

La Place looks at a daughter's relationship with her father. In a fragmented and largely retrospective way the narrator describes her feelings of separation and betrayal that arise when education and marriage place her in a social class with different values, language, tastes and behaviour. She explores the ways in which individual experience is related to class and group attitudes, and at the same time tells us a great deal about French society in general since the turn of the century.

La Place is a concentrated text; cut through with irony, it may be read in several different ways. It is written in simple prose, yet the reader is made aware of the problems of finding an appropriate language for writing about such experiences. Reproduced here with a new introduction and notes which help to clarify any difficulties with the language, *La Place* will be an accessible and exciting addition to French studies courses.

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Annie Ernaux

LA PLACE

Edited by

P. M. Wetherill

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THE AUTHOR

Annie Ernaux was born in 1940 at Lillebonne, near the mouth of the Seine. Her early years were spent in the Lillebonne, Lisieux, Yvetot area, where her parents had a 'café-épicerie'. After leaving school, she took a *Lettres modernes* degree and then the *agrégation*. She became a schoolteacher in the outskirts of Paris. She now teaches French literature at university level on a *télé-enseignement* course.

Further information about her life is given in the part of the Introduction devoted to the writing of *La Place*, p. 30.

INTRODUCTION

La Place is a concentrated text which raises a wide variety of problems in a book of barely 50 pages.

The narrator looks at a daughter's relationship with her father. In a fragmented text which owes much to the workings of memory, she describes the sense of separation and betrayal which arises when education and marriage place her in a social class which has different values, language, tastes and behaviour. She explores historically the ways in which individual experience is related to class and group attitudes.

The book has multiple values. It is cut through with irony and may be read in a variety of ways. It tells of an individual case and the difficulties involved in the telling, but it is not restricted to one person's experience. It tells us a great deal about French society in general since the turn of the century. But it is not only about French society: there are many familiar echoes which show that it relates to all western societies.

In addition, *La Place* looks at the problems of writing about such experiences: the kinds of language which are appropriate and which are not, and the effect of ordering material in different ways.

The *manner* in which Annie Ernaux worked out the meaning of her book is especially interesting. If one follows the different stages of its composition, one realizes how useless

are such terms as 'inspiration' and 'genius'. All art is hard work and calculation. Composition involves the conscious attempt to *organize* thinking about attitudes and events into a coherent whole. Whilst fiction may contain autobiographical material, this soon ceases to be relevant. A book's meaning comes from the way in which lived experience may be distorted, reworked and combined with impersonal and purely invented elements.

THE WIDER SOCIAL CONTEXT

La Place covers the period from about 1890 to 1970: a time of enormous change all over the western world. Very different social structures were evolving for a variety of interlocking reasons: the accelerated drift from the land to the cities and the rapid dwindling of the servant class; compulsory education and a rising school-leaving age which improved the level of literacy, increasing class mobility and opportunities for self-advancement; universal suffrage combined with the rising influence of the trade unions producing new forms of political power; a decline in religious faith; mechanization, new means of transport and the accelerated growth of technology created a whole new dimension of existence: physical mobility matched social mobility.

These social changes were paralleled by equally massive political events: the 1914-18 war decimated a whole generation and destroyed many traditional values; the Russian Revolution (1917) was for at least twenty years to inspire all those who wished for a radical change to much greater social equality; the Front Populaire of 1936 brought a right to *congrés payés* (a fortnight's annual holiday with pay) and many other advantages; the Second World War further undermined values, behaviour and class structures.

Such details need to be looked into in greater depth and detail if *La Place* is to be properly appreciated.² Annie Ernaux's book makes frequent allusions which French readers will instinctively understand from their own personal

background, but which we cannot - for example, 1936, the German invasion in 1940 and the reconstruction of France in 1945.

La Place offers a view of events which is not so much abstract social history as the *lived experience* of that history. It is limited to one particular part of France, Normandy, not far from the Channel coast, and to one particular class. More precisely still, it is social history based on the family - and especially on the relationship between daughter and father.³

The narrator of *La Place* concentrates on an account of her father's life, but emphasizes its typicality. As a result, she mentions many major social changes in France since the turn of the century and the progressive social diversification they have led to (p. 63).

So a basic theme of the novel is that of the general and the particular: general social history as seen through the father's experience. Thus the industrial activity mentioned is necessarily typical - filatures and petrol refineries (p. 66 and 68) - as are political attitudes: her father votes for Poujade, as did many non-communist artisans in the early 1960s.

However, the narrator is anxious to achieve representativity without loss of personality. This raises a stylistic problem which becomes one of the book's themes: how detail and overall impression may be given equal emphasis. The narrator, attempting to recreate her father and his world, speaks of the conflict between 'l'épure [qui] tend à prendre toute la place' (p. 69) emphasizing his whole class and culture, and the 'piège de l'individuel' (p. 69) which over-isolates him. At the same time, 'tous les signes d'une condition partagée avec d'autres me deviennent indifférents.' Similarly, once she has left her parents she becomes aware how unrealistically schematic they have become; she uses the same word, 'épuré' to characterize it (p. 95) - as if the alternatives could never really combine.

The world described is to say the least complex. It is full of *décalages* and tensions. Many things are out of phase. For example, antiquated and highly sophisticated, 'modern'

behaviour exist side by side. Thus the father is contemporaneous with Proust and Mauriac, although 'son cadre à lui c'est le Moyen Âge' (p. 60).

S O C I A L T H E M E S

Over and above such complexities, the descriptions of social conditions strongly emphasize the time to which they belong, and therefore the fact that the parents' living conditions are different from those of their children.

A central theme of *La Place* is that of constant social change. If its most dramatic aspect is the one which leads the narrator to 'betray' her family, the process concerns every episode in the book. The father's experience is equally one of social change, influenced by widely varying phenomena: industrialization, the cinema, yoyos, wine and slang (p. 63).

Change for the narrator's father and people like him was essentially material and economic: 'On avait tout *ce qu'il faut*' (p. 74 *et seq.*). The post-war development of Y . . . (p. 71) is described as something which directly affects their well-being.

Social change is constant. Modernity itself evolves all the time. The final scene, with its indifference and forgetfulness on the narrator's part, points to new social relationships, new kinds of work and prospects and even new forms of failure. The narrator's attitude to the dead-end, mechanical job of a former pupil she no longer remembers indicates that she cannot really sympathize with the changes which are affecting people younger than herself. Many details of the narrator's adolescence show her to be old-fashioned in relation to a teenager in the mid-1980s. People are always very different from their parents. Their sense of social change is different too as is symbolized by their attitude to the past. Betrayal concerns relationships between all generations. The way the narrator's parents redecorate their house, hiding it under layers of formica, destroying its traditional Norman

appearance, demonstrates that social progression for them may be equated with destroying the past (p. 75).

For the daughter, social change is quite different. It is linked to the cult of the past: classical music, great writers, historical monuments and tradition.⁴ Later, she decorates her house with hessian wall covering and antique furniture (pp. 95-6) in a way which shows how much change of class has become for her a change in culture. It is linked with the desire actually to *revive* the past. The material disappearance of the parents' house finalizes the cultural break and the idea of change (p. 102). This all points to a second aspect of social change: it creates new social groups and splits up old ones.

La Place shows how social groups slowly become more diversified at Y . . . and how this creates gaps between people. In the context of the family, this may even be expressed spatially: groups break up because of increased physical mobility. There are also many divisions within classes. Hence: 'L'épouse d'un entrepreneur voisin a été *refoulée*', etc. (p. 55). The narrator lives in increasing geographical separation from her parents and their milieu: she goes to boarding school (not as rare or middle-class in France as in England: many teacher-training colleges are boarding schools; but the daughter's departure to one of these is nevertheless a break and a new thing for her parents), she spends some time in London, and finally settles in a very different part of France.

The process is not a passive or a neutral one. As Richard Hoggart has shown in *The Uses of Literacy* (see Bibliography); Annie Ernaux has said that this work greatly impressed her), intense emotions are involved. One of the novel's themes is the idea of revolt and betrayal. At an early point in the book, we hear of one of the father's sisters who runs away from home (p. 61) and of the hostility felt by country people towards those who move to the town and work in factories (p. 64).⁵

IDENTITY AND CLASS

In exploring the theme of change, *La Place* continually returns to notions of what is supposedly up to date and what is not. It situates people by reference to the material ways in which their surroundings evolve. Common objects serve as markers of time and place: makes of car, pop stars, clothes, the use of aftershave, corner shops and supermarkets.

