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Author(s): Warren Motte

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Annie Ernaux's Understatement

by Warren Motte

SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF *Les Armoires vides* in 1974, Annie Ernaux has established a place for herself in contemporary French literature as a distinctive voice of the personal. In a body of work that now comprises seven major volumes, she has deliberately put the specificity of autobiography and fiction on trial, interrogating traditional notions about the possibilities and limits of those modes. Throughout her career, she has wagered on a rare simplicity of style, an expressive austerity that has become in a sense her writerly signature. I would like to examine that stylistic strategy locally, as it is played out in *La Place*, the story of a woman's attempts to come to terms with her father's death, with their life together, with the concept of class in society and, finally, with the craft of writing.

La Place distinguishes itself from Ernaux's previous works in two important ways. It is more apparently confessional than the texts that precede it, animated by an anonymous *je* that continually questions the theoretical dissociation of narrator and author.¹ Like Ernaux's other works, *La Place* positions itself in the hybrid domain of autofiction, yet it pushes that discursive mode toward one of the boundaries of its range, autobiography. The confessional character of *La Place* is complemented by another group of reflexive gestures, as Ernaux stages, for the first time in her work, a sustained meditation on writing and its uses. More particularly, she carefully elaborates a critical dimension in the text through which she examines her own writing, encouraging the reader to join in that examination. Early in the text, she announces her narrative strategy openly and frankly: "Aucune poésie du souvenir, pas de dérision jubilante. L'écriture plate me vient naturellement, celle-là même que j'utilisais en écrivant autrefois à mes parents pour leur dire les nouvelles essentielles" (24). The shape of her writing will be "flat," unembellished, without the sort of flourish that normally characterizes elegy. The notion of the "natural" is important here, as is that of the "essential"; Ernaux intimates that she can account for the essential only through the natural, eschewing artifice and transcendence, renouncing—in a word—poetry. She will tell her father's death through the language she used in her letters to her parents. It is a language that belongs, in a sense, to *them*, and it colors *La Place* from beginning to end. In the text's incipit Ernaux puts that epistolary mode into play, announcing to her parents that she has

passed her final examinations: "Le soir même, j'ai écrit à mes parents que j'étais professeur 'titulaire'. Ma mère m'a répondu qu'ils étaient très contents pour moi" (12). She learns of her father's death when her mother says, simply, "C'est fini" (13, 110), a locution that frames *La Place* and effectively establishes its rhetorical tone.

In French, one might use the term *litote* in describing the tenor of the mother's language. From the Greek word for "plain" or "small," *litote*, according to Bernard Dupriez, designates "une expression qui dit moins pour en faire entendre plus" (277). In English, we use "litotes" to mean the expression of an affirmative through the negation of the contrary. A better term for the sort of language the mother uses is "understatement," which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "A statement which falls below the truth or fact." More specifically still, one might invoke the term "meiosis," or "A figure of speech by which the impression is intentionally conveyed that a thing is less in size, importance, etc., than it really is" (*OED*). Despite Quintilian's dismissal of meiosis,² it is a figure that remains rhetorically powerful, and one that can be used to achieve certain precise effects in writing, as M. H. Abrams has noted: "Some critics extend 'meiosis' to the use in literature of an utterly simple, unemphatic statement to enhance the effect of a pathetic or tragic event" (75). This sort of device seems to me perfectly characteristic of the mother's rhetoric in *La Place*; and I would like to argue further that Ernaux expropriates her mother's meiotic gesture, deploying it as the central tactic of her own narrative strategy.

