

la caissière de la file où j'attendais avec mon caddie, une ancienne élève. C'est-à-dire que je me suis souvenue qu'elle avait été mon élève cinq ou six ans plus tôt. Je ne savais plus son nom, ni dans quelle classe je l'avais eue. Pour dire quelque chose, quand mon tour est arrivé, je lui ai demandé: «Vous allez bien? Vous vous plaisez ici?» Elle a répondu oui oui. Puis après avoir enregistré des boîtes de conserve et des boissons, avec gêne: «Le C.E.T., ça n'a pas marché.» Elle semblait penser que j'avais encore en mémoire son orientation. Mais j'avais oublié pourquoi elle avait été envoyée en C.E.T., et dans quelle branche. Je lui ai dit «au revoir». Elle prenait déjà les courses suivantes de la main gauche et tapait sans regarder de la main droite.

novembre 1982-juin 1983

NOTES TO THE TEXT

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- 49 **Epigraph:** see Annie Ernaux's own remarks in the Appendix.
- 51 **Capes:** 'Certificat d'aptitude au professorat de l'enseignement supérieur du second degré', teachers' training certificate. After obtaining their 'licence' (ès sciences, ès lettres - the equivalent of B.A., B.Sc.), prospective teachers take a one-year course ('l'année du Capes'). The examination is competitive and very tough, with a 1 in 12 to 15 pass rate, for example, in *Lettres Modernes*. It is made up of a number of written papers (depending on the subject) and an oral presentation in front of a panel of examiners ('un jury'). It is followed by a probationary year called the *Capes pratique* culminating in the model lesson we witness in this first scene. A certified teacher, at any level, is said to be 'certifié'. 'Titularisé' means that he/she holds a professional qualification - 'titulaire du Capes - hence 'titularisation'.
- 52 Passages, here and elsewhere, are separated by large blanks, even within episodes. The effect of this is to reduce events and reflections to brief fragments. This technique also points to the impressionistic, somewhat disjointed nature of the main character's experience,

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which is not part of a coherent story as might be the case in Balzac or Maupassant.

52 **Mon père est mort:** *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* offers a different view of the daughter's attitude to such events: 'j'ai peur quand ils sont malades, ils changent de visage, c'est comme s'ils étaient fous. Mon dieu faites que mes parents vivent jusqu'à ce que je sois mariée, que j'ai deux enfants, ce serait moins triste' (pp. 42-3).

Y . . . : this is a long-standing device, but it is not realistic: towns do not have names like that anywhere in the world. When a place name is not spelled out in a novel, a specific effect results: the author may suppress the name because he or she cannot bear to think specifically of that place; for the reader, however, the implication is that, because of the town's semi-anonymity, the events and emotions described become more universal. They are not by implication restricted to any one place. The same is true of characters: anonymous ones appear to be more typical than precisely named ones. **se taponnait** . . . : the unpleasant and embarrassing detail in the episode of the father's death has great point and purpose: it underlines the painful nature of the experience and stresses that the narrator is anxious to describe things with a minimum of cultural gloss or elegant style.

C'est fini: see p. 102.

53 **'Cache ta misère** . . . **Il est plus gentil comme ça**: the use of popular and regional speech serves a specific purpose throughout this novel: it offsets the middle-class language which the narrator has acquired and points to the growing contrast between her position in society and the 'place' of her parents, the difference between her instincts and what she has learned. See p. 58: 'L'écriture plate me vient naturellement', etc.

55 **fermé pour une heure**: yet another class detail - profits in working-class shops are so low that even for

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important events like funerals they cannot stay closed any longer than is strictly necessary.

Plus que jamais [mon mari] a paru déplacé ici: the awareness of class and cultural differences is achieved in this work not through abstract thought but directly through 'physical' situations. This is the way literature 'thinks about' experience.

On a dormi dans le seul lit à deux places, celui où mon père était mort: symbolically, and with strong sexual implications, the husband replaces the father. This compares interestingly with 'ma mère a éclaté en sanglots, comme le jour de mon mariage, à la messe' (p. 56). The most overt expression of loss creates an ironical link between funeral and marriage.

56 **livret de famille**: an official document which each family possesses. It contains especially details of births, deaths and marriages.

57 **école normale d'institutrices**: see note to p. 91. **voyageurs de première**: this contrasts with the short holidays and the parents' permanently open café. See p. 65, *their* constant fear: '*retomber ouvriers*'.

Par la suite, j'ai commencé un roman . . . : the work is not just about a particular experience; it is very importantly about the way that experience is narrated and thought about.

