



# INTRODUCTION

## Annie Ernaux: politics lived and written

French Cultural Studies

2024, Vol. 35(1) 3–16

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DOI: 10.1177/09571558241231735

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### Abstract

'Annie Ernaux: Politics lived and written' starts by outlining the aim and key terms of this special issue of *French Cultural Studies* dedicated to 'Annie Ernaux: Writing, Politics'. It then provides an overview of her life, highlighting some of the ways in which the writer, who was born in 1940, experienced or witnessed first-hand the historical events, legal pressures, and socio-political realities of her era. There follows a reminder of the two prevalent concerns that have structured her work, namely 'le mépris social' and 'la domination masculine', both of which pertain to 'le politique'. 'La politique' being also subject to examination in the articles in this issue, the politics of Ernaux – the citizen and the writer – is subsequently surveyed and consideration is given to the author's will to distinguish it from the 'political action of literary writing'. Finally, this introduction examines the processes of representation and self-positioning that shape the political in Ernaux's prose. A concluding section provides an overview of the nine contributions brought together here.

### Keywords

Annie Ernaux, domination, *engagement*, interventions, literature, politics, the political

This special issue reflects on some of the forms taken by writing and politics in Annie Ernaux's publications and on the interactions between the two.<sup>1</sup> Ernaux is part of a significant cohort of modern and contemporary French and Francophone authors for whom these paradigms feed off each other and may lead to the probing of the nature, means and ends of each<sup>2</sup>. A dual stance has been conspicuous in her writing ever since the start of her career in 1974: her extreme attentiveness to 'le social', which, combined with historical phenomena (Ernaux, 1989: 550), forms the lens through which 'nous percevons le politique' (Ernaux and Gefen, 2022: 102), in her view; and,

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**CORRECTION (April 2024):** The word "interpretation" in the opening sentence of footnote 2 has been deleted.

concomitantly, her search for verbal forms best suited to expose the ways in which these realities are experienced. Taking this double focus into account, the articles collected here examine key aspects of the complex interface of her texts with the political realm, particularly, albeit not exclusively, over the last decade.

Most of the contributions to this volume stem from an international conference entitled ‘Annie Ernaux: Writing, Politics’ organized at St Hugh’s College, Oxford, in June 2023<sup>3</sup> to celebrate both the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Ernaux in December 2022 and the bequest to St Hugh’s of previously unpublished correspondence exchanged between her and St Hugh’s alumna Lyn Thomas, Professor Emerita of Cultural Studies at the University of Sussex and the first scholar to publish a monograph on the author in the UK (Thomas, 1999). These documents were featured in an exhibition on Ernaux entitled ‘Class, Gender, and Life-Writing’ held at the library of this former women’s college (June–December 2023). It aimed to present to a general audience crucial facets of Ernaux’s life, significant intertexts of her works<sup>4</sup>, and her understanding of domination.

Complementing the exhibition and a series of related film screenings<sup>5</sup>, the articles brought together in ‘Annie Ernaux: Writing, Politics’ further probe her scrutiny and critique of class and gender. They consider her publications across genres and build on the existing literary and sociological studies on the writer in both the francophone and anglophone worlds. But they also analyse the overt commitment of her non-creative writing to additional twentieth- and twenty-first-century political questions and they investigate the more oblique ways in which politics manifests itself in her novels, *récits*, auto-socio-biography, diaries, and collaborative projects. Furthermore, the participants in this special issue shed light on how her meta-poetic reflections and creative work position themselves in relation to her chosen subject matter, the very notion of literature, and the agency of the author and of dominated subjects. The symbolic figure that Ernaux has become for some readers—including a number of younger writers—as an innovative author and class migrant, outspoken feminist, and left-wing intellectual over her almost fifty-year career, and her regular interventions in national and international political debates are also subject to examination.

### Living politics: Ernaux’s *parcours*

Born in September 1940 to parents who were humble *cafetiers-épiciers*, Annie Ernaux was able to experience upward social mobility thanks to several factors. Among them: her parents’ own modest social promotion (Ernaux, 1984), their resolute focus on their only child’s education<sup>6</sup>, and her successful studies in a private Catholic girls’ school followed by access to higher education. Her father Alphonse Duchesne (1899–1967) had worked on farms from age 12, at the request and following in the footsteps of her paternal grandfather, a carter who hadn’t had the opportunity to learn how to read or write, contrary to his son (Ernaux, 1983: 25, 26, 29). After eight years tending farm animals and a compulsory stint in the army that took him away from his native Normandy in 1919 (Ernaux, 1983: 32, 34; 2024), A. Duchesne was recruited by a small rope factory. There, he met Ernaux’s mother Blanche Duménil (1906–1986), who, like many of her generation<sup>7</sup>, had also started to work in her early teens<sup>8</sup>. After their marriage in 1928, he found a better-paid job working for his brother-in-law, a roofer (Ernaux, 2024). In the town of Yvetot as elsewhere in France, this interwar period saw the rise of industrialization (Ernaux, 1983: 35). In 1931, Ernaux’s father and her mother Blanche were eventually able to borrow money to open their own small business, a grocery shop *cum* café, in Lillebonne, a town about 20 miles from Le Havre (Ernaux, 2024). Most of their customers came from the nearby ‘ghetto ouvrier construit autour d’une usine textile, l’une des plus grosses de la région jusqu’aux années 50’ (Ernaux, 1983: 39). With patrons frequently unable

to pay them upfront, Ernaux's father took up jobs on a construction site and then a refinery while his wife looked after their shop.