Ernaux describes the scene of her father's death objectively, with a measured, studied neutrality. Within that description, she carefully emblazons the very rhetorical technique that she will rely on throughout the text: "Toute cette scène se déroulait très simplement, sans cris, ni sanglots, ma mère avait seulement les yeux rouges et un rictus continu. Les gestes s'accomplissaient tranquillement, sans désordre, avec des paroles ordinaires" (14). In addition to its role in the diegetic economy of her father's story, the passage demands to be read as a commentary upon the manner in which that story is *told*: Ernaux's narration, too, will unfold very simply, with simple words. This simplicity is at the crux of a broader aesthetic that animates *La Place*, that of minimalism. Like Frank Stella's "Black" paintings, like Arvo Pärt's *St. John Passion*, *La Place* relies on formal simplicity for effect; like those artists, Ernaux intends to exploit minimalism's apparently paradoxical logic, the idea that extreme poverty of expression can in fact enrich the aesthetic experience.³

Speaking of American minimalist art of the 1960s, Kenneth Baker locates the notion of plainness at its very root:

New York Minimalism had sources closer to home in the distinctly American tradition of respect for plain facts and plain speaking, manifested in Shaker furniture and the pragmatist philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, in the precisionist painting of Charles

Sheeler, in the "scientific" realism of Thomas Eakins, in the photographs of Paul Strand and Walker Evans, and the poetry of William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore. (13)

Other concerns appear to be common features of minimalist art, whatever the particular expressive medium may be. For instance, the clarity that Ernaux insists upon in *La Place* is invoked as an artistic value in such otherwise dissimilar works as Dan Flavin's fluorescent light sculptures and Philip Glass's compositions for solo piano.⁴ The emphasis on literalness that one encounters in Ernaux's writing is likewise a familiar characteristic of minimalist art (Colpitt 36). Regardless of medium, these artifacts present themselves as being what they *are*, no more, no less; largely renouncing metaphor and other transcendent figures, there is an astonishing quiddity about them. They are animated by a close attention to economy, subtended by a common axiom that John Barth has formulated in the following manner: "artistic effect may be enhanced by a radical economy of artistic means, even where such parsimony comprises other values: completeness, for example, or richness or precision of statement" (1). The work of art should be sober in conception, rigorous in execution, ascetic in effect; in short, it must be *austere* (Baker 9). Minimalism involves a theoretical leap of faith: the idea is that form itself should signify. The smallness of the object is intended to inflect the nature of its experience; the minimalist credo is that one may approach this art more closely, experience it more intimately, precisely because it is smaller.⁵ Arthur Saltzman argues moreover that minimalists see in these lesser forms "fortifications against evanescence" (432), as if the very smallness of the artifact could make it more durable, less transitory.

Finally, the minimalist gesture entails a refusal of conventional mannerism (Goossen 168). That sort of refusal is amply apparent in *La Place*, and indeed Ernaux emphasizes it quite openly:

Depuis peu, je sais que le roman est impossible. Pour rendre compte d'une vie soumise à la nécessité, je n'ai pas le droit de prendre d'abord le parti de l'art, ni de chercher à faire quelque chose de "passionnant", ou d'"émouvant". Je rassemblerai les paroles, les gestes, les goûts de mon père, les faits marquants de sa vie, tous les signes objectifs d'une existence que j'ai aussi partagée. (24)

The contract she offers to her reader in *La Place* guarantees a direct literary experience, unmediated by figure or flourish.⁶ Obviously, this anti-mannerist stance is in itself a "manner," just as the renunciation of rhetoric constitutes a new kind of rhetoric; one cannot escape from style. But it is important to realize that minimalism's fundamental position is oppositional in nature; it sets itself apart from conventional art and plays itself out agonistically in opposition to the latter.⁷ Evidence of that conflictual relation is abundant in *La Place*, for in fact Ernaux is proposing a sort of antiliterature in order to establish for herself a *place* within literature.