Depuis peu, je sais que le roman est impossible: Cf. Hoggart:

difficulties of definition are less troublesome than are those of avoiding the romanticisms which tempt anyone who discusses 'the workers' or 'the common people' We should avoid the impression of a sense of heroism in the people who actually live this kind of life. (*The Uses of Literacy*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1957, pp. 337)

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58 **L'histoire commence:** the sequence of events is strongly reorganized in this text. Situations are highlighted by taking them out of their chronological sequence: the opening scene is a case in point. The social history of twentieth-century France becomes significant only when the narrator's own experience has been pinpointed.

pays de Caux: in Normandy, between Rouen and the sea.

se louaient: italicized words, here and elsewhere, build up a whole vocabulary of family and working-class speech and psychology. See pp. 72, 95, etc. See also my remarks on 'notes de régime', p. 23.

mon père: note the unobtrusive way in which the main character's experience is introduced. Such a device shows him essentially as being representative of a social group.

59 **la semaine où les serviettes hygiéniques:** telling them whether the wife was pregnant or not. See below pp. 63, 100.

faux cult: a bustle; the French is more explicit, but the term, here, is in no sense crude - cf. 'pet-de-nonne'.

60 **Proust . . . Mauriac:** these novelists are especially significant because they represent literature preoccupied with serious problems (class, art, religion) - see the visit to the library. This is the kind of middle-class literature the father was never able to read and which offers no idea of the primitive peasant conditions in which he grew up. Hence the reference to the Middle Ages which in many senses - before the First World War, the extension of rail transport and the media, and the (albeit fragile) establishment of universal literacy - could be taken quite literally.

parvenaient au certificat: Certificat d'Etudes - primary-school leaving examination, normally taken at 13-14 years.

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61 **Le tour de la France par deux enfants, [Devoir et patrie - Livre d'instruction courante, Cours moyen]:** an immensely popular school-book in the form of an instructive novel. It was written at the end of the last century by G. Bruno and was still popular in the 1950s. The moral lessons it contains, samples of which are given (because they typify the mentality of a whole age), determined the attitudes of several generations of Frenchwomen and men (note the number of editions it ran to). The extracts contain sanctimonious attitudes to wealth and poverty which are barely relevant to the second half of the twentieth century - and thus point to the gap between the narrator's upbringing and that of her father.

62 **jusqu'au régiment:** military service, before the 1914-18 war, was compulsory (as it still is) and lasted seven years. See also p. 63.

La viande a été changée. Ce n'est pas le Cuirassé Potemkine: reference to a Russian film by Eisenstein in which a historic pre-Revolutionary revolt on a battleship is sparked off by the scandalous quality of the food.

l'almanach Vermont: a collection of rather clumsy funny stories.

Ce serait facile de faire quelque chose dans ce genre: these are the narrator's words. They are critical and point to too facile an option. They stress yet again the important theme of writing in *La Place*. See p. 57: 'Par la suite j'ai commencé un roman', etc.

63 Many social changes and outside influences are implied or symbolized by these details: American fashions (the yoyo), the progressive loss of regional character ('on buvait du vin'), the increasing importance of city habits and standards ('Dans les bals'), the contrasts between town and country, the wider experience which came with military service and the First World War. These

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facts underline the extent to which the novel is concerned with a broad notion of social change and not merely a narrowly individual one.

64

ni syndical ni politique: after the First World War, politics and trade-union activity became strongly polarized: these were the years of the growth of the communist trade unions, and of various extreme right-wing groups ('les Croix-de-feu', etc., see note to p. 67) which were to collaborate with the Germans during the occupation of France (1940-5). The father is popular with his employers because he is a 'good worker': he avoids all forms of political activity or trouble making.

de haut: this detail strengthens the sense of class divisions which are at the centre of the novel.

col à manger de la tarte: a wing collar which looks like a 'pelle à tarte'. The novel contains many period details which underline the sense of time and social change, as does the reference to Sarah Bernhardt (a famous late nineteenth-century actress).

65

ne pas s'oublier dans une femme: the implication being that the biggest threat to an ambitious working man is too many children. The problems of only children are not mentioned.

prendre un commerce: the frequent use of telegraphic style, normally made up of clichés, stresses the semi-articulate and cliché-ridden nature of the parents' experience as well as the narrator's fragmented recollections and her search for an unemotive style.

mise de fonds: the level of investment required.

retomber ouvriers: cf. Hoggart: 'cleanliness, thrift and self-respect arise more from a concern not to drop down, not to succumb to the environment, than from an anxiety to go up' (*The Uses of Literacy*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1957, p. 58).

