Seems to whom? To 'the reader' – who is not Mr Cleverdick the reviewer, or Ms Sycophant the publicist, or your fond mother, or your jealous rival, but some kind of ideal reader, shrewd, intelligent, demanding but fair, whose persona you try to adopt as your own work in the process of composition."

(Lodge, 2001, p. 61-2)

"[J]e ne suis pas désireuse, pour ma part, de retrouver et de lier les éléments de ma vie intime, d'atteindre une vérité totale de mon être (à laquelle je ne crois pas). Les mots et les phrases retrouvés ouvrent sur le social et l'histoire, quelque chose de collectif."

(Ernaux in Thumerel, 2004, p. 14)

Chapter 5 - ERNAUX'S DISCURSIVE SPACE

Introduction

So far in this thesis, I have illustrated the manners in which both 'Ernaux' and her texts are constructed by their critical readers and Ernaux's awareness of the reader/author dynamic. I examined in Chapter Two the manner in which critics have constructed 'Ernaux' through their engagements with the author and her work, and I then showed in Chapter Three how Ernaux and her texts have been classified according to pre-determined critical categories or, in other cases, categories that Ernaux or her critics have attempted to create themselves. Finally, in the previous chapter, I showed how the fragmented, constructed subject is a recurring dynamic that reflects the reader/ author relationship. What is common in the three preceding chapters is the manner in which both 'Ernaux' and her texts have been *discursively* constructed, and, as Pearce (1997, p. 6) suggests, it is through an engagement with interpretation itself – and, by extension, with language itself - that these constructions take place. Both 'Ernaux' and

her work are constructed both in the reading of Ernaux's texts and in interpretation beyond that of the primary texts. It is this 'beyond' that I shall now explore.

In this chapter, I shall assess the roles of the press and new media in discursively constructing 'Ernaux' and her texts. The examination is necessary due to the arguably decreased amount of power associated with critical writing. As Lardellier (2007, p. 57) argues, the emergence of hypertext has resulted in a democratization of reading: no longer do professional readers have a solitary claim to written responses to a work; instead, 'lay' readers are able to share their thoughts on their own reading experiences so that they might be read alongside those of the professionals. In an interview with Fell and Welch, Ernaux comments that throughout the past decade, the status of the professional writer has, accordingly, been reduced. Ernaux explains that "[s]ur le web, dans les blogs, les individus prennent la parole avec virulence, ne se fient pas aux discours légitimes, tels qu'ils soient" (Fell & Welch, 2009, p. 6). Given Ernaux's comment that there has been a shift in power dynamics between authors and readers, who may now act as authors themselves, it seems reasonable to suggest that the previously held power of the literary critic as gatekeeper or 'chief interpreter' of a text has been called into question: 'lay' readers are now able to contribute their own interpretations and thoughts on texts within the public domain. Interpretive communities that were once restricted to book clubs and letters to the author are now in the public domain thanks to the web, and these interpretations and criticisms of literary works can be read alongside – or, indeed, instead of – professional interpretations and criticisms.

For an author like Ernaux who, as we have seen, does not privilege critical constructions of her work over any others, an analysis of online 'lay' reception, in contrast with the professional reception, also allows one to observe directly how her work and 'Ernaux' herself are received and constructed beyond professional circles. I shall draw not only upon media response, as have other Ernaux critics, but also go beyond academic criticism and letters to the author in order to draw upon this the online response, where critical, 'lay,' and authorial voices converge in a shared space.

I Methodology and Review of Previous Work on Ernaux Reception

Theoretical Framework

At the heart of postmodern theory is, ironically, the underlying truth that there are no stable entities or underlying truths (Burr, 2003, p. 6). The degree to which this sentence undermines and subverts its own logic is exemplary of the problematic nature of language itself: its legitimacy as a method of analysis is constantly called into question as interpretations and meanings of words change with time and place, and each interpretation can, in turn, be interpreted. Postmodern theory also suggests that language cannot simply reflect 'reality' but instead actively constructs it: words are "about the world but [...] also form the world as they represent it" (in Wetherell et. al., 2001, p. 16). Discourse, in turn, refers not only to language *in use* but "language use, whether speech or writing, seen as a type of social practice"

(Fairclough, 1992, p. 28).¹ For analysts of discourse, nothing has *meaning* outside of this discourse itself: when people talk to each other, the world – as well as the people and objects within it – are constructed. In this way, it can be argued that in writing *about* Ernaux, readers discursively *construct* 'Ernaux.' These discursive constructions of 'Ernaux' are irremovable from the social and political contexts in which they occur, and Burr (2003) uses the term 'social constructionism' to illustrate the manner in which language both reflects social practices and constructs them. Goffman (1981) developed the term 'footing' for the analysis of writing about public figures. He suggests that in writing or speaking about someone, one occupies one of three possible positions: one can speak as author of what is said (in this case, what Ernaux says about herself), as principal of what is said (in this case, the person about whom something is being said – in this case, Ernaux herself), or animator (the person who makes a statement about a third party). In all statements written about her, then, Ernaux plays the role of principal, though she is not necessarily the author of the statement. A reader or a critic might be the author, for instance, and in situations in which readers respond to critical reviews, they may play the role of animator.

Reader relationships with Ernaux's texts, and, indeed, 'Ernaux' herself, are constructed through language that traverses and forms her *discursive space*, a term developed by Wetherell (2001,

¹ There are a wide variety of definitions for the term discourse, although Jaworski & Coupland suggest that the core of most definitions is the study of language *in use* and that this meaning of discourse is in contrast to the more conventional use of the term discourse (or its plural form, discourses) which can refer to "a wide range of practices from such well documented phenomena as sexist discourse to ways of speaking that are easy to recognize in particular texts but difficult to describe in general terms (competitive discourse, discourse of solidarity, etc.)" (Lee, 1992, p. 97 cited in Jaworski & Coupland, 2006, p. 2). I would add the example of Barthes' text, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (or, in English, *A Lover's Discourse*), a study of the manner in which language is *used* within a romantic setting and the manner in which language constructs relationships.

p.25) drawing on Gilbert et al (1999) and Silverstone (1998) in her analysis of the phenomenon surrounding Princess Diana. In her analysis, discursive space refers both to Diana herself as well as to all words written about her by various authors and animators. Discourses of femininity, morality, royalty, and family many of which jostle with each other and all of which are political, are mobilized in the representation of 'Diana,' and their intersections form points of argument and discussion. This discursive space largely comes to usurp Diana herself. Through discourse, 'Diana' is perpetually re-constructed through a dialogic process, in which Diana's words are intermingled with words said about her. Wetherell focuses in particular on the famous interview that Diana gave to Martin Bashir on the *Panorama* program during which she discussed a broad range of issues, challenging the traditional representation of monarchy. It is the combination of what Diana said (and how she said it) during this interview and what, in turn, was said about the interview that have helped, in part, create constructs of 'Diana.'

In a manner similar to Diana, Ernaux's discursive space incorporates not only all of Ernaux's writing and statements but also all texts written *about* her by her readers (or animators), just as Pearce (1997, p. 142) suggests that during the reading process, the reader 'looks' for the author, who is caught up in a media image and previous texts. In studying the manner in which 'Ernaux' is constructed by readers through language in use, one can also document 'discursive categories' or subtexts² that are revealed in the texts. In Ernaux's case, her discursive space encompasses a broad range of discursive categories: femininity, feminism, gender, sexuality,

² Discursive space is similar to the term "semiotic space" (Jaworski & Coupland, 2000, p. 8) in that various subtexts and themes can be detected within a given sample of text.

autofiction, and class migration traverse the space through which 'Ernaux' and her works are constructed.

In this final chapter, I shall undertake a study of Ernaux's discursive space and outline the discursive categories that I have detected during the period following the publication of *LA*. I shall draw upon press reception of Ernaux's most recent works in the first part of the chapter and then assess the online reader constructions of 'Ernaux.' Finally, building upon the work of Thomas (1999, 2005), Charpentier (1994, 1999, 2009), and Ernaux herself (1994, 2000), I shall assess Ernaux's own role in shaping her constructions following the publication of her most recent work both in the media and online. Thomas and Charpentier similarly undertook investigations into both journalist and reader response to Ernaux's work. Thomas focused on the journalistic response to *JNS* and *LH* by interpreting Gallimard's *dossier de presse* on each work. With respect to readers, Thomas was given access by Ernaux to a representative sample of letters written between July 1974 and March 1997 in response to all of Ernaux's works up to and including *JNS*. In Charpentier's case, she similarly surveyed press reception of Ernaux's work, focusing particularly on the manner in which 'Ernaux' and her work were constructed from one ideological group to another. Charpentier's sociological study also provided a profile of Ernaux's readership by reading a large number of letters to the author, conducting extensive interviews with teachers and librarians who were in contact with Ernaux's readers, and corresponding with and interviewing Ernaux herself. Ernaux, in her own study of readership letters, evidently drew her arguments based upon her own reading of letters written to her.

Unlike authors of this previous work, I have not solicited letters written to the author.

Charpentier (2006, p. 120) has suggested that letters alone are not enough to give a complete analysis of Ernaux's readership. I further want to suggest that in the case of letters, reception analysis is largely restricted to those readers who would take the time to write to the author, often due to their intense admiration or dislike of the author or her work. Letters to the author are also written with an ideal reader – Ernaux herself – in mind. As I reviewed in Chapter One, Iser suggests that the ideal reader is constructed by the author and embodies the qualities necessary for the work to take effect (Iser, 1978, p. 34). A study of letters to the author must, therefore, be read with this dynamic in mind. Hugueny-Léger has also suggested (2007, p. 130) that there are limitations to such an investigation, although her own proposed method of investigation – the distribution of a questionnaire to 130 undergraduate students in the United Kingdom – also presents its own limitations. Namely, it is unclear whether the students who completed the survey were Hugueny-Léger's own students, and the fact that most questions were multiple choice allowed for a narrow framework of responses to questions. While letters to the author undeniably come from a small pool of readers, the open-ended format of the response allows for a more complex engagement with their discursive constructions of 'Ernaux' and her work. In addition, I highlighted in Chapter Two my desire to maintain a distance from the object of my study at an Ernaux conference, and this desire reflects my intention of not interacting with Ernaux during my research. Undoubtedly, undertaking a reading of letters written to the author would have necessitated contacting Ernaux. In this way, the present study marks a departure from previous study of Ernaux readers' responses to the works in that the study has not been sanctioned, approved, or possibly filtered by the author.

Methodology

In carrying out my investigation, I shall be giving my reader my own subjective interpretation of the language through which Ernaux is constructed, as I cannot reflect Ernaux's discursive space, just as language cannot reflect any 'reality': indeed, in this chapter, I shall largely be constructing the discursive space drawing on the language of many others. I shall attempt to detect the discursive categories that make up Ernaux's discursive space by looking for keywords and ideological subtexts.

In Section Two of this chapter, I shall outline the discursive categories that construct 'Ernaux' within the press reception primarily of *LA*. As a researcher in Canada, my only immediate sources for the press reception were, initially, online. In order to carry out my research, however, I had initially planned to visit Gallimard and consult its *dossiers de presse* for each work. Through correspondence with Gallimard, however, the publisher offered instead to send me photocopies of the entire contents of the *dossier de presse* for both works, as Gallimard is in the process of digitizing its resources. As a result, I was sent all press clippings associated with both works, as Gallimard routinely stores and classifies a comprehensive collection of reviews and mentions of its authors following the publication of a new work. Like Thomas, I initially assessed each article in terms of whether it was positive or negative, focusing as much on the tone in which the article was written as well as specific comments. To some extent, both Thomas and Charpentier also break down media response into categories based on whether a

medium left-wing or right-wing, which I shall not do in this particular context because political allegiances are not always declared in online forums. I shall, however, like both Thomas and Charpentier, document the gender (to the extent that this is possible) of commentators and readers in order to determine whether the gendered subtexts that have been documented are still at play with the most recent publications.

In Section Three of this chapter, I shall assess how 'lay' readers have discursively constructed 'Ernaux' online. This is a new medium for analysis that has not previously been explored in any Ernaux scholarship. In part, this is because such analysis has only recently become possible. In expanding my analysis, it is possible to consider text from readers whose relationship to Ernaux's work is more casual. This chapter aims to allow these voices once again to break and enter into the traditionally more 'closed' domain of the critical text (namely, this thesis) in order to assess points of intersection with, as well as departures from, letters to the author.

In the final section, I shall assess Ernaux's own presence in the online medium. I have chosen to undertake this analysis rather than to undertake a summary of Ernaux's appearances on French television for two reasons. Firstly, many of these appearances were available online and form part of the analysis. Secondly, because Section Three incorporates comments from readers from various countries, I did not want to restrict my sample to one country or in any privilege one over another in any way.³ My aim here is to detect the manner in which Ernaux

³ Of course, in the press clippings, I have assessed articles that nearly all appeared in France. I have done so because the overwhelming majority of press response is in that country, and using the *dossier de presse* allows me to draw comparisons with previous work on Ernaux press reception.

has helped shape her discursive space through presences in the media. Arguably, Ernaux's capacity to do so has increased with the proliferation of webcasts that are available to readers all over the world. Like Charpentier, I suggested in Chapter Two that Ernaux has played a role in shaping her own reception, and I shall assess the manner in which Ernaux has continued to be able to do so following the publication of *LA*.

It must be noted, however, that a drawback of studying online text might well be its temporary, fleeting nature. Due to bandwidth concerns, web pages do not last as long as the printed word. In writing this section of the chapter, one of my goals is to mirror Ernaux's project by committing to writing these elusive texts that have helped shape Ernaux's discursive space online in the same way that Ernaux commits to writing fragments that might otherwise have gone unrecorded. These websites and postings form a part of a discursive space that represents 'Ernaux' at moments in time. In this case, those moments in time cover a period of sixteen months (from February 2008 until June 2009). Comments were retrieved and printed for analysis on 15 July 2009, and all hyperlinks refer to pages that were retrieved on 1 August 2010 unless otherwise indicated.

II Critical Constructions of *LA*

Despite Ernaux's general dislike of the press (as expressed in her article "L'écrivain en terrain miné")⁴, with the exception of the well-documented reception of *PS* (Charpentier, 1994, p. 45-75; Ernaux, 1994; Thomas, 1999, p. 145-6), Ernaux's relationship with the press has been positive. The overall critical response to *LA* was, however, overwhelmingly positive. The timing of these reviews might have played a particularly important role in the sales of Ernaux's book, as many reviews were published in the same editions of newspapers and magazines that were covering the recently announced wedding of French President Nicholas Sarkozy to Carla Bruni. Of the 34 press clippings included in the *dossier de presse*, 24 were positive, 6 were negative, and 4 were neutral in tone. More specifically, 25 of the 34 articles were reviews, while 5 were interviews and 4 were more neutral announcements of the book's publication.⁵

Discursive Category 1: Masterpiece

As I suggested in the second chapter, Ernaux has devoted a great deal of time to developing her thoughts on literature and tends to stay away from value judgment, and a rejection of

⁴ Ernaux, Annie. "L'écrivain en terrain miné." *Le Monde*, 23 March 1985 : 21

⁵ By way of comparison, the press response to *L'UDLP* is weak in contrast to the widespread academic response, but again, the press reception was generally positive. Dugast-Portes summarizes the generally positive reception that the work enjoyed, highlighting an article by Jocelyne Savigneau in which Savigneau repeats a motif that she had used upon the publication of *PS*: Ernaux has "le courage de dire le désir" (Dugast-Portes, 2008, p. 162). Not all of the press at the time of the text's release, however, was directly related to *L'UDLP*. Instead, of those fourteen articles, three were passages written by Ernaux herself and released near the date of publication of her new work, two were short articles on the question of autofiction, two were interviews, and the remaining six were critical reactions to the work. Of the six reviews, four were positive. The two remaining cannot be convincingly dismissed as altogether negative, but the two reviews (both written by male critics) make a number of tongue-in-cheek comments that are diminishing to the text and its authors and suggest that despite being worth reading, *L'UDLP*, like Ernaux herself, cannot be taken all that seriously.

literary conventions in Ernaux's works underscores her rejection of the literary establishment (Thomas, 2005, p. 157). It would appear that with *LA*, however, critics agree that the text has earned Ernaux a place in the canon. A common compliment is that *LA* is Ernaux's "plus beau livre"⁶ while some go further to term the work Ernaux's "chef-d'oeuvre."⁷ Even those critics whose reviews I have termed as negative are, in general, unsparing in their allotment of flowery adjectives to describe the writing.