Throughout the text, Ernaux passes different sorts of places in review,

testing each for its literal and figurative resonance, in an effort to learn how the notion of place is constructed. On a fundamental level, she suggests, place arises out of the idea of belonging: each of us has a community that we may claim as our own. Conversely, we are out of place when we venture outside the boundaries of that community. When her bourgeois husband joins her in her parents' simple home after her father's death, Ernaux says, "Plus que jamais, il a paru déplacé ici" (19). Scanning the crowd at her father's funeral, she remarks, "Naturellement, aucune de ces personnes 'haut placées' auxquelles mon père avait affaire ne s'était dérangée" (20). The adverb *naturellement* here displays the equivocation that characterizes Ernaux's reflection on the notion of place. She uses it ironically of course, in order to suggest the cavalier manner in which those people betray her father after his death. But she uses it frankly as well, for at some level Ernaux believes that the idea of place is bound up in the *natural*, that we are indeed natural only when we are in our place and—like her husband—strikingly unnatural when outside it.

Among all the constructions that she considers, it is her father's understanding of place that she comes back to again and again. For she must come to terms with it, if she is to find a place of her own. This is a process that is fraught with conflict and constantly haunted by the specter of treason. Ernaux says that her father left school at age twelve and began to work as a farm laborer; his own father had succeeded in "placing" him in the farm where he worked (29). When his young sister, a housemaid, ran away from her "place," their father took her straight back, making her feel how shameful her act was (32). More than anything else, Ernaux sees in her father a sense of place. Throughout his life, she notes, he was guided by a simple rule: "Il cherchait à *tenir sa place*" (45; emphasis in original, here and elsewhere). Even when his own daughter (born before Ernaux) dies, the father stays in place: "il restait sans parler, à regarder par la fenêtre, de sa place à table" (47). For the prospect of being out of place terrifies him:

La peur d'être déplacé, d'avoir honte. Un jour, il est monté par erreur en première avec un billet de seconde. Le contrôleur lui a fait payer le supplément. Autre souvenir de honte: chez le notaire, il a dû écrire le premier "lu et approuvé", il ne savait pas comment orthographier, il a choisi "à prouver". Gêne, obsession de cette faute, sur la route du retour. L'ombre de l'indignité. (59)

It is in such a perspective that the closing incident of *La Place* should be seen. Now a secondary-school teacher, Ernaux meets one of her former students, working as a cashier in a supermarket. Her studies had not succeeded, she explains to Ernaux (113–14), and she has left school. The encounter is emblematic of the notion of place as Ernaux understands it. On the one hand, Ernaux sees herself in this young woman, and the "place" she might have occupied had her own studies not worked out. On the other hand, Ernaux feels irretrievably distant from her former student:

for the latter has remained in place, in the working-class world, while Ernaux herself has emigrated to another. She sees this displacement as a kind of treason, directed first and foremost against her father, and her struggles with this untenable idea may be seen as the real motor of *La Place*. With a gesture of circularity, the end of *La Place* points toward the beginning, allowing us to read the epigraph Ernaux borrows from Jean Genet in a new light: "Je hasarde une explication: écrire c'est le dernier recours quand on a trahi" (9). If the writing of treason is itself inherently treacherous, one way to subvert that treachery may be to write from *beneath* writing, as it were, to use deliberate understatement as the key integer in one's discursive formula.

As Ernaux casts it, the basic issue problematizing her relation with her father is the question of class. Stated in that fashion, things seem simple enough; but class is a very slippery notion in *La Place*. Ernaux sees that notion—initially at least—through her father's eyes. His experience of class had been for him the code through which he read his life, had furnished the means of situating and interpreting his goals and aspirations. Beginning as an unlanded peasant, he had become a factory worker, and then the owner of two modest café-groceries, one after the other. He had, in other words, traversed the proletariat and escaped from it. But just barely: Ernaux notes that the first café brought in no more than a workingman's wage (42), and while her mother looked after the café during the day, her father took a job first as a construction worker, then in an oil refinery, where he was in due time promoted to foreman. The second café provided a better living, and her father was no longer obliged to take an outside job. Yet even then Ernaux's parents were constantly haunted by the prospect of returning to the social condition from which they had escaped: "ils avaient peur d'être roulés, de tout perdre pour finalement retomber ouvriers" (39).

