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# Past, Present and Passion Tense in Annie Ernaux's Passion simple

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Past, Present and Passion Tense in Annie Ernaux's  
*Passion simple*<sup>1</sup>

Annie Ernaux's *Passion simple*<sup>2</sup> (1991) is a contemporary text which fuses both progressive and traditionalist elements. On the one hand, in this story of passion, sexuality and writing, Ernaux experiments with narrative strategies and grammatical patterns in an effort to seek new ways of expressing the life of a contemporary woman. On the other hand, she depicts a heroine caught up in traditional societal conventions which have long denied equality to women. Writing in the first-person autobiographical mode, Ernaux reconsiders typical female trajectories by re-examining the adulterous plot and re-writing the fate of Madame Bovary to fit contemporary standards.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite the fact that the narrator/protagonist<sup>4</sup> seems to live out personal and sexual freedom, the reader has the nagging notion that beneath a facade of independence is a woman somewhat uncomfortable with her choices. The traditional and stereotypical female role haunts her, and seems to prevent her from fully embracing personal liberation. Textual tensions and inconsistencies in this autobiographical narrative seem to reflect Ernaux's struggles: to both revamp the heroine at a moment in which expectations of women protagonists are varied and contradictory, and to break new narrative ground in order to express women's complex, modern realities.

Ernaux finds in the autobiographical form the flexibility needed to examine contradictory aspects of the self and of writing. While postmodern theorists have questioned and complicated the definition of the 'self', for example, Ernaux and other women writers in particular are also re-examining the parameters of a 'life'. Ernaux depicts in this text one scene in a life rather than recounting a complete autobiography from childhood to adulthood.<sup>5</sup>

Similar to other recent publications which depict significant episodes in a life, this story also implicitly asks whether and how this historical moment is representative.<sup>6</sup> The narrator remembers important events which coincide with her liaison with her lover, who is called A. and who comes from "un pays de l'Est" (32), such as the fall of the Berlin wall and the murder of Ceausescu. Including these historical moments serves a dual purpose: it lends authenticity to the story, and at the same time it validates this woman's experience in the

still male-dominated world of history and politics.<sup>7</sup> What is common to the personal narrative and to the brief chronicle of societal changes in *Passion simple* are the themes of liberation and freedom.

Political uprisings in the East, however, are secondary to the storyline. Ernaux's *éducation sentimentale* is perhaps in part a modern feminine version of the romantic education of Flaubert's Frédéric Moreau. Ernaux expresses her admiration for the nineteenth-century author in an interview: "(J)'ai vraiment une très très grande admiration (pour Flaubert) et (j)'ai été) très très profondément marquée par *L'Éducation sentimentale*" (Epron 2: 10). Richard Terdiman explains that in *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1869), for example, Frédéric witnesses the street demonstrations at the start of the insurrection in February 1848, yet rather than join the revolutionaries, he hides and waits for his beloved with whom he has arranged a rendez-vous (709). Terdiman elaborates:

The novel reproduces this sense that the action of the revolution happens *alongside* the concerns of its characters, but never engages them directly . . . The 'outside' world of social existence is there—*outside*. But it seems to have nothing to do with the inner drama of 'feeling' (*sentiment*) that is played. . . (709)

Likewise, the all-consuming passion of Ernaux's protagonist in *Passion simple* dictates that the political transformations in the former Eastern block and turmoil in the Middle East (The Gulf War is cited briefly toward the end of the text) can only have a secondary impact; the heroine is first and foremost living a romance.

Ernaux continues to fuse the post-modern and the traditional in her choice of narrative structure and voice. She adopts contemporary techniques in autobiographical writing, for example, in her avoidance of conventional chronological organization. In *Passion simple*, we encounter the same structural pattern found in her previous works, such as *La Place* (1984) and *Une Femme* (1988), where the narrator moves from the moment of loss of a loved one to the reconstruction of the past. Writing allows the narrator to reflect on the events and illusions of her relationship, and also to grieve the loss of the beloved. It fills a void and enables the loved one to live on in memory. In *Passion simple*, the reconstruction is not a "biographical" one, as in *Une*

*Femme* and *La Place*, but rather the recreation of this couple's passionate liaison from the female perspective. The text is a woman's meditation, reflection, and lyrical moment.