This discursive category is particularly focused on the work as opposed to the author as a person. This is in contrast to a discursive category identified by Thomas with respect to Ernaux's construction in the press (1999, p. 147), that of focusing on Ernaux the person rather than on her texts. Thomas develops the discursive category by drawing upon Toril Moi's critical work on Beauvoir (1994). Ernaux's works are critically constructed through language that assigns both the author and her work to patriarchal language: in particular, the term *midinette*, Moi argues, has been associated with women's writing and, as such, the 'everyday life' aspects of Ernaux's works (listening to popular music and going clothes shopping, for instance) are ridiculed using gendered subtexts and in a manner that criticizes Ernaux (the person) directly. Like Thomas, Charpentier points out the sexist reception of *PS* as well as the way that Ernaux has been frequently disregarded as a writer of popular sentimental or Harlequin-like texts that are far too short and simply written to be considered 'real' literature (Charpentier, 1999, p. 53-56). Instead, *LA* confirms Ernaux's status as a major contemporary

⁶ Crom, Nathalie. "C'est ainsi que nous avons vécu," *Télérama*, 6 February 2008; Lapaque, Sébastien. "La vie derrière soi." *Le Figaro littéraire*, 28 February 2008.

⁷ Amette, Jacques-Pierre. "Annie par Ernaux." *Le Point*, 14 February 2008; Liegeois, Yonnel. "Femme entre les lignes," *NVO*, 7 March 2008; Maudit, Jean. "Les femmes écrivains: *Les années d'Annie Ernaux*," *Canal Académie*. Audio. <http://www.canalacademie.com/Les-Annees-d-Annie-Ernaux.html>.

French writer. Much critical attention is focused on the structure – or architecture – of the text, as critics find the use of photographs, video, and meals an effective way of moving from one era into another. Lamberterie, for instance, writes that the text is “très dense mais extrêmement bien architecturé”⁸ and comments on the manner in which the text is structured. Amette describes the writing as “nettoyé jusqu’à l’os,”⁹ putting into archaeological terms what Ernaux might have termed her *écriture plate*. Charges carrying negative connotations frequently leveled at Ernaux, once referred to as “la petite Annie” (Thomas, 1999, p. 145; 2005, p. 233) are absent.

Because Ernaux already has a body of work against which *LA* might be judged, many critics do so. In comparing Ernaux’s works, the general consensus is that this one is her best and that it weaves previous texts together. As I suggested in the previous chapter, *LA* might be read as a summary of Ernaux’s writing career to date. Leménager writes that this book is “un livre-somme, qui contient tous les précédents, les prolonge, les embrasse, les dépasse.”¹⁰ Liegeois, in turn, suggests that *LA* will encourage readers to re-read previous works or, in the case of new readers, to read them for the first time.¹¹ Crom addresses criticisms leveled against Ernaux in her other works, including charges, previously mentioned, of *impudeur* and a lack of emotion, arguing that for Ernaux, these questions are not relevant: instead, Crom argues that Ernaux’s writing seeks to reflect the truth of an authentic human experience, with its high and

⁸ Lamberterie, Olivia de. “Passé simple,” *Elle*, 11 February 2008.

⁹ Amette, op. cit.

¹⁰ Leménager, Gregoire. “Les raisons d’un succès: Les années d’Annie,” *Nouvel Observateur*, 14 February 2008.

¹¹ Liegeois, Yonnel, op. cit.

low points.¹² Within this discursive category, it appears that not only is *LA* a masterpiece but that the text, by extension, legitimizes previous works.

Discursive Category 2: Sexual/Textual Politics

As mentioned above, such a construction of the work is not unanimous. Despite the overall positive critical reception, a minority of critics fit Thomas' discursive category of those who judge the person rather than the work. Ernaux explains to Crom that while she has maintained a similar writing style since *LP*, mainly her *écriture plate*, she has since explored more personal subjects.¹³ As a result, there is criticism of Ernaux for her lack of emotion in her work in relation to what they consider emotionally-charged events, and it is implied that this deficit may be a reflection of her personal lack of sympathy for the emotional. In a *TéléZ* review of the text published on 25 February 2008, for instance, B. E. writes, "Mais on regrette l'absence de sentiments familiers: les notions de bien-être ou de plénitude semblent étrangères à l'auteur de ce beau récit rigoureux et gris [...] Heureuse? Chut! Le bonheur n'était pas au menu." In this extract, the critic implies that happiness is foreign to Ernaux and further uses cooking imagery in his criticism – perhaps assigning 'Ernaux' to a conventional feminine stereotype and associating the female writer to the domestic sphere. Such language is reminiscent of the announcement of Ernaux having won the Renaudot and Duras' having won the Goncourt (Boué, 1984, p. 12, cited in Thomas, 1999, p. 144).

¹² Crom, Nathalie, op. cit.

¹³ Crom, Nathalie, op. cit.

Critics appear to suggest that if Ernaux were simply happier in her life, she might enjoy her success more – and her readers might have a lighter read. In these and similar reviews, Ernaux is constructed as an accomplished writer who, if she could find more happiness in her life, would be an even better one. A discursive category identified by Thomas in the analysis of critical response to Ernaux's previous works (1999, p. 147 and 2005, p. 239) is Ernaux's rejection from the literary sphere by gatekeepers, largely due to the fact that Ernaux has been targeted by (mostly male) critics because her texts are brief, her subject matter is profane (and Ernaux is often accused of *impudeur*), and her own knowledge and familiarity with French literature – as well as its critical theories – constitute a threat to the literary establishment. Within the press reception of *LA*, there are once again gendered undertones: for *LA*, female critics generally write positive critiques, as was the case following the publication of *PS* (Charpentier, 1994, p. 53), while negative reviews tend to come from male critics. Of the articles reviewed, 14 were written by male critics, and 16 were written by female critics. The remaining four articles were either not credited with a specific author's name or were written by an author whose gender was not identifiable. Of the male critics – whose pictures were normally included with their critical review – most were seasoned veterans of literary criticism, and their reviews of Ernaux's work were most likely to contain references to male writers, especially Proust, Flaubert, and Maupassant. Of the reviews written by men, 9 of 14 were positive in tone, while 4 were negative and 1 was neutral. Of the reviews written by women, 14 were positive, while 1 was negative and 1 was neutral.

While many male critics provide at least some positive commentary, they question the notion

that Ernaux's work is a collective, shared history of French society and further reinforce a patriarchal order in which a male perspective is the unified, truly representational form while the female voice is distinctly *other* and, it is implied, marginal. Some male critics reject the notion that Ernaux's text is a 'collective' story (or *autobiographie impersonnelle* about which Ernaux speaks and writes in the press surrounding the work), such as Denis, who terms Ernaux's text "atrocement féminin"¹⁴ and reinforces the 'otherness' of Ernaux's work in contrast with respect to the more 'established' and unified male autobiography. The 'atrociousness' of the femininity of the work is clearly disturbing to Denis. In his review printed next to a large photograph of Denis, who would appear to be at least of the same age as Ernaux, he also disturbingly suggests that Ernaux's book is more about her distress about facing old age, noting in particular the physical changes brought about in the ageing process: "[...] le lecteur est touché par cette détresse à fleur de peau, une peau qui a longtemps tenu le coup et ne peut plus aujourd'hui dissimuler son âge."¹⁵ In what might only reasonably be described as symbolic violence, Denis reduces the text to a superficial lamentation on Ernaux's part that her physical beauty is no longer what it once was and further suggests that the text, similarly, reflects a writing project that is now in its declining days. Denis' linking of the physical deterioration of the body in the ageing process with the notion of a writing project that also 'shows its age' directly links Ernaux's writing with her physical 'beauty,' and the title of his article "La fin d'une femme" also refers to the title of one of Ernaux's previous works. The title may instead be a cruel intertextual reference to the end of Ernaux's own mother's life, captured in the text entitled *Une femme*. While the article is tempered with flowery adjectives,

¹⁴ Denis, Stéphane. "La fin d'une femme," *Le Figaro*, 29 February 2008.

¹⁵ Ibid.

within it, *LA* is reduced to being simply about a woman who is unhappy with her deteriorating appearance.

Other male critics invoke images that reveal their own gender constructs. Birnbaum,¹⁶ for instance, likens the text to the tale of an elder grandmother telling stories of her past, thereby evoking a traditional gender role that reduces the significance of the amount of work involved in the writing process. Martin-Chauffier, in turn, criticizes Ernaux for lack of traditional elements in her text, including characters and emotion, writing that "il y a à peu près autant de soufflé dans ce livre que dans un infatigable sèche-cheveux,"¹⁷ evoking a traditionally feminine image of beauty that is in keeping with Martin-Chauffier's title for his article, "Annie Ernaux se plante dans le décor,"¹⁸ once again drawing on stereotyped feminine occupations. His final analysis is that Ernaux's project is a page-turner, but he reduces Ernaux the person by using highly pejorative language. For instance, he refers to Ernaux as "une vieille pro"¹⁹ who draws on her experience as a "bonne ancienne de 68 et en groupie de Bourdieu,"²⁰ thereby reducing Ernaux to the status of a 'groupie' from that of an established author and implying that Ernaux's writing simply imitates and blindly follows the work of Bourdieu, the more 'established' (and not to mention male) writer. In his analysis, Martin-Chauffier reduces Ernaux here to her gender as well as to her political associations. Ironically, he also rebukes Ernaux for not figuring prominently in the text herself, while other male critics have accused the author of doing precisely the opposite – of being too self-absorbed.

¹⁶ Birnbaum, Jean. "Autobiographie de l'époque," *Panorama du médecin*, 3 March 2008.

¹⁷ Martin-Chauffier, Gilles. "Annie Ernaux se plante dans le décor," *Paris-Match*, 28 February 2008.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

Henric's review²¹ criticizes Ernaux's writing project by questioning how representative her use of the inclusive pronoun 'on' truly is, suggesting that Ernaux's memory is in fact much better for trivial personal details than it is for issues of historic significance. Henric points out Ernaux's inaccurate account of an assassination attempt on the Pope and uses this inaccuracy as a springboard for suggesting that the book is less concerned with constructing a representative collective history and is more self-absorbed than it is collective, arguing that Ernaux has a better memory for those events which only affected her personally rather than wider society. Amette's²² review, while positive, diminishes Ernaux by adopting the title "Annie par Ernaux,"²³ thereby reducing the author to her first name.²⁴ Despite his glowing review, Amette is reluctant to address the text with any critical detail but rather appears to be at a loss as to how he could possibly have enjoyed the book, beginning his article by stating that "[c]'est un cas unique, Annie Ernaux,"²⁵ owing to the fact that her success has been a surprise, as he is not able to construct Ernaux's success using the predetermined tools of assessment that he has used for other writers.

A flagrant example of reducing the work not only to the writer but, more specifically, to her

²¹ Henric, Jacques. "Sauver," *Art Press*, May 2008, p. 77.

²² Amette is, of course, an author himself who, as Charpentier has argued (1994, p. 53), comes from a similar background to Ernaux's, and has written in the first person, as is the case of *Ma vie, son oeuvre* (Seuil, 2001).

²³ Amette, op. cit.

²⁴ He is not alone in doing so, as Leménager, also a male critic, titles his article in the *Nouvel Observateur* "Les années d'Annie," once again reducing the author to her first name, recalling the reference to 'la petite Annie' that followed the publication of *PS* (Charpentier, 1994, p. 54).

²⁵ Ibid.

gender can be found in a review by Capel,²⁶ printed in *Le Canard enchaîné*, a satirical magazine designed to poke fun at authors and celebrities. While most critics identify Ernaux as the author of *LP*, her Renaudot-winning and, arguably, her most well-recognized text, this critic identifies her as the author of *PS*, the text that, in this critic's opinion, broke Ernaux's streak of good books owing to a mid-life crisis in her fifties. In a similar vein as Henric, Capel accuses Ernaux of only being able to paint an accurate portrait of the 1940s through to the 1970s, as these were her formative years in which she underwent her most intimate and exciting experiences – sexual awakening, university, marriage, and political activism among them. As for recent years, Ernaux is "dépassée par le projet"²⁷ owing to her inability to write with any amount of affection for the period. In short, more recent periods of time were not as exciting for Ernaux, so she was not able to write about them as well. To accentuate his point, Capel's article includes a cartoon of Ernaux holding a handheld mirror in her right arm with three wall-length mirrors behind her. Above the cartoon is the title, "Avec le temps, va...: Dans *Les années* (Gallimard), Annie Ernaux tente de capter son image derrière le miroir de la mémoire collective."²⁸ The implication, of course, is that Ernaux is writing in mourning of her deteriorating physical appearance, and the implication is underscored by a cartoon of a woman looking at herself in the mirror who is depressed by what she sees. This reduction of the text to its author's appearance and the association of Ernaux with physical vainness is an echo of the stereotypical female vocabulary of garden work and domestic items (such as hair dryers) that are present in Martin-Chauffier's article and underscores a male critical tendency to 'other' the

²⁶ Capel, Igor. "Avec le temps, va...", *Le Canard enchaîné*, 5 March 2008.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

narrating voice. In short, while some male critics are particularly harsh in constructing 'Ernaux' and *LA*, they are in the minority. What is lacking in numbers, however, is made up by intensity.

Discursive Category 3: The Domestic 'Ernaux'

As I suggested in Chapter Two, Ernaux has a history of granting interviews to academics in her home and within the realm of her domestic space. In the case of the press critics, there again appears to be a trend to invite the critical press into the author's home. At times, Ernaux gives an interview there, and other times, she has a series of photographs taken within her domestic space for public consumption. Of the 34 articles about *LA* surveyed for this study, 24 contained photographs of the author, and seven of them appear to have been taken at Ernaux's home.²⁹ Notably, these photographs were taken outside of her designated writing space and instead in her more private, domestic setting, marking a distinction from more recent preoccupations in British and North American newspapers with authors' writing spaces. At times, Ernaux is photographed near her collection of books, while in others, she is in her garden, looking out of her window, or simply looking into the camera, meeting the reader's gaze.³⁰ This tendency to photograph Ernaux in her domestic space is underscored by her willingness to expose that space not only in words (such as in *SP*) but also in photographs (such

²⁹ Chaudey, Marie. "Annie Ernaux: Sa vie est son oeuvre," *La vie*, 7 February 2008; Crom, Nathalie. "C'est ainsi que nous avons vécu," op. cit; Eliard, Astrid. "Les choses de la vie," *Point de vue*, 6 February 2008; Ferniot, Christine and Philippe Delaroche. "Je n'ai rien à voir avec l'autofiction," *Lire*, February 2008; Janicot, Stéphanie. "Annie Ernaux," *Muze*, No. 43, March 2008; Lapaque, Sébastien. "La vie derrière soi," *Le Figaro littéraire*, 28 February 2008; Payot, Marianne. "Nos années Ernaux," *L'Express*, 7 February 2008.

³⁰ Indeed, I would argue that part of Ernaux's strategy for her construction in the media is a desire consistently to meet the reader's gaze just as Ernaux sought to do with *S*. in *SP*. This desire is underscored by Ernaux's statement that her motto is "[n]e jamais baisser les yeux" (in *Lire*, May 2006, available online at http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/questionnaire-de-proust-annie-ernaux_811221.html).

as in *L'UDLP*).

This domestic construction of 'Ernaux' is further encouraged by critical discourse within this discursive category. In her review of *LA*, Crom includes a photograph of Ernaux standing outside patio doors with a caption below that reads, "Chez Annie Ernaux, depuis toujours, la vie et l'écriture se rejoignent, s'élancent."³¹ In this caption, Crom plays with two interpretations of 'chez.' Other interviews more explicitly construct 'Ernaux' in a domestic setting. In an interview with Payot published in *L'Express*, Payot begins with the lines:

Il pleut sur Cergy et Annie Ernaux rayonne. Comme si le temps n'avait pas de prise sur ce corps élancé à la blonde et longue chevelure de jeune fille – ni les années noires, celles du cancer puis de l'inexplicable maladie de peau au nom imprononçable, ni les 67 printemps humés depuis le 1er September 1940.³²

This portrait of Ernaux in her home setting highlights, in particular, her age (by citing her date of birth) and physical appearance, at which Payot seems to marvel. The portrait is in keeping with other critics who are quick to point out Ernaux's age. Payot seems fascinated at the degree to which Ernaux seems well-preserved *despite* her past illnesses and age. This type of commentary is perhaps what one might read in a celebrity magazine, yet the opening of domestic space in critical discourse – as well as in Ernaux's writing itself – makes Ernaux increasingly vulnerable to such domestic discursive constructions, as Payot evidently feels compelled to describe Ernaux in her domestic setting. In using the two meanings of *temps*, Payot seemingly presents Ernaux's physical appearance in a positive light in contrast to the rain outside, but at the same time, there are references to Ernaux's attempt to look younger:

³¹ Crom, Nathalie, op. cit.