As people move in relation to society, and society to people, their relationship with their own basic personality is strained and distorted. The daughter's breaking with her roots makes her realize that she can no longer say 'nous' about her experience and that of her parents (p. 77). She has rejected these things: 'J'émigre doucement vers le monde petit-bourgeois'. As a result she becomes alienated from herself: 'C'est le temps où tout ce qui me touche de près m'est étranger' (p. 86).

In a striking way, her father abdicates his personality for that of his daughter (p. 83): he invests his own arrested ambitions in her. But even this ambition is distorted and divided for he feels 'la peur OU PEUT-ÊTRE LE DÉSIR' that she might fail (p. 86). Self-improvement is both a goal and a threat.

More simply, the parents' own modest success illustrates the breakdown of family structures: they are 'obligés d'être en froid avec les frères et soeurs' (p. 66); 'dans leur dos, ils étaient traités de riches, l'injure' (p. 68).

Enough has been said so far to show that the author was anxious to give her work a very special bias. One of the book's original tentative titles was: 'Éléments pour une ethnologie familiale'.⁶ The documentary intention is clear. In addition, Annie Ernaux is quite adamant that she finally wrote something that was not a novel, but rather a fictionalized study of family relations based on her own experience and centred on the way she reacted to the death of her father.

It is especially her father's illness and death which transform her. These events together with her success at the highly

competitive Capes exam make her aware of what is happening to her, her sense of loss both as an individual and a member of a class: '«maintenant, je suis vraiment une bourgeoise»' (p. 57); '«je suis donc bien grande que je fais cela»' (p. 101). Here is the motivation to write the book.

CLASS DOMINANCE

La Place is, however, not merely about class change. It is also about traditions and permanence. The middle class maintains its dominance throughout the book. This is clear from the uncompromising self-confidence of the daughter's middle-class friends and of her fiancé's family. They make no concessions when they have a stranger in their midst.

Class dominance breeds arrogance. It is suggested that the middle classes lack both sincerity and concern for others (p. 83), very different from the efforts the father makes when the narrator brings friends home (p. 93).

Through the father, working-class vulnerability and isolation in the face of real or supposed bourgeois values are underlined. The parents seem to have no contact with their son-in-law (appropriately named, a mark of his *physical* difference from them (p. 55)) – and indeed we are given no idea of his character which might lead to some exchange, some communication.

Above all, we know what he is not. He and the group to which he belongs (and to which the daughter aspires (see pp. 82–3)) could not possess the father's aesthetic values as set out on p. 79: values which are expressed not through museums and classical literature, but through inarticulate, instinctive reactions and visually through objects like gardens – hence the insistence of terms like 'l'almait', 'l'admirait', 'émotion'.

THEMES AND STRUCTURE

It is through education and marriage that the narrator finds her way into the dominant classes. One might say that such a

marriage as hers is possible only if one has the right kind of education.

So the book's opening scene is very important. It gives precise meaning to the mentalities at play. The narrator's teaching certificate does not merely offer her the possibility of a better job. It signifies a major and permanent change in her social status. It also brings to a head the whole nature of her relationship with her parents which has been so difficult since her school-days.

The death of her father, which takes place shortly after, develops the book's main opening theme. It is not merely a biographical fact. It combines meaningfully with the Capes episode to raise a basic problem: how do children whose education and career lift them out of the class and the mentality into which they were born come to terms with their social and family origins? How may they communicate with the group to which they used to belong?

Children whose lives follow this path often feel that in some sense they have betrayed their origins, that they do not belong anywhere. This is the emotion felt by the narrator. The solution for her was to write about the experience. The quotation from Genet, at the beginning, shows that this attempt at contact with her past is also a sign of betrayal. It shows that direct contact is no longer possible. Writing is the last resort when all other forms of contact have failed.

From the moment, seven years before publication, when she started working on her text (the stages through which the novel went before it was completed are examined on p. 30 *et seq.*), Annie Ernaux knew the central subject which allowed her to explore social change and class betrayal. This subject was to be the relationship between father and daughter, the gap between them, brought to a head by the father's death.

The theme of betrayal does not affect the narrator alone. Her experience highlights a wider experience, for *all* characters in *La Place* belong to 'une société confusément honteuse de ses origines':⁷ 'personne à Y . . . , dans les classes moyennes, commerçants du centre, employés de bureau, ne

veut avoir l'air de «sortir de sa campagne»' (p. 81).

So the idea of betrayal is always present. The danger is perhaps that it may take on too moral a tone – that people may be *condemned* for moving out of their class – although this is perfectly natural in twentieth-century society. *La Place* suggests that condemnation could be a mistake. Characters (especially the narrator) are faced with a moral dilemma. They feel that they have betrayed. But it is this dilemma rather than any outright guilt that the text sets out to explore.

The theme of judgement and its dangers is necessarily allied to that of betrayal. The most likely reader of *La Place* is a middle-class one.⁸ She or he has lived in a stable environment – the one whose values dominate the whole of society and which others strive to adopt. He or she may have had no direct experience of the instability described in *La Place*, and is in no position to pass judgement. The whole tone of *La Place* refuses judgement. The reader may only become aware of the problem and attempt to understand it.

FICTIONAL DOCUMENT

However great our sociological interest in *La Place*, however 'true' (or otherwise) the work may seem to be, it would nevertheless be wrong to try to read it as a traditional sociological study. Whether it is specifically a novel or not, we *must approach it as a work of fiction*. We have to examine the ways in which its fictional techniques (language, subject matter, ordering of material and characterization) are used to explore and emphasize the work's main themes.⁹

The order in which events are recounted is used to clarify and qualify earlier or later events. Points are made mainly through the way in which they *disrupt* chronological order. Indeed this disruption is a useful pointer for the reader to the relative importance of episodes and events. So when we read *La Place*, we need to compare the chronological order of events and their order in the text. We need to pay attention to

the position of episodes. This helps us to identify the key scenes around which the text is built.

Thus the opening pages (like those of any novel) are important. They do not just 'set the scene': they define the themes, the experience and values which are going to be central to the whole of the text. They tell us how to read what is to follow.

At the beginning, the narrator sets side by side two events which are detached from the book's chronological order: a professional examination and her father's death. Although they seem very dissimilar, they are very close to each other in the book. The strong implication is that they are in fact comparable, that they are closely related thematically: they converge to stimulate the narrator into writing about her experience. This is further stressed by the language which describes the first event: 'Je n'ai pas cessé de penser à cette cérémonie jusqu'à l'arrêt de bus avec colère et une espèce de honte' (p. 51). This reaction is closely matched by the lines which describe the narrator's return home after her father's funeral: «il faudra que j'explique tout cela». Je voulais dire, écrire au sujet de mon père, sa vie, et cette distance venue à l'adolescence entre lui et moi. Une distance de classe, mais particulière, qui n'a pas de nom' (p. 57).

The final scene in a novel is equally important. It does not merely 'round off' the story, it tells us what has changed, it represents the final state of things and invites comparison with what has come before. In *La Place*, we are encouraged to compare the supermarket scene with the narrator's intention to write about her father, and what that implies. Its message is that there is no escape for the narrator or the society in which she lives - everyone is trapped in the same indifference. The girl at the cash-desk, forgotten by her former teacher, is one of those people who have not managed to break free from drab, mindless jobs and have no real contact with those, like the narrator, who have 'progressed'. The final scene reminds us ironically of the book's opening pages.

The book's overall structure follows the pattern not of a chronological sequence but of a search for meaning and

understanding: the father's death, followed by the decision to write (pp. 52-7), is the novel's point of departure as a piece of writing. Detail radiates from this central event. The event itself encloses the novel: the account both of the narrator's career and her father's death is split between beginning and end.

In addition, the novel stresses the importance of isolated detail. The sequence of events is thus undermined. Blank spaces constantly separate the different elements and episodes. The whole construction of the book is based not on the linking up of things but on ellipses which isolate them in time and memory. This is in itself an ironical comment on the way in which the search for understanding and contact is a bitter affair which does not really succeed. Nothing ultimately falls into shape. The narrator's grasp of her past and of her father is ironically incomplete and impressionistic.

At the end of the novel, significantly, detail fragments and disintegrates more than ever before.

This approach indicates that details are not mere anecdotes. They become meaningful when they are linked to or contrasted with other similar details.