Ernaux also avoids a strict distinction between "the time of experience" and the "time of writing" (Starobinski 85); there is a blurring of boundaries between past and present, between the protagonist who lived out the affair and the narrator who retells it. This is fitting given the fact that A. is still very present in the narrator's mind and memory. We are given pieces of information about the lover throughout the story. For example, we learn on page sixty that he left two months before the narrator began writing (yet she can't recall the exact date). We don't learn his age until the end of the text. Ernaux also uses indentation, which sometimes, but not consistently, separates past activities related to the protagonist's lover from the present moment of inscription.<sup>8</sup> The indented portions of the work consist mainly of fragments. A lack of punctuation in these fragments gives the impression that such "bits of memory" – buying whiskey and almonds for the evenings the lovers would spend together, trying on lingerie in front of the mirror, feeling mesmerized by Edith Piaf and Sylvie Vartan's songs on the radio – constantly return to the narrator's mind. Ernaux writes for example:

A partir du mois de septembre l'année  
dernière, je n'ai plus rien fait d'autre  
qu'attendre un homme . . . Les seules  
actions où j'engageais ma volonté  
. . . avaient toutes un lien avec cet  
homme:

lire dans le journal les articles  
sur son pays (il était étranger).  
choisir des toilettes et des  
maquillages  
lui écrire des lettres  
changer les draps du lit et  
et mettre des fleurs dans la chambre  
(13-14)

We note that the use of parentheses in the above passage, a technique which continues throughout the text, also allows the narrator to interject impressions and interpretations of past experiences. The juxtaposition between the main text and the "text within a text" points to a double nature which is in fact characteristic of the entire work (conventional/modern; past/present).

Although Ernaux is innovative in structure, she still employs a traditional first-person narration. There is no fluxuation between *je* and *elle*, so characteristic of contemporary female autobiographers. We rarely hear, in fact, any other perspective. We have at the same time, then, a very conventional narrative voice coupled with deliberately non-traditional narrative structure and strategies.

The creative excitement of writing is frequently set in an analogous relationship to sexual fervor in the work: "Il m'a semblé que l'écriture devrait tendre à cela, cette impression que provoque la scène de l'acte sexuel" (12); "Souvent, j'avais l'impression de vivre cette passion comme j'aurais écrit un livre" (23). Ernaux attempts to capture amorous fever in words. Critics note that "l'adultère tel quel, pour le moment, reste un thème technique un peu désuet. Mais il y a la passion brute qui se risquerait brusquement . . . dans la folle aventure du plaisir" (de Biasi 60). *Passion simple* is not overly graphic in its treatment of sexuality, outside of a limited number of scenes, but raw sexuality as a theme is discussed, and this still captures the interest of contemporary readers. Ernaux accumulates "signes d'une passion, oscillant sans cesse entre 'toujours' et 'un jour' . . ." (31), underscoring the relationship between written signs and physical ones, and the transcendent nature of her liaison which lives on in this text and in memory.

The constraints of rendering life experiences and love experiences into writing, and the problematics of communication in autobiography, include the attempt to stabilize moments which have no beginning and no end. Ernaux's effort to break out of temporal boundaries is illustrated in several ways. The narrator recounts certain dreams, for example, which manifest the subconscious desire to eliminate the past/present distinctions: "Dans mes rêves, il y avait aussi ce désir d'un temps réversible. Je parlais et me disputais avec ma mère (décédée), redevenue vivante, mais je savais dans mon rêve- et elle aussi- qu'elle avait été morte" (59). Ernaux also experiments with what she calls "le temps de la passion" (66), a tense which embodies and expresses amorous desire, and which is outside of/beyond past and present. We read, "Je suis

toujours dans le temps de la passion (puisque un jour je ne constaterai plus que je n'ai pas pensé à A. en me réveillant), mais ce n'est plus le même, il a cessé d'être continu" (66). She includes a footnote to this last phrase which reads: "Je passe de l'imparfait, ce qui était-mais jusqu'à quand?-, au présent-mais depuis quand?- faute d'une meilleure solution" (66). She finally affirms: "Le temps de l'écriture n'a rien à voir avec celui de la passion" (61). Her quite innovative "passion tense" reflects an effort to break out of grammatical and narrative boundaries. It is an attempt to manipulate and liberate writing which is oftentimes limited.

The image of the woman in love, consumed by thoughts of her man, can be read in two ways. On the one hand, it seems to contradict many feminist ideals of autonomy and independence. On the other hand, the sexually liberated modern woman can enjoy intimate relationships without guilt. Other contemporary writers, such as Marie Didier, take up similar themes, and also challenge a conventional, often judgemental reading of the amorous plot. For example, in *La Mise à l'écart*, Didier depicts a woman "controlled" by her passion for a lover, and yet seemingly in control of her life as she maintains this relationship by choice. Yet once again the true degree of the heroine's autonomy remains questionable—at the end of the story the reader is left uncertain about the future of this woman's liaison. Furthermore, Didier's use of a third-person narration results in a less convincing portrayal of agency.<sup>9</sup>

Ernaux's representation of the self through a relationship with a man may also be explained by the common female practice of defining and writing oneself in relation to others. This has been analyzed in detail by feminist theorists such as Nancy Chodorow.<sup>10</sup> This connectedness to another which frequently informs women's writing is quite common in the works of other modern women autobiographers such as Marie Cardinal and Marguerite Duras.