³² Payot, op. cit.

despite the passing years, Payot implies, Ernaux is determined to maintain her youthful appearance. This particular discursive category, while not particularly personal, approaches the border between the public and the private.

Discursive Category 4: Literary Canon and Membership Privileges

In Chapter Three, I documented a tendency within the academic interpretive community to attempt to find a 'label' for Ernaux. I further drew upon Charpentier's argument that Ernaux's work has often been subject to weak literary comparisons, as critics, whom Charpentier likens to *lectores* (Bourdieu's term), seek to assign writing to pre-existing categories – or else to assign the writing to an already existing trend or movement. Within the press reception, such work has continued to abound. I argued above that both academic and media critics make frequent use of literary comparison between Ernaux's work and the canon of French authors, although, as Charpentier suggests in her study of the reception of *PS*, many of the comparisons are "confuses et embarrassés" (1994, p. 50). There is a tendency to gravitate toward the same literary comparisons in both circles, although the depth of analysis is not as significant in the case of the journalists. The most frequent comparison has been to Proust, as a number of critics refer to *LA* as an "entreprise proustienne."³³ Indeed, 6 of 34 reviews draw links between the text and Proust, often stating that the goal of the writing projects are similar – to make sense of the passage of time by re-constituting events through writing. One critic

³³ Rossignol, Véronique. "Mémoires d'une femme du siècle," *Livres Hébdô*, 25 January 2008.

goes so far as to echo a title of a Proust's novel by calling his article "Du côté de chez nous,"³⁴ a reference to *Du côté de chez Swann*.³⁵ Birnbaum³⁶ points out that the final pages of *LA* reflect the final pages of *Temps retrouvé*. Barbacci is a dissenting voice in these comparisons, insisting that beyond the opening pages of the work, the comparisons between Ernaux and Proust end. Instead, she asserts that "rien ne peut parvenir à définir adéquatement ce livre, qui ne manquera pas de fournir matière à réflexion aux universitaires de tout poil,"³⁷ no doubt a veiled jab toward what she imagines the plethora of academic essays that might well compare the two works.

Interestingly, one critic credits the success of *LA* in part to the critical reception that made such comparisons. Bloch-Dano writes that after the first printing of 25,000 copies of the text, the critical response played a significant role in the surge of interest: one month after the reviews appeared, 115,000 copies of the work had been sold:

Prudence, cependant: un premier tirage de 25 000 exemplaires, une mise en place de 15 000. Entrent alors en jeu les critiques. *Livres Hebdo* donne le ton. 'Une entreprise proustienne', une 'fascinante autobiographie à la troisième personne.' Très vite, la presse écrite orchestra ces premiers échos. Reprise de la référence à Proust. Déferlement d'adjectifs [...]³⁸

For this critic, the Proust references have played a significant role in this text becoming a bestseller, and yet these comparisons are superficial at best. Assessing Ernaux's writing by

³⁴ Jacob, Fabienne. "Du côté de chez nous," *Impact Médecine*, 28 February 2008.

³⁵ Other examples of critics' tendency to title their articles after well-known works include Bloch-Dano, Evelyne, "Les années retrouvées," *Le Magazine littéraire*, No. 475, May 2008 (after Proust); Vaquin, Agnès, "Une vie," *La quinzaine littéraire*, 16-31 March 2008 (undoubtedly after Maupassant); Lebrun, Jean-Claude, "Une histoire simple," *L'Humanité*, 7 February 2008 (after Flaubert).

³⁶ Birnbaum, Jean, op. cit.

³⁷ Barbacci, Christine, "La tête dans le sablier," *Rouge*, 6 March 2008.

³⁸ Blanche-Dano, Evelyne, "Les années retrouvées," *Le magazine littéraire*, No. 475, May 2008.

comparing her to Proust is not, as we have seen, a new exercise, yet in this case, the comparisons are partly credited for the success of Ernaux's work. Ernaux's work is also frequently compared, as it has been in academic circles, to Bourdieu and Beauvoir. Several critics point out the homage that Ernaux has paid to both authors and the influence that each has had upon her. Some critics³⁹ make the now seemingly unavoidable links with Beauvoir, underscoring the degree to which the iconic image is a signifier through whom Ernaux and her works are routinely constructed. The text is also compared to Maupassant's *Une vie* (which *LA* refers to on page 158), notably by a critic who gave her review the same title as Maupassant's work, and another critic points out that Ernaux is 'indebted' to Virginia Woolf for her title.⁴⁰

Discursive Category 5: Reading as a Construction of the Self

The final discursive category in the press reception of *LA* is the role of the reader/text relationship in readers shaping their own subjectivities. This discursive category is identical to Thomas' category identified in letters to the author (Thomas, 1999, p. 124) but operates here within the context of professional rather than 'lay' readings. Some critics are able to appropriate the text to suit their own cultural and intellectual history – though, as we have seen, such appropriation is at times constructed or circumvented along lines of gender. This critical appropriation of the text reflects a common current detected in readers' letters to the author in earlier works in that the critics at times feel as though Ernaux is telling their own story. In the case of critics, they often admit to having read the same works as Ernaux and

³⁹ Barbacci, Rossignol, Vaquin, op. cit.

⁴⁰ Amette, op. cit.

having witnessed or participated in the same political demonstrations rather than admit to similar personal experiences. In this light, as with academic critics, *LA* appears to enable journalists to reveal their personal connections to the work and removes the impression of journalistic objectivity.

As an example, Crom provides insight into her reading of *LA* in an interview with *Télérama*. Crom speaks in more personal terms in this interview, stating that even though she is several years younger than Ernaux, she is still able to find her 'place' in the work, as she had been able to do in previous works. Crom argues that Ernaux writes about herself:

pour mieux offrir aux autres le miroir où se voir, se reconnaître; se servir de sa subjectivité pour 'penser et sentir dans les autres' et finalement composer 'une autobiographie qui se confonde avec la vie du lecteur'⁴¹

In a passage that could easily act as a summary of Ernaux's *Pour un je transpersonnel* from fifteen years earlier, one can see a 'scholar-fan' identity emerging in the case of Crom, who is willing to transcend critical neutrality in order to write of the way in which she personally 'connects' to Ernaux's work, despite the apparent boundary of age. One can also find additional evidence of the manner in which Ernaux's own language used to describe her writing has been appropriated by her critics, as Crom's passage echoes Ernaux's article. In her analysis of *LA*, Crom implies that Ernaux's autobiographical work becomes merged with her own life, as it is implied that the *lecteur* to whom she refers is herself.

⁴¹ http://www.telerama.fr/livre/25249-les_annees.php?xtor=RSS-22

For other critical writers, the self-reflexive function that Ernaux performs can be traced to her use of literary references or a shared collective history. For instance, Delorme writes that "ses références à elle deviennent nos références à nous,"⁴² highlighting the wide period of time that the text covers and the number of relevant signifiers that Ernaux has committed to writing. The use of 'nous' here indicates a wider appropriation of the work that includes Delorme himself. Macé-Scaron writes that Ernaux successfully navigates the boundaries that separate autofiction and what he terms 'egofriction,' stating that Ernaux "parvient à raconter la vie d'une femme, à dire le monde et à les faire fusionner."⁴³ Even for the trained critic, then, there is a space in the text so as to allow a passage from the professional to the personal, in that the critic includes herself or himself in the group of people whose story is being told – as though Ernaux were writing in their place. This discursive category is one that is shared across the spectrum of 'lay' and critical readers and, as I suggested in Chapter Two, gives evidence of the manner in which Ernaux transcends a strictly critical reading and moves into a 'personal' reading. The significant difference between the critical and 'lay' reader settings, however, is that critics make reference to the strategies through which Ernaux allows the reader to appropriate the work, whereas in the case of 'lay' readers, as we shall later see, the appropriation is explained, as Miller (2002, p. 5) has suggested, by removing the degrees of separation between themselves and Ernaux.

⁴² Delorme, Marie-Laure, "Une femme dans son siècle," *Journal du dimanche*, 3 February 2008.

⁴³ Macé-Scaron, Joseph. "Le parfait du *subjectif*," *Marianne*, 16 February 2008.

III A Shared Space: Reader Constructions in New Media

In order to represent more fully Ernaux's discursive space, it is necessary to look at the 'lay' reader response to her recent writing. As I suggested in Chapter One, Pearce examines the role of emotion in the reading process in the advent of technology. When her book was written in the latter part of the twentieth century, the notion of 'text' was already undergoing considerable change. With the emergence of e-mail and online chat groups, Pearce acknowledges the extent to which individual readers look to construct subject positions within online texts (1997, p. 17) and their desire to have textual others respond to them. Gauntlett (2000, p. 2-4) further suggests that the rise of the Internet has also had an effect upon scholarship. Despite the developing and emerging areas of textual reception in the face of technology, however, the theoretical vocabulary with which this intertextual dynamic can be examined has yet to be invented (Gillespie, 2005, p. 45), though there is critical consensus that the influence of hypertext can be seen on the reading process, as reading has turned into more of a scan (Lardellier & Melot, 2007, p. 12). As a result, the reader plays a more constructive role, in that the reader may construct the text across the fragmented readings not only of the text itself but also of other, related texts.⁴⁴

For the reading subject, the interactive nature of the process may well dilute the source text or otherwise influence individual interpretations of works. While it has always been possible to access writing *about* a given text, it is easier than ever to do so now. 'Googling' Ernaux in

⁴⁴ Others fear that the reading process has been reduced even further from a 'scan.' For instance, the bestselling *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read* by Pierre Bayard (2007) provides evidence on how the importance of the source text itself has been reduced in the academy and in wider society.

August 2010, for instance, allowed me to access online versions of *CQDR* and *LP* in English; *bookrags.com* website that provides links to previews of scholarly articles as well as summaries of Ernaux's works – including student papers (for which the user can pay to have full access); *questia.com*'s links to a variety of critical articles and books on Ernaux; *thecompletereview.com*'s summary of quotations from journalists and links to critical essays; archived episodes of *Apostrophes* (including episodes on which Ernaux appeared in 1984 and 1988); as well as many of the web video interviews that I analyze in this chapter. As readers are able to access full texts with a few clicks, they are able to read simultaneously other texts written about the work in question, which can, of course, affect the reading process of the 'primary' text. Ernaux has been reluctant to embrace this new technology in her writing process, as she continues to write with pen and paper and participates relatively little in online forums: she has no official website and participated only reluctantly in an online chat in April 2008.⁴⁵ That said, it is interesting to note that one of her more recent texts is, in fact, a set of e-mail correspondence with Jeannet about writing, published as *L'ECUC*.

Recent research on the reading experience has also begun to explore the notion of the text as just one component of the reading experience. One of the most notable centres for research into the area is the University of Birmingham, which initiated the *Beyond the Book* project from 2005-2008. While the primary objective of research was to assess the phenomenon of 'mass reading events' and the extent to which they attract new readers, significant discussion emerged on the role that technology plays in the reading experience. Events such as Canada

⁴⁵ This comment was made at the Ernaux conference in May 2008.

Reads,' the Canadian equivalent of Richard and Judy's Book Club, make use of weblogs and Facebook to invite reader comments. Interpretive communities are thereby made textual and viral and construct their own texts that become objects for interpretation by researchers. To that end, the Beyond the Book project website has established a blog, in which participants and other interested parties can explore questions of common concern arising from the conference and its published or otherwise diffused research. In this venue, both researchers and 'lay' readers can post comments. Desmond Maley, an academic librarian, posted the following question on April 16, 2007 about the effects of new media on the reading process as a whole:

Speaking as an academic librarian, I am wondering about the state of reading in the online era. I am concerned that the culture of the Internet, with its emphasis on skimming and cut-and-paste, is undermining sustained, intensive reading of complex texts. These texts were/are conceived and published in book form - yet often are received/read in electronic form. Is something being 'lost in transition?' And are there corresponding impacts on the quality of writing?⁴⁶

This question is, perhaps, at the crux of the reading process in contemporary literary study. The cut-and-paste culture described here underscores the reduced importance of source texts themselves. For readers of Ernaux and other authors, their participation in this culture is a matter of their own horizon of experience and personal preferences with respect to the reading process. Younger readers of Ernaux's texts, however, may undoubtedly make use of this 'cut-and-paste' culture in constructing their own interpretations of text, given that Ernaux is regularly taught in the French school system. A case in point would be a posting on the Annie

⁴⁶ http://www.beyondthebookproject.org/content_list.asp?itemtype=blog§ion=000100010004

Ernaux Facebook wallboard⁴⁷ on 7 December 2008 from a user asking fellow group members to help her with a homework question (due the following day, no less) asking her to explain why Ernaux chose the title of *La place* for her work. Another high school student writes on 18 June, 2009 that "je lis annie ernaux ds le cadr de mes etudes et son styl me deçarcone un peu"⁴⁸ while another writes on 17 February 2010 and appeals for help with one of Ernaux's works : "est ce que quelquun peut m'aider et me dire quel est le but de la femme gelee."⁴⁹

This diminished role of the text in the reading process in favour of a combined media approach to reading is similar to the diminished role of the individual television program in the viewing experience, as Gillespie (2005, p. 229) suggests that the balance of power has been shifting between media producers and consumers with the emergence of digital and satellite programming that allow the viewer more control over the viewing experience. The advent of the VCR – and, more recently, 'on-demand' programming – means that viewers further shape their own viewing experience, as they can re-watch, pause, and switch programming at will.⁵⁰ In a similar light, readers can create 'on-demand' reading by doing Google searches while reading the text on Google books in order to search for key passages, reading about the work online, or corresponding with other readers in online communities. What Pearce was acutely aware of in the late twentieth century has taken on significant importance in literary analysis in the twenty-first century. Just as Kant's model of the book as an intellectual unit that acts as

⁴⁷ The url for Ernaux's Facebook group is <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/group.php?gid=8410799820>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Barthes underscores the illusion of a complete, 'word-for-word' reading when he writes, "a-t-on jamais lu Proust, Balzac, *Guerre et paix*, mot à mot? (Bonheur de Proust: d'une lecture à l'autre, on ne saute jamais les mêmes passages.)" (Barthes, 1973, p. 19-20)

the access point to the great author has been rendered obsolete, so has the emergence of hypertext and rapid access to information decreased the authority of the printed book itself as sole source of meaning – or, indeed, of the author and critic as privileged providers of meaning.

Despite the emergence of online discourse that constructs 'Ernaux,' Ernaux has published with Gallimard, one of the most prestigious and established publishing houses in France, since the beginning of her career. That said, recent works have been accompanied by increased online presence: Ernaux has, for instance, allowed some extracts of her writing to be published online rather than in printed form, as I outlined in Chapter Four. In addition, having participated in online chats, video interviews posted online, and filmed readings, Ernaux is only a click away for readers in various countries. Media interviews that were previously only available in France are now accessible online due to French television websites archiving interviews on their sites.⁵¹ Outside of these more controlled environments, however, there is an additional online presence, in the form of the online interpretive community, composed of such elements as a Facebook group, Wikipedia entry, and online author databases. While literature surrounding fan communities focuses on the manner in which academic discourse is used to study fan cultures objectively (Hills, 2002, p. 19), the emergence of internet texts has resulted in an 'interdisciplinary' collision of academic, literary, and fan discourse. This is not to suggest that the online setting in any way provides a 'unified' voice: indeed, Pullen argues (in Gauntlett, 2000, p. 60) that online fan communities may have begun to "mainstream fandom," but it is apparent that fans do not always interpret texts in similar manners.

⁵¹ As I mentioned earlier, many of Ernaux's interviews on *Apostrophes* have been archived online at ina.fr. Many of these interviews are from the 1980s.

Ethics

Because my study involves assessing comments written by human subjects who are not public figures, it is important that their privacy be considered and that ethics be taken into account. As ethics in internet research is a relatively new field, there are no universally accepted standards for ethical behavior in research involving human participation, including measures that should be taken to anonymize online text in order to protect the identity of respondents. Postings made online are, after all, in the public domain, and one chooses what one is willing to post online. The matter is further complicated by the fact that online participants in discussion groups generally come from a variety of countries, in which laws concerning privacy vary. Bruckman, a pioneer in research on internet communities and groups, expresses the novel idea that those who post online can be likened to amateur artists, and researchers must balance the need to protect anonymity with the need to acknowledge their creative work (Bruckman, 2002, p. 229). While in her study of reader letters sent to the author, Thomas systematically anonymized the names of letter writers and included only a first initial for the writer's name and further included the writer's age and profession, those letter writers composed their letters with only one ideal reader (Ernaux herself) in mind and had not chosen to have their letters displayed to a wider public. Within online forums, however, online writers compose their messages and texts knowing that what they write will be on display to the public. Writers are, therefore, responsible for what they write but may choose to anonymize themselves through the use of a pseudonym. In the case of my research, all of the comments that I have

used are publicly available and can be traceable by my reader at the appropriate website. The only site that requires authentication of any kind in order to gain access is the Facebook page, of which I am the creator,⁵² and that page has open access, meaning that any user who wishes to join may do so without approval of a group administrator.