Thus the trip which father and daughter make to the library is not just an outing. It demonstrates by reference to a key problem in the book (language, literature and bourgeois culture) that it is impossible for them to get closer together. Their isolation from each other is stressed through the way the choice of books is *imposed upon them* by the librarian. It is a choice which 'type-casts' them: they never go back there - their interests do not merge, they conflict.

Similarly, the train journey is an event which takes a great deal of its significance from the implications of the opening pages. It is much more significant than a real journey would be. It has strong symbolical overtones: the psychological and cultural differences take on concrete expression through the physical distance over which the narrator has to travel from the very different part of France where she lives with her middle-class husband to return to her parents' home.¹⁰ The

widening social gap which separates her from her family is thus emphasized. Here, too, disruption of the original chronology points to the book's essential meaning.¹¹

Other effects point in the same direction. Temporal indications are generally vague. Except for really important social and historical markers (the First and Second World Wars, the Front Populaire), we are often given simple references to events without dates. The implication is that people's temporal 'mentality' generally works in this way.

On the other hand, the order in which things are put does not destroy the very real sense of difference between one period and another. Living conditions and activities in 1900 are characterized by examples ('bonne à tout faire' (p. 61, etc.)) which could not really belong to a later period.

NARRATIVE FOCUS AND THE CLASH OF CULTURES

More than anything else, the emphasis is on the daughter's experience and the tensions it brings. This is perhaps because other characters are involved in a much slower process of essentially material social change. When the narrator's parents move to the café, a break occurs which in no sense separates them from their origins: in their language and general behaviour, their precarious position, even their snobbery, they owe a great deal to their past.¹²

The daughter, by her education and career, is shifted into a quite different cultural¹³ dimension. Her links with her family and her class are broken.¹⁴ She moves into a world which is taken up with the value of language and expression, culture in the narrow sense. Her sphere is worlds away from that of her grandfather: 'Ce qui le rendait violent, surrout, c'était de voir chez lui quelqu'un de la famille plongé dans un livre ou un journal. Il n'avait pas eu le temps d'apprendre à lire et à écrire. Compter, il savait' (p. 58).

For him as for his children social improvement will relate to the acquisition of things: having enough to eat, being

warm, etc. (p. 66). Their real preoccupations find expression in terms like 'posséder' (p. 74) and the 'Sacralisation obligée des choses' (p. 75).

The narrator's experience of social change will be intellectual. The influences come not from her family but from outside: her school friends, her reading, her school, which pressure her into adopting new values and codes (p. 81). Material goods and money will be a minor problem in family relations (p. 80). It is ironical that her father's help for the young couple can only be financial (p. 94). The division comes from the fact that the narrator's father is not really able to appreciate material objects which possess a middle-class colouring (p. 95) except as a sign of his daughter's success. He has a very vague understanding of his daughter's career (p. 92), just as the narrator is not really able to understand the problems of later generations.¹⁵

La Place is basically not just about social change. It is about *new* attitudes and divisions which now exist in society. It is about misdirected efforts to make contact with others – whether we are dealing with the inappropriate way the father talks to his daughter's school friend, or the fact that, instead of trying to remain the same, the daughter wishes to make her parents change with her (p. 78).

One thing that is very noticeable is the neutral presentation of detail: the reader must interpret what she/he is told.

In the opening passage, the narrator is given a page of Balzac to comment on. This represents her final acquisition of bourgeois status: she is allowed to teach its message and communicate its values. But the situation is far from satisfactory: in what is merely an examination exercise, an archaic literary text is presented to the wrong kind of audience (a group of maths students). Although it is an implicit cultural gesture,¹⁶ its sole overt meaning, absurdly, is to provide the narrator with a meal ticket for life.

The middle-class culture to which the narrator aspires would appear to be empty – more so perhaps than the culture she has abandoned. It has just as much to do with 'going

through the motions' as with the firm expression and understanding of precise moral and aesthetic values.

STYLISTIC PROBLEMS

Significantly, we are not told what the narrator says in her model-lesson. This fact is important because the use of language, and the problems it raises, are central to our understanding of the novel. *La Place* constantly returns to the way people speak and write, the books they read, their communication with each other.

It is no coincidence that the narrator searches for a form of expression which removes the gap between narrator and subject and which allows her to get through to her subject.

The meaning of *La Place*, its central dilemma, concerns the uncertain links between language and reality. In *La Place*, this works on two levels: that of the characters themselves and that of the narrator. They are closely linked. They may involve actual conflict, or at best lack of communication: the daughter tries aggressively to correct her parents' French, because it is different from what she hears at school (p. 78). She claims that their bad grammar is holding her back:

«Comment voulez-vous que je ne me fasse pas reprendre, si vous parlez mal tout le temps!»

The father, for his part, has a very limited understanding of the culture which his daughter is acquiring (pp. 83-4). He sees that there is a linguistic problem. His attempt to associate with her education is inadequate for it takes the form of a dictation test - as if spelling were really important. Significantly, language is involved but its status and purpose are misunderstood. The daughter's choice of a subject of study lacking practicality further widens the gap.

As a result, the father pronounces the teachers' names in a way which has a strangely distancing effect. He cannot grasp

the 'vie bizarre, irréelle' his daughter is beginning to lead (p. 92).

His standpoint results from the kind of conditioning which he was subjected to at school: quotations from *Le Tour de France par deux enfants* (p. 61) show the form this has taken with its slogans aimed at maintaining the status quo (i.e. keeping the poor in their place and satisfied with their lot) and its meaningless expressions: 'heureux', 'beau', 'richesses'.

His daughter's education is different. This is also brain-washing, but it has to do with a body of culture which confirms and affirms the values of a different class: the right books, the right, somewhat ironical, way of speaking, the sense simply of being right.

Implicitly what we learn about the father is always set against middle-class habits and language.

The language of the daughter's 'great' writers diverges noticeably from the language the father reads (*Paris-Normandie*), which is popular, journalistic, or again, dirty books (p. 85).

His world has a different kind of creativity. It builds its own myths: tales, especially about the Second World War, told at parties and get-togethers (pp. 70, 79). This is not bookish at all; but it is the oral tradition through which popular culture has always expressed itself.

Emphasis is placed on the different ways in which people and groups express themselves, and on how groups are different because of that. Language in *La Place* is always a question of comparison and contrast - not to say incompatibility. So the narrator's search for an appropriate style is crucial:

je n'ai pas le droit d'abord de prendre le parti de l'art, ni de chercher à faire quelque chose de «passionnant» ou d'«émouvant». . . . Aucune poésie du souvent. . . . L'écriture plate me vient naturellement, celle-là même que j'utilisais en écrivant autrefois à mes parents pour leur dire les nouvelles essentielles. (pp. 57-8)

The narrator rejects certain kinds of distortion and she searches for a flat style, directly appropriate to the language and behaviour of her subject. This style is that of her parents:

Ma mère m'écrivait un compte rendu du monde autour. . . . Elle ne savait pas plaisanter par écrit, dans une langue et avec des tournures qui lui donnaient déjà de la peine. Écrire comme elle parlait aurait été plus difficile encore. . . . Mon père signait. Je leur répondais aussi dans le ton du constat. (p. 91)¹⁷

One way in which she tries to strengthen such links is by making catalogues of the language they use.

Tout au long du récit, les italiques reprennent et rappellent les mots et expressions qui plus que la description de scènes ou de photos, ou l'évocation de souvenirs, resituent, en le balisant, ce monde pauvre de son enfance. Entre ces mots, ces adjectifs ou ces adverbes, ces dictons, son père a été enfermé toute sa vie.¹⁸

Such catalogues are frequent in *La Place*. They are a key element in the way language contributes to the theme of place. They are used to point to the aggressive familiarity of family life: 'Zéro! - Cinglé! . . . Triste individu! - Vieille garce! . . . On ne savait pas se parler entre nous autrement que d'une manière râleuse. Le ton poli réservé aux étrangers. . . . La politesse entre parents et enfants m'est demeurée longtemps un mystère' (p. 82).

What is even more significant is that *illustration comes before definition*. Explanation (or the search for one) is an important part of the novel's purpose, but it is the practical experience of the language which is stressed primarily.

The narrator's relationship to her parents is an important key to more general social behaviour. It allows the narrator to stress that general social experience is closely related to the concrete experience of language.

The examples I have already given show that the narrator is anxious to define the various ways in which language situations

the protagonists in relation to the world outside. They also show how characters relate to one another, especially when people belonging to different social groups are involved.

Language is thus used as a means of exploring social disorientation: 'Enfant, quand je m'efforçais de m'exprimer dans un langage châtié, j'avais l'impression de me jeter dans le vide' (p. 78).