66

L... à trente kilomètres du Havre: no doubt Lillebonne - such vagueness (which also extends to

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proper names) makes the narrator's experience much more universal. Cf. Y. . . .

Desgenétais . . . Boussac: respectively large regional and national textile manufacturers - a major traditional industry in northern France. The narrator describes typical after-school experience in the area.

Ils ont acheté le fonds à crédit: La Femme gelée, offers a view of similar details:

Le mien de père ne s'en va pas le matin, ni l'après-midi ni jamais. Il reste à la maison. Il sert au café et à l'alimentation, il fait la vaisselle, la cuisine, les épiluchages. Lui et ma mère vivent ensemble dans le même mouvement. . . . Les mêmes connaissances, les mêmes soucis, ce tiroir-caisse qu'il vide chaque soir, elle le regarde compter, ils disent, lui ou elle, 'c'est pas gras', d'autres fois, 'on a bien fait'. (pp. 16-17)

See too *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*, pp. 26-7.

la moins pire: a popular, highly 'ungrammatical' phrase. The different levels of language in this text characterize different social groups and sub-groups.

67

la Coop, [le] Familistère: major grocery stores dating from pre-supermarket, pre-war days. Such references firmly situate experience in an identifiable period.

Croix-de-Feu: an extreme right-wing organization made up of First World War veterans, much given to violent action. Contrast here with 'rouges'. The father is so non-political that he does not even belong to a trade union. Tradespeople have to be acceptable to all their customers. See note to p. 64.

68

36: 1936 - the date of the Front Populaire, an important symbolic moment in recent French politics, when major social reforms, including a fortnight's paid holiday a year (*les congés payés*), were achieved, and when

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working-class movements realized, albeit briefly, how powerful they could be.

69 **J'écris lentement:** the narrator's difficulties may be compared with the experiences recounted elsewhere:

Je sentais qu'il y avait quelque chose à écrire, contenu dans cette chambre, lié à ce décor, à ma vie connue, et les oiseaux qui fêtaient la pluie, et ces désirs. Comment faire, décrire la ville, le quartier, et puis moi, après, plus rien, nous ne sommes pas des personnages de roman, c'est assez visible et il ne m'arrive rien. . . . J'ai essayé malgré tout, et à la troisième personne, il me semblait que c'était plus tranquille, au cas où j'aurais eu des trucs délicats à dire. (*Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*, pp. 67-8)

70

du piège de l'individuel: the novel is about both a specific experience and the problems of writing about it – the inadequacy of language in recreating experience. The problem which faces all writers is that a great deal of experience is not verbal. Details must be chosen, others left out. All statements are biased – especially if they are given artificial coherence ('la trame significative'). Hence the narrator's deliberately disjointed style, the importance attached to the workings of memory and the rejection of all sentimentality – see p. 69 'le plaisir d'une complicité que je refuse'.

il est parti à bicyclette: this refers to the French defeat by the Germans in 1940 when large numbers of the population tried vainly to flee south from the advancing armies.

Pont-Audemer: half-way between Lisieux and Rouen. **Lisieux:** east of Caen. An important pilgrimage centre dedicated since the end of the nineteenth century to Sainte Thérèse; hence the basilica and 'ils croyaient être protégés'.

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71 **ces années-là:** the narrator stresses the 'survival' aspects of the Second World War: the parents' business and the population's real preoccupations. These details also bring out positive aspects of the father's character.

72 **La vie d'ouvrier de mon père:** this underlines the fact that social progress and change of class are common to all characters in the story – and not merely to the narrator.

Longtemps le centre est resté en ruine: the narrator uses major political events to contextualize her story, and points to the specific impact of major political events on her characters.

73 **Clientèle du dimanche:** clearly different from the weekday customers. The narrator here is pointing to the classic ways in which the café fits into French working-class life.

poussant la romance. . . . rincettes et surincettes: the inmates of the local old people's home are merry and tuneful – they sober up in one of the outhouses.

assommoir: from *assommer*, a boozier, where the drink knocks you out. Cf. Zola's novel of the same name. The term is not at all common nowadays. The narrator's distinctive use of this rare word shows that, in spite of her efforts, her vision is coloured by literary culture.

Voie étroite. . . . l'accompagne: the narrator is stressing the difficulties involved in writing a story which aims to recreate a social world without sneering at its values.

74 **4 CV: A Renault Quatre-Chevaux,** so named because it was rated at four horse-power for tax purposes; a cheap, small, low-powered (750cc) Renault car, produced in vast numbers in the early post-war years. The French equivalent of the Volkswagen or the Morris Minor. Still occasionally to be seen, but very much the symbol of that particular period.