The social condition of Ernaux's parents was thus complicated and necessarily conflicted: if their culture was (and continued to be) that of the working class, their material situation separated them from the proletariat. When they buy the second café, Ernaux firmly declares: "La vie d'ouvrier de mon père s'arrête ici" (52). Yet they find themselves in a sort of social no-man's-land, caught between the bourgeoisie—to which they themselves have no real hope of access—and the proletariat. They occupy the bottom of the social stratum that Poujade (for whom her father votes) would so deftly exploit, a class defining itself by opposition to those surrounding it in the social order and by amorphous common-place: "Mon père est entré dans la catégorie des *gens simples* ou *modestes* ou *braves gens*" (80). Amid the competing, uprooted constructs that form his ideological horizon, Ernaux's father holds firmly to at least one notion abstracted from the bourgeoisie, that of investment. His investment is his daughter. The possibility that she should accede to the bourgeoisie is what allows him to make sense of all the travails he has affronted, and

permits him to see meaning in his own life: "Peut-être sa plus grande fierté, ou même, la justification de son existence: que j'appartienne au monde qui l'avait dédaigné" (112).

For Ernaux, coached from her youth to aspire toward a more privileged class, seeing her parents' world both from the inside and the outside, obsessed by the idea that her new acquaintances will find her home vulgar and crass—"Tu sais," she tells a college friend, "chez moi c'est *simple*" (92)—this process entails far more than mere social alienation. As she moves away from the working class, she moves away too, ineluctably and irreversibly, from her father. Sketching out the narrative contract she will propose to her reader, she explains the reasons that led her to write *La Place*, and privileges this latter distancing:

Plus tard, au cours de l'été, en attendant mon premier poste, "il faudrait que j'explique tout cela". Je voulais dire, écrire au sujet de mon père, sa vie, et cette distance venue à l'adolescence entre lui et moi. Une distance de classe, mais particulière, qui n'a pas de nom. Comme de l'amour séparé. (23)

Ernaux reads her social emigration both as the successful fulfillment of her parents' hopes for her and as treason. That conflict permeates not only *La Place*, but all of her work. It torments in equal measure Denise Lesur, the narrator of Ernaux's first novel, *Les Armoires vides*, who in many ways prefigures the narrator of *La Place*. Loraine Day remarks of Denise that "the obsessive desire to escape from her class background retrospectively appears to the narrator to be the fundamental trope of her psyche from early adolescence until the present time of the unfolding narration" (43), and argues that "it is her experience of *class* which consistently emerges as the dominant factor in the construction of her subjectivity" (46). The same is true of the narrator of *La Place*, I think, except for the fact that here the notion of class has been nuanced and intensified by its deliberate location in the father-daughter dynamic. Indeed, it is only after her father's death that Ernaux realizes fully her new social status: returning to her own home by train after her father's funeral, she tells herself: "maintenant, je suis vraiment une bourgeoise" (23).

But the issues of class and the conflict they engender prove to be broader still. As Carol Sanders remarks about Denise Lesur, Ernaux is the first member of her family to be afforded a voice (23). For the notion of class is as intimately bound up in language as it is in economy. Clearly, changing one's class means changing one's language. Ernaux remarks that her grandfather, a farm laborer and an alcoholic, was illiterate: "Chaque fois qu'on me parlait de lui, cela commençait par 'il ne savait ni lire ni écrire', comme si sa vie et son caractère ne se comprenaient pas sans cette donnée initiale" (26). Her grandparents' only language was *patois*, rather than standard French, which Ernaux's father interprets as a shameful sign of their social inferiority (62). As Ernaux receives it, family tradition always insists on the grandmother's difficult life: "Sa femme *ne*

riait pas tous les jours" (25). Ernaux studiously italicizes the words in this passage, and in many others, in order to point toward another sort of language. For if her parents, like many other rural Frenchpeople of their generation, had succeeded in breaking out of the linguistic slum of *patois*, the new language to which they acceded remained a "popular" one, a language dominated, in Ernaux's view, by cliché and received ideas. Like *patois*, it is in a real sense a "sublanguage," sharply distinguished from the sort of French Ernaux learns in the course of her literary studies at school and university.