Bruckman further recognizes that the researcher has a responsibility to distinguish between low-risk and high-risk text when using it for Internet research, which is an argument that she makes in drawing upon American law (Bruckman, 2006, p. 86): there is a significant difference, for instance, between researching a bereavement support group, in which users register, and an online fan page devoted to a celebrity. I want to suggest that the text that I have analyzed is low-risk in that respondents do not reveal personal information about themselves that is in any way compromising. In addition, the text is widely available to any user who wishes to track the website – or simply to ‘Google’ the author’s name – and, therefore, anonymizing respondents would seem futile. However, as Bruckman (2002, p. 226) suggests would be ethically responsible, I have posted on the Facebook site that I have written about the responses to Ernaux’s work contained on the website and will make my work available to anyone who would like to see it. As a final note, I have not corrected any spelling or grammatical errors in my transcription of online comments.

⁵² I created the Facebook page both because I was interested in how Ernaux is discursively constructed by her readers – but in my non-academic life, I am, in fact, a fan of Annie Ernaux and have disclosed my scholar-fan identity to my fellow group members. By virtue of this footnote, I have also disclosed it to my reader.

An Initial Exploration of Ernaux's Online Discursive Space

Ernaux's online discursive space is rapidly expanding, and no doubt that space will be the object of study for future Ernaux researchers. In addition to the Facebook group described above, any Facebook user who indicates in her or his profile that Annie Ernaux is an author that she or he 'likes' will automatically be linked to the Annie Ernaux fan page, which contains a bibliography, a set of external links (including one to the *Auteurs contemporains* website, and a direct link to Ernaux's Wikipedia page. There is space for relevant posts, but perhaps due to the fact that this page was only recently created, there are none as of the time of writing. As of the time of writing (June 2011), in the "Annie Ernaux Readers/Lecteurs" group, there are 379 members, and a variety of age groups, nationalities, and discourses permeates the site – as well as many wall postings. While several members of the group appear to be from France, there are a number of English-speaking members, as well. On the fan page, by comparison, there are 401 people who "like" the author. Because Facebook also functions as a venue where users can exchange information and make inquiries about other users' interests, such interaction has been evident within the Ernaux community. A thread discussing members' favorite Ernaux book, for instance, reveals that there is no clear winner: in six postings, *PS*, *LH*, *L'E*, *SP*, *LFG*, and *LP* are all mentioned, with *PS* winning two votes. Similarly, a thread inviting readers to post their favorite quotation from one of Ernaux's works reveals that readers' favorite quotes come from across the spectrum of Ernaux's works. In addition, Ernaux's recent text has been the subject of many blog postings, and readers who participate in online book

clubs, such as *goodreads.com* and *leblogdeslivres.com*,⁵³ as well as readers who post on sites that sell books, such as *amazon.fr* and *Fnac.com*⁵⁴ have helped construct Ernaux's discursive space. In the case of this last group, such readers may have an impact on a reader's decision whether to read a book or not.

Ernaux's online community also extends into the realm of academia. While a longstanding custom in academic circles has been to produce 'proceedings' from conferences, the ease with which events can be recorded and uploaded has meant that academic conferences are often recorded and posted online. An example of this emerging trend is a recent conference celebrating the career of Elizabeth Fallaize held at St. John's College, Oxford. Fallaize's 1993 publication, *French Women's Writing: Recent Fiction*, featured a section on Ernaux, and the March 2009 conference similarly devoted a portion of the day's events to discussion of *LA*. As part of this conference, the Contemporary Women's Writing in French (CWWF) Seminar, the group organizing the event, arranged for the conference to be recorded and stored by the Backdoor Broadcasting Company, a web-broadcasting company that has a specific section devoted to the web-casting of academic conferences.⁵⁵ Based in Oxford, the company provides services that allow conferences to be streamed live or to be recorded for future broadcasting. Those who listen to the broadcast are not only able to access readings of traditional literature papers but also to experience the immediate formation of an academic

⁵³ GoodReads: http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/3079197.Les_ann_es; Le Blog des Livres: <http://www.leblogdeslivres.com/post/2008/04/10/235-les-annes-annie-ernaux>

⁵⁴ Amazon: <http://www.amazon.fr/ann%C3%A9es-Annie-Ernaux/dp/207077922X>; Fnac: <http://livre.fnac.com/a2061060/Annie-Ernaux-Les-annees>

⁵⁵ <http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/archive/2009/03/contemporary-women's-writing-in-french/>

interpretive community, an activity which normally occurs behind closed doors within the academy. In addition to the recording of the brief papers given by Fell and Holmes at the beginning of the recording, readers can also listen to a half-hour discussion that follows this presentation. By making use of technology to capture these spontaneous exchanges between members of this particular interpretive community, this CWWF seminar mirrors Ernaux's writing project, which captures exchanges that would otherwise have been lost. In this light, there is also a demystification of the 'neutral' critical voice, as listeners are able to hear the less refined, extemporaneous nature of discussion among critics who might normally be able to hide behind peer-reviewed publications. In the recording, for instance, Fell, who has published at length on Ernaux, reveals that she sometimes identifies 'Ernaux' with her own mother, largely because her mother was born in the same year as Ernaux. Fell also, on two occasions, points out her self-consciousness of being surrounded by Ernaux specialists and specifically references Day and Thomas, who were seated directly in front of her as she spoke. In addition, as I referenced in Chapter Two, conference participants learned of Ernaux's direct involvement in the publication of Fallaize's 1993 text on contemporary French women's writing and her influence on its publication. Day and Thomas also reveal their own relationships with the author, as Day hints that Ernaux is currently working on a new writing project, and Thomas indicates Ernaux's recent frustration with the lack of translations of her work into English. Both revelations give evidence of the personal relationship between the critics and the author. In accessing this digital recording, the 'neutrality' of the academic voice is deconstructed, as academics often speak from a personal perspective, but such discourse is largely reserved for gatherings of fellow academics. Through the online form, it is available to all.

Thumerel's website (*libr-critique*) is also an online point of interaction for Ernaux critics.⁵⁶ The website contains a section entitled "Dossier Annie Ernaux" which, as mentioned in the second chapter, contains an article written by Hugueny-Léger, an excerpt from Ernaux's journal from 2005, an interview with Ernaux, an article by Isabelle Roussel that compares *L'UDLP* with Sophie Calle's *Quand il n'y a pas photo*, and a letter exchange between Bernard Desportes and Ernaux following the publication of *LA*. The website is designed as a hub for contemporary French literature criticism and frequently posts news items on contemporary French writers.⁵⁷ Ernaux figures prominently on the site, and this may be in part due to the fact that Thumerel also regularly promotes his publication on Ernaux (the proceedings of the 2003 conference). At the end of each article, there is the possibility for any visitor to the website to submit comments, yet there is little to no reaction to the website's contents, with the notable exception of "Hugueny," who comments at the end of Hugueny-Léger's article, "Bravo, bravo."

Online Reader Constructions of *LA*

Discursive Category 1: Judging the Person, Not the Text

Ironically, contrary to press response to *LA*, many of the comments on Facebook might be assigned to the discursive category of judging the person rather than the text. This

⁵⁶ <http://www.t-pas-net.com/libr-critique/?tag=annie-ernaux>

⁵⁷ The site owner has also recently set up a Twitter account where he posts news on contemporary French writers at www.twitter.com/librcritique/.

construction of 'Ernaux,' however, is based as much upon in-person encounters with the author as it is upon textual analysis. Such constructions usually portray the author in a positive light. Of the 25 wall postings, four detail meetings with the author, usually at a book signing. In describing these encounters, most posters reveal that they found the author to be charming and polite. Philippe Leuckx, for instance, writes on 26 October 2008 that "Je l'ai vue à la dernière Foire du livre de Bruxelles (2008) et je l'ai trouvée d'une noblesse! Un peu triste, sous les traits d'une très belle femme, qui est d'une modestie à toute épreuve. Une toute grande."⁵⁸ Along a similar line, Didier Millot, himself an author, writes of his first encounter with Ernaux in 2000 at a conference. This meeting, he writes on 11 April 2009, was a shock, but he was grateful that Ernaux was willing to contribute to his most recent work.⁵⁹ Another member of the Facebook community, Adeline Chouquet, writes on 22 January 2009:

Ah je l'ai rencontré et elle m'a signé mon livre, je suis bien contente :)

Elle est super douce et gentille et ses livres sont des chefs d'œuvres :)⁶⁰

The comment above emphasizes Ernaux's personal characteristics as warm and kind during her public appearances. 'Ernaux' is constructed here very much as an object of fandom, and readers are anxious to share their encounters with Ernaux. Other readers are keen to demonstrate their personal links to Ernaux, as in the instance of Eric, who posts to *leblogdeslivres.com* that Ernaux is his former French teacher,⁶¹ and he has followed her writing career with every new book. Personal contact with Ernaux is portrayed within this discursive category as a prize to be sought.

⁵⁸ http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=8410799820&v=app_2373072738#/group.php?gid=8410799820

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ <http://www.leblogdeslivres.com/?2008/04/10/235-les-annes-annie-ernaux>

Negative 'lay' reader comments construct Ernaux's collection of works as an interconnected whole and address their 'crude' nature, usually, as in the press reception, along lines of gender and class. The most thorough online textual space devoted to *LA* is the website of the *Nouvel Observateur*.⁶² The site contains the review originally printed in the 14 February 2008 print version of the publication as well as reader comments, links to reviews of Ernaux's other texts, and a link to a video interview with the author. The website encourages readers to respond to new works as they are reviewed, and the website also includes a link which allows readers to publish letters to their authors. The website also allows readers to respond to their professional critic's review of the work in question. In response to a largely positive professional review, 'lay' reviews do not always share the view. Of the six online responses on the *Nouvel Observateur* website, five are negative while only one is positive, with one anonymous reviewer writing that Ernaux "n'a pas grand chose à dire, et elle l'écrit aussi platement que nécessaire,"⁶³ while another writes "[r]édigeons la liste de nos courses et donnons l'amplitude de nos orgasmes....Un style trop épiciier pour moi."⁶⁴ As in Charpentier's study, Ernaux is here constructed along the lines of her social class of origin, as the reader suggests that Ernaux's style resembles that of a grocery shopping list. The implication is that Ernaux's writing is too provincial for this particular reader. Both reviewers appear to accuse Ernaux of writing uninteresting and uninspiring texts, even bordering on the objectionable, and her work is dismissed as beneath them owing to an unrefined writing style. Along a similar line, another writer on the same site writes, "Il me semble pourtant que cette dame fait preuve

⁶² <http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/20080215/3266/les-annees-dannie>

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

de beaucoup de crudité dans certains de ses livres....," underscoring the gendered construct that is often used in the case of Ernaux, using the term *cette dame* rather than *cet auteur* or *cette écrivaine*. One reader, sybilline, posts on 13 July 2008 that "Cette auteur peut aussi bien être détestable et glaciale qu'amical et chaleureuse, alors to read or not to read?"⁶⁵ This (potential) reader suggests that the author's personal qualities play a role in determining whether she or he will read her work.

Some readerly response constructs 'Ernaux' as continuously writing about herself and re-telling the same stories. At *paperblog.fr*, a website that allows users to set up their own blog on topics related to literature, music, culture, politics, and sports, Lise Marie Jaillant writes on 18 February 2008 that:

C'est vrai qu'on peut reprocher à Ernaux de ne pas être une vraie romancière. Ses bouquins tournent toujours autour de sa propre vie: son enfance en province, dans une famille d'épiciers; la volonté d'ascension sociale et la honte de son milieu d'origine.⁶⁶

In this comment, Ernaux is dismissed as not a "real" writer – but in this circumstance, the rejection is not due to her class origins but instead because this background is the only topic about which Ernaux, according to Jaillant, writes. As a result, Ernaux cannot be considered the author of novels, a prestigious literary genre that Ernaux has nearly consistently rejected. Such a comment, of course, ignores Ernaux's work from 2000 onward, upon which this thesis is focused. Charges of self-absorption are all but absent from critical writing on the work – perhaps due to the current overabundance of first-person writing in contemporary French

⁶⁵ <http://alombreducerisier.over-blog.org/article-17556167-6.html>

⁶⁶ <http://www.paperblog.fr/473277/annie-ernaux-les-annees/>. This user also writes this comment on her blog at <http://wrath.typepad.com/wrath/2008/02/annie-ernaux-le.html>.

literature that would make such a criticism appear redundant. Indeed, Delphine comments that Ernaux "[...] dit peu d'elle même, à part à travers certains évènements de sa vie. Elle dit peu sur son ressenti face à ces évènements parfois forcément très douloureux."⁶⁷

Discursive Category 2: Defending and Deferring to Ernaux

As with professional critics, the majority of online lay readers respond positively to *LA*. Interestingly, in the case of the lay readers, there is an acknowledgement of the negative perceptions that some have toward Ernaux, and they are quick to come to the defense of the author based on the merits of her work. The most recurrent trend in lay reader online response toward professional reviews is through engagement with the critical discourse surrounding her work. A reader on the *Télérama* website who adopts the identity "jemlire" writes on 14 September 2008 that Ernaux's text is "UN grand livre! Je comprends qu'on n'aime pas Annie Ernaux mais c'est un tort," insisting that those who do not enjoy Ernaux's work are, quite simply, wrong for not doing so. Along a similar line, a reader on the same site, "jef49," appears surprised at how much he enjoyed the book, writing that "Ce goût de l'autofiction, dans ce livre est moins fatigant qu'attendu." In some cases, there is strong resistance toward this critical discourse. In one instance, a lay reader response rejects the critical practice of genre classification to which Ernaux and other authors are subjugated. Marc Audet writes the following on 31 July 2008 in response to a review on the Canadian *Voir* site:

Ceux qui liront les *Années*, ce beau roman d'Annie Ernaux, constateront vite à quel point les écrivains échappent aux catégories inventées par des critiques pour tenter de les

⁶⁷ <http://delphinesbooks.blogspot.com/2010/07/les-annees-annie-ernaux.html>

situer les uns par rapport aux autres. Car avec ce récit romancé, ce n'est pas le Je de l'autofiction qui prend toute la place, mais un moi qui est une synthèse, ou tout au moins le produit synchrone de la durée extérieure historique et sociale et de celle plus intime du je.⁶⁸

In this passage, the reader rejects the critical tendency to categorize authors within particular genres, a phenomenon that we have already seen is prominent in Ernaux's case. Instead, the reader employs language that echoes Ernaux's own statements about her project.