Although Ernaux's father did not fight during World War II, he and his family experienced the bombings, displacements, precarity and shortages brought about by the Nazis. The German Occupation had begun a few months before Ernaux was born. She remembers escaping a bombing raid with her parents (1988: 46) and wearing a tricolour dress to celebrate the Liberation of France (Ernaux and Gefen, 2022: 100). In October 1945, her parents were able to settle back in the small town of Yvetot, badly damaged by the war (Ernaux, 1988: 47). There, they once more owned and ran an unpretentious *café-épicerie*. She reports that, in this environment, the memory of the workers' strikes of 1936 and of Socialist leader and Prime Minister Léon Blum, who implemented major labour policy reforms under the *Front Populaire*, was alive and well (Ernaux and Gefen, 2022: 102). In keeping with their newly acquired status as 'petits commerçants', Ernaux's parents nevertheless voted for the populist founder of the Union de Défense des Commerçants et Artisans Pierre Poujade in the legislative elections of 1956. However, she explains, they otherwise supported the left consistently, including in the December 1965 presidential elections that pitted Charles de Gaulle against François Mitterrand, his surprisingly popular challenger from the *Fédération de la gauche démocrate et socialiste*.<sup>9</sup>

Each parental figure and their respective trajectories are brought to life in two consecutive book-length portraits, *La Place* (1983) and *Une femme* (1988). With the pared-down language and factual straightforwardness of these publications, Ernaux crafted a novel form of writing, which she herself famously labelled 'écriture plate' (1983: 24) and tentatively situated 'entre la littérature, la sociologie et l'histoire' (1988: 106). Its aim: 'réhabiliter le mode de vie de [s]es parents' (Ernaux, 1984), all romanticizing aside. Ernaux's prose notably lets the reader see the distance, as well as the occasional frustration and shame, that installed itself between her and her milieu. The daughter's socio-cultural codes and practices progressively diverged from those of her parents and their working-class relatives and customers under the influence of her education and contact with middle-class classmates, professors, and acquaintances at her *lycée* in Rouen, and later at university. One of the critical locations of Ernaux's writing, and politics, is the intersection of her fierce loyalty to her socio-economic origins, the *de facto décalage* created by class in-betweenness (and ultimately class migration), and the analytical purchase which the discovery of Pierre Bourdieu's sociology in 1971 provided her with. As she has acknowledged, Bourdieu's work offered her a fundamental tool kit (2002: 912–913)<sup>10</sup> and an 'authorization' (2014b) to bring to light in her writing the class dynamics and symbolic violence experienced in her youth, and witnessed in the life of others, including her lower-class pupils when she taught French literature at secondary-school level (2003: 11). In the 'ethnotexte' *Journal du dehors* (1993: 65), as in her subsequent 'journaux extimes' *La Vie extérieure* (2000) and *Regarde les lumières mon amour* (2014c), Ernaux would keep capturing figures that belong to dominated groups in contemporary France. She has turned to such sites of consumption and common spaces as the 'ville nouvelle'<sup>11</sup>, the 'hypermarché' and the RER, and, through uncompromising snapshots, she has exposed the gaps that separate social classes.

Ernaux's parents were far from conforming to the gender roles that prevailed in the laws and mores of mid-twentieth-century France. In 1940, the year of Ernaux's birth, the Vichy regime, building on the *Code de la famille* of the Third Republic, implemented a natalist policy and assigned women to procreative, maternal, and domestic functions, to the extent that it made abortion a 'crime against State security', punishable by death, in 1942. It wasn't until April 1944 that an executive order signed by de Gaulle granted French women the right to vote and be elected<sup>12</sup>. Ernaux remembers being with her mother the first time she voted in 1945, 'dans ce drôle d'endroit fermé par un rideau, qui ressemble au confessionnal de l'église, l'isoloir' (Ernaux and Gefen, 2022:

101). In 1946, the preamble to the French Constitution formalized the principle of equality between men and women<sup>13</sup>. Over a decade later, a more detailed formulation enumerated the electoral, professional and social dimensions of this premise in the Constitution of 1958<sup>14</sup>. Yet from birth up until their death, French women continued to be considered as minors in key civil and political respects until the mid to late 1960s: they could neither work nor open a bank account without their husband's permission until 1965, and the notion of 'chef de famille' only disappeared in 1970<sup>15</sup>. Against the norms of her time, Ernaux's mother was the figure of authority in the household. As both *Une femme* and the earlier autobiographical novel *La Femme gelée* (1981) testify, she ran the family business energetically, oversaw its book-keeping, and had a marked taste for learning and books. She did not care for docility, house cleaning, or cultivating 'feminine' looks on a daily basis. Her husband was the more reserved figure in the marriage. This non-conformity also applied to Ernaux's upbringing. At the insistence of her mother, whom she calls 'féministe avant la lettre' (2014b), it prioritized reading and studying over other expectations. As a result, Ernaux passed her *baccalauréat* at a time when only about 10% of an age group obtained it (Defresne and Krop, 2016: 6). She then attended university, successfully sat both the *CAPES* and the *agrégation*, began a doctorate, and taught literature in secondary schools<sup>16</sup>. Blanche Duchesne's objective was for her daughter to secure a profession that would make her financially independent. Paradoxically, and as *La Femme gelée* also reveals, Ernaux's upward-social mobility and later petit-bourgeois marriage with an aspiringly progressive young man in 1964 was what led her to discover the deep-rootedness of conventional gender roles in heteronormative relationships and to realize how iconoclastic and emancipated the model established by her parents during her childhood had been.