Or it can be a means of exploring social conflict, as when the narrator corrects her parents' language: 'Tout ce qui touche au langage est dans mon souvenir motif de rancœur et de chicanes douloureuses, bien plus que l'argent' (pp. 78-9).

Only language, it is suggested, can reveal differences between classes and the mentalities involved.

THE THEME OF PLACE

The problem of language is, however, tackled in a unique and specific way. Without departing from its aim of describing 'real' rather than imaginary situations (this is why *La Place* is *not* called a novel), it is a word, not social reality, which sums up a great deal of what the book is about. The word is of course *place*, which, together with the ideas associated with it, recurs constantly throughout the book.¹⁹ This creates a *theme* which binds the whole narrative together. Once again, it is a sign which gives unity to a wide variety of detail. These different occurrences are worth listing in detail.

The idea of *place* is used basically to define social situations: the position which one occupies in society, one's links with other social groups and the states of mind involved.

La Place stresses and extends the significance of this idea by repeatedly playing on the different but convergent values the word and its synonyms may have, whether they be literal or metaphorical.²⁰ It underlines the idea that concrete experience and abstract ideas are not totally distinct.

Repetition of the idea of *place* gives significance and unity to elements (such as the literal meaning of the word) which are not at first sight connected with the meaning the word

possesses in the title. Out of context, these elements would certainly have a different value. This a typical way in which fiction produces coherent and unique statements – creating meaning rather than anecdote.

Thus the reference to the 'seul lit à deux places' (p. 55) indicates that the daughter and her husband are in some way usurping the place of the father who has just died. Turns of phrase like 'prendre toute la place' (p. 69) or 'de sa place à table' (p. 69); 'des buveurs . . . dont la place est sacrée' (p. 73), set up a tangible link between the physical position of a character and her/his place in society. The same is true of 'profitait d'une place' (p. 70) and the spatial value of *displacement*: 'envoyer à sa place' (p. 57).

Very similarly, it may refer to the idea of being out of place, 'ne pas être à sa place': 'plus que jamais, [mon mari] a paru déplacé ici' (p. 55); 'la peur d'être *déplacé*, d'avoir honte. Un jour il est monté . . . en première' (p. 76). Physical place is thus closely related to links in relation to others: 'la place du père dans la vie quotidienne et dans le *coeur des habitudes*' (see p. 54).

The notion of social position thus involves the idea of an emotional place. It may even be sexual as well as merely social as when the daughter's adolescence physically and emotionally separates her from her father, moving her closer to her mother (p. 87).

In very different contexts, the term may bring in the dynamic idea of *replacement*, or self-effacement, the changes, pressures and rivalries taking place in time: 'inviter la personne à comprendre et à poursuivre à sa place' (p. 78); 'prendre la place de ma mère à l'épicerie, sans plaisir' (p. 85); 'A la place des ruines' (p. 88).

But of course, it especially refers to 'la place *sociale*', 'la *classe sociale*' which an individual occupies: 'Il cherchait à *tenir sa place*' (p. 68); '«Quelle position?»' (p. 71); '*haut placé*' (p. 78); 'On a choisi à notre place' (p. 103).

Work, a job, with all its social connotations is close to this meaning. People's work is an obvious indication of their

social position. Hence the importance of references to 'une place mieux payée' (p. 65); 'elle s'était encore une fois sauvée de sa place' (p. 62); and more relevantly still, because it is ambiguous: 'L'Etat m'offrait d'emblée ma place dans le monde' (p. 91).

But whatever meanings the word takes on, it does not have a simple, static quality. It refers to dynamic, changing contexts and experience: people changing jobs, moving up in the world, being threatened by others, giving way to them, dominating them. Most frequently language is directly involved. That is why the *linguistic* conflict with the parents (p. 78) is so significant – it defines the 'places' the narrator and her parents occupy, and the widening gap between them.

The idea of place is, however, much wider than the simple use of the word might imply. Ernaux works on the theme of place by wide use of different *synonyms* of the term. Once the reader becomes aware of this device, she/he realizes how many social processes the theme implies, and how many characters are involved: '*retomber ouvriers*' (p. 65); 'Au retour, il n'a plus voulu retourner dans la culture' (p. 63); 'Obsession: «*qu'est-ce qu'on va penser de nous?*» (les voisins, les clients, tout le monde)' (p. 77). As one can see, the theme has wide connotations in the minds of a variety of groups, for each of whom it takes on a different colouring.

For the narrator's parents, it is linked to the 'place' imposed by external influences. The father's school reading has taught him to keep to his assigned 'place' and be 'toujours heureux de notre sort' (p. 61) – a lesson which he readily accepts: 'C'est le seul livre dont il a gardé le souvenir, «ça nous paraissait réel»' (p. 61). The links with other themes (especially that of language, mentioned above) are clear.

At the same time, we see that characters are not always passive to the same extent. The narrator's parents try to improve their lot by buying a small café-cum-grocer's shop. In this way, they highlight the kind of 'place' which they reject and point to the fear involved: '*retomber ouvriers*'

(p. 65), and to the pride: '«mon mari n'a jamais fait ouvrier»' (p. 64).

The same people are also shown in relation to the 'place' which they seek after and have achieved: 'Il cherchait à tenir sa place' (p. 68) – or which they may have failed to achieve: 'Tu n'étais pas fait pour être commerçant' (p. 82).

The parents may often express such striving through their children: 'l'espérance que je serais mieux que lui' (p. 84) – even though this may lead to a break in family ties: 'peu-être sa plus grande fierté, ou même la justification de son existence: que j'appartienne au monde qui l'avait dédaigné' (p. 103).

The theme points inevitably to radical differences of *cultural* place: 'les livres, la musique, c'est bon pour toi. Moi, je n'en ai pas besoin pour vivre' (p. 88); or to that same place sought by the narrator, as seen by her parents: '«elle étudie pour être professeur»' (p. 92) – and the 'place' (her profession, her marriage) which she ultimately achieves: 'maintenant je suis vraiment une bourgeoise' (p. 57) – and the effect it has on her outlook: 'Il est trop tard'; 'Je me suis pliée au désir du monde où je vis, qui s'efforce de vous faire oublier les souvenirs du monde d'en bas comme si c'était quelque chose de mauvais goût' (p. 83).

One important variant of the theme of place comes from the way it merges with the theme of space. The geography of *La Place* is very closely defined, even if some towns remain anonymous. Social movement is confined to where people are born and grow up. The claustrophobic milieu in which people live may well restrict all possibility of change and improvement. Hence the *double* value of the café:

Symbole de la promotion sociale, le bistro se révèle un autre lieu d'enfermement et d'aliénation.²¹

In a more abstract way, that space may concern the gap between people: the one that separates the narrator from her father and all he represents – an *empty* space therefore, which contains neither values, nor language, nor communi-

cation. Finally, place may relate to that search for a style through which the narrator's parents may be honestly described but which ironically keeps them at a distance:

C'est par les mots, la seule richesse que l'ascension sociale ne pouvait procurer à son père, qu'elle parvient à reconstruire ce continent englouti, celui de la première moitié de notre siècle.²²

Although language and writing carry with them no guarantee that the subject will be adequately described:

rarement a été mieux soulignée l'impossibilité d'atteindre le réel et notre enfermement dans les mots.²³

This 'écriture de la distance' is the only way for the narrator to get anywhere near her subject. But the irony is that it creates another *gap* by which the theme of place may be defined. Even the tense used, the 'passé composé', 'le temps de la distance', contributes to this separation (see below).

THE THEME OF LANGUAGE

Style in *La Place* needs to be looked at more broadly than we have done so far, for the theme of language concerns every aspect of the book. Once again, apparently isolated or anecdotal details point back to the central ideas (change, betrayal, communication) which we have already seen the narrator grappling with.

Thus the changing face of the father's world is illustrated by an experience which links him to his daughter: that of new language, language which has come from outside his own social group: 'Il disait les mots d'argot rapportés par son frère en permission' (p. 63).

At the same time, this points to major differences between father and mother. For it is she who is the more socially mobile of the two. Whilst the father does not get beyond the point where 'Au retour [du service militaire], il n'a plus voulu retourner dans la culture' (p. 63), she is 'soucieuse de faire

évoluée' (p. 78) and experiments with new language: 'A l'inverse de ma mère . . . qui osait expérimentier, avec un rien d'incertitude, ce qu'elle venait d'entendre ou de lire, il se refusait à employer un vocabulaire qui n'était pas le sien' (p. 78).