Other readers who come to Ernaux's defense tend to do so in a more personal manner. This discursive category incorporates many similar features to Thomas' second category, that of "Reading as a Construction of Self" (Thomas, 1999, p. 124). Thomas argues that in writing to Ernaux, some readers construct themselves as subjects of a creative process. Readers describe the circumstances in which they read Ernaux's work, often indicating the conflicting texts with which they engage during their reading. Letter writers in this discursive category write of their emotional identification with Ernaux's works, and while the readers' circumstances are not identical to Ernaux's, the common links allow an emotional engagement. For Charpentier, readers construct 'Ernaux' largely from the perspective of her social trajectory, as Ernaux comes to represent her readers' stories as well as her own. Furthermore, in her study of the *réceptions croisées* of *PS*, Charpentier argues that the popular class from which Ernaux originates is the "thématique privilégiée" of Ernaux's work and further points out that much of the early critical interest from academics was from psychologists and sociologists (Charpentier, 1994, p. 70-1). Similarly, Day has suggested:

⁶⁸ <http://www.voir.ca/publishing/article.aspx?zone=1§ion=10&article=59068>

Ernaux explores her own lived experience as a means to illuminate the social and historical reality which contains and creates a story that is not hers alone, because it is shared by many others whose social trajectory has alienated them from their class of origin, and/or who have experienced an intense passion such as those she evokes in later texts. (Day, 2007, p. 17)

The result is that while readers ostensibly defend Ernaux and her works, it is their own construction of 'Ernaux' that they defend. Some readers respond as others have done in their letters to the author – by stating that Ernaux's text tells their own story, and the reading is a construction of the self. Picksy writes on 26 March 2008 that "Je suis de 1953 et j'ai vu défiler MA vie...[...] Son livre est quand même autobiographique comme les 'autres' de ses livres (je les ai tous lu)." The trend is also apparent among readers who are of a different age group. Tisotte writes on the *bibliosurf* website⁶⁹ that even though she or he is of a different age than Ernaux, there is still a sense that the text is telling the story of the reader. Claire, for instance, writes on 6 May 2008 that, like Crom, "Même si j'ai quelques années de moins qu'Annie Ernaux, je me suis retrouvée dans cette histoire de femme."⁷⁰ Similarly, on her *Belles plumes* blog, Daniele' writes "Ce récit fait de nous les découvreurs d'un monde qu'on a connu comme elle, jour après jour, mais presque oublié. C'est derrière nous. Mais c'est en nous."⁷¹

Yet other readers who come to Ernaux's defense do so in a somewhat ironic way, as they invoke some of the same techniques of the professional critics in their own commentaries. An anonymous reader on the *Nouvel Observateur* site writes:

⁶⁹ <http://www.bibliosurf.com/Les-annees>.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ <http://bellesplumes.blogs.courrierinternational.com/archive/2008/02/29/annie-ernaux-les-annees-les-annies.html>

visiblement ceux qui ont laissé un commentaire n'ont pas lu "les années". ce récit - chronique d'une vie est dans la lignée d'"un cœur simple" de Flaubert. c'est le récit d'une vie obscure. "cela n'est nullement ironique, mais au contraire très sérieux et très triste." (lettre de flaubert du 19 juin 1876 à edma roger des genettes. ce qu'ilo dit de son etxte s'applique à annie ernaux. [...] bien, enfin, grace à Ernaux un coin du voile est levé et la verité d'une âme apparait.. toute "l'écrabouillerie" d'une vie sauvée par la justesse du constat.⁷²

This writer comes to the defense of the author by accusing those readers and critics who dismiss Ernaux's texts on the site of simply not having read the text. In making the comparison between *LA* and Flaubert's *Un cœur simple*, this reader demonstrates her or his own literary capital, much like critics. This reader further implies that Ernaux's work is somehow beyond the grasp of those who have rejected it.

It is interesting to note the role of gender in the construction of both 'Ernaux' and her work within the Facebook community. While male journalists had more difficulty adopting a subject position, for male 'lay' readers, it has been easier to appropriate the work. In some cases, readers describe their surprise at that ease. An example of this tendency is a post by Jean-Claude Wydou, who writes on 10 April 2009 that "Je lis actuellement 'Les Années', je m'y retrouve complètement. En garçon... et j'aime ça. C'est simple, c'est vrai, c'est clair, c'est intime et tellement général..."⁷³ For this reader, the appropriation of the text transcends issues of gender, which appears to be of surprise to this particular community member. Along a similar line, Le Général Midi writes on 3 April 2009 that "Ce qui est étrange, c'est d'arriver à de l'universel avec une culture aussi Yvetotaise... Quand je pense que j'aurais pu la découvrir dès

⁷² <http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/20080215/3266/les-annees-dannie>

⁷³ http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=8410799820&v=app_2373072738#!/group.php?gid=8410799820

1986 lors de son passage dans mon lycée..."⁷⁴ This reaction indicates that despite geographic difference from one region to the other, this (presumably male) reader is also able to find his own story within Ernaux's work. Her writing is here discursively constructed as *transféminin*, to use Fort's term: while the text may be written from a female perspective, the story may also be appropriated by or for a male reader, just as the personal nature of Ernaux's works is *transpersonnel* in that it can be appropriated into the story of others (Fort, 2007, p. 22). This type of commentary would undoubtedly be reassuring to readers such as "Karine :)" who writes on 31 May 2009 that "Je n'arrive pas à être vraiment tentée par ce livre parce que j'ai peur de me sentir complètement larguée avec l'histoire et les références par rapport à la France... tu penses que je m'y retrouverais quand même?"⁷⁵

Some readers are resentful of the perceived lack of stature that has been accorded to the author. 'Anna Rozen,' for instance, writes on 4 November 2008 that "Les Années, chef d'oeuvre dont je déplore qu'il ne figure sur aucune liste de prix cette année ...," while 'Yvonne de la Monneraye' writes on 11 December 2008 "Merci Annie d'être Le grand auteur contemporain," once again combining deference to the author with a personal connection through use of the first name – a trend that is reinforced by a Facebook discussion topic entitled "Toujours Annie E.," in which readers are invited to post their favourite quotations from Ernaux's writing. Referring to Ernaux by her first name is seemingly not done owing to a

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ [http://oceanicus-in-folio.fr/lire/index.php?post/2009/05/31/Les-ann%C3%A9es-\(Annie-Ernaux\)](http://oceanicus-in-folio.fr/lire/index.php?post/2009/05/31/Les-ann%C3%A9es-(Annie-Ernaux)). With respect to this particular concern, Canadian critic Danielle Laurin writes that "[a]u passage, nous, lecteurs non français, nous serons un peu perdus dans le tourbillon de références franco-françaises, soit les marques de produits, émissions de télé, politique interne... Mais la démarche d'Annie Ernaux est on ne peut plus universelle" (<http://www.radio-canada.ca/arts-spectacles/livres/2008/04/03/001-annie-ernaux-critique.asp>).

lack of respect or with a view to dismissing the author: readers demonstrate an affinity toward the author as a person owing to the similarities in their own stories and those told by Ernaux. For Katerina Spiropoulou, Ernaux has reinvented a genre. Spiropoulou writes on her blog that "*Les Années*, en somme, c'est une manière de réinventer l'autobiographie, sans avoir l'air d'y toucher. Il faut espérer que ce petit ouvrage s'offrira comme ouverture afin de revisiter le genre et ses paradigmes."⁷⁶

Other readers defer to the author as the only possible source of meaning of her works. This line of discourse suggests that only Ernaux can elucidate the meaning of her works. For example, the reader "jib93" responds to other negative comments on Ernaux's work by suggesting that those readers should listen to what Ernaux has to say about her own work by watching her on television or listening to her on the radio: "Un conseil, écoutez-la parler de son travail [...] si vous n'arrivez pas à la lire, et donc à la comprendre." In this statement, 'jib93' implies that Ernaux is able to provide the meaning of her work to those readers who are unable to understand their meaning, thereby suggesting that there is an ideal reader who is actualized by the text. "Jib93" is evidently a devoted Ernaux reader who follows Ernaux's media appearances. In this light, it might be argued that like the critics who appropriate Ernaux's terminology when discussing and analyzing literature, Ernaux is able, to some extent, to play a role in the response to her works to the extent that some loyal readers perpetuate Ernaux's own interpretations of her work.

⁷⁶ <http://mondesfrancophones.com/espaces/frances/les-annees-par-annie-ernaux/>

Discursive Category 3: Seeking the Author, Seeking Her Construct

Thomas argues that many letters to the author that she read gave evidence that many readers seek the author for a personal relationship, and she entitles this discursive category “Desperately Seeking the Author” (Thomas, 1999, p. 114-123; 2005, p.183-200). Many of these readers, to varying degrees, imagine a relationship with the author through language and within their own social contexts: most readers identify with the author and give their age and profession, and they remove the degrees of separation between themselves and Ernaux by telling their own stories. In some other cases, Thomas argues that readers behave in a “groupie” manner, in that they follow Ernaux’s appearances and often write seemingly to support Ernaux when she is on the receiving end of bad press. The manner in which the author is addressed often reveals the degree to which the reader feels comfortable in writing the letter and appropriating the text (the use of *tu* instead of *vous*, for instance, as in Tondeur’s use of *tu* (1995b, p. 37), indicates a greater level of comfort in addressing the reader), and the degree to which letters are personalized to the author range from deferential to Ernaux’s stature to highly personal. Similarly, in the online response, many readers seek a connection with the author, and many express their desire to meet Ernaux in person. One reader who identifies herself as the same age as Ernaux, “Janine MEUNIER,” identifies not only with the images evoked but also with ‘Ernaux.’ In commenting on how much she enjoyed the work on 29 March 2008, the reader adds some suggestions that Ernaux might have also included in her description of the family meal in the 1950s. Such is the enjoyment that she writes, “Ce serait un bonheur pour moi si Annie Ernaux lisait ce message et me renvoyait un petit mail ! merci,

Janine."⁷⁷ This reader evidently feels a personal connection to the author in addition to the text itself to the point where she wishes for the relationship to transcend a reader/textual dynamic into an authentic relationship with the author, as has been the case with Vilain and Marie in Ernaux's recent works. Similarly, Daniel Gruat writes on Facebook on 15 August 2010, "Bonsoir Madame ! J'ai lu hier votre livre, ...Invraisemblable...Je souhaite, Absolument vous écrire, comment, où, à quelle adresse,...puis-je le faire ?? merci de répondre, même si c'est très tardivement ..."⁷⁸ In Atwood's words, these readers seek the duck rather than the paté.

While some readers address the author in a personal way, it is not always in as flattering a manner as the readers above. For another reader writing in response to *LA*, "Dominique" writes on 31 March 2008 that while the book is easy to read, this is so only to a point: "Tout au moins jusqu'aux années 70 : là, elle a raté un coche dans sa vie. On sent une mélancolie, quelque chose qui ne s'est pas passé, un certain ennui qui s'installe dans la vie d'Annie Ernaux ; et du coup, la description devient plus pâle, on ne 'rentre' plus dans son histoire."⁷⁹ "Dominique" makes a speculation about a private, undocumented occurrence in the private life of the writer, thereby judging the (construct of the) person rather than her text. The change in tone is explained from a personal standpoint rather than from an artistic one, and this writer states that the perceived change makes him unable to appropriate the work or enter into a relationship with its language. The points at which there is a divergence between Ernaux's story and their own are often brought forward in reader response, such as "Tisotte":

⁷⁷ <http://www.bibliosurf.com/Les-annees>

⁷⁸ http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=8410799820&v=app_2373072738#!/?ref=home

⁷⁹ <http://www.bibliosurf.com/Les-annees>

je trouve que l'on rentre dans ce livre de bout en bout. Il y a bien sûr un changement de rythme à partir des années 80. L'auteur y est plus mélancolique, mais moi j'ai le sentiment qu'elle "comprend" moins ces années, cette période, qu'elle s'en détache plus parce que tout va plus vite, tout s'accélère.⁸⁰

This comment is perhaps ironic given the venue in which it has been made. The reader is, in fact, underscoring an important subtext concerning technology and immediacy put forward in the book, as discussed in the previous chapter.

In the online response to Ernaux's work, there are also a number of current or aspiring authors who seek to establish connections with her writing. Such links reflect both admiration for Ernaux's work or, perhaps more cynically, an attempt to entice Ernaux readers to try their own work. One aspiring author, Noemie Hyde, writes on 12 February 2009 not only of her meeting Ernaux but also of her desire to construct a relationship with her:

j'ai rencontré Annie, il y a quelques années à Caen, lors des Boréales, elle m'avait dédicacée son livre que j'adore et qui correspond bien à mon tempérament "Passion Simple", j'écris moi-même des poèmes dans le même genre (un peu "cru" par moment), mais je ne trouve pas d'éditeur, je ne sais qui serait intéressé... comme Annie j'adore écrire à une terrasse de café, regarder les personnes, délecter ma cigarette et rêver en regardant la fumée s'échapper... ailleurs. J'aimerais trop, un jour, boire un petit café avec Annie, toutes les deux, nous raconter nos "passions simples" passées ou présentes, du côté de Cabourg (proche de chez moi), où les écrivains aimaient contempler la Mer et ses secrets... Quelle Femme ! Elle m'appelle quand elle veut !⁸¹

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ <http://www.facebook.com/?sk=2361831622#!/group.php?gid=8410799820>. Another blogger, 'Martine,' who evidently lives in Cergy, writes of her excitement of having Ernaux sign her book. She includes the photo of Ernaux doing so at <http://www.cergyrama.com/article-17663545.html>.

In her construction, Noemie Hyde includes characteristics of Ernaux that are inaccurate:

Ernaux's interventions on her writing process will reveal, for instance, that she does not write in public (in fact, she must work in silence – and only at home in her study), she does not smoke, and despite the nature of her texts, she is a relatively private person.⁸² The imagined encounter with Ernaux in this instance might be said to reflect a desire to be recognized by a major author in whose writing this group member sees fragments of her work or to seek out potential readers (or a publisher). In the above passage, Ernaux is once again referred to by her first name, which is a common tendency among Facebook posters (one Facebook poster, Helga Walop, writes "Joyeux anniversaire, Annie!" on 1 September 2008). For many readers who post on Facebook, Ernaux is like a friend to them, such as Françoise Bright, who writes on 2 January 2010:

Annie Ernaux c'est l'amie que l'on aurait aimé avoir ...comme elle a du coeur elle a préféré raconter pour nous émouvoir, nous aider à mieux nous comprendre....
Pour ne pas la déranger, il suffit d'ouvrir un livre, de reprendre une histoire, une explication, une penséeil ne manque que la tasse de thé à partager!!!⁸³

For this reader, Ernaux is constructed as a friend, and her comments, like those of Noemie Hyde, relate to Ernaux the person as she imagines her to be. Yet there is a recognition in Françoise's comments that this relationship cannot become a real-life relationship. Instead, the relationship is to be constructed during a reading event in an engagement with her work.

⁸² For instance, in an interview for *Lire* following the publication of *L'UDLP*, Ernaux is asked to describe the last time she cried. Her response was to say that "Cela ne regarde personne" ("Questionnaire de Proust," *Lire* 1 May 2006. Available at http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/questionnaire-de-proust-annie-ernaux_811221.html).

⁸³ <http://www.facebook.com/?sk=2361831622#!/group.php?gid=8410799820>

There is also overlap between the discourse of fans and that of other writers who comment, more informally, on Ernaux's project and, in other cases, "ride the coattails" of the author and attempt to promote their own projects. Jeannet, for instance, writes informally "Annie Ernaux forever" on 18 February 2010, inscribing his discourse within the domain of a fan more than a critic, while Alain Dion, a well-known actor and artist in France, makes multiple postings: he writes on 13 February 2010 that he had, as a part of the jury to select the "meilleur roman" for France Television, argued for LA but had been unsuccessful – "...mais j'ai pu rencontrer Annie," he explains, and further promotes his own concerts in March 2010 that will allow fans to discover "mes années à moi." Helga Walop also takes advantage of the Facebook site to promote her own project, writing:

My second novel *Vluchtplaats* (Refuge), published by Dutch Publishing House De Arbeiderspers talks about my childhood in the Dutch calvinist province and my friendship and correspondence with Annie Ernaux since 2004, the year my father died.

You can look for the book on my website.

Such discourse underscores the degree to which Ernaux has, in fact, become a mainstream author: other writers hope to attract Ernaux readers by posting their own promotional material on a site that is primarily populated by Ernaux's own readers, implying that their texts are kindred spirits, or part of a common discursive space.

Discursive Category 4: Ernaux's Work as Bildungsroman

Ernaux's presence on the English Wikipedia site is limited to a rather short entry created on 26 January 2006 which has been revised 44 times by 32 different users. The article contains no referenced material and is limited mainly to autobiographical details focused on Ernaux's childhood upbringing and the autobiographical nature of her texts. There is a brief description of the central element of each work, with a longer passage devoted to *LA* which is, according to the Wikipedia article, considered Ernaux's "magnum opus." The article links to a dated⁸⁴ set of lecture notes written by an academic, Tony MacNeill of the University of Sunderland, focusing mainly on *LP* but also on Ernaux's wider project as a writer.⁸⁵ Ernaux's Wikipedia entry has been given the dubious distinction of "stub-class," meaning that it is too short to be considered a full-fledged entry by the WikiProject Biography - despite the best efforts of WikiProject France, "a collaborative effort to improve the coverage of France on Wikipedia."⁸⁶ The French entry on Ernaux, created 29 April, 2005, has been edited 100 times by approximately 65 different users. There is, once again, a substantial amount of autobiographical information, to the extent that the language almost appears to have come from one of Ernaux's works:

Contrairement à ses parents, Annie Ernaux allait régulièrement à l'école et apprenait bien. Elle a fait ses études à l'université de Rouen. Les parents de Annie Ernaux décident d'inscrire leur fille dans une école privée pour qu'elle puisse suivre des études. Annie Ernaux se rend très vite compte de la différence sociale entre l'école et sa

⁸⁴ The website indicates that the last revision was in 1996, although the 'Selected Readings' contains works that were published in 1999.