Summarizing her upbringing, focused on her education and future financial autonomy, Ernaux notes that she was raised like a boy; except, she hastens to nuance, for matters relating to sexuality (2014b). A conservative conception of the female body, pleasure, sex and morality, marked by Christianity and traditionalist mores, prevailed in France until the 1970s. It infused Ernaux's socio-cultural environments, whether that be her family, the Catholic school she attended, or the middle-class, bourgeois circles that she encountered as she pursued her studies and went on to get married. The double standards applied to men and women and the suspicion and blaming attached to women's sexual lives - both of which cut across class - were also framed by law: before the Neuwirth law of 1967, contraception was illegal, and it took four years after the publication of the 1971 'manifeste des 343', in which both well-known and anonymous women stated that they had had a clandestine abortion, until the Veil law legalized this procedure, despite the opposition of most right-wing members of parliament. Ernaux read *Le Deuxième Sexe* in 1959 and credits Simone de Beauvoir with opening her eyes to the ways in which a certain 'honte sexuelle' was instilled in women (2011a: 44). Following the path that the philosopher paved for second-generation feminists opposed to the penalization of reproductive choice, Ernaux was active in the Mouvement pour la liberté de l'avortement et de la contraception (MLAC) (2014b). Her first novel, *Les Armoires vides*, 'livre scandaleux' (Ernaux, 2011a: 76) published with Gallimard in 1974, offered a ground-breaking fictionalized account of both her 'déchirure sociale' (Ernaux, 2003: 10) and the abortion she had undergone a decade earlier. Like the revisiting of the latter experience in *L'Événement* (2000), her novel lays bare the brutal - and life-threatening - reality of an outlawed practice. The narrative begins *in medias res*, forcing it before the reader's eyes: 'Une petite sonde rouge, toute recroquevillée, sortie de l'eau bouillante. [...] J'étais sur la table, je ne voyais entre mes jambes que ses cheveux gris et le serpent rouge brandi au bout d'une pince. Il a disparu. Atroce' (Ernaux, 1974: 9).

Since then, Ernaux has continued to scrutinize the politics attached to the female body and to women's desire. Her literary and non-literary output has frequently challenged the societal

norms, practices, and silences surrounding it: in 1992, *Passion simple* chronicled a woman's obsessive desire for a married man, revisited in diaristic form with *Se perdre* (2001); in 2005, five years after her retirement from the CNED, she explored both her relationship with photographer Marc Marie and her 'combat flou, stupéfiant' against breast cancer (Ernaux and Marie, 2005: 16) in 2002–2003 through a photo-biography entitled *L'Usage de la photo*; in 2016, *Mémoire de fille* provided an account of her first, non-consensual and traumatic, sexual experience at the age of 18, as well as the bulimia and anorexia that ensued; in 2019, after the #metoo movement emerged, she hailed it as 'une grande lumière, une déflagration' (Ernaux, 2019a); in 2022, she published *Le Jeune Homme*, considering her past relationship with a man 30 years her junior, and, shortly after the award of her Nobel Prize was announced, she expressed her support for Iranian women and protesters suffering at the hands of the Iranian state authorities in the wake of Mahsa Amini's death in custody.

## The politics of the writer and the politics of literature

These selected highlights of Ernaux's *parcours* point to some of the ways in which she experienced or witnessed first-hand the historical events, legal pressures, and socio-political realities of her era. Two prevalent concerns emerge out of the understanding she took from them: 'le mépris social' and 'la domination masculine' (Ernaux, 2022a). The rejection of both explicitly informs her œuvre, and she famously encapsulated the former—the more significant of the two, in her view (Ernaux and Charpentier, 2005)—in a phrase inspired by Arthur Rimbaud<sup>17</sup>, first noted in her diary at age 22: 'venge[r] ma race' (2011a: 12). She reprised this guiding principle in the lecture she gave to the Swedish Academy on 7 December 2022, pairing it up with a mirror imperative: 'venger mon sexe' (2022c). This quest to redress social and gender injustices is fundamentally political in that it concerns the conditions under which a community may come together—the principles that underlie it as well as its laws and power (Rancière, 1998: 13). In other words, it pertains to 'le politique'. As noted earlier, our special issue also endeavours to consider Ernaux's texts aside from her literary production. These publications reflect on the political while also frequently engaging with 'la politique', understood as the political scene and as political power exerted 'from above', with its professionals, policies, and strategies. In considering 'la politique' as well as 'le politique' in Ernaux's creative and non-creative prose, this volume embraces both her politics as a citizen and writer and what Jacques Rancière has termed 'the politics of literature' (Rancière, 2007: 11).