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- 75 **les trois-huit des raffineries:** reference to shift work (trois fois huit heures).
les rats de la Vallée: the millgirls at L. . . -- see note to p. 66.
- 76 The change in decor symbolizes social values rejected and those which are sought after.
 For the lists of expressions attitudes and habits which the narrator gives, cf. Hoggart:

Surveys of working class life . . . convey the complex and claustrophobic impression which [it] makes on the observer . . . [that] of being immersed in an endless forest, full of the most minute detail, all of it different and yet all of it similar . . . we have to see beyond the habits to what habits stand for . . . to detect the differing pressure of emotion behind idiomatic phrases and ritualistic observances. (*The Uses of Literacy*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1957, p. 6).

'**il ne faut pas péter plus haut qu'on l'a:** 'i.e. 'son cul'. Once again the problem of one's station in life, here expressed in popular terms.

Bourvil: comic film actor. Some of his best-known films are: *La Vache et le prisonnier*, *La Traversée de Paris*, *La Grande Vadrouille*. His typical roles, significantly for this story, were naïve, often peasant heroes, out of their depth in middle-class contexts.

Bécassine: a Breton folk heroine with cartoon looks who figures in a large number of children's books. Bécassine is used in French to describe a girl who is naïve to the point of silliness: hence 'Quelle Bécassine!' . . . 'elle est un peu Bécassine'. But how many modern readers (including the more well-educated characters) know what *idem* means? Which is perhaps the point of the anecdote.

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- 77 **Proust:** author of *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1909-1922). An important character in this long novel is François. The narrator's attitude here to language is not aesthetic but related exclusively to class differences.
- 78 **sente:** 'péter de santé'. 'Péter' is less vulgar in French than its English equivalent.
faire évoluée: a key expression in the novel: the characters' 'linguistic' problems neatly extend those of the narrator: language is a central problem both in writing and in social relations. One might stress the importance of the mother - class mobility comes much more from the mother than the father: new fashions; fonds de commerce (pp. 66, 71, 72), etc. 'C'était une femme qui pouvait aller partout. . . franchir les barrières sociales' - nevertheless she keeps the morality of her origins (p. 64) and is half out of date even when young - she looks like Sarah Bernhardt.
- 79 **le pont de Tancarville:** 29 km from Le Havre, a massive toll bridge (built in the early post-war period) which links Normandy north of the Seine to the motorway network ('autoroute de l'ouest').
- Bouglione:** a well-known continental circus.
- Tati:** Jacques Tati, film actor (died 1984), well known for his gentle satire of modern life. His best-known films include *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot*, *Mon oncle*, *Playtime* and *Trafic*.
- René Clair:** film director (died 1981), active for over half a century. Amongst his most famous films are *Le Jour se lève*, *Le Million*, *Sous les toits de Paris*, *Les Grandes Manoeuvres*. As elsewhere, the main character's experience belongs to the past, just like that of her parents. She cannot 'faire évoluée' either.
- blockhaus:** concrete defences built on the Channel coast by the Germans during their occupation of France (1940-5).

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80 **C'est un homme de la campagne:** stresses the mother's social pretensions (see comes from the town), and the gap she has set up between herself and her origins.

Opinel: a well-known make of clasp-knife.

81 **il a mangé de la soupe le matin:** a peasant habit.

le dégoûtant: the narrator is using these concrete details to present a picture of her father which is not based on psychology but rather on actual habits. The constant problem is in knowing to what extent such a portrait may reach beyond a mere list of class traits.

CM2: 'Cours Moyen deuxième année'. Final primary-school class. Pupils in this class are about 10 years old. After it, they go on to secondary school, where the lowest form is called 'sixième'.

82 **Vedette . . . DS . . . CX:** see above, p. 113, the reference to a 4CV. Three recent models of cars are mentioned here, the first by Simca, the last two by Citroën. They stand, like Jaguars, as a symbol of financial success. The first DS came out in the mid-1950s and the model was used by government ministers until quite recently when it was replaced by CXs. The narrator uses makes of cars as markers of changing social situations and values.