Still, something in Ernaux's text points to a tension, an underlying *dependence* which troubles her: "Je ne veux pas expliquer ma passion—cela reviendrait à la considérer comme une erreur ou un désordre dont il faut se justifier—mais simplement l'exposer" (32, emphasis mine). I read Ernaux's refusal to explain or justify her passion, and her desire "simply to expose," along with the "simple" in her title, as a subconscious guilt for fashioning her protagonist into a "traditional" female posture in many respects. Other statements signal a similar discomfort with the story presented to the reader. Although the work preserves and immortalizes A., along with the relationship

the protagonist had with him, in writing, we read: "je n'ai pas écrit un livre sur lui, ni même sur moi. J'ai seulement rendu en mots—qu'il ne lira sans doute pas, qui ne lui sont pas destinés—ce que son existence, par elle seule, m'a apporté" (76-77, emphasis mine). The narrator's repetition of what she is *not doing* seems to point to a desire to repress aspects of the story which she refuses to confront.

Freud's study on "Negation" sheds light on Ernaux's repeated denials (19: 235-39). According to Freud, certain ideas or images that have been repressed can begin to make their way into consciousness, "on the condition that (they are) *negated*" (19: 235). He explains that "(n)egation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed; indeed it is already a lifting of the repression though not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed" (19: 235-36). To my mind, Ernaux's continual renunciation of the notion that A. is one subject of her text, or the destined recipient of it, is the first step (through negation) toward recognizing his essential presence in her writing and her memory. The effort to repress A.'s sustained emotional impact, and the desire to force him completely into the past, indeed into the past historic or preterite tense which is echoed in Ernaux's title, is an incomplete and impossible attempt. The "passé simple" is the tense which is absent in *Passion simple*. We read: "L'imparfait que j'ai employé spontanément dès les premières lignes est celui d'une durée que je ne voulais pas finie, celui de 'en ce temps-là la vie était belle,' d'une répétition éternelle" (61). Perhaps Ernaux's inability to sever herself entirely from A., and her aborted desire to write of him in the "passé simple" is another impetus for her to break out of grammatical barriers and seek a new tense beyond past and present, the "passion tense" outside of writing. The narrator continues to express contradictory emotions as she approaches the completion of her text. She writes, for example:

Je ne ressens naturellement aucune honte à noter ces choses, à cause du délai qui sépare le moment où elles s'écrivent, où je suis seule à les voir, de celui où elles seront lues par les gens et qui, j'ai l'impression, n'arrivera jamais. (42)

Yet some twenty pages later toward the end of the text, she writes of her difficulty in abandoning it, and of the anxiety of the approaching publication date: "Maintenant . . . je regarde les pages écrites avec étonnement et une sorte

de honte, jamais ressentie—au contraire—en vivant ma passion, pas davantage en la relatant” (69). The “Maintenant” of the above passage brings us to the moment of writing, and the distance between the protagonist and the narrator emphasizes the fact that the latter is speaking from a position of experience, learning, and a perhaps modified vision of her romance. Pierre-Marc de Biasi notes: “. . . par malheur le livre est très bavard sur cette dimension personnelle des choses, et sur la mise en abyme de sa propre publication. Paradoxalement c’est cette véracité autobiographique qui rend le livre profondément faux” (62). Why does the liberated woman Ernaux designs in *Passion simple* seem to so many of us unbelievable?

In my correspondence with Annie Ernaux, I solicited her comments on this study and gained insight into the writing of *Passion simple*. She in fact struggles with the distinction between a memoir written for herself alone and the public perception of the published work. Her apprehension also seems to stem from an uncertainty regarding why this book needed to be written. In her letter to me, she states: “J’ai écrit ce livre, mue par un désir, une nécessité dont les tenants et les aboutissements ne me sont pas vraiment clairs.” Concerning the reception to the text, Ernaux writes that two “uses” emerge: “l’un—pour les femmes le plus souvent—de déculpabilisation, l’autre—hommes et femmes—d’aveu: lis ce livre que je t’offre, tu me comprendras.” The work is hence ultimately offered to the public, and that offering is an attempt to communicate. It is not an attempt “simply to expose” her passion (32, trans. mine) but an effort to console and to teach. Frustration occurs, perhaps, in the awareness that words will not express her perception of her experience, and with public consumption she is no longer the sole reader and/or critic of her writing. We find such themes in the text as well. The protagonist meditates upon the fact that her lover does not speak French perfectly, and that she cannot communicate in his original language, and yet: “j’ai admis que cette situation m’épargnait l’illusion de croire à une parfaite communication, voire fusion, entre nous” (36). A parallel misinterpretation exists between Ernaux and her readers, one which is limited by “l’à peu près des échanges de paroles” (36).