In 2022, Ernaux surveyed her own political trajectory in an interview given to Alexandre Gefen. This overview provides an insight into her stances and engagements from her teenage years onwards and flags the lack of clarity that characterized her early 'political habitus', owing to the contrast between the views expressed in her private Catholic school and the realities experienced by her family and her parents' lower-class customers, for whom what was 'bon pour l'ouvrier'—as opposed to 'les gros' (Ernaux and Gefen, 2022: 102)—came first. She attributes her overcoming of this ideological conflict and her endorsement of a markedly leftist lens to the discovery of relatable fiction and essays shedding light on the condition of farmers and blue-collar workers, to the Marxist analyses of a Christian philosophy teacher in high school (Ernaux and Charpentier, 2005), and to her mother's constant insistence that feelings of social inferiority were unfounded (Ernaux and Gefen, 2022: 103). Decolonization constitutes another early component in the formation of Ernaux's political consciousness. In her teens, the battle of Dien Bien Phu (*ibid.*: 101), during which the French colonial forces were defeated by the Viet Minh, was a major topic of conversation in the *métropole* and that same year, 1954, marked the beginning of the—then

unnamed—Algerian War of Independence, to which she became openly opposed as a university student. In 1958, she helped an Algerian family living in barracks in Rouen (Ernaux and Charpentier, 2005). Despite her initial support for the 1958 French constitutional referendum, she came to oppose de Gaulle's politics (Ernaux and Gefen, 2022: 101): she was in favour of an independent Algeria (from before July 1962) and rejected his proposal that the French president be elected by direct popular vote in the referendum of October 1962 that aimed to reinforce his power against that of the French Parliament.

Ernaux did not take an active part in May 68. This is, she notes, because she was pregnant and living in provincial France at the time (Ernaux and Charpentier, 2005). Her attachment to and activism in favour of socio-economic justice, sexual emancipation and political freedom nevertheless emerge as life-long constants. They are not anchored in the French 'socio-liberal' reformist left first and foremost: in her view, as in that of many other supporters of the Parti socialiste, the 'tournant de la rigueur' implemented by François Mitterrand in 1983 and its revival by François Hollande's presidency (2012–2017) followed an economic neoliberalism that has been detrimental to public services, the redistribution of wealth, the working class and the lower-middle class in France. While crediting the French socialists with a number of progressive advances both in 1981–1982 (such as the abolition of capital punishment and the Auroux laws<sup>18</sup>) and under Lionel Jospin's government during the third *cohabitation* (1997–2002), Ernaux has made clear that her allegiance lies with a left that clearly resists increasing economic and socio-cultural 'droitisation' (Ernaux and Gefen, 2022: 103–4). Her alert memory of, and tireless solidarity with, major national strikes and social movements testify to this, from her recollection of the successful opposition of unions to Joseph Laniel's wish to impose drastic budget cuts on the public sector in summer 1953, when she was only 12, to the sustained work stoppages and demonstrations against the Plan Juppé and its proposed reform of both the *Sécurité Sociale* and pensions in 1995, to the rejection of the *Contrat Première Embauche* (CPE) by students, high school pupils and unions leading to the rescinding of this employment contract in 2006, and, more recently, the unsuccessful petitions and marches against the *loi Travail* put forward by François Hollande's government in 2016, the major *Gilets jaunes* movement led by the lower and middle classes in rural areas and the outskirts of cities against fiscal pressure, socio-economic injustices (Ernaux and Gefen, 2022: 104–105), and *déclassement* in late 2018 (Ernaux, 2019b), and, closer to us still, the massive protests against Emmanuel Macron and Élisabeth Borne's pension reform throughout the first half of 2023. The powerful open letter to E. Macron that Ernaux penned during the Covid-19 pandemic and that was read out on the national public radio France Inter on 30 March 2020, at the beginning of the lockdown in France, likewise excoriated the damage caused by his economic policies since 2014, when he took office as economy minister:

[...] vous avez préféré écouter ceux qui prônent le désengagement de l'État, préconisant l'optimisation des ressources, la régulation des flux, tout ce jargon technocratique dépourvu de chair qui noie le poisson de la réalité. Mais regardez, ce sont les services publics qui, en ce moment, assurent majoritairement le fonctionnement du pays : les hôpitaux, l'Éducation nationale et ses milliers de professeurs, d'instituteurs si mal payés, EDF, la Poste, le métro et la SNCF. Et ceux dont, naguère, vous avez dit qu'ils n'étaient rien, sont maintenant tout, eux qui continuent de vider les poubelles, de taper les produits aux caisses, de livrer des pizzas, de garantir cette vie aussi indispensable que l'intellectuelle, la vie matérielle. (Ernaux, 2020)

Ernaux's support for a left that has now come to be called 'extreme' by most French media, and her literary publications scrutinizing experiences of socio-cultural domination have resulted in her being successively called a 'stalinienne', 'le dernier écrivain français vraiment communiste'