Language is a point of conflict and contradiction therefore between husband and wife. It is the area in which the gap, the fissure, shows most clearly. But it is also the key to the nature of different relationships. Such relationships are very varied. One thinks of the special language the mother uses to her husband after his death: '«mon pauvre petit père»' (p. 53); or the *lack* of communication on sexual matters between mother and daughter.

Language does not only vary in its appropriateness. It may also highlight major differences in attitude through the different use of the same term. For the father the word itself has a quite different meaning from that which his daughter adopts: 'Il a toujours appelé ainsi le travail de la terre, l'autre sens de culture, le spirituel, lui était inutile' (p. 63).

Examples like this show us how we should interpret the lists of expressions the narrator gives: once again, as in Hogart (see Bibliography), they define the linguistic/social place the family occupies - its real cultural identity. But these standard expressions, these *idées reçues*, are not those of one individual but of a social group. They define social difference, possible conflict and incompatibility.

When the narrator meets a former pupil in the final scene the writing focuses insistently on the verb *reconnaître*: 'J'ai reconnu . . . une ancienne élève' (pp. 103-4). However, it becomes clear that only *physical* recognition is involved. She has in fact forgotten what had become of her. The language used to describe the incident (which, being the last in the book, sums up what has gone before) is not really correct. It implies the opposite of the facts: it is therefore ironical.

The theme of irony works in two ways. On the one hand, it is referred to as the distinctive and divisive viewpoint of a

particular social group. Of her husband, the narrator says: 'Comment un homme, né dans une bourgeoisie à diplômes, constamment «ironique», aurait-il pu se plaire dans la compagnie de *braves gens*, dont la gentillesse . . . ne compenserait jamais à ses yeux ce manque essentiel: une conversation spirituelle' (p. 95).

Secondly, in a book which systematically avoids moralizing, irony has an important function. It is through irony, the conflict of statement and appearance, description and implication, that the narrator indicates how we may grasp the *implications* behind the story. This is true of the ways in which different groups relate to each other. It is also true of the way in which the narrator's language relates to the things she evokes. Writing about events is closely linked to the events themselves.

The very fact that the narrative is ironical shows how much the meaning of *La Place* is based on conflict and incompatibility. Any satisfactory reading of *La Place* must therefore avoid taking what it says at face value. It must bear in mind the extent to which the statements the book makes are revealingly at odds with what they claim to describe.

Such an approach is especially necessary because *La Place* appears to be a realist narrative. It invites us to take things at face value; it implies that language is perfectly adequate to define reality; it claims that the structure of the narrative, the order in which things are presented, clarifies the account. To strengthen this impression, the narrator makes explicit reference through 'notes de régime'²⁴ to the way in which she is trying to get closer to her subject.

However, the relationship between narrative and reality is not something that can be taken for granted: it is a theme in its own right - a problem which the narrator explores in the same way as she explores the very closely linked subject of her relationship with her father.

Once this is accepted, the text may be seen as realistic, for this theme, like the factual detail (events, experiences, appearances), may be taken to be 'true'. There are right and

wrong answers to it. It is not a figment of the narrator's imagination. Unlike many non-realist, modern texts, *La Place* is not preoccupied with the idea of its own textuality, of writing as an end in itself. It does not suggest that it is independent of the outside world, that it has no connection with real events – or that real events do not exist.

La Place points to the difficulties of accounting for experience. It is modern not in the sense that reality is unsure, but rather in the sense that language is not to be trusted: communication is always difficult.

In *La Place*, the inadequacy of language is strongly emphasized: the narrator's own style disintegrates at the end of the book. This in itself instils a sense of failure through a final, vain attempt to recapture the father and the past in general.

In addition, the characters' own language may in one sense suggest aspects of their personality. In another sense, it is full of stereotyped phrases which set up a permanent barrier between the reader and an understanding of those characters as individuals. The mother's cliché-ridden description of her first daughter's death ('«elle est morte à sept ans comme une petite sainte»' (p. 69)) tells us a great deal about the religious reflexes which particular events call forth but nothing very distinctive about the mother. Speech and behaviour are ritualistic, as are the devices used in popular speech to get round awkward, embarrassing situations: using popular songs when one would not know what to say (p. 65). This shows how we should understand the café customers' 'paroles de circonstance' when the father dies. They have, as the author suggests, ethnological value.

Language is of value especially in establishing the nature of class relationships. So *La Place* brings in notions of distinction and correction, to show how dominant language defines social structures.

Annie Ernaux has said herself how important the writings of Bourdieu (see Bibliography) were in deciding how to write

La Place. Bourdieu claims that language cannot in itself achieve anything: orders are not automatically carried out; silly statements are not necessarily made fun of. It depends on who makes them. Language has no power in itself. What gives it power is the place which the speaker occupies, the group to which she/he belongs and the authority which this implicitly confers upon her/him.

Language always functions in society in a specific way: essentially, one set of speech habits or language (often that of teacher, the visible representative of authority) dominates other linguistic patterns (accent, intonation, dialects, patois, popular speech) which are 'deviant', non-normal forms and, because of this, devalued.²⁵

Those who use the dominant language use it to manipulate subordinate groups. The doctor in *La Place* illustrates this clearly when he speaks patois with his working-class clients. The fact that he can change his speech stresses the dominance which he possesses – his normal language is that of the dominant group to which he belongs. Bourdieu speaks of 'stratégies de condescendance'.²⁶ They are another means of retaining the upper hand.

The opposition between dominant and 'inferior' linguistic forms, and the groups which they represent, is one of conflict. We have seen the grandfather's attitude to reading (p. 58): the 'culprits' here (his children) are the ones who have *learned* more than him. The conflict is educational and is often directly expressed in *La Place* through the opposition of school and family influences.²⁷ The grandfather's hostility is still to be seen in the father's attitude towards his daughter: 'Il s'énervait de me voir à longueur de journée dans les livres' (p. 87).

Hence the crucial importance of the book's opening scene. The narrator obtains a teaching certificate and this gives her the right to use the dominant language. It places her automatically in the class which 'possesses' that language and the authority it confers. In so doing, it separates her from those who cannot get beyond the threadbare prose (and ideas) of

popular journalism (*Paris-Normandie*), and whose command of language is so unsure²⁸ that they cannot tolerate pompous or naturally elegant speech.

However, the narrator does not sit comfortably in her new social class. She never uses the dominant language with the offhanded self-confidence of those who are born to it. The conflict continues within her, for she is just as much in a half-way house as her father: she has put down new roots but cannot break away from the old ones.

In order to describe her father and what he represents, the narrator rejects glamourization and lyricism, and opts for factuality (p. 62). She strives to avoid glossing her subject with an irrelevant dominant language. The flat style, the 'ton de constat', the lists of regionalisms are those of her parents too and make up in some way for the betrayal she feels she has committed.

Her refusal to adopt an ironical tone – distinct from the ironical *implications* in *La Place* – further confirms her rejection of the dominant language, for irony, with ambiguity, is a fundamental aspect of bourgeois discourse and the literature which goes with it (see pp. 69, 95). This is the only way for her to achieve the 'Voie étroite... entre la réhabilitation d'un mode de vie considéré comme inférieur, et la dénonciation de l'aliénation qui l'accompagne' (p. 73).

These points demonstrate how much the novel's style is bound up with its subject. They stress how difficult it would be to call *La Place* either a novel or a *récit*: it deliberately rejects a literary style and traditional characterization; it *invites* us to read it as something other than a novel because of the fact that it is not placed in a traditional category. As a result, we must pay particular attention to any documentary value the book may have, or to the kind of documentation used and the way they combine. For example, the narrator's detailed use of photographs is especially significant. It could be seen as an attempt to succeed where clichés have failed – indeed, there

are points in *La Place* where examples of speech are set against detailed, factual, unemotive descriptions of photographs. The mother's clichéd account of her first daughter's death is followed by the description of the photograph.

So, in one sense, the description of photographs is the opposite of the catalogues of expressions which have already been mentioned. It is perhaps no coincidence that the word 'cliché' may be applied both to stereotyped expressions and to snaps: we are still in the world of language – the fact that the same word *can* be used for both proves that – but their usefulness is not the same.

The general emphasis may be on the characteristic, but more particularly, the narrator uses photography as a way of remembering. She talks about an 'Instantané de la mémoire' (p. 94), as if she thought all her recollections were like photographs – detailed, but wrenched from any context.