⁸⁵ <http://seacoast.sunderland.ac.uk/~osotmc/contem/er1.htm>

⁸⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Annie_Ernaux

famille.⁸⁷

The above passage from Wikipedia emphasizes Ernaux's social trajectory but frames it as a *bildungsroman* narrative that plays out in her texts. Similarly, *The Complete Review*⁸⁸, a website designed to give succinct summaries of authors and their work, declares that Ernaux's books are "powerful little reads" and that there is "no great embellishment. In style and form she sticks to basics – and still manages to achieve a certain poetry." For the *Complete Review*, as well, Ernaux's works are presented as an ongoing process, in which writing represents not only her 'growth' but also the manner in which she achieves coherence in her own life: "[s]imilar territory is revisited and re-examined from book to book as she tries to come to terms with her childhood, her parents, her love affairs" yet "still [...] manages to create something new each time."⁸⁹ The strength of Ernaux's works lies in her ongoing quest to write her life, and the success of the work is due to the manner in which the style is simple, as Ernaux is "human and believable." Interestingly, on Wikipedia, Ernaux's genre is listed as *auto-socio-biographie*, thereby indicating that Ernaux's own terminology has been appropriated within Wiki-space and listed alongside more traditionally accepted genres. The Wikipedia article also links to the *auteurs contemporains*⁹⁰ website, which contains a repository of links to articles and dissertations written on Ernaux's work. The list of critical articles and links to interviews is far from exhaustive, but for a reader looking to read what critics have to say about the author (or for the student on Facebook looking for some critical insight into the works), the website is a good starting point. Thus, for both Wikipedia and *The Complete Review*, Ernaux's works are

⁸⁷ http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annie_Ernaux. Other websites also use Wikipedia as a link for users to find more information about Ernaux, including Babelio, at <http://www.encre-vagabondes.com/rencontre/ernaux.htm>.

⁸⁸ <http://www.complete-review.com/authors/ernauxa.htm>

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ <http://auteurs.contemporain.info/annie-ernaux/>

described much in the same light as the critical work, as examined in Chapter Three, in which Ernaux's writing constitutes a form of therapy for the writer.

Discursive Category 5: Ernaux by Keyword

Library Thing is a website created in 2006 that allows book readers to network with each other. Users register with the system and create a list of books that they own. Users are then matched with other readers who have similar collections. Each book mentioned, in turn, has its own sub-site, in which comments on works are grouped together. Ernaux's entire collection of texts has been listed on the website⁹¹ – often in French, English, and German - although there are generally only one or two reviews per text. There are approximately a dozen regular contributors to reviews of the various works, and the reviews tend to be fairly superficial in nature. The most popularly reviewed work is *PS*, which some members write is a "pleasure-induced reading." Other works link to reviews written in languages other than English and French, including several with links to *boktips.net*, a German book review site. While most reviews tend to be fairly general in nature, there are occasionally more detailed reviews that contain references to how Ernaux is perceived within the academy. Writing about *LP*, for instance, "jon1lambert," who has reviewed the majority of Ernaux's books on the site, writes on 12 October 2008 that "Years ago I asked Mike Wetherill who was a professor of French at Manchester who was the best living author in France. He mentioned Annie Ernaux as up

⁹¹ <http://www.librarything.com/author/ernauxannie>

there."⁹² With respect to *LA*, 31 members have added the book to their collections and have given the text an average rating of 4.5 out of 5. While there are no specific comments on the text, the website permits conversations among members. Interestingly, each author is given a number of tag words that are associated with her or his writing. In Ernaux's case, the standard tags of "autobiography," "French," and "contemporary literature" are applied, but there are also more provocative words such as "affair," "sex," and "relationships" in addition to labels such as "feminism," "roman," and "fiction" that do not necessarily apply to some or any of the body of work. Users searching for a contemporary French writer who produces writing on "sex" or "affairs" might well end up being recommended some of Ernaux's work. Readers looking for writers of fiction are also likely to encounter search results that include Ernaux. It would appear that one potential consequence of Ernaux's wish to maintain as wide a readership as possible has meant that in an age of keyword searches, she fits into a broad range of categories – some of which she may not herself have chosen. Readers who discover Ernaux through such a search may, as a result, read her work at least in part within the context of their initial search terms.

IV Ernaux's Presence in the Online Constructions of *LA*

Thomas' work on Ernaux (1999, p. 156-161; 2005, p. 258-267) has presented media analyses of Ernaux's presence on television shows, in newspapers, and on the radio. Many of these appearances have taken place in France and, as a result, have largely been limited to readers in

⁹² <http://www.librarything.com/work/258182/reviews>

that country. As a result, readers of Ernaux's texts outside of France often do not have first-hand access to these media texts. With contemporary technology, it is now possible for more widespread dissimulation of these media appearances. In assessing Ernaux's online presence in media, I shall examine online texts and media that are available to any Ernaux reader having access to a computer. As an Ernaux reader in Canada, the capacity to access French newspapers has become easier due to the increasing online presence of web versions of newspapers and magazines, and YouTube has made it possible for French television programming to be posted to a wider audience. From February 2008 until August 2009, I tracked Ernaux media appearances related to *LA* available online with a view to examining how the media discourse relates to and departs from that of printed in both professional and 'lay' responses.

Discursive Category 1: Literary Canon and Membership Privileges

As I argued earlier, what is striking about the reception of *LA* is the degree to which Ernaux has attained the status of a highly respected veteran writer of French literature. In his commentary on the work, Jean Mauduit, a seasoned veteran of literary criticism, refers to Ernaux as "un écrivain très confirmé,"⁹³ insisting on the use of the masculine form of 'écrivain' specifically because he believes her to be a major writer in comparison to other established writers both male and female. As a result of this status, Ernaux is largely given ample time and space to provide her own interpretation of her works, unchallenged for the most part by her

⁹³ <http://www.canalacademie.com/Les-Annees-d-Annie-Ernaux.html>

interviewers during her media appearances. This is in stark contrast to the manner in which Ernaux has been documented as being treated in her media appearances following the publication of earlier works, in which questioning of a personal or critical nature was not at all uncommon. In her press reception study, Thomas investigated the manner in which Ernaux conducts herself on television panels in which literature is discussed (1999, p. 156-61): Ernaux is sometimes combative, sometimes defines the terms of the debate when possible, and often uses her own knowledge of literature and literary theory to her advantage. I want to suggest further that having now written a significant body of work, Ernaux is able to play the dominant role in her media appearances and largely control her interviews. Ernaux is also able to command the line of questioning by inserting embedded comments and references in her remarks. Ernaux's stature as a writer has allowed her the freedom to express her ideas on her writing, often unchallenged by the media critics, who often appear as though they are in the presence of a star.

An example of Ernaux's current stature as a writer can be found in a video interview with the *Nouvel Observateur's* online series "Actualité littéraire,"⁹⁴ an interview which has been viewed 2751 times as of this time of writing. A visibly impressed Grégoire Leménager introduces Ernaux as:

un des rares auteurs dont l'œuvre rassemble et constitue à la fois un vaste groupe de lecteurs, et les plus exigeants jusqu'aux universitaires de la littérature contemporaine qui [...] la considèrent comme l'un des écrivains majeurs de notre temps.

Much of the interview is ceded to Ernaux, who is able to describe *LA* in her own terms with

⁹⁴ <http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/20080222/3454/en-video-annie-ernaux-ou-sont-passees-nos-esperances>

little interjection or questioning from the interviewer, other than to pose a new question to which Ernaux provides a complete response outlining the terms of her own writing. In precise terms, then, Ernaux is able to say what her book is and what it is not. At the beginning of the interview, in answering a question about how this work relates to and exceeds (*dépasse*) her previous texts, Ernaux explains that *LA* is longer, whereas her previous works were generally shorter and dealt with specific people, subjects, or stories ("de petits textes," Ernaux explains). Without prompting, Ernaux further explains that in *LA*, she wanted to revisit "toutes les années vécues" - but not just revisit her own years but also those of others. Ernaux then explains the adoption of the use of 'elle' and confirms that it is self-referential but can be appropriated by many readers.⁹⁵ Thus, within the first two minutes of the interview, Ernaux is able to explain her motivation for writing her text, its interpretation, and furthermore to set the terms for the discussion to follow. In presenting her own analysis of her writing, Ernaux draws upon contemporary philosophy in addition to her own previous works. Further in the interview, in discussing the political atmosphere surrounding the end of her writing period, Ernaux invokes the structure of classical tragedy to explain Sarkozy's inevitable rise to power, thereby further giving evidence of her own literary capital. The interviewer, in turn, does not question Ernaux on her references or analysis of her own work other than to ask follow-up questions. Clearly, Ernaux's status as a major writer has provided her with a platform from which to communicate her ideas not only about her work but also about politics, philosophy, and writing in general.

⁹⁵ In an interview for France2, Ernaux corrects the interviewer (Monique Atlan) when she states that Ernaux moves from *je* to *elle* in *LA*: in fact, the entire text makes use of the pronouns *elle*, *nous*, and *on* (<http://ma-tvideo.france2.fr/video/iLyROaftCXq.html>).

Discursive Category 2: The All-Knowing and Shape Shifting Author

I want to suggest that in Ernaux's recent interventions in the media, she has recently become more preoccupied with authorial intent than with reader interpretation. While Ernaux's attitude toward the reception of her work has been to accept appropriation of her texts in all its guises, her reaction to specific interpretations in the media is not as all-embracing. In her interview on the *Nouvel Observateur* website, Ernaux further reacts strongly when she is not in agreement with the premise of a question. When Lemenager raises the familiar question to Ernaux about whether her writing could be considered a "leçon d'autofiction," a commentary that he had heard made about Ernaux on the radio, Ernaux's response is to reject the accusation outright, stating that there is "jamais une once de fiction dans mes livres," which is, as I outlined in Chapter Two, in contradiction to statements that Ernaux has previously made about her work. Having rejected the question of autofiction, undoubtedly for the umpteenth time, Ernaux then further defines her writing as "de la recherche de la réalité, de la vérité, et ça c'est très important, parce que c'est le projet qui est dans un livre qui est important." In this response, Ernaux not only defines the terms of her writing but further outlines that authorial intent, or what she would term the *projet*, is most important in the work. Similarly, the author rejects the notion that her texts constitute a form of nostalgia, and in her interviews with *Nouvel Observateur*, France 2,⁹⁶ and Gallimard, Ernaux responds "pas du tout" in all three cases in responding to this question. What is most significant here is not the rejection of labels or genres but rather the redefinition of the writing project and Ernaux's insistence upon it. This

⁹⁶ <http://ma-tvideo.france2.fr/video/iLyROoafCXq.html>

subsequent privileging of authorial intent stands in contrast to Ernaux's written statements, especially those found in *L'ECUC* and *Vers un je transpersonnel* that it is readers' interpretations of texts that is most important, and that upon publication, the text is no longer that of an author but that of the reader to be appropriated at will. It might well be argued, then, that critically trained readers conform to an ideal reader construct while lay readers, who may be less versed in literary theory, have less liberty to interpret her texts. In contrast to Ernaux's positive response to those critics who adopt methodology framed by Bourdieu or Beauvoir, for instance, two writers whom Ernaux holds in high esteem, those critics who adopt different standpoints – those of psychoanalysis⁹⁷ or autofiction, in particular – might not be as well-received by the author.

In addition to asserting the role of authorial intent, Ernaux has, I would argue, become more preoccupied with the degree to which her texts should be considered "literary." Ernaux comments in her interview with Crom that she writes "[p]our que d'autres puissent s'avouer peut-être [...]: vous me donnez envie de parler de moi. C'est ça, le rôle de l'écriture, quand elle mérite de s'appeler littérature,"⁹⁸ thereby implying that there is a distinction between writing "qui mérite de s'appeler littérature" and writing that does not. Such a comment on literary value is unusual for Ernaux, who had written a few years earlier that she no longer attempts to define literature and has not attempted to do so since the publication of *LFG* (*L'ECUC*, p. 29).

Ernaux's statement underscores the degree to which she is now inscribed among major writers

⁹⁷ As I argued in Chapter Three, Ernaux's aversion to psychoanalytic theories has been well documented, although the attitude has been inconsistent. Day notes that Ernaux's lack of interest in psychoanalysis stands in contrast to "her readiness to acknowledge the sociological dimension of her work," (Day, 2007, p. 22).

⁹⁸ http://www.telerama.fr/livre/25442-rencontre_avec_annie_ernaux_ecrivain_de_la_memoire_offerte.php

who have produced masterpieces, although this “imagined community” (Anderson, 2006, p. 6-7) of great writers is never rigidly defined.

Ernaux also continues in the media to provide the vocabulary with which to define her own writing. Where *écriture plate* and *autosociobiographie* had been proposed as an appropriate classification for her earlier works, the terms *autobiographie impersonnelle* and *autobiographie collective* come to play similar roles in shaping the reception of *LA*. In an interview for the program *Dans quelle étagère?* on 13 February 2008 on France2, Ernaux also terms the work an *autobiographie collective* in the early stages of the interview. I have already outlined the extent to which Ernaux has been able to create the vocabulary through which her work is to be analyzed. This trend has continued in the case of *LA*. The frequency with which the final line of the text (“sauver quelque chose du temps où l’on ne sera plus jamais”) has been cited as an overall summary of the writing project has, unquestionably, also played a role in shaping the critical reception of the work, as the phrase appears regularly in the critical reviews of the work. So, too, do the terms *autobiographie impersonnelle* or *autobiographie collective* pepper Ernaux’s interviews and various critical reviews of the work.

Discursive Category 3: The Domestic ‘Ernaux’

I have already suggested in the previous chapter that the personal nature of Ernaux’s texts allows the reader at times to feel as though she or he has an intimate relationship with the author. My survey of textual media reception of *LA* similarly, at times, reveals a significant

number of images of Ernaux in a domestic setting, thereby seemingly inviting readers into private spaces. I now want to argue that this domestic image has been further cultivated in web media appearances following the publication of *LA* and suggest that this media image of 'Ernaux' might to a certain degree contribute to the manner in which she has been constructed in personal terms.

Although Ernaux has often written about her home and has even depicted it in *L'UDLP*, Ernaux's home at times figures prominently in the audio-visual reception of her latest work. On 3 August 2008, Ernaux participated in a web radio interview for *RTL* with Bernard Lehut, who hosts a weekly radio program with contemporary French authors. In "Écrivains à domicile : Annie Ernaux pour *Les années*,"⁹⁹ the interview took place in Ernaux's home, and throughout the course of the interview, Ernaux describes her house, writing space, writing routine, and the significance of her home to her writing career, acting as a constant in the face of personal change. Throughout the interview, the listener can hear the sounds of Ernaux and Lehut shutting car doors, walking in the driveway, and subsequently walking from one room to another. For Ernaux readers, spaces that before had been constructed in the minds of readers are made tangible and real. Through Lehut's interview, they concretize the space and penetrate into the home. What is remarkable about this particular interview is the manner in which the interviewer constructs 'Ernaux' using language related to domesticity, making use of language that one would use when describing, for instance, a good bed and breakfast hostess. Lehut employs language designed to make the reader feel as though she or he, too, could visit

⁹⁹ <http://www.rtl.fr/fiche/782744/ecrivains-a-domicile-annie-ernaux-pour-les-annees.html>

Ernaux in her home. In his introduction to the interview, Lehut employs the second person and addresses the listener directly. This tendency to construct 'Ernaux' through domestic language was noted by Thomas (2005, p. 253) following the publication of *LVE*, when critics commented extensively on Ernaux's domestic setting in Cergy-Pontoise and the implicit choice of a more domestic, suburban life over a more urban, Parisian existence. In the case of this interview with Lehut, this domestication of Ernaux extends further. He begins the interview by explaining that for the past thirty years, Ernaux has been sharing personal stories with her readers. He continues his introduction as follows:

Pour lui rendre visite, le mieux est de prendre la ligne 'A' du RER en banlieue parisienne, de descendre à Cergy où elle vous attend au volant d'une vaillante Peugeot 205, quelques kilomètres encore, et vous voilà, au bon port, chez Annie Ernaux.

The implication of this language, especially the use of the second person, is that Ernaux might well be open to readers looking to arrange similar visits: Ernaux would arrive at the train station and promptly drive them to her home for a visit.