(Ernaux and Charpentier, 2005), and an author at once ‘politiquement naïve et absolue’ (Assouline, 2022). Impervious to this labelling, she has not shied away from publicly expressing her admiration or support for clearly-identifiable political figures in line with her convictions. These have included Salvador Allende in Chile (Ernaux and Charpentier, 2005; Ernaux and Ernaux-Briot, 2022) and, in France, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, whom she was notably vocal in supporting during the three presidential races between 2012 and 2022, and next to whom she demonstrated in a march denouncing ‘l’inaction climatique et la vie chère’ shortly after being awarded the Nobel Prize in October of the same year. Despite the fact that she doesn’t consider herself a militant of La France Insoumise (LFI), a writer’s open endorsement of a politician and party does not come without risk, as she no doubt knows, having had to disavow Mélenchon during the ‘affaire Quatennens’, which saw the LFI leader show much clemency towards his protégé MP Adrien Quatennens, who had been convicted of domestic violence against his former partner in December 2022 (Ernaux, 2022b). On the eve of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, in late January and early February 2023, Mélenchon also maintained that ‘la menace russe n’existe pas selon les Ukrainiens eux-mêmes’ after stating that the positioning of Russian troops by the Ukrainian border was justified, that the United States and NATO had adopted a ‘position agressive’, and that Vladimir Putin’s stance was ‘compréhensible’ (France Inter, 2022), eight years after the annexation of Crimea. Mélenchon backtracked on 24 February 2022. Ernaux didn’t comment on this sequence but her Nobel lecture unambiguously denounced a ‘guerre impérialiste menée par le dictateur à la tête de la Russie’ (2022c). This speech also provided her with the opportunity to underscore a critical political cause that has characterized her activism in the first two decades of this twenty-first century: the fight against the Front National / Rassemblement National and its imitators on the French right and center-right; against political thought grounded in exclusion and discrimination more broadly, both within and beyond France; against what she diagnoses as ‘la montée d’une idéologie de repli et de fermeture, qui se répand et gagne continûment du terrain dans des pays jusqu’ici démocratiques’.

While, as these examples attest, Ernaux’s political engagements are long-standing and numerous, she is careful to distinguish between such commitments, notably manifest in petitions, open letters, and interviews that draw in her increasing symbolic capital as a prominent contemporary writer, on the one hand, and, on the other, the ‘action politique de l’écriture littéraire’ (2022c). The distinction might be taken with a grain of salt insofar as the views expressed in her non-literary writings don’t challenge what her literary work exposes. Nevertheless, she convincingly uncouples literature from the delivery of a message<sup>19</sup> and from the discursive explicitness and relative ephemerality that generally characterize the former kind of writing. ‘Le politique’ that literature harbours is located elsewhere. As early as 1989, in an article entitled ‘Littérature et politique’ – in which, as Ann Jefferson rightly notes in this special issue, ‘littérature’ and the more capacious term ‘écriture’ tend to be used interchangeably – Ernaux asserted:

l’écriture, quoi qu’on fasse, ‘engage’, véhiculant, de manière très complexe, au travers de la fiction, une vision consentant plutôt à l’ordre social ou au contraire le dénonçant.<sup>20</sup> (1989: 550)

This validation or contestation of the social order depends on both a choice of subject matter and – crucially – the creation of a form. Ernaux’s article swiftly turns to Roland Barthes’s *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture* in order to draw attention to ‘la morale de la forme’, that is to say the fact that literary writing is ‘le choix de l’aire sociale au sein de laquelle l’écrivain décide de situer la Nature de son langage’ (1989: 550). In her own creative prose, the ‘dénonc[iation]’ of the social order that depends on a ‘morale de la forme’ hinges on several processes of representation. One such process consists in making the unseen or the disregarded visible. Therein lies the force of *La*

*Place*, for instance, which proceeds to “remonter” [un] monde’ [her father’s] (Ernaux, 2003: 14), that is to say to piece back together the socio-sphere of one individual. Her craft focuses on the narrative and linguistic means that may make this restitution possible, allowing for the reader’s immersion into a lost world while blocking any exoticization. Techniques notably include the recourse to an ‘approche objective’ that gives the reader the impression that they are seizing this world and individual in their barest reality, or the resuscitation of a now-disappeared vocabulary. In the latter case, Ernaux’s enterprise of ‘visibilisation’ may go so far as to become literal, as when the conspicuous use of italics underscores her grandfather’s professional status: ‘Ceux qui n’avaient pas de terre se louaient chez les gros fermiers de la région’ (1983: 25). She comments herself on this emphasis that signals the necessary self-commodification of agricultural workers:

J’emploie des mots qui ont un sens très fort : ‘se louaient’, ça dit tout. Les hommes qui n’avaient pas de terre, se donnaient eux-mêmes en quelque sorte, c’était leur personne, ils appelaient ça ‘se louer’. Pour donner tout le sens à cette expression j’utilise les italiques. Ces italiques sont là le signe que le sens est à prendre au pied de la lettre d’une certaine façon et contient toute la condition sociale. (2003: 14)

Where does the political lie here? The active visibilizing of what Ernaux names a ‘vérité sensible’ (2011a: 7) – using a qualifier central to Rancière’s thesis on the politics of aesthetics, that is to say the ways in which works of art ‘distribute’ the ‘sensible’ (Rancière, 2000) – leads the reader to have access to new knowledge (Ernaux, 2014a): they see the world differently and are able to give a precise shape, and a face, to others (Ernaux, 2014a; 2014b). The same dynamic applies to her figuration of taboo or hitherto un- or under-represented experiences such as abortion, rape, or trans-generational sexual intimacy.