In earlier texts, Ernaux placed much greater emphasis on social issues and class difference. In an interview conducted in 1987, for example, she states:

. . . la différence entre je nomme et je femme écrivain est sûrement

moins importante qu’entre le je . . . euh le je d’un écrivain issu d’une classe bourgeoise et le je issu d’une classe populaire. Je crois que la différence de classe est plus importante que la différence sexuelle. (Epron, 2: 17)

She continues to explain that she thinks that literature can change people’s views and ultimately transform society (Epron, 2: 19-20). Ernaux touches on such issues in *Passion simple*. Her narrator explains: “j’avais été une adolescente avide de robes, de disques et de voyages, privée de ces biens parmi des camarades qui les avaient” (33). A., “‘privé’ avec tout son peuple” (33), revels in the material possessions which he can attain easily in the West. He represents “la partie la plus ‘parvenue’ d’(elle)-même” (33). And yet, as in her treatment of political happenings in the former Eastern block and the Middle East, social engagement is secondary to this woman’s love story.

In *Passion simple*, the author moves past her previous political commitment to a more focused personal and feminist one. This is perhaps ironic given the inconsistent female representative we meet in this story. Such a figure can be understood, however, in light of the contradictory expectations of women and of women writers in the contemporary period. Feminist concerns of establishing and reestablishing female identity<sup>11</sup> are evident in this text, as Ernaux deals with themes of agency, control, sexuality and relationship roles. Although the uncomfortable echoes of the woman “séduite et abandonnée” dominate in this text and influence Ernaux’s writing, we also hear the voice of a woman who affirms that pleasure despite pain is a “luxury” (77, translation mine). Ernaux hence remains a committed writer insofar as she grapples with the revisionary task of granting the modern-day heroine a new narrative role. Just as Ernaux situates her protagonist somewhere in between our dependent foremothers and our sexually liberated sisters, she endeavors to express through narrative a moment between past and present. Likewise, she recounts not a life story from beginning to end, but a lyrical moment “somewhere in the middle.”

Claire Marrone

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of the talk I presented entitled "Past, Present and Passion Tense in Annie Ernaux's *Passion simple*," Div. on Writing Women's Lives in French, MLA Conference, Toronto, 28 Dec. 1993.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations will be taken from the edition listed in the "Works Cited" section, and indicated by page number in the text.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Pierre-Marc de Biasi's interpretation of the main characters in Ernaux's *Passion simple* and Marie Didier's *Mise à l'écart* as contemporary versions of Emma Bovary. Jean-François Josselin also cites Flaubert, but in a less serious vein. He mockingly refers to "Annie" as "plus Madame Ovary que Bovary."

<sup>4</sup> Due to the self-reflexive nature of autobiographical texts, the first-person speaker can represent both the narrator and the protagonist. At times, there is a distance between the narrator and the protagonist, the latter a personage of the past, of memory. There is often, however, a blurring of the two in Ernaux's writing. Whenever possible, when treating the moment of writing, I shall refer to the narrator. When dealing with the moment of experience, I shall refer to the protagonist.

<sup>5</sup> Another example of a particular relationship, that of a mother and her unborn child, and a particular segment of life set in an autobiographical context, is Oriana Fallaci's *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* (*Letter to an unborn child*). Cardinal's *Comme si de rien n'était* also focuses on a particular 'moment', the year 1989. Cardinal's context is different from Ernaux's, in that the former juxtaposes many individual lives, particularly those of women, to the larger *Histoire*. Her text does, however, similarly deal with women's (auto)biography, and also with her own connection to the female collective.

<sup>6</sup> Similar events are evoked even more frequently in Cardinal's *Comme si*, and allow the author to comment on women's roles and the writing of History.

<sup>7</sup> Cardinal's *Comme si* also illustrates the structural technique of indentation. Passages that we have read previously in the work are often repeated in the indented "text within a text."

<sup>8</sup> Joanne S. Frye discusses the frequency of the first-person narration in women's texts, and favors that choice of narration due to the potential force of the "I" to subvert established views. She explains: "To speak directly in a personal voice is to deny the exclusive right of male author-ity implicit in a public voice and to escape the expression of dominant ideologies upon which an omniscient narrator depends" (51).

<sup>9</sup> See *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* in which Chodorow explains that due to different childhood experiences and child-rearing practices, women and men's inner object worlds are different. Women define and experience themselves relationally, whereas men feel more autonomous.

<sup>10</sup> See Molly Hite's foreword to *Redefining Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Women's Fiction*. Hite discusses the "constructed nature" of the self posited by (mainly male) theorists, and women writers' efforts to break out of these narrow and constricting notions of female identity (xiv).

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