Sans aucune importance: For the parents' aggressive speech habits see Hoggart:

working-class speech and manners in conversation are more abrupt, less provided with emollient phrases than those of other groups; their arguments are often conducted in so rude a way that a stranger might well think that after this, fighting would follow, and at best a permanent ending of relations. (*The Uses of Literacy*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1957, p. 66).

l'extrême gentillesse: *Les Armoires vides*, pp. 61-2, gives another view of a working-class narrator's attitude to middle-class friends:

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Je me sentais lourde, poisseuse, face à leur aisance, à leur facilité, les filles de l'école libre. J'enlevais le gros gilet de laine que ma mère m'avait fait enfiler en plein mois d'avril. Je croyais sortir de ma lourdeur, de ma grossièreté, je n'étais pas Jeanne pour autant. Il me manquait tout le reste, flottant autour d'elle, la grâce, le truc invisible Mais je ne faisais pas le rapport. Je croyais que sa légèreté, ses moqueries alertes, étaient de purs dons.

83 **Puis je me suis aperçue . . . déchiffrement:** the book is in one important sense about the ability of language to define reality. The narrator's decision to define her father's personality through gesture and habit, and her problems, as here, with middle-class discourse reveal two aspects of the problem.

pose des colles: ask awkward, technical questions, in revision for example. Cf. 'se faire coller/coller' - to fail an exam.

Laputa: this reference, significantly, would not have been understandable to her father.

84 **Souvent, sérieux:** this telegraphic style is another attempt at stopping language getting in the way of reality.

composition . . . examen: the two terms distinguish between school and public examinations (e.g. BEPC, baccalauréat). Public examinations, like university ones, have changed a great deal with successive governments. The student demonstrations in December 1986 show that this is likely to continue.

magasins . . . reconstruits: after the massive destruction which took place in France after the Normandy landings in 1944-5.

Poujade: right-wing politician who defended small businesses. He founded the Union de défense des commerçants et artisans de France (UDCA,

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'mouvement Poujade' or 'poujadiste'). He had a large following especially in the mid-1950s.

85 **plaisanteries rodées**: more specifically, the ones quoted are catch-phrases.

les Buissonnets . . . **Trouville-Deauville**: holiday towns on the Normandy coast, near Lisieux, on the opposite side of the Seine estuary from Le Havre.

86 **Je travaillais mes cours**: *La Femme gelée*, p. 96, offers a much more feminist view of a narrator's education:

Je lis, Sartre, Camus, naturellement. Comme les problèmes de robes et de rancarts foirés me paraissent mesquins. Lectures libératrices qui m'éloignent définitivement du feuilleton et roman pour femmes. . . . Que faire de sa vie, la question n'a pas de sexe, la réponse non plus. . . . Je le crois naïvement l'année du bac.

Both *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* and *Les Armoires vides* are novels about the process of feminine conditioning. **J'émigre** . . . : This is an important passage in the novel. Social mobility is often associated with geographical mobility. This is true of the daughter as it had been of her parents.

Luis Mariano: a sentimental musical-comedy singer.

Marie-Anne Desmaretz, Daniel Gray: writers of Mills and Boon-type novelettes. The narrator is not necessarily wrong. Cf. Hoggart:

Most mass-entertainments are in the end what D.H. Lawrence described as 'anti-life'. They are full of corrupt brightness, of improper appeals and moral evasions . . . a view of the world in which progress is conceived as a seeking of material possessions, equality as moral levelling and freedom as the ground for endless irresponsible pleasure. (*The Uses*

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of *Literacy*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1957, p. 282).

Henri de Régnier: a late nineteenth-century poet. He will be quoted later in a middle-class context. Now very much out of date, which is understandable given the pompous silliness of this quotation.

les cours: *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*, p. 147, offers a different view of school:

Ce défilé de profs pétulants, toujours, au début, m'a étourdi. . . . Je n'ai jamais été à l'aise avec les profs, même les plus aimables je me méfie, encore le premier jour on peut se faire minuscule, leurs yeux papillonnent sur tout le monde.

Les Armoires vides, pp. 57-8 etc., offers a different, more detailed view of school life. See too *La Femme gelée*, p. 57.

dirlo: slang for 'Directeur (de lycée)'.
Et toujours la peur OU PEUT-ÊTRE LE DÉSIR . . . :

because of the realization that success will separate her from him.

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ne pas prendre un ouvrier: as a husband.

ma mère: except at the beginning and end of the account, the mother is given significantly little attention. This underlines the father's central importance.

rue du Gros-Horloge: main street in Rouen, with expensive shops and medieval buildings, now a pedestrian precinct.

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Paris-Normandie: important regional newspaper for northern France, now extinct. This brief scene clearly distinguishes the father from his daughter.

philo: former name for what used to be the elite final-year class (arts stream) at secondary school, in which, traditionally, philosophy was taught. Baccalaureat stream courses are now prefixed by a letter. 'C' (maths)

is now the most sought after. The arts stream (literature and languages) is 'A' or 'B', depending on subject combinations. Final-year classes at school are called 'Terminale A', 'Terminale C', etc.