This tendency is not, however, restricted to Ernaux. Upon the publication of *LA*, Gallimard posted a series of online videos of Annie Ernaux.¹⁰⁰ This tendency has now become common for authors published by Gallimard, as the company website promoting newly released texts contains links to a variety of resources, including a summary of the book in question as well as textual and video interviews with the author. Curiously, the online set of video clips is titled "Rencontre avec Annie Ernaux." In choosing the noun 'rencontre' rather than 'entretien' or 'interview,' there is a suggestion of a more informal encounter rather than an exchange of

¹⁰⁰ <http://www.gallimard.fr/catalog/html/clip/A77922/index.htm>

question and answer between two people with defined roles in a setting. This title is now used in all video interviews with many Gallimard authors. Further to this choice in title, there is once again an element of domestic imagery at play. Each interview is shot on the same 'set,' which suggests a domestic setting: the author being interviewed is generally seated next to or near a fireplace and surrounded by books. In Ernaux's interview, she is sitting in a chair next to a fireplace with books in the background. These interviews with authors allow the reader to appropriate the role of the interviewer asking the questions. Unlike most video interviews with authors appearing on television, the interviewer in this case is invisible: the person asking the questions is neither seen nor heard throughout the interview. Instead, the questions are presented in textual form against a black screen before the footage of Ernaux answering it is shown. With this visual setup, the viewer can appropriate the role of the interviewer and be under the impression that the author is speaking directly to her or him. In the author interviews surveyed for this chapter, at no point could an interviewer's voice be heard. Furthermore, each question and answer is given its own clip on the Gallimard site so that the reader must click on a particular sequence in order to hear the question and answer. In this way, the reader can create a desired order of questions, and she or he can then start, stop, and pause the interview at will. This interview is more actively constructed than absorbed. The final portion of the interview is generally a few clips of the author reading a selected passage from the work from sheets of paper or from a laptop. In this way, readers can experience a virtual reading of the work. The effacement of the journalist, who possesses normally not only the intellectual capital and also the shared proximity with the author, allows the reader to assume this role and structure a program text much in the way described by Morley (in

Charpentier, 2006, p. 272). Ernaux's construction within a domestic context is, therefore, a prominent one in both press and academic settings, and the domestic constructions of 'Ernaux' are, rather sadly, part of a consistent discursive category throughout the years of Ernaux's critical and popular reception.

Conclusion

In this final chapter, I have explored the discursive space that both represents and is represented by 'Ernaux.' My analysis of Ernaux's discursive space allows us now to draw some general conclusions about the manner in which 'Ernaux' is constructed.

In the first instance, I want to suggest that Ernaux's recent construction as a major contemporary French author, underscored by the discursive category of masterpiece, has allowed her to influence the reception of her work to an even greater extent, especially following the reception of *LA*. While Thomas (1999, p. 147) argued that in criticism of her earlier work, Ernaux was often disqualified from the literary sphere on the grounds that her work is not 'literature,' she now appears to have a place in the canon. For journalists, this place in the canon means that she is to be perpetually compared to other established writers. For readers, such prestige also lends perceived legitimacy not only to Ernaux's work (which could certainly be considered legitimate in its own right) but also to the lives of readers who continue to construct themselves through it. For Ernaux, it has resulted in her becoming more preoccupied with her own status as a writer and, by extension, with the importance of

authorial intent in her works.

While Ernaux appears to have cemented a place in the canon, for 'lay' readers, there is still, as was documented by Thomas and Charpentier, a tendency to construct 'Ernaux' in personal terms, as 'Ernaux' is at times constructed as though she were an imaginary friend who happens to be a writer. For instance, Ernaux's behaviour at book signings or on television intersects with readers' interpretations of a work in order to construct 'Ernaux.' While much press criticism continues to construct 'Ernaux' as though she ought to be judged as a person for the contents of her work, this tendency has been drastically reduced when compared to earlier reception of Ernaux's work. Indeed, I would argue that at this stage of her writing career, while Ernaux appears to have earned the respect of many critics, it is now with 'lay' readers that her construction in personal terms is most pronounced, although such constructions take on mainly positive undertones. This increase in critical respect for Ernaux is in contrast with the continued 'lay' reader tendency to construct 'Ernaux' in personal terms.

The social construction of gender continues to play a significant role in the representations of 'Ernaux' that constitute her discursive space. As in previous reception of her work, Ernaux is more positively constructed by female than by male critics. Press reception of Ernaux appears to suggest both that Ernaux is representative of a universal feminine experience – while other (mainly male) critics see the feminine aspect of her recent works as a barrier to enjoying their own reading experience and finding a position in the work. Related to this category, Ernaux's willingness to expose herself in a domestic setting, inviting journalists and academics alike into

her home, compounding the personal themes of some of the texts, has no doubt provided fodder for journalists to construct her within the narratives of domestic femininity.

In addition, now that Ernaux appears to have become established as a major writer, she accords increased importance to the role of authorial intention and the merits of literature. In her media appearances, Ernaux's readiness to use literary quotations and to write short essays on other writers or artists in which she draws links between them and herself (as in her writing before the release of *L'UDLP*) confirms her own literary capital and the ways in which she fits into the discursive spaces of other distinguished writers. Ernaux thereby enjoys the privileges of being a part of the literary canon, which is a further discursive category that I identified. In addition, readers often defer to Ernaux as the provider of meaning in her works, even though Ernaux's stances on her own work and her attitude toward writing have changed over time.

I want to further suggest that Ernaux has mastered the ability to manage and control the media settings in which she is presented. While Thomas' work outlines the manner in which Ernaux previously adopted a combative approach in her media settings, Ernaux no longer needs to have recourse to such strategies, as she is most often firmly in control of her appearances. I have given evidence that critics have frequently adopted the language through which Ernaux has constructed her work. In the case of 'lay' readers, we have seen that some readers encourage other readers to read what Ernaux has to say about her own work and others who are quick to defend those who speak against her work. While I argued in Chapter Two that Ernaux's own involvement in her academic interpretive community has given her the

capacity to, at the very least, influence the ways in which her texts are interpreted in those circles, I have argued both that Ernaux is now given ample opportunity to provide her own interpretations of her work to journalists and that she is largely unquestioned in media circles. 'Ernaux' is, evidently an author who is most definitely not dead in the Barthesian sense.

In this chapter, I have undertaken to give a representative analysis of Ernaux's discursive space between 2005 and 2010. Because of the nature of online technology, discursive space develops from day to day. I have aimed to give future researchers an idea of the manner in which 'Ernaux' is constructed by her readers at this point in her literary career. To measure these constructions now, while the author is living and actively participating in her reception, also accords 'Ernaux' a certain immortality: as the author is continuously discursively shaped by her readers within their own social circumstances, new media gives evidence that 'Ernaux' will continue to be both everywhere and nowhere at once, reborn with each new reader and each new reading.

"It's difficult to put into words how impressed I was by the depth and accuracy of this book. It provides an in-depth analysis of the importance of the gaze, the mother/daughter relationship, my desire to return to the 'text-world' of my childhood. I have to hurry to forget what [Lyn Thomas] has written, in order to be able to write 'innocently.'"
(Ernaux, back cover of Thomas, 1997)

CONCLUSION

Losing Innocence

As the quotation from Thomas' book above indicates, even though she suggests that she forgets what critics have written about her and her work, Ernaux is often aware of the manner in which both she and her works are constructed by her critical readers. In addition, as I have argued, Ernaux often participates in these constructions. As evidenced by the quotation above, Ernaux at times also endorses or rejects critical work on her writing. Contrary to her suggestion above, then, Ernaux's writing is anything but innocent. I have suggested throughout this thesis that Ernaux's involvement with the construction and reception of her work is also evident through her preoccupation in her recent writing with real and imagined relationships with readers. This development in Ernaux's recent writing is an extension of her earlier work, in which Ernaux interrogates self/other relationships, and I have argued that Ernaux's more recent preoccupation with reader and author identities and relationships has connections with the theme of postmodern subjectivity that is recurrent throughout Ernaux's work. In this final section, I shall summarize my principal findings concerning recent directions in Ernaux's writing and its reception. I shall focus in particular on this turn toward introspection

on reader and author relationships and identities, and I shall assess possible implications for future Ernaux scholarship.

Central to my thesis are the parallels between the postmodern notion of subjectivity and reader response theory's ideas concerning the relationship between authors and readers. I suggested that the postmodern self/other dynamic has links to the self/author relationship. In Chapter One, I drew upon earlier Ernaux scholarship and suggested that Ernaux's writing has consistently interrogated the postmodern notion of the subject which is constructed through relationships with others. While Ernaux has consistently drawn attention to her writing subject as a textual construct (particularly in metatextual passages), her writing subjects also reflect the imagined relationship between self and author: the reader is invited to use an imagined 'Ernaux' as a stand-in other. In engaging in a relationship with the text, readers can simultaneously construct a relationship with 'Ernaux.' In Chapter One, I argued that just as Hegel posited that the subject is not a unified whole but instead an ongoing construction, so, too, is the author an ongoing construction before, during, and after the reading process. I drew further on the work of reception theorists Iser, Jauss, Fish, and Pearce in order to draw the links between these two processes of construction.

In the case of Ernaux and her readers, however, these self/author relationships are not always imaginary. In Chapter Two, I explored some of the relationships between Ernaux and her critical readers, and I argued that the transition between an imagined self/author relationship and a real-life relationship sometimes occurs in Ernaux's academic interpretive community. I

examined how Ernaux has developed relationships with critics who, in turn, shape critical response to Ernaux's work. My survey of Ernaux's academic interpretive community constitutes the first full meta-analysis of Ernaux criticism to date which is overdue, particularly given the proliferation of Ernaux scholarship over the past ten years. The idea of an interpretive community of academics is the model that I have suggested to discuss Ernaux's role in shaping relationships, and it is particularly appropriate because Ernaux is also a member of that community. I argued that Ernaux's relationships with her academic critics allow her to become involved in the critical reception of her works, as most recent publications on Ernaux involved direct communication with the author, and, in many cases, Ernaux contributed to them through an interview, through e-mail exchanges, or through her own written passages. I also documented Ernaux's involvement in academic conferences and her interventions in printed critical works. I suggested that within academic study of Ernaux's work, then, the author is most certainly not dead, and, indeed, she is an active participant in the study of her own work and is, perhaps, the most prominent member of her own interpretive community. I further argued that the manner in which some critics have declared their personal affinity for the work or the author – or sometimes both – demonstrates that Ernaux often invites even the trained reader to read or criticize in personal terms. In this way, Ernaux's writing exposes, to varying degrees, the inherently artificial premise of a neutral critical subjectivity. Just as Pearce suggests (1997) that in reading a work, a reader enters into a relationship with language, for the critical reader, reading critically, as Barthes (1966) has suggested, involves entering into a relationship with language. Furthermore, as Hills (2002) has suggested, the relationship between reader and text is influenced by a critic's particular "faith" or theoretical standpoint.

This review of critical work constitutes the first full analysis of critical discourses in Ernaux scholarship and constitutes an interdisciplinary study of scholar and fan identities. My survey of Ernaux's critical interpretive community allows me to argue that her critics are, more often than not, prepared to self-identify as "scholar-fans" (Hills, 2002). While it is certainly not unusual for critics to be fans of the texts or authors about whom they write, Ernaux's texts seemingly encourage critics to declare their affinity for both the texts and for the author herself.

In Chapter Three, I investigated some of the ways in which Ernaux's work has been constructed by academic critics, and this analysis is itself a new contribution to Ernaux scholarship. I investigated the various theoretical frameworks through which Ernaux's work has been criticized, and I surveyed some of the recurrent themes in Ernaux criticism, such as the relationship between Ernaux's work and feminism, the role of the mother in Ernaux's writing, the debate about Ernaux's work belonging to (or not belonging to) autofiction, and the often problematic comparison of Ernaux's writing and that of other French authors. My aim was to demonstrate the degree to which Ernaux's writing has been constructed within existing critical terminology but also to uncover some nuances in critical debate and discourse. For instance, Ernaux's complicated relationship with feminism has resulted in much critical debate, and I suggested that this debate has been influenced greatly by Ernaux's consistent privileging of social class over gender in both her primary texts and in her critical interventions. Ernaux's privileging of issues of class over issues of gender has meant that Ernaux's writing does not adopt a distinctly feminist standpoint but that gender is an important but not exclusive

element used in the construction of her writing subject. I further argued that despite some critical tendency (as well as some journalistic tendency, as I argued in Chapter Five) to categorize Ernaux as a writer of autofiction, Ernaux has consistently rejected the label, even though she has, at times, benefited from her association with the label, such as in the press upon the release of *L'UDLP*. I also surveyed some of the comparative studies of Ernaux and other writers, which have been done both by established critics and by a large number of graduate students. I suggested, like Charpentier (in Thumerel, 2004, p. 228) that many of these comparisons are artificial and, in the case of the press, serve mainly to assign 'Ernaux' to a pre-existing discursive space.

In addition, I discussed the degree to which Ernaux's own terminology for her writing (such as *écriture plate* and *autosociobiographie*) have shaped the language of Ernaux criticism and, by extension, the degree to which Ernaux helps structure the language through which she and her works are constructed. I demonstrated that, in many cases, Ernaux's terminology has invaded the critical space and that, by creating her own terminology for her work and by commenting on her goals of a particular writing project within the text itself, Ernaux shapes the critical response to her work. In particular, many critics have written at length on Ernaux's own terminology for her work and have, in some circumstances, claimed that new genres have been created or that Ernaux calls into question traditional literary boundaries. I concluded the chapter by suggesting that some criticism of Ernaux's work could instead be read as personal criticism of the person, and this is perhaps facilitated by the highly personal nature of Ernaux's

work, particularly in its exploration of Ernaux's relationships with men as well as with her mother.

Toward the end of the chapter, I surveyed the ways in which Ernaux's works have been grouped, whether by genetic process or by Ernaux's development as an author and, in some cases, as a person. Whilst there are clear continuities in Ernaux's corpus, I suggested toward the end of the chapter that Ernaux's most recent writing nonetheless represents a new departure in its intensive focus on reader/author relationships. Readers are invited to become increasingly conscious of the manner in which they construct 'Ernaux' and, by extension, of the manner in which they use 'Ernaux' to construct themselves. In Chapter Four, I substantiated my argument that Ernaux's recent writing is increasingly focused on these reader/author relationships. I suggested that in her recent texts, Ernaux continuously draws the reader's attention to the fact that she is a writer.³ In particular, the romantic relationships described in three of her recent texts began as reader/author relationships – Ernaux's relationship with Vilain/W. (*L'O*) and Marie (*L'UDLP*) – or began because of Ernaux's roles as a writer – as is the case with S. (*SP*). I demonstrated that these relationships both represent Ernaux's real and imagined relationships with her readership and provide a point of entry for readers who wish to construct an imaginary relationship with 'Ernaux' by entering the text through their textual representative (S., Vilain/W., or Marie). While it is not unusual for authors' personal relationships to figure prominently in their work (for instance, Sartre and Beauvoir's well-documented letters to each other or, more recently, Millet's highly personal accounts of her

³ Indeed, another of Ernaux's recent texts upon which I have commented at length (*L'ECUC*) is an entire work in which Ernaux discusses her writing. Appropriately enough, this text was co-written with another author.

relationship with Jacques Henric - as well as his accompanying works that chronicle the same relationship), what is particular about Ernaux's case is the significance of Ernaux's role as a writer both in the relationships themselves and in their constructions. These relationships, which began through writing, develop into real relationships, and readers may project themselves onto the role of the character who is in a 'real' relationship with Ernaux. Such a fantasy, as I demonstrated in Chapter Five, is not unusual, as various readers have expressed a desire to enter into a relationship with 'Ernaux,' as has been suggested in earlier work on the relationship between Ernaux and her readers (Thomas, 1999 and 2005 and Charpentier, 1994, 1999, 2002). While I argued that the reader/author relationship can be read as a romance in the case of *SP* (just as Barthes argues that a lover constructs the other in a relationship, so, too, does the reader construct the author), I also argued that in *LA*, Ernaux acknowledges the symbiotic nature of her relationship with readers: by adopting a more impersonal voice, Ernaux presents a text that purports to speak for a generation. In doing so, Ernaux makes more explicit the intimate nature of the relationship with readers that she had developed over the course of earlier works by acknowledging their mutual dependencies.

I suggested in Chapter One and Chapter Four that for many readers, their relationship with 'Ernaux' remains an imagined one and, unlike in *SP*, *L'O*, and *L'UDLP*, does not transcend into a real-life relationship with Ernaux. To this end, I sought to examine in Chapter Five the tangible evidence of these imagined relationships within a contemporary context. Such analysis was, in the past, limited to letters to the author. My analysis took place online, where readers of all types increasingly construct works and authors themselves in the democratic and unfiltered

online setting. This study marks the first foray into Ernaux's online discursive constructions, and I would argue that such analyses of the manner in which authors and their works are constructed will constitute a significant area of research in readership studies of contemporary authors. I argued that in a contemporary context, authors such as Ernaux are sites of textual production as are celebrities, and this discursive space largely takes the place of the celebrity herself or himself. In constructing 'Ernaux' and her works online (and, like critics, engaging in a relationship with language), I suggested that readers and critics alike construct Ernaux's discursive space, which allows the literary researcher to examine the ways in which 'Ernaux' and her works exist in the minds of readers. My notion of Ernaux's discursive space allows me to study not only what professional readers have written about Ernaux but also, alongside these texts, what 'lay' readers have written. It also acknowledges 'Ernaux' as a site of textual production that transcends the living author. For an author like Ernaux who has demonstrated a clear interest and perhaps even a preoccupation with what is said and written about her and her works, it is only appropriate that texts written by readers and critics become objects of analysis in their own right.