Logically, therefore, recollection is a series of detailed static fragments rather than a connected story. It concentrates on the physical context and backgrounds which are socially significant:

les signes . . . de la condition sociale, ces bras décollés du corps, les cabinets et la buanderie qu'un oeil petit-bourgeois n'aurait pas choisis comme fond pour la photo. (p. 70) . . . On se fait photographe avec ce qu'on est fier de posséder, le commerce, le vélo, plus tard la 4CV. (p. 74; see p. 86)

The narrative is especially fragmented when the narrator's memory, or memories, are directly involved. The father's early life is much more connected, as is the account of his death. The account of the father's death is split between beginning and end. The chronological order is inverted. Nevertheless, there is a strong contrast between the 'instantanés' which the text uses elsewhere and the continuity adopted here. By implication, this episode's narrative and thematic function, its meaning for the rest of the book, are also different.

The father's death is of course a central episode: the rest of the book derives from it. It is immediate and graspable, whereas the memories which the narrator uses to explore her father's character and her relationship with him are much more uncertain. Because of this the writing is much more disjointed: her recollections do not fit into any continuous pattern.

The narrator becomes aware of this fact for the first time at this moment: yet another reason why the meaning of the novel is strengthened by making the father's death coincide with the daughter's professional progress (p. 52), the Capes examination which puts the seal on her break with her family.

Clearly, there is nothing purely literal about *La Place*. There is no difficulty in seeing symbolical meaning in quite a few details: the daughter is *made* to live in a distant, very different part of France: her increasing *geographical* separation gives a physical dimension to the break; the first paragraph stresses the idea of separateness and difference: 'Un lycée neuf, avec des plantes vertes dans la partie réservée à l'administration et au corps enseignant' – the pupils' surroundings, one supposes, are not so attractive; when the parents ultimately buy a café, it is 'à mi-chemin de la gare à l'hospice' – a detail which bears clear intimations of mobility and death.

The narrator's flat and unemotive style nevertheless excludes unusual images. 'Bouquets de rires' may be noted (p. 73), but that is about all. Symbols work much more through concrete examples given without comment or emotion. The father's death, the most emotive event in the book, is recounted in a totally factual way, as is his early life. This stresses the distortion lyricism would cause. The detailed, factual style has a documentary function: it stresses Hoggart's point about the minute character of a working-class world made up of a number of details and involving the repetition of the same actions.

Memory holds many threads of the narrative together. It is

by recalling the past that the narrator attempts to describe her experience and to grasp her father's personality. When these details were present to her she did not notice them, or even rejected and despised them.

Le déchiffrement de ces détails s'impose à moi maintenant, avec d'autant plus de nécessité que je les ai refoulés, sûre de leur insignifiance. Seule une mémoire humiliée avait pu me les faire conserver. (p. 83)

And so, the instant has to be recreated. It is a slow process:

J'ai mis beaucoup de temps parce qu'il ne m'était pas aussi facile de ramener au jour des faits oubliés que d'inventer. (p. 97)

It is a devious process too – the best evidence for her father's social personality may come from unexpected quarters:

J'ai retrouvé dans des êtres anonymes rencontrés n'importe où, porteurs à leur insu des signes de force ou d'humiliation, la réalité oubliée de sa condition. (p. 97)

But this can only produce snatches of detail. It can only happen in a way which fuses together apparently dissimilar detail: the text constantly moves without transition from written statements to spoken ones, from description to the thoughts which accompany them. The father's eating habits are handled in this way (p. 90) as are the traditional phrases used in the shop: 'merci au plaisir' (p. 66). Similarly, echoes of nursery rhymes are inserted without markers (p. 62).

This is not unrealistic, but it is a modern kind of realism. It points to the way in which disjointed details merge when we remember them.

The theme of memory is determined by the narrator's choice of tense. This is not the 'literary' preterite, which implies a coherent, written organization of the past, with all causes and effects visible, but the 'passé composé' – the colloquial way of talking about the past. It implies details

produced one after the other, in no precise order. It is therefore completely appropriate, given the way memory works in *La Place*. It fits in with the isolated images the narrator draws on in her writing, the frequent use she makes of photographs (p. 69). Such a choice serves another purpose: it underlines the conscious decision on the narrator's part to break away from a middle-class style and the distance it would have created between herself and her subject.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

As *La Place* is called neither a 'roman' nor a 'nouvelle' the temptation is perhaps to see it as a piece of autobiography. In fact, there are huge *differences* in style, order and events-isolated incidents may have provided the starting-point or a kind of documentation, but they necessarily change out of all recognition once they are merged with invented details and overall themes.²⁹

Whether a writer really experienced what she/he describes is generally irrelevant unless we pay very careful attention to the ways in which her/his experience changes in the writing. This is true of Annie Ernaux. There is no doubt that her father's death and her feeling of betrayal provided the initial motivation as well as the initial theme for *La Place*. But it is equally clear that the book has very little to do with naive autobiography, the kind of journalistic approach which suggests that something is interesting only because it really happened.³⁰

If *La Place* has anything at all to do with the author, it can be seen in her evolving approach to her text as she was writing it: the *transformation* of a sense of guilt into a piece of writing.

THE WRITING OF LA PLACE

The initial writing for *La Place* began in 1976 (seven years before publication), nine years after the author's father had

died. The first draft has no plot as such. It is made up of twenty-five pages on her own attitudes and psychology. After this there is a pause, showing that these notes do not have any specific goal in mind. They are set to one side so that Annie Ernaux can write another novel.

The second attempt comes after the publication of *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* (1977).³¹ In a new draft (about 100 pages) which she was to abandon in April 1977, Ernaux now concentrates both on the father's death and life. So some elements of the final text are already present: from the beginning the basic subject is the father's death and the gap between father and daughter; the basic theme is the narrator's sense of betrayal. However, the *focus* of the final version is very different. The second attempt is made up of what Annie Ernaux calls an emphatic and over-constructed narrative ('une narration très pesante'); she uses 'une écriture dérisoire', to describe her father's experience. Both of these stylistic devices will disappear from the final version. This change tells us a great deal about the way the author thought through her subject. Indeed, the two elements used in 1977 are so meaningful that in the published version the narrator rejects them *explicitly*.³²

The problem of focus comes up again in 1977/8, when Annie Ernaux undertakes her third attempt. Now, she moves away from the fictionalizing aspects of the second version and the subjective aspects of the first and attempts a portrait of her father's and her own real existence. Different kinds of divergences creep in, which will be eliminated from the printed version. In the third attempt, the 'conseil de classe' is much longer. The structure and balance of the later text have not yet been achieved. The imbalance between the symbolic beginning and the description of the father's death will be eliminated only later.

The third draft adds commentaries on the practical, written difficulties involved which will provide an important strand in the final version: 'je découvrir et j'écris' - 'j'écris lentement' (p. 69). At the same time, the author has a feeling

of great dissatisfaction, especially because her text is too emotive. The problems are such at this stage that the beginning was rewritten ten times. By June, however, Annie Ernaux had reached a point which she describes as a 'blocage total'.

In her fourth attempt, she therefore adopts another tack: reflection on 'la condition féminine'. Given the book's final themes, this is clearly a dead end – for *La Place* at least. The line she is following at this stage leads to a novel of a different kind:³³ *La Femme gelée* (written between September 1978 and October 1979, and published in February 1981). However fundamentally different this novel turned out to be, the way it came to be written shows that, 'in depth', the different strands of her (or any writer's) activity tend to be very closely linked. The basic potential, the possibilities, may be worked out in a variety of ways. This is why the study of one text is always the best key to understanding the others. More specifically, this phase marks a turning-point in Ernaux's literary activity. The beginning of *La Femme gelée* was in fact written originally in the flat style so characteristic of *La Place*.

In 1977 Ernaux was given a teaching post in a state school. The need to prepare classes meant that her summer holidays were lost. This held up the process of redrafting. However, during the period in which direct work on *La Place* was interrupted, Annie Ernaux gathered together notes and documentation made up of recollections and observations on her father's cultural habits, and the distance which separated father and daughter.

The fifth attempt to write *La Place* came in 1980. It shows the impact of the author's current experience, both personal and professional, for by this time, the author was giving university courses on autobiography and 'le récit poétique' which come very close to the theoretical problems which needed to be solved before *La Place* could be written. For Annie Ernaux, the whole question of autobiography and style is therefore academic as well as emotional.