The problem she faces, thus, is analogous to the one her father encountered: her language is no longer the language her parents speak. It is not only the lexicon that is different, but the very tone of the language as well: "On ne savait pas se parler entre nous autrement que d'une manière râleuse. Le ton poli réservé aux étrangers" (71). In writing *La Place*, Ernaux quite "naturally" deploys a literary language, for one of her intents is to demonstrate a mastery of that code. If she wishes to give an accurate picture of her father's life, however, some account of his own language must be given. Part of her meiotic strategy, then, is to interpolate this popular discourse into her own. Yet these italicized passages—there are 57 of them in *La Place*—clash starkly with the language surrounding them; their alterity and their minority status within the general discursive economy of the text are massively apparent. In other words, just as Ernaux "tells" her father's language, she also effectively tells the social and linguistic chasm that now separates him from her.

For Ernaux, language is thus necessarily a script of duplicity and treason: "Tout ce qui touche au langage est dans mon souvenir motif de rancœur et de chicanes douleureuses, bien plus que l'argent" (64). In an attempt to come to terms with that, she will examine her own linguistic apprenticeship in some detail. She notes that her first grapplings with bourgeois discourse resembled those of a student learning a foreign language: "Enfant, quand je m'efforçais de m'exprimer dans un langage châtié, j'avais l'impression de me jeter dans le vide" (64). Like any student of foreign language, she proceeds by deliberate imitation, in a process of painstaking—and painful—trial and error. Once again, Ernaux's experience closely resembles that of Denise Lesur in *Les Armoires vides*, as Loraine Day describes the latter:

At school, Denise is immediately projected into an alien world, a world where the habits, behaviour and above all language of her home environment have no currency. The refinement and style which Denise perceives in the existence of her class-mates, and which figure in the books which she increasingly loves to read, exert an irresistible appeal, and she grows more and more contemptuous of her parents' humble existence. Denise learns to hide her shameful "difference": she maintains a strict silence about her home life, earns the respect of her class-mates for the consistently high marks which she achieves, and above all, she trains herself to speak as the teachers and other girls do, to adopt the language

of the books she reads, a discourse retrospectively perceived as “a system of passwords to gain access to another milieu”. (44)

Once having acceded to the bourgeois linguistic world, it is clearly impossible to return, and Ernaux finds that she is irrevocably separated from her parents by her language—the very language that she proposes to use in order to recount that separation. Glossing and commenting upon her parents’ language, she finds herself in the position of Proust, delighting in Françoise’s solecisms; yet, as Ernaux points out, Françoise was Marcel’s maid, rather than his mother (62). The other pungencies of the allusion to Proust are not lost upon Ernaux. Practitioner of an eminently elite discursive style, Proust, too, recognized language as a social construct. Like Ernaux, Marcel and Swann reflect upon the chasm which yawns between the language of two different classes, that of Madame Verdurin’s salon, for example, and that of the Duchesse de Guermantes. Proust will see language moreover primarily as a vehicle allowing him to account for a life. Yet in terms of its fundamental attitude toward language, Ernaux’s autodiegetical project could not be less Proustian. For each sentence, each word that she inscribes upon the page separates her from her past more definitively still:

Naturellement, aucun bonheur d’écrire, dans cette entreprise où je me tiens au plus près des mots et des phrases entendues, les soulignant parfois par des italiques. Non pour indiquer un double sens au lecteur et lui offrir le plaisir d’une complicité, que je refuse sous toutes ses formes, nostalgie, pathétique ou dérision. Simplement parce que ces mots et ces phrases disent les limites et la couleur du monde où vécut mon père, où j’ai vécu aussi. (46)

Ernaux is constantly writing *against* language and literature. If this oppositional stance is obvious in the case of the italicized popular language in *La Place*, it is no less true of the more “conventional” literary language which makes up the bulk of the text. For the rhetoric of understatement in the text serves constantly to destabilize the latter; in short, language in *La Place* is radically undercut.