J'écris peut-être parce qu'on n'avait plus rien à se dire: this is what the previous paragraph implies. See the initial quotation from Genet. *La Place* is essentially a novel about communication between individuals and the way in which education and promotion may isolate people and groups from each other. Ironically, the text which the narrator produces would most probably have been equally inaccessible to her father.

Le quartier s'est prolétarisé: this element strengthens the general themes of the novel: the development and diversification of the working classes, and working-class living conditions after the narrator's parents have settled into a fixed pattern of life.

familles nombreuses: a traditionally favoured section of French society (since the mass carnage of the First World War). They are entitled to high family allowances, cheap transport and priority housing. See Christiane Rochefort's novel *Les petites enfants du siècle*, which tells of the working-class life of a bright girl who, in spite of her efforts, cannot ultimately escape the poverty trap into which she was born.

d'une H.L.M.: (generally masculine) 'habitations à loyer modéré - low-rent council flats built on a large scale in the 1950s and 1960s.

Je me me sentais plus le droit d'entrer à l'Université: one of the novel's themes is class betrayal by the rising generation. To go to university, which effectively cuts a son or a daughter from his or her roots, may be seen as one form of betrayal. It is significant that this conclusion comes from a physical impression rather than any abstract reasoning. The daughter feels

she has no right to go to university when her father is tied to his shop.

sécurité sociale: the French equivalent of the national health service. Not as generous as the British version. The patient pays and then applies for a refund, which is normally about 75 per cent. Prescriptions are reimbursed by putting the small stickers (*vignettes*) found on the medicine packets on to the repayment application form.

Plusieurs sens peut-être: perhaps implying his sexual inadequacy.

la guerre d'Algérie: war of independence (1956-62). Before the French colony gained independence after the 1962 Evian talks and treaty, the extreme right carried out a military take-over (April 1962), 'le putsch des généraux', which lasted barely a weekend. Then, killer groups (l'OAS: Organisation de l'Armée Secrète) operating both in Algeria and metropolitan France, organized a campaign of murder and intimidation in an attempt to resist an outcome which was, however, inevitable. They were no match for their main opponent, de Gaulle, 'le grand Charles', President of the Fifth Republic from 1959 to 1969.

école normale [d'instituteurs/d'institutrices]: four-year training school (normally residential) for primary-school teachers (cf. p. 51 Capes); trainee teachers are called 'élève-maîtresses' or 'élèves-maîtres'. At the time of the narrative, they began their training at 15, did their baccalauréat ('A' levels) and then had one year's teacher training. At present future teachers pass their baccalauréat, study for two years at University (obtaining a *Diplôme d'études universitaires générales* - Deug) and only then spend two years at an Ecole Normale d'Instituteurs. Afterwards they may complete their degree (by doing the third year, 'année de licence').

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Granville: at the base of the Cherbourg peninsula – a long way for a day trip. The parents' world is normally much more restricted, and this is expressed geographically, as well as in other ways. Neither Paris nor Le Havre play any part in the novel. The only major town is Rouen, the local préfecture.

92 **Letres modernes:** a degree course ('cours de licence') which includes French and a modern language.

boursière: grants for study are hard to come by in France. They are usually available only to university students who belong to working-class 'familles norm-breuses' or to students committed subsequently to working for the state in institutions like the 'Grandes Ecoles' ('Polytechnique', 'Ecole Nationale d'Administration', 'Ecole Normale Supérieure', etc.), 'Ecoles Normales d'Instituteurs/Institutrices', or students working for the Capes, which is the case of the narrator.

93 **opaque:** the parents' stereotyped ('idéale') and deferential view of the isolationism and secretiveness which in their view typifies the middle classes.

mes amies: the way in which the narrator's family receives her friends and the way in which she herself is received mark a further stage in the novel's plot as well as a reinforcement of its central theme. Like so many other elements it is both syntagmatic (concerning the plot) and paradigmatic (relating to themes, etc.).

comme ça va-ti: popular attempt at the formal, 'correct' 'comment cela va-t-il?' which no one uses. The normal form is, of course, 'comment ça va?'

94 **de ses mains:** this stresses the difference between two cultures, one mechanical, the other essentially intellectual. Ironically, the father thinks that he can make contact with his future son-in-law by showing him what he has built.