April 1982: the sixth draft deals with the father's death in a

traditional novel form. It centres, with great emphasis, on a railway platform scene, on a woman's journey with her child to see her parents, with an underlying, undefined theme of intended divorce. The journey takes on the character of 'un voyage initiatique': it recounts the break with the middle-class world. This element is therefore given much more weight than the journey which takes place in the final version of *La Place*. Another difference in focus comes from the fact that the female narrator has become the central character. There is no mention of the father's life and death. The heroine is that of *Les Armoires vides*, but ten to twenty years older, rather cold with no feelings of hate. Her child plays an important part. By May 1982, the cold tale of a journey had not developed enough for the point of arrival to be reached in the narration. Stylistic difficulties led to a further interruption until September.

September 1982 saw the writing of a seventh version. This is no longer a 'voyage initiatique'. The first draft still relates a journey ('J'ai pris un train'), but its focus has changed: it has become the story of a 'visite à la mère', with the father still alive. It includes an important departure scene on the station platform. More important than this, however, is the fact that from now on, the process of writing is actually part of the text.

Documentation for the eighth version, subsequent to September 1982, consists of further notes with a view to producing what Annie Ernaux calls a 'travail ethnologique', much more of a case study than a pure work of fiction. One of the first projected titles bears this out: 'Éléments pour une ethnologie familiale'.

When after September 1982, Annie Ernaux begins work on the eighth version, she concentrates on the order in which the different elements of narrative or sentence order are to be put. Clearly, by this stage, one of the central features of the final version is emerging. Things are not finalized yet, however: for example, the library scene had originally come at the beginning. Now the Capes examination comes at the

beginning, before the father's death, thereby emphasizing the sense of separation and betrayal. The temporal ordering of the work shifts: as in the final version, the key moments of the work come at the beginning although they belong to the end of the book's chronology – making them even more significant.

Questions of balance still remain to be worked out: in the September 1982 version, the Capes episode lasts five pages. It excessively overshadows the equally important episodes of the father's death. Other major changes take place at this time. Whereas earlier versions explored a state of mind, and gave the narrator's opinions, the final version is much more neutral: it points to the understanding acceptance of another culture – that of her father.

At this stage, earlier drafts are merged into the version which is very close to the final one. Earlier work cannot be seen as a waste of time. It belongs to a process of exploration and 'storage': for example the last page comes from the 1978 version. Similarly, the twenty-five pages of notes and documentation written in 1977 were very similar in style to that of the final version, even if the psychological *reactions* and *attitudes* dealt with a set of characters who have disappeared.³⁴

These then are the main stages through which the novel goes before it reaches its final version. The fact that Annie Ernaux wrote other novels whilst working on *La Place* shows how closely linked her novels are and how much each text is a variant of the others – whilst the time taken to write *La Place* reveals how distinctive this book is.

The reworking of material, its manipulation beyond any requirements of pure autobiography, stress the fact that the narrator is not to be confused with the author – any more than fiction can be a direct reproduction of reality.

If there are clear similarities (Y . . . is by the author's own admission Yvetot), there are also substantial differences between Annie Ernaux's life and her work: differences in time and place between the experience of the author and that of the narrator. For example, in real life the father's death

took place before the author took her teaching certificate. If we know that Y . . . is Yvetot, the home town, in the text it is made deliberately anonymous and vague as are the author's precise birth date, her specific career, and the town she went to live in.

In the case of Annie Ernaux, it is very difficult to separate the autobiographical aspect from the writing of the novel. As we have seen, however, we need to see how it is reorganized and the meaning that reorganization gives to the text.³⁵

je hais par dessus tout c'est l'écriture qui joue continuellement sur les symboles Les écrivains qui donnent dans l'exotisme social ont le sentiment de réhabiliter le monde alors qu'ils produisent l'effet inverse. . . . J'ai essayé de dire: '*Je vais vous montrer quelque chose, regardez, ne touchez pas; il n'y aura pas d'identification ni de complicité possible*'. . . . Tous mes livres sont des univers clos, hélas! Il n'y a pas d'issue. . . . L'image du père dans *La Place* est très positive. Alors que mes trois premiers livres sont écrits 'contre'. *La Place* n'est plus un monologue intérieur. (*Revolution*, 260, 22 February 1985)

La trahison, c'est ce sentiment que j'ai eu fortement à la mort de mon père. Il était d'une extraction très pauvre (surtout pas modeste); il a essayé de s'élever difficilement, il est parvenu à une petite place et moi je suis devenue professeur, lui le désirait, il a tout fait pour que je sorte de son aliénation; et j'ai eu l'impression d'une trahison puisque j'avais oublié ce qu'était l'héritage de gêne, de pauvreté et aussi d'absence de culture. Maintenant qu'il est mort, je n'ai pas le moyen de combler cette distance qui s'était établie entre nous deux; il n'y a plus rien que les mots. . . . J'ai commencé par écrire un roman, mais j'ai pensé que c'était aussi une trahison,³⁷ car c'est transformer une existence réelle en forcément quelque chose d'imaginaire, de plus beau que la réalité. J'ai voulu travailler comme un ethnologue. . . . Le langage renvoie à la psychologie de mon père et aussi à leur manière de vivre . . . je n'ai pas voulu . . . favoriser une complicité entre le lecteur et la narratrice sur le dos de mon père en disant 'c'était un homme simple, mais attachant' . . . je voulais dire tout ce qui d'habitude paraît moche, laid. . . . [de nos jours] les hiérarchies sociales sont moins visibles mais elles existent toujours d'une manière insidieuse. . . . Je pense qu'il y a beaucoup d'humiliation et que le milieu tâche toujours de l'oublier et quant à

APPENDIX

QUOTATIONS

From *Annie Ernaux herself*

Jusqu'à dix-huit ans j'ai absorbé parallèlement [le style du feuilleton populaire et celui de la 'grande' littérature]. Ce qui me tient c'est de trouver [une] voix par rapport à ce que vivent les gens. Dans cette visée, la littérature 'bourgeoise' ne me 'convient' pas au sens propre. Je n'ai jamais eu envie de l'imiter. Cette volonté de me situer³⁶ me laissait totalement démunie pour dire mon monde. C'est ce que j'ai eu envie de dire en écrivant *Ce qu'il disent ou rien*. Ce problème a été encore plus aigu pour l'écriture de *La Place*: quelle écriture pour parler de mon père, cet homme que j'ai connu? . . . Je n'ai pas l'impression d'avoir écrit du langage parlé. C'est dans *La Place* que j'ai été le plus 'près' des lettres que ma mère m'écrivait ou que des membres de ma famille m'adressaient. On y trouve toujours l'absence de transitions et l'exposé du fait brut sans cause. J'ai essayé de m'approcher de ce langage écrit. Ce n'est pas à proprement parler un modèle mais un trouble; car s'ils écrivent ainsi c'est peut-être maladresse mais c'est aussi très profond, ce côté défait qui dit l'essentiel. . . . j'ai évité tout ce qui peut être romanesque, les descriptions par exemple. Je ne voulais pas décrire un destin particulier mais atteindre autant que possible la généralité. [Le style est une] mise à distance. . . . Ce que

l'humiliateur, il ne s'en rend pas compte. (Radio interview with Roger Vrigny, France Culture, 21 June 1984)

J'ai essayé de montrer qu'une existence individuelle ne peut pas être: on est toujours conditionné par une appartenance à un groupe social; ce qu'on appelle le refoulé social¹⁸ existe dans toutes nos conversations; donc je ne pouvais pas considérer l'existence de mon père seulement en tant qu'individu. . . . La place qu'on occupe dans la vie sociale. . . . il y a par exemple des endroits où l'on n'ira pas parce qu'on s'y sentira déplacé. . . . 'La place', dans ce livre, c'est à la fois celle qu'a voulu acquérir mon père. . . . c'est aussi l'ensemble des pratiques culturelles qui le situent dans le monde et j'ai voulu parler dans ce livre de choses dont on ne parle pas et les considérer comme naturelles, tout ce qui était son quotidien: tout est très concret. . . . Les expressions de mon père traduisent tout à fait l'univers où il vivait; il faut donc les prendre au pied de la lettre. . . . Ce ne sont pas mes souvenirs à moi, mais les souvenirs en relation de mon père. Je me suis gommée, moi. (Radio interview, *Un livre, des voix*, 30 January 1984)

Critics

La compétence, qui s'acquiert en situation, par la pratique, comporte, inséparablement, la maîtrise pratique d'un usage de la langue et la maîtrise pratique des situations dans lesquelles cet usage de la langue est *social-ement acceptable*. Le sens de la valeur de ses propres produits linguistiques est une dimension fondamentale du sens de la place occupée dans l'espace social (P. Bourdieu, *Ce que parler veut dire*, p. 84).