Once again, it is a question of *place*. The final interrogation of that notion will be situated on the ground of literature and its norms. Characteristically, Ernaux’s examination of place will play itself out in conflict and apparent paradox. On the one hand, her project is subversive: in writing *La Place*, she is trying to undermine literature; on the other hand (and through the very same gesture), she is seeking to burrow into literature from beneath, and establish a place for herself within it. Just as she felt it necessary to rehearse her father’s understanding of the notion of class in order to examine her own understanding of it, so too she evokes his very tentative relation with literature as a necessary first step in an analysis of her own view of reading and writing.

Ernaux remarks that the only book her father remembers from his childhood is *Le Tour de France par deux enfants*, a collection of popular

homilies and maxims. As she quotes five passages from the 326th edition of that work, it becomes clear that its discursive style is built around precisely the sort of moral commonplace that characterizes her parents' language. If her father remembers that book to the exclusion of any other, it is because, as he puts it quite simply, "ça nous paraissait réel" (31). When she was twelve, she says, her father took her to the municipal library, where neither of them had ever set foot. Asked by the librarian which books they would like to borrow, her father is filled with shame and consternation: "A la maison, on n'avait pas pensé qu'il fallait savoir d'avance ce qu'on voulait, être capable de citer des titres aussi facilement que des marques de biscuits" (112). The librarian chooses in their stead, *Colomba* for Ernaux, a "light" Maupassant novel for her father; they never return to the library, and Ernaux's mother is obliged to return the books for them. Her father's understanding of the word *culture* is particularly important for Ernaux. He takes the word literally, as it is used in the rural lexicon of farmwork: "Il a toujours appelé ainsi le travail de la terre, l'autre sens de culture, le spirituel, lui était inutile" (34). It is this very idea of *uselessness* which makes him impervious to the other kind of culture, in spite of his daughter's increasing interest in the latter: "Les livres, la musique, c'est bon pour toi," he tells her. "Moi je n'en ai pas besoin pour vivre" (83). Although he takes great pride in his daughter's scholastic accomplishments, the things that she learns in school remain for him outside of real life: "Les études n'avaient pas pour lui de rapport avec la vie ordinaire" (81). The sort of education that his daughter is acquiring is, for him, a luxury; in a real sense, her growing knowledge bears only a supplementary relation to life as he lives it. Yet Ernaux will realize that, in her new world, the same is true of her father's culture: "Ses mots et ses idées n'avaient pas cours dans les salles de français ou de philo" (83).

There too, Ernaux discovers that the kind of literature she enjoyed as a child, the novels of Anne-Marie Desmarests and Daniel Gray, has no currency. Like the other manifestations of her early culture, they are considered silly and provincial, a critical judgment which she receives with a Copernican shock: "L'univers pour moi s'est retourné" (79). Yet with all the suppleness that such a situation demands, she will subscribe to that new set of cultural norms. She prides herself on reading "real" literature now. She deliberately copies out the most eloquent passages from those texts, including a maxim from Henri de Régnier which, examined many years later from the narrative perspective of her maturity, seems fully as trite as anything found in *Le Tour de France par deux enfants*. Culture is, after all, a difficult game to win. Its rules are uncertain and liable to change at any point, leaving one at a loss. Just when one thinks one has gotten the knack of it, has achieved mastery over the doxa as it were, along comes a book by Philippe Sollers: "Je me souviens d'un titre *L'Expérience des limites*. Mon découragement en lisant le début, il n'y était question que de métaphysique et de littérature" (113).