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Au repas . . . les plats: it is striking that the narrator's engagement and marriage are told exclusively from the father's point of view. The narrator's sexual experience here as elsewhere is barely touched on. This is very different from Annie Ernaux's other novels: *Les Armoires vides* and *La Femme gelée* are very largely centred on adolescent sexual preoccupations.

tout . . . est très bien: in *La Place* the narrator distances herself from events – her preoccupation is with her father's experience – not directly, but as seen through her eyes. Which means that we do not really know whether what she says about him is accurate.

certainne qu'il ne s'amusait pas: this is ambiguous – the narrator could be wrong.

95 **une ville touristique des Alpes:** the links with other works by Annie Ernaux suggest that this might be Anancy. See *La Femme gelée*.

The social habits and tastes described here and in subsequent pages (types of wallpaper, radio programmes, etc.) are both middle class for the period (the 1960s) and old-fashioned for present-day readers. See below: the reference to aftershave. The working-class reaction would no longer be 'je vais sentir la cocotte!' – which shows how constant the process of social change is and how old-fashioned the narrator has herself become by the time she starts writing. The way she tells the story of her father is, on the other hand, very modern.

Note the expressions 'bourgeoisie à diplômes', 'constamment "ironique"', 'conversation spirituelle' – and the way this contrasts with the idea of 'braves gens'.

une conversation spirituelle: cf. 'les discours ne sont pas seulement . . . des signes destinés à être compris . . . ce sont aussi des signes de richesse destinés à être évalués . . . et des signes d'autorité, destinés à être crus et obéis.' They are forms of 'domination

symbolique' (P. Bourdieu 1982) *Ce que parler veut dire*, Paris, Fayard, pp. 60, 68.

Les discours savants peuvent tenir leur efficacité de la correspondance cachée entre la structure de l'espace social dans lequel ils sont produits, champ politique, champ religieux, champ artistique [etc.] et la structure du champ des classes sociales dans laquelle les récepteurs sont situés et par rapport à laquelle ils interprètent le message. (ibid., p. 19).

Vers de Sully Prud'homme: this late nineteenth-century poem is called 'Le vase brisé'. Literary culture as an everyday way of describing one's own experience is much more characteristic of middle-class than of working-class behaviour. But it is as cliché-ridden, and therefore as 'unreal', as the stereotypes of working-class culture.

des corps glorieux: 'corps des bienheureux après la Résurrection' - washed of all their defects (*Petit Robert*).

«a» pour «elle»: this pronunciation is peculiar to Normandy.

Je me sentais séparée de moi-même: a good example of alienation, the strong feeling of fragmented, divided and contradictory personality. The end-product of the narrator's experience: she belongs neither to her original class nor to the new one she has entered by marriage and education. The parents are alienated too from their family origins. Hence the intermittent hostility of their relations.

96 **malabars:** bubble-gum.

97 This break in the text stresses the central experience and theme of memory and writing. With the present tense in the following paragraph ('Je vais prendre un train', etc.), it shows that the father's death intervenes whilst the story is being written. The relationship between the

time of action and the time of writing is complex, adding to the sense of direct, 'natural' experience. This passage (and the writing of this passage) takes place before the events described at the beginning. See p. 102 and my Introduction, p. 29.

l'Oise toute proche: most references in the novel are to La Basse Normandie, between Rouen and the Channel coast. This allusion to a river which joins the Seine much further east, at Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, dislocates true geography and has the effect of fictionalizing, and therefore generalizing, the experience.

la réalité oubliée de sa condition: this stresses the father's role in the book as a class type.

Je vais prendre un train: the chronology of the story is disrupted here. One effect of this sudden future is to block off the final episode.

je leur amène leur petit-fils: very little is said about the narrator's child. This contrasts with, say, *La Femme gelée*, pp. 144-5, where much angry detail is devoted to his birth and upbringing:

c'est un garçon. L'éclair d'un petit lapin décarpillé, un cri. Souvent après, je me suis repassé le film, j'ai cherché le sens de ce moment. Je souffrais, j'étais seule et brutalement ce petit lapin, le cri, tellement inimaginable une minute avant. . . . Restait l'élevage. Pouponner, disaient-elles, la logeuse, ma belle-mère. Gracieux, pouponner, joujou, risette dodo enfant do. Trop énorme pour y croire. Je découvre la journée rythmée par six change et six biberons, la bonne volonte n'y a rien fait, mon lait a séché en dix jours.

And so on. A different approach is found in *Les Armoires vides*, centred on the story of an abortion.