Les Armoires vides, si littéraire qu'il soit, pose un sérieux problème de la culture, notre culture, quand les classes

populaires l'absorbent, aboutit-elle à les déraciner? (Jacqueline Piatier, *Le Monde*, 5 April 1974, p. 16)

In exploring her own sense of estrangement from the milieu in which she grew up, Ernaux reminds the reader how easily those who enjoy status and privilege. . . . close their eyes to the lives of those whose cultural experience does not match the norms and values of *le beau monde*, and shows how education all too frequently serves to reinforce class divisions and to maintain the existing power structure within society. (Lorraine Day, *Modern and Contemporary France*, December 1985).

[Children whose education lifts them out of their class origins] have a sense of loss [which] is increased precisely because they are emotionally uprooted from their class, often under the stimulus of a stronger critical intelligence or imagination, qualities which can lead them into an unusual self-consciousness before their own situation. . . . for a number of years, perhaps for a very long time [they] have a sense of no longer really belonging to a group. . . . Almost every working-class boy who goes through the process of further education by scholarship finds himself chafing against his environment during adolescence. He is at the friction-point of two cultures. . . . very much of both the worlds of home and school. (R. Hoggart, *The uses of literacy*, pp. 242-4).

If we want to capture something of the essence of working-class life. . . . we must say that it is the 'dense and concrete life', a life whose main stress is on the intimate, the sensory, the detailed, and the personal. (ibid., p. 81).

The popular press - though it makes a speciality of safe or pseudo-controversy - hates genuine controversy, since that alienates, divides and separates the mass audience, the buyers. (ibid., p. 144).

We are moving towards the creation of a mass culture . . . the remnants of what was at least in parts an urban 'culture of the people' are being destroyed; . . . the new mass culture is in some important ways less healthy than the often crude culture it is replacing. (ibid., p. 12)

NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION AND APPENDIX

- 1 A great deal of information, especially that concerning the way in which the book came to be written, was supplied by Annie Ernaux herself, to whom I am most grateful.
- 2 See especially the books by Dupeux, Noirel and Hoggart in the Bibliography.
- 3 In this and other respects, *La Place* reworks material and themes which are to be found in all Annie Ernaux's novels. Each one starts from the same framework, the parents' *café-épicerie*, and explores the problems of adolescence, sexuality, education, professional life and marriage. There are noticeable differences, however: description is often more detailed than in *La Place*; the mother plays a much more important part and the female narrator is the central character in texts which are often systematically feminist. Flashback techniques may be used as in *La Place*, but the style, which seems to owe something to Céline (see *Voyage au bout de la nuit*), exploits varied forms of literary impressionism and indulges in noticeable shifts of focus. *La Place* is, however, different from the other works because of the emphasis it places on the father's death, problems of class and the difficulty of writing.
- 4 This is shown to be an artificial process. It illustrates Hoggart's comment: '[The scholarship boy whose education has lifted him out of his class-origin] becomes an expert imbibber and doler-out; his competence will vary, but will rarely be accompanied by genuine enthusiasms. He rarely feels the reality of knowledge . . . on his own pulses.' (*The Uses of Literacy*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1957, p. 246.)

- 5 The kind of personal experience the narrator describes is much more recent, however: 'the intellectual minority, [especially] during the latter part of the nineteenth century, used to stay within the working classes [much more] than it does today.' (Hoggart, op.cit., p. 279).
- 6 Other titles were 'L'expérience des limites', 'Signes', 'Images', 'La bonne voie', 'Distances'. All are worth analysing to find out the way in which they influence our reading of the novel.
- 7 S.C. in *Le Courrier Cauchois*, 16 June 1986.
- 8 Another possible intended reader is the narrator's father. This point is dealt with in the section on style.
- 9 It is useful to distinguish between subject and theme. The *subject* of a novel is the plot line, the story; its themes, on the other hand, are what is *implied* by the subject matter, the problems, types of behaviour and overall attitudes which the subject matter highlights. The subject of *Hamlet* is a man's attempt to avenge the murder of his father. One of its *themes* is the way action may be paralysed by too much thinking.
- 10 The narrator is living in south-east France, at the foot of the Alps, which is markedly different from lowland, northern, maritime Normandy.
- 11 If chronology had been respected the journey would have been placed between the Capes examination and her father's death.
- 12 Change is seen through the minor theme of religion - at each stage of the novel (see the themes of superstition, pilgrimages (p. 00), Lisieux, etc.) the narrator escapes although she is sent to a religious school.
- 13 I am using the word 'cultural' here in both its senses as defined (in the most relevant ways for us) by the *Trésor de la langue française*:
 - 1) Bien moral, progrès intellectuel, savoir à la possession desquels peuvent accéder les individus et les sociétés grâce à l'éducation, au divers organes de diffusion des idées, des oeuvres etc. 2) Mode-système de vie, civilisation, au sens de civilisations tenues pour des organismes autonomes et moriels.
- 14 In *La Place*, by exploring her relationship with her father, she attempts to reforge them.
- 15 See the final scene of the book.
- 16 Taking place in school, it implies that even in front of a group of maths students, this is Culture.

- 17 Ironically, the mother is closer to the daughter - she writes the letters; the father merely signs.
- 18 Francine de Martinot, *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, April 1984, p. 113.
- 19 This was according to the writer a barely conscious process.
- 20 Such repetition goes beyond obvious sociological values and gives the writing its literary coherence. It would be useful to consult the *Petit Robert* or better still the *Trésor de la langue française* to find out all the possible meanings and synonyms the word *place* may have in French.
- 21 Bernard Alliot, *Le Monde*, 13 November 1984.
- 22 Martinot, art.cit.
- 23 *ibid.*, p. 112.
- 24 Strategic notes which the text itself contains about the techniques it is using, as if it were giving itself instructions. See especially p. 00. Part of the novel is an explicit discussion of the way in which it should be written and subsequently a description of the experience of writing - 'j'écris lentement' (p. 00); 'aucun bonheur d'écrire' (p. 00); etc.
- 25 Quotations from Bourdieu clarify this point:

[l]a langue d'État devient la norme théorique à laquelle toutes les pratiques linguistiques sont objectivement mesurées. . . . Tout se passe comme si, en chaque situation particulière, la norme linguistique . . . était imposée par le détenteur de la compétence la plus proche de la compétence légitime. . . . La valeur naît toujours de l'écart, électif ou non, par rapport à l'usage le plus répandu, 'lieux communs' . . . tournures 'triviales' . . . langage 'recherché' etc. (P. Bourdieu, 1982, *Ce que parler veut dire*, Paris, Fayard, p. 27, 50, 77).
- 26 *ibid.*, p. 61.
- 27 *ibid.*, p. 53.
- 28 See p. 00: the father writes 'à prouver' instead of 'approuvé' - an involuntary comment on working-class suspicion of middle-class sharp practice. However, see Hoggart, op.cit., p. 269: 'People are not living lives which are imaginatively as poor as a mere reading of their literature would suggest.' It would be unfair to forget the importance of the handyman side of the father's character.
- 29 To see a novel purely as a recounting of 'real experiences', interesting only if you can spot the sources, is largely a waste of

- time. It implies that authors (like Shakespeare) whose lives are not well known cannot really be interesting.
- 30 More characteristic of *Paris-Normandie* than *La Place*. Autobiography itself is now seen as being a genre which has very clear narrative, fictionalizing procedures. See P. Lejeune (1975) *Le pacte autobiographique*, Paris, Seuil.
- 31 Her first novel *Les Armoires vides* was published in 1974.
- 32 We can see that *La Place* recounts parts of the story of how it came to be written. These are authentic autobiographical elements.
- 33 *La Place* is in one sense a *reworking* of themes found in Annie Ernaux's other works. See Notes to the text where this idea is developed.
- 34 In jettisoning these, Annie Ernaux creates something different from a novel in the normal sense of the term.
- 35 It is clear that a text of such varied complexity is of interest to a wide variety of readers. This explains why it has been translated into Russian, Bulgarian, Czech, Italian, Danish, German, and Dutch. Strangely, or perhaps significantly, it has not as yet been translated into either Spanish or English.
- 36 Yet again, the problem of 'la place'.
- 37 This points to the meaning of the quotation from Genet given at the beginning.
- 38 That is to say those forms of social behaviour which one attempts to suppress in order to hide one's origins both from others and from oneself.

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