In addition, in analysing these texts, this study mirrors Ernaux's writing project in *LA* in that it inscribes fragments that would otherwise disappear. In Chapter Five, I have provided an archive of Ernaux's discursive space between 2008 and 2010, which allowed me to identify a variety of discursive categories through which 'Ernaux' is constructed. The study also constitutes an overview of how 'Ernaux' is constructed in her most recent period of critical and commercial success and marks the first Ernaux readership study in ten years. I have developed

work by Thomas (1999, 2005) and Charpentier (1999, 2002) by engaging the writing of 'lay' readers and assessing their constructed relationships with Ernaux through their use of language, but my analysis investigated texts written without Ernaux as an ideal reader. This analysis, when combined with my investigation of Ernaux's critical interpretive community and my discussion of Ernaux's recent writing, confirms the degree to which 'Ernaux' has become a powerful author whose significance in the lives of readers transcends her own person. In addition, my analysis of the media response to *LA* demonstrates that 'Ernaux' is now constructed as a major contemporary French writer. My study revealed, however, that her readers continue to construct 'Ernaux' in more personal terms. Many readers continue to construct 'Ernaux' self-reflexively, and Ernaux appears to be a space in which readers construct many of their own life narratives. Ernaux's emergence as a major contemporary French writer appears to affirm not only Ernaux and her works but also the life stories of many Ernaux's readers. Significantly, Ernaux's status as a writer has enabled the creation of a discursive space that is the site of many international textual representations that are less restricted by gender, nationality, or social class.

New Directions in Ernaux Criticism

I shall conclude by assessing the potential impact of my findings on future Ernaux scholarship. Whereas Ernaux had earlier been constructed (and had constructed herself) as resistant to the literary establishment, as I argued in Chapter Five, she is now firmly a part of it. I posited that unlike in her earlier media appearances and critical interventions, Ernaux has also begun to

accord greater importance to the role of authorial intent: Ernaux appears to be more and more preoccupied with ensuring her legacy as a writer, which is perhaps no surprise, and this tendency is underscored by Ernaux's acknowledgement of a canon of French literature. Ernaux has not only successfully been able to break and enter into this literary canon but has also become increasingly conscious of her own *place* within it. It will be intriguing to observe whether Ernaux's future appearances and publications continue to give evidence of Ernaux's newfound status and whether Ernaux begins to appropriate more traditional discourse related to literature and its criticism as a result.

In addition, Ernaux's recent writing has, as I have argued, given evidence of the importance that she places on reader/author relationships. Throughout the past ten years, as Ernaux has worked simultaneously on her various projects and *LA* (in addition to undergoing treatment for cancer), an assessment not only of a life to date but of a writing career has undoubtedly been necessary. Having committed important stories and relationships to texts, I would argue that it is this unique relationship with readers that has transcended all other relationships in Ernaux's texts, and it is a major unifying element in Ernaux's work. In future research and in future texts, it will be interesting to see how the relationship is constructed by Ernaux and, equally, how it is constructed within her discursive space and academic interpretive community by others.

For her readers, however, Ernaux's newfound status has not significantly changed the manner in which they construct 'Ernaux' or her work. I have argued that while professional readers

have increasingly constructed 'Ernaux' as one of the major writers of contemporary French literature (in addition to many other labels), her readers continue to construct her as an author with whom they identify, above all else, on personal terms, as 'Ernaux' continues to be perceived as telling their own stories. Whereas in earlier work, Ernaux sought perhaps more modestly to tell her own story (and, by extension, that of many of her readers), her more recent writing, *LA* in particular, has constituted a *conscious* step for Ernaux toward literary immortality. Ernaux's construction as an established author who has been compared by the press, academics, and 'lay' readers to Proust and Gide is an anointment that brings with it various repercussions. In particular, given the contemporary focus on personal lives of celebrities and their connections with fans and readers (through Twitter, webcasts, and Facebook), future study of Ernaux's relationship with readers will have to discuss whether the dynamics of the relationship change as a result of Ernaux's newly consolidated status.

My study of Ernaux's discursive space has also allowed me to argue that Ernaux's interventions in the critical process have had an effect on the manner in which she is constructed by academics, journalists, and 'lay' readers alike in part because Ernaux's own terms for her work have invaded the critical domain. Ernaux has continued to create new vocabulary with which to analyze her writing, including her "nouvelle forme d'autobiographie, impersonnelle et collective," as the back cover of *LA* tells its reader. Furthermore, Ernaux continues to participate regularly in her own critical reception. Ernaux's specific role in the critical work surrounding her texts will continue to be an object for analysis in its own right, as I believe that this aspect of Ernaux criticism has not been fully addressed. Future analysis of Ernaux's role in

shaping her reception and constructions can include not only Ernaux's own comments on her work but also the degree to which she was involved in the critical work of others. It is my hope that my study will bring increased critical attention to Ernaux's role in shaping her own reception, as Ernaux's unique profile as a critic and an author makes the study of her involvement in her own academic interpretive community a particularly interesting one that is worth pursuing.

I have argued throughout this thesis is that Ernaux has encouraged relationships with readers of all types – professional, critical, and 'lay' readers. These relationships have been beneficial to Ernaux in that they have provided her with a livelihood. The relationship is also beneficial to 'lay' and professional readers: through her participation in the critical process and her emphasis on reader/author relationships in recent work, Ernaux allows readers to feel as though they are, in a sense, co-writers of her texts. In writing texts that explore and reflect the self/author dynamic in explicit ways, Ernaux breaks and enters not only into readers' reading and writing spaces but also into their lives, just as she breaks and enters into her own criticism. 'Ernaux' thereby transcends her role of author and enters irremovably into reader imagination, and her language becomes not only her own but also that of her readers.

APPENDIX 1 : ONLINE CHAT WITH ANNIE ERNAUX, 17 APRIL 2008

Bonjour, le chat avec Annie Ernaux commence à 16 heures, vous pouvez poser vos questions dès maintenant, elles seront prises en compte au moment du direct, merci

Bonjour, le chat va commencer... vous pouvez poser vos questions.

Claire : J'ai 40 ans et j'ai adoré votre livre et j'ai pu en discuter avec d'autres femmes d'âges différents surtout plus âgées que moi et ce que je trouve formidable c'est que la lecture change en fonction du moment où l'on raccorde, où l'on passe de l'histoire au vécu, de la fiction au documentaire en fonction de sa propre histoire et de ses propres souvenirs.. Je ne sais pas ce qu'on pu éprouver d'autres lecteurs mais j'ai trouvé que le tableau allait plutôt en s'obscurcissant au fur et à mesure que j'avancais dans ma lecture.. Avez-vous le sentiment vous-même d'avoir écrit un livre sombre ?

Annie Ernaux : Peut-être ai je un regard plus désenchanté concernant effectivement les quinze dernières années, mais c'est un regard sur la société, mais pas sur ma vie personnelle. Et ce à partir des années 95.

Annie Ernaux : Mais non, en ce qui concerne ma vie personnelle.

Monique : Y-t-il un site ou une adresse pour suivre votre actualité, en particulier les débats et les émissions télé ou radios. Car comme relire vos livres, on aimerait poursuivre la conversation?

Annie Ernaux : Je n'ai pas de site internet.

Annie Ernaux : Et je crois qu'il n'y a aucun moyen, les éditions Gallimard ont un site pour les signatures de mes livres sont généralement indiqués.

Annie Ernaux : Je vais à Toulouse, le 6 mai, au Havre le 15 mai, et à Rouen le 30 mai...

Annie Ernaux : Je fais très peu de signatures et de rencontres.

Monique : "Les années " est déjà un grand livre de l'année 2008 de ceux qu'on emporte de déménagement en déménagement comme un album photo témoin d'un parcours de vie. La sensation ancienne d'être hors de la fête "un prochain roman"?

Annie Ernaux : Un prochain livre, je l'espère.

Annie Ernaux : Dont je ne peux parler, parce qu'il n'est pas fini!

Brigitte : J'ai lu avec beaucoup d'intérêt la plupart de vos romans, pas encore le dernier ! J'ai une préférence (particulière...) pour la Place. Je ne le considère pas vraiment comme un roman, mais plutôt un essai. Vos mots sont simples et émouvants, ce qui lui donne toute sa sensibilité.

Annie Ernaux : C'est un livre qui était important pour moi d'écrire, sans doute le plus important.

Brigitte : Une question me tarabuste depuis des années sur un détail stupéfiant... Dans l'incipit de La Place, vous racontez avoir étudié avec vos élèves lors du Capes pratique un extrait du Père Goriot, roman de l'ascension sociale et du père trahi : ce détail est-il véridique ? autrement dit, la vie est-elle elle-même capable de mises en abyme ?

Annie Ernaux : Oui, c'est absolument véridique, j'ai eu à expliquer à l'épreuve pratique du Capes qui se passait au Lycée Saint Exupéry à Lyon, un passage du Père Goriot, c'est vrai la vie vous propose des abymes.

Annie Ernaux : La Place n'est pas un roman, effectivement, Les Années non plus.

Jean-Michel : Merci pour votre réponse (qui me "détarabustera"...) et surtout pour votre oeuvre (qui nous émeut à chaque fois, par ses enjeux et par la tension constante de la phrase, tous ces efforts pour "écrire juste", un travail que je ressens aussi comme une réconciliation de chaque instant avec le "monde du travail", celui de vos parents).

Annie Ernaux : Je préférerais réparation, au lieu de réconciliation.

Patrick : L'actualité du débat sur l'Ecole rend urgente la question de la place des humanités : la conception de l'être humain, du citoyen, qui se profile derrière les mutations annoncées, parfois déjà en cours dans l'ensemble du système éducatif, semblent relever d'une conception réductrice de l'enseignement et de la culture.

Patrick : Par conséquent, ne vous semble-t-il pas nécessaire, en tant qu'écrivain(e), de réaffirmer que l'Ecole, sans ignorer la réalité sociale et économique, doit former des individus épanouis, réfléchis, capables de prendre en charge leur destin et qu'à ce titre les humanités en constituent la colonne vertébrale ?

Annie Ernaux : Le terme humanité, je voudrais bien savoir ce qu'il recouvre vraiment, et s'il n'y a pas derrière une forme de nostalgie pour l'enseignement traditionnel que ma génération a reçue.

Clementin : Avez-vous travaillé uniquement sur vos souvenirs pour écrire "les Années" ou avez-vous réuni une documentation ?

Annie Ernaux : Non, uniquement avec ma mémoire et des archives personnelles.

Clementin : La femme qui traverse "les Années" vous ressemble beaucoup. Avez-vous envisagé d'inventer un personnage plus éloigné ?

Annie Ernaux : Non, j'ai scruté mes propres photographies, mon journal intime, et il n'y a aucune distorsion autobiographique, tout appartient à ma propre vie.

Annie Ernaux : Depuis la couleur d'une robe, jusqu'à la chatte noire et blanche.

JM : Ecrire une autobiographie à la 3ème personne, était-ce AUSSI un défi formel, comme un jeu avec les codes du genre tels qu'ils ont été définis par Philippe Lejeune, comme une transgression formelle semblable au roman à la 2ème personne écrit par Michel Butor avec La Modification ?

Annie Ernaux : Non, ce n'est pas une forme de transgression intellectuelle, mais c'était une nécessité venue de l'intérieur, de ma vie, de mes sensations.

Annie Ernaux : Je n'ai jamais inventé une forme à priori.

Annie Ernaux : La forme vient du projet lui même et à partir de la vie.

Clairez : La place occupée par votre soeur disparue est-elle un événement que vous pourriez envisager de comprendre par l'écriture ? La question semble intime, mais ne cherche pas à l'être. J'ai besoin de vos livres ...

Annie Ernaux : La réponse est oui.

JM : Dans la somme des événements qui nous ont traversés et que vous évoquez, je suppose qu'il y a un tri : lesquels par exemple avez-vous peut-être éliminés ? Quels ont été vos critères de sélection ?

Annie Ernaux : Oui, j'ai éliminé des événements.

Annie Ernaux : Le critère est très souvent la sensation.

Annie Ernaux : Des événements qui, au fond, je me souvenais, mais ils ne m'avaient pas franchement marqués, ni en bien ni en mal, c'était une sorte d'indifférence.

Annie Ernaux : Ce que j'appelle une mémoire froide.

Annie Ernaux : Pour les dernières années, je disposais de trop de souvenirs.

Annie Ernaux : Et le critère de sélection a été plutôt un climat général.

brigitte B : J'aime le mot réparation, en effet on ne se réconcile pas, on répare des morceaux. Vous sentez-vous "plus entière" ou moins morcellée ?

Annie Ernaux : C'est pas ainsi que se pose la question.

Annie Ernaux : J'ai l'impression davantage d'un transfert d'une souffrance individuelle en une prise de conscience par l'écriture.

Annie Ernaux : Et qui peut servir aux autres.

lauren : Je voudrais vous demander à quel moment vous avez (avec Marc Marie) décidé de faire publier 'L'usage de la photo' - est-ce que c'était prévu comme une possibilité dès le début de la composition des textes sur les photos?

Annie Ernaux : Oui.

Annie Ernaux : Bien sûr si nous réussissions à réaliser le projet.

Annie Ernaux : C'est un projet d'écriture, donc de publication, cela va ensemble.

Leu Tchi : Avez-vous été tentée d'insérer les photos décrites dans vos "années" ? C'est selon moi le point faible (relatif tant votre style est brillant de simplicité par ailleurs) de votre récit. Je les trouve parfois laborieuses.

Annie Ernaux : Non, je n'ai pas été tenté d'insérer les photos, pas du tout.

Annie Ernaux : Cela aurait été un livre très différent, qui aurait substitué au mouvement collectif des Années à l'histoire de personnages.

stephanos : Bonjour Annie Ernaux. Je vous ai entendue dire à la radio que vous écriviez « traversée par le collectif. » Comment la littérature peut-elle encore servir de ponts entre les gens?

Annie Ernaux : Je ne sais, moi-même en écrivant je ne savais pas que beaucoup de gens placeraient leur propre histoire au-dessus de mes mots.

Annie Ernaux : Il n'y a pas de méthode pour cela.

Pierred : Bonjour je suis allé vous écouter à Bordeaux il y a deux jours et deux questions me sont venues à l'esprit. D'abord la première: pourquoi cette réticence à utiliser le terme "autobiographie" voire "autofiction" pour qualifier vos livres. On doit souvent vous poser cette question mais j'avoue ne pas avoir tout compris à ce sujet.

Annie Ernaux : Premièrement, autobiographie je n'aurais qu'une part à l'utilisation du mot "autobiographie".

Annie Ernaux : Mais je préfère dire que j'utilise la matière autobiographique, de différentes façons.

Annie Ernaux : En revanche, je récusé absolument le terme "autofiction".

Annie Ernaux : Puisque je ne fictionne pas à partir de ma vie, c'est toujours une exploration du réel.

Leu Tchi : Vous avez été prof de collège Evire à Annecy et il semble que vous occultez quelque peu cette période de votre vie. Par rejet personnel ?

Annie Ernaux : La période Evire, où j'étais après 68, est dans Les Années, sous une forme collective.

brigitte : l'écriture est-elle pour vous une sorte de thérapie, une écriture nécessaire ?

Annie Ernaux : L'écriture n'est pas une thérapie de toute façon, parce que le désir d'écrire renaît après chaque livre, c'est constitutif de mon mode de vie, de ma façon de voir le monde.

Annie Ernaux : quelque part j'écris toujours, même quand je n'écris pas.

Paul : Quels auteurs contemporains lisez-vous ? Et que lisez-vous d'une manière générale ?

Annie Ernaux : Je lis peu de romans.

Annie Ernaux : J'aime découvrir des premiers livres.

Annie Ernaux : Vraiment contemporain, au fur et à mesure que les auteurs sortent, le dernier Modiano, par exemple.

Annie Ernaux : J'ai lu Chantal Thomas, le Café de la mémoire.

Annie Ernaux : Je lis Bernard Desportes, et je lis de la sociologie et de la philosophie.

Annie Ernaux : J'ai lu Alain Badiou.

Merci à tous pour vos questions, et à bientôt pour un prochain chat sur Libération.fr

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