Ma mère attendait à la barrière de sortie: *Les Armoires vides*, p. 110, gives a different view of things:

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J'ai toujours horreur d'aller les voir. Ça commence sitôt que je descends du train . . . Pendant des années, j'ai rêvé qu'ils déménageraient, qu'ils iraient travailler je ne sais où, à l'usine, j'aurais préféré. Tous les cartons entassés devant la porte, c'est à l'odeur que je reconnais ce qu'il y a eu dedans, huile, lessive, sucre, infailible.

See too *La Femme gelée*, p. 17.

elle ne teint plus: the mother stops dyeing her hair when the narrator gets married. She then automatically assumes her 'sexless' role of grandmother.

98 **Ils ont cherché de quel côté il était:** this indicates a desire to maintain family links, to fight against the break **un moment qui ressemblait à un rachat:** an important point; the family returns to some kind of unity, but only briefly.

à peine branché . . . : signs of change, decay and the passage of time are given very economically. Note that the narrator's tastes have changed too.

99 **Le docteur est monté:** the theme of doctors is present in other novels by Annie Ernaux:

Il est venu le soir, ce vieux singe à roulettes de Louvel, le docteur. Il me fait peur maintenant, il m'agacait seulement. Il roule en 2 CV, pas fier pour un rond, il paraît. Ce qui me dégoutait déjà, c'était ce qui se passait entre lui, ma mère et moi. . . . Il s'adresse à mes parents sur un air de moquerie supérieure, et ils n'ont jamais eu l'air de s'en apercevoir. (*Ce qu'il disent ou rien*, pp. 43-4)

See too the 'avortreuse' in *Les Armoires vides*, pp. 11-12, 57.

L'Hôtel-Dieu de Rouen: the main hospital. The Paris hospital on the Ile de la Cité is also called l'Hôtel-Dieu, recalling the religious orders which once worked there.

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100 **C'est un pet de travers:** instead of telling the family exactly what was wrong, the doctor, a member of the privileged classes, normally uses the language of the social group he is dealing with. Such condescension disappears when the father's condition becomes serious. **tomber enceinte:** the episode of the father's death, like earlier risks of pregnancy, reveals how difficult it is for the members of the family (the class?) to communicate directly and explicitly.

101 **Les Mandarins de Simone de Beauvoir:** a cult existentialist novel, published in 1954, which explores the moral and political dilemmas of the intelligentsia in post-war France. It is therefore a significant novel for the narrator to be reading at that time, especially given her background and the circumstances. By her choice of reading material, she effectively shows how far she wishes to distance herself from her parents' life and attitudes.

102 **C'est fini:** this brings us back to p. 52 and further stresses the story's circular construction.

Le commerce n'existe plus: Yet another sign of the impermanence of things and attitudes - and the way in which the same things can take on a totally new meaning and function.

A . . . D . . . 1899-1967: See the name of the town Y . . . - the father is not named either, with similar implications.

J'ai fini de mettre au jour l'héritage: this resumes one central theme in the novel. But not the only one: the changes in the parents' class attitudes, and their social/political context are also very important.

Un dimanche: this flashback and subsequent descriptions exemplify a typical aspect of the novel: the attempt to use precise examples to point, not so much to some general fact, but rather in a fragmented way to essential features in the attitudes and events described

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which could not be evoked in another way.

103 The choice of the two novels is significant: a harmless, early nineteenth-century classic for the daughter; a spicy tale, again by an Establishment writer, for the father. This lame search for some sort of cultural common ground is not repeated.

Passéur entre deux rives: the working-class/small shopkeeper father taking his daughter to high school ferries her like a boatman between two cultures. There is the hint here too of a Classical (and therefore middle-class) reference: to Charon who in Greek mythology ferried the dead to hell. This suggests the degree of cultural stunting thus inflicted on the daughter.

C'est l'aviron qui nous mène en rond: a traditional French song – perhaps less well known to post-war generations.

L'Expérience des limites: a work by Philippe Sollers. The last few pages of the book crumble into a series of isolated fragments, and show the way in which the narrator's memory of her father functions. It piles up disjointed details in a (vain?) attempt to seize the whole personality. The tension between her origins and the new class to which she belongs is still present. The last paragraph of the novel points to the existence of other career patterns, and different kinds of failure within the same basic social framework, but evolving with the general evolution of society. This contrasts strongly with the *success story* narrated in the book's opening paragraphs. For children of a generation later than that of the narrator, 'les C.E.T.' ('Collèges d'Enseignement Technique') are generally seen as a trap which forces the children of manual-class parents into manual jobs. See Pascal Lainé's *L'Irrévolutions*, Paris, Gallimard, 1977. **L'année dernière:** the narrator's indifference to her pupil's fate is significant of the sense of individual isolation and continuing betrayal which runs through the whole of this work.