In addition to implementing a remarkable visibilization that arguably carries into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – albeit through very different means – what the nineteenth-century realist and naturalist novels had done by foregrounding the lives of the bourgeoisie and the ‘fourth estate’ respectively, Ernaux’s literary representations take on a collective dimension. Critic Marc-Henry Soulet has showed that the constitution of a collective in her works is of two kinds. One has to do with the scrutiny of universal affects and behaviours, such as desire and jealousy, in what could be named a psycho-anthropological vein. The other results from a ‘désingularisation’ of experiences and the production of a ‘commun partagé’ (Soulet, 2012: 166) that illuminates the socio-historical situation of a particular group, usually one that experiences some form of domination (gender-based, economic and/or socio-cultural). Paradoxically – at least on the surface – this ‘collectivisation’ of class- and/or gender-based experience is born out of Ernaux’s exploration of her intimacy. ‘Je me suis aperçue ultérieurement que, quand on descendait très loin dans son propre moi, dans son propre cheminement, qu’on essayait d’aller très loin, on rencontrait la vie des autres’ (2003: 10), she remarked retrospectively about *Les Armoires vides*. The same could be said of most of her early novels and later autobiographical *récits* and auto-socio-biographies. Her well-known construction of a ‘je transpersonnel’ (Ernaux, 2007b: 316), which echoes the ‘confessions impersonnelles’ of Bourdieu’s *auto-analyse* (2004: 5), as well as her use of the indefinite pronoun ‘on’ and the ‘principe de résonance’ (Gefen, 2022: 276) that connects the individual with the mentalities, events and culture of a generation in *Les Années* (2008), or else her alternating between ‘je’ and third-person designations that externalize her experience in *La Honte* (2007a) and *Mémoire de fille* (2016) achieve this transfiguration: although the experience of the self is detailed minutely, its unicity ends up disappearing behind the construction of a subject that becomes both emptied out and inclusive.

Literature’s ability to intervene in and act on the world is therefore contingent on aesthetics and poetics, for Ernaux. While she happily employs the lexicon of ‘engagement’ to discuss her craft,

and while she is acutely conscious of her historical ‘situation’ and responsibility as a writer, keeping a privileged place for Jean-Paul Sartre and *La Nausée* in her pantheon, the literary revolutions she admires are the Nouveau Roman or Virginia Woolf’s modernist prose. Parts of Sartre’s 1947 dogmatic definition of ‘la littérature engagée’ do not fit squarely with her obsession to ‘trouver une langue’, in Rimbaud’s words, and with her more modest and nuanced take on the gradual impact that literary works may have on the reader’s imagination<sup>21</sup>: ‘[la littérature] peut, sur le long terme, imprégnant l’imaginaire du lecteur, rendre celui-ci sensible à des réalités qu’il ignorait, ou l’amener à voir autrement ce qu’il considérait toujours sous le même angle (Ernaux, 1989: 550). Ernaux’s analysis also considers the potential of literature to penetrate the ‘profondeur du temps historique’, highlight its complexity, and unsettle individualism and ‘présentisme’ (Ernaux and Gefen, 2022: 110). The register she uses in these reflections on her art is neither prescriptive nor programmatic. Her refusal to position herself as a guide unveiling the real for an audience have led Bruno Blanckeman to apply – aptly – the adjective ‘impliquée’, rather than ‘engagée’, to her figure and writing (Blanckeman, 2005, 2013, 2015). In fact, this proposition has an antecedent in yet another qualifier, ‘embarqué[e]’, chosen by an author whose ethics and prose Ernaux has openly and repeatedly saluted (Ernaux, 2022a, 2022c; Ernaux and Demorand, 2022): Albert Camus.

Tout artiste aujourd’hui est embarqué dans la galère de son temps. Il doit s’y résigner, même s’il juge que cette galère sent le hareng, que les gardes-chiourme y sont vraiment trop nombreux et que, de surcroît, le cap est mal pris. Nous sommes en pleine mer. L’artiste, comme les autres, doit ramer à son tour, sans mourir, s’il le peut, c’est-à-dire en continuant de vivre et de créer. (Camus, 1957: 247)

Like her, Camus was a class migrant faithful to his origins, an individual preoccupied with socio-economic injustices and domination, and an intellectual who refused to separate himself off from his contemporaries and used the public platform granted to him in times of crises. Like her also, as a writer, he opposed both pure aestheticism and the subordination of his art to a political agenda and he mastered a language of ‘l’en-deça’. With them, in them, both ‘la politique’ of an era and ‘le politique’ of an *œuvre* are subjected to a double demand for truth and solidarity, however uncertain its total fulfilment might be.

## Overview of contributions

The contributions that follow are grouped into three – permeable – sections. The first, ‘Literature, Politics’, reflects on the political ramifications of Ernaux’s conception and practice of literature. Élise Huguéy-Léger examines the distance that Ernaux established between her writing and the idea of literature firstly in the 1980s and, secondly, from 2008 onwards, through collaborative creative projects. With the latter initiatives, which have disclosed the ‘fabrique’ of her prose, Ernaux’s demand for a language that clings onto the real has remained, but it has done so alongside the sketching out of a genealogy and mythical imaginary of the writer’s *œuvre* and craft. Maryline Heck studies Ernaux’s ‘theoretical positioning’ vis-à-vis the presence of the political in her literary writing. Focusing on the author’s statements and self-reflexive analyses, this contribution argues that Ernaux draws upon aspects of the Sartrean conception of engagement which have been overshadowed by the emphasis that critics, and the writer herself, have instead often laid on the key role played by sociology, and more specifically by Pierre Bourdieu, in her work. Ann Jefferson elucidates the ways in which the construction and figuration of time proves political in Ernaux’s literary production. From *La Femme gelée* to *L’Événement* and *Les Années*, among other texts, the anticipation of the future highlights the weight of social expectations and of differences attached to sex


and gender, thereby pointing to the difficulty of emancipation. Conversely, writing is defined as consistently open, in-progress and freely forward-looking.

The second section of this special issue considers the ‘Political Critique’ that is implicit in Ernaux’s œuvre as well as that which her direct interventions in the public sphere overtly express. Simon Kemp teases out the critical effects of the shifting focalization that characterizes *Mémoire de fille*: oscillating between 1958 and the moment of writing, between the ‘elle’ and the ‘je’, the narrative invites an understanding of sexual coercion and public shaming split between ‘objectivation’ and identification. Carole Bourne-Taylor details the applicability of Georges Didi-Huberman’s—polysemous—phenomenological and anthropological motto about uprisings, ‘Désirer désobéir’, to Ernaux’s political *prises de position* in the public sphere. Paying particular attention to the past four years, her contribution sheds light on the reasons for Ernaux’s revolt and on its modalities, including its life-affirming quality. The writer’s defense of a value system that foregrounds social justice and individual dignity is shown to critique Emmanuel Macron’s two presidencies (2017–), portrayed as reinforcing socio-economic inequality and as relying on linguistic casuistry. An English translation of the article that the sociologist Gisèle Sapiro published in France one month after the announcement of Ernaux’s Nobel Prize in October 2022 rounds up this section. It analyses the vehement criticism to which both the writer’s political commitments and challenging of symbolic domination have been subject, including the various reproach formulated by Alain Finkielkraut and Pierre Assouline on the radio programme ‘Répliques’ on 26 November 2022. G. Sapiro notably examines the fact that Ernaux’s critique of the Israeli government’s policy in the Occupied Territories has been wrongly denounced as antisemitic by conservative thinkers and media outlets. This analysis is all the more important in light of the Israel-Hamas war that has broken out since. In October 2023, Ernaux was one of 93 artists calling for an immediate and unconditional cease-fire in Gaza (Ernaux *et al.*, 2023). The ‘tribune’ demanded the release of the Israeli hostages detained in the Gaza Strip and condemned both the ‘horrif[ying]’ massacres perpetrated by the Hamas on 7 October 2023 and the response of the Israeli authorities killing Palestinian civilians *en masse*. In mid-January 2024, the writer’s German publisher Suhrkamp also indicated that she had signed a petition entitled ‘Strike Germany’, calling for the boycott of German cultural institutions accused of suppressing ‘expressions of solidarity with Palestine’ (Oltermann, 2024). Politics and *engagement*, in and beyond Ernaux’s case, are defined by their ever-evolving nature.

Section three, entitled ‘Regarding Others’, turns to the ways in which Ernaux herself and/or her œuvre position themselves vis-à-vis a range of ‘others’, be it in the narratives she crafts or through the reception that her work is met with. Aurélie Adler assesses Ernaux’s impact on and interactions with writers who are feminists and/or class migrants. Their responses to her prose contribute both to Ernaux’s own take on her writing and to the understanding that a wider readership has of her publications and of their ‘transgressive’ potential. Raissa Furlanetto Cardoso uses the analytical framework provided by ‘care studies’ to read *La Place* and *Une femme*, considered as narratives of working-class filiation, as well as ‘*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*’ (1997). She draws attention to the emphasis on the ordinary and the representation of caring gestures in these works, as well as to the meta-poetic practice of ‘care’ that their writing may be said to perform. Last but not least, Lyn Thomas brings together Ernaux’s writings on class transition, her own experience of this process, and her correspondence with the writer since the 1990s. In doing so, she provides an insight into the epiphanic effect that Ernaux’s works have had for some class migrants, while at the same time reflecting on her practice as a researcher who has specialized in Ernaux’s œuvre and for whom the personal and the scholarly have overlapped in acute ways. One may wonder if, ultimately, Ernauxian politics doesn’t reside in memory and relationality.

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## Notes

1. I am deeply grateful to Jim House and to Élise Hugueny-Léger and Lyn Thomas for their generous help and attentive proofreading throughout the preparation of this volume.
2. See the diverse forms of politicization, *doxa* and contestation found in the production of numerous left- and right-wing writers as examined and classified in *Les Écrivains et la politique en France. De l'affaire Dreyfus à la guerre d'Algérie* (Sapiro, 2018). Other well-established periodizations of the close bond between modern and contemporary French writers and politics begin earlier in the nineteenth century – when literature gradually gained its autonomy – with the Second Restoration, for instance (Sapiro, 2011), or, further back still, with the Enlightenment, as authors enjoying a high cultural visibility, such as Voltaire, invested the realm of politics by opposing State authorities in defense of tolerance and justice, values presented as universal. Benoît Denis's concept of 'littérature de l'engagement', distinct from the more strictly defined and historically situated notion of 'littérature engagée', allows him to head further back in time and to consider the Classical era as one in which writers like Pascal already interrogated their relation to power and politics (Denis, 2000).
3. 'Annie Ernaux: Writing, Politics', 9 June 2023, St Hugh's College, Oxford, co-organised by Élise Hugueny-Léger, Ann Jefferson, Lyn Thomas and myself.
4. From the literary and philosophical works that played a significant role in Ernaux's intellectual and artistic formation (including Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Sartre's *La Nausée*, Woolf's *The Waves* and Bourdieu's *La Distinction*) to the popular women's magazines that she read in her youth, one of which, as Lyn Thomas has shown, informs Ernaux's understanding of what an unwanted pregnancy could mean for a young working-class woman (Thomas, 2004).
5. *Les Années Super 8*, directed by David-Ernaux Briot, text by Annie Ernaux, 2022, screened at the Curzon Theatre, Oxford, and followed by a Q&A with the director, on 8 June 2023; *L'Événement*, directed by Audrey Diwan, 2021, screened at the Maison Française d'Oxford, 9 June 2023.
6. Before Annie Ernaux's birth in 1940, her parents had a first daughter, Ginette, born in 1932. However, she died of diphtheria in 1938. Ernaux was therefore raised as an only child, even if the absence of this unknown sister did not go unnoticed after she found out about her previous existence. The writer returns to this discovery and to the ways in which Ginette's absence-presence impacted her life in *L'Autre fille* (2011b).
7. While the law of 28 Mars 1882 made primary education mandatory from age 6 to 13, its application proved challenging (Chapoulie, 2010: 201–221).
8. She was twelve and a half (Ernaux, 1988: 29).
9. The incumbent president won the second round of these elections with 55.2% of the votes, while 44.80% of the electorate opted for Mitterrand – for a total turnout of 84.32%.
10. 'Lire dans les années soixante-dix, *Les Héritiers*, *La Reproduction*, plus tard *La Distinction*, c'était – c'est toujours – ressentir un choc ontologique violent. [...] mettant au jour les mécanismes cachés de la reproduction sociale, en objectivant les croyances et processus de domination intériorisés par les individus à leur insu, la sociologie critique de Bourdieu défatalise l'existence' (Ernaux, 2002: 912–913).
11. Ernaux herself moved to Cergy in 1975 and has been living there since. She has praised its 'diversité heureuse' (Ernaux, 2022a).
12. Article 17 of the executive order signed by Charles de Gaulle on 21 April 1944: 'les femmes sont électrices et éligibles dans les mêmes conditions que les hommes' (Ordonnance du 21 avril 1944 portant organisation des pouvoirs publics en France après la libération).
13. '3. La loi garantit à la femme, dans tous les domaines, des droits égaux à ceux de l'homme' (Préambule de la Constitution du 27 octobre 1946).
14. First article: 'La loi favorise l'égal accès des femmes et des hommes aux mandats électoraux et fonctions électives, ainsi qu'aux responsabilités professionnelles et sociales'.
15. 'Loi n° 70-459 du 4 juin 1970 relative à l'autorité parentale'.

16. Ernaux ultimately suspended her doctoral studies. In 1977, she took up a post at the CNED (Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance).
17. In *Une saison en enfer*, the poem 'Mauvais sang' reads: 'Je suis de race inférieure de toute éternité'.
18. These laws as well as related executive orders improved the rights of unions and workers, brought down the working week to 39 hours, introduced a fifth week of paid holidays and lowered the retirement age to 60.
19. 'Il n'y a pas de mot plus aberrant pour moi que celui de "message" en parlant de mes livres et même d'"engagement" au sens traditionnel de l'après-guerre. Ce que j'engage dans un livre, c'est moi-même, ma vie, totalement' (Ernaux and Gefen, 2022: 107).
20. Ernaux reiterated this point on several occasions. See for instance *L'Écriture comme un couteau* (Ernaux and Jeannet, 2003 : 68).
21. Pierre-Louis Fort and Violaine Houdart-Merot go so far as to state that 'l'écrivaine ne partage en rien la définition que le philosophe donne de la prose' (Fort and Houdart-Merot, 2015: 7).

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