Watching over her dying father, Ernaux reads Beauvoir's *Les Mandarins*, realizing that before she finishes that lengthy novel, her father will cease to be. The passage is emblematic, insofar as Ernaux's experience of her father's death is clearly mediated by Beauvoir's book. There has arisen a distance between her father and herself, a distance as vast as literary history and as formidably material as the printed page. Ernaux passes the time her father takes to die in reading, hoping that literature will palliate that experience. Not just any literature, at that: Beauvoir is a feminist, deeply concerned with staking out a woman's place in contemporary literature; and *Les Mandarins*, including as it does a very marked dimension of autodiegesis, stands in a privileged intertextual situation with regard to Ernaux's own project in *La Place*.⁸

Just as surely, Ernaux hopes that her own practice of literature will help her come to terms with her father, will allow her to bridge the gap between her life and his. Yet the literary language to which she has apprenticed for so long, both as a professor of literature and as a writer, is dramatically insufficient to her purposes. Once again, she reflects upon the letters she exchanged with her parents when she was away from home, as if that particular kind of writing might help her now to achieve some sort of *correspondence* with her father:

Ma mère m'écrivait un compte rendu du monde autour. Il fait froid par chez nous espérons que cela ne va pas durer. On est allés dimanche voir nos amis de Granville. La mère X est morte soixante ans ce n'est pas vieux. Elle ne savait pas plaisanter par écrit, dans une langue et avec des tournures qui lui donnaient déjà de la peine. Ecrire comme elle parlait aurait été plus difficile encore, elle n'a jamais appris à le faire. Mon père signait. Je leur répondais aussi dans le même ton du constat. Ils auraient ressenti toute recherche de style comme une manière de les tenir à distance. (89–90)

Her mother, like Ernaux herself, is caught between two languages. If she cannot use her quotidian, spoken language in the letters to her daughter, neither can she master a more formal, "written" mode. The only option remaining to her is the deliberate, flat *ton du constat*, a discourse from which, according to Ernaux, style is conspicuously absent. It is that understated, declarative tone which Ernaux will try to imitate in *La Place*.

This strategy, however, is fraught with conflict. For the deliberate eschewal of "style" constitutes in itself a stylistic choice; a rhetoric of meiosis is nonetheless rhetorical. That problem inflects heavily upon a broader representational dilemma that Ernaux faces. Having set herself the task of telling her father's life, she comes progressively to realize that his life resists telling. For just as her father cannot really write—he contributes nothing apart from his signature to the mother's letters—so too he cannot truly be written. Early on in *La Place*, Ernaux speaks of trying to write a novel in which her father was the principal figure; she abandoned that project, she says, in failure and disgust (23). Later, after a passage

describing some of her father's habits, she remarks that she could have sketched that portrait much earlier, during her school years, if the description of ordinary life had not been forbidden to her (69). Yet, as a professor of literature, Ernaux is institutionally bound to the very constraints she deplures, a situation that becomes painfully apparent when she compares her own writing to that of her students: "Tout le temps que j'ai écrit, je corrigeais aussi des devoirs, je fournissais des modèles de dissertation, parce que je suis payée pour cela. Ce jeu des idées me causait la même impression que le *luxé*, sentiment d'irréalité, envie de pleurer" (113).

In short, Ernaux finds herself caught once again between two kinds of culture, unable to come to terms with either one, telling only the manner in which they clash:

Voie étroite, en écrivant, entre la réhabilitation d'un mode de vie considéré comme inférier, et la dénonciation de l'aliénation qui l'accompagne. Parce que ces façons de vivre étaient à nous, un bonheur même, mais aussi les barrières humiliantes de notre condition (conscience que "ce n'est pas assez bien chez nous"), je voudrais dire à la fois le bonheur et l'aliénation. Impression, bien plutôt, de tanguer d'un bord à l'autre de cette contradiction. (54)

Armed with a set of literary norms and conventions that cannot account for her father's life, Ernaux discovers that, in writing that life as carefully as she may, she is nonetheless writing her father *out* of the story: "J'écris lentement. En m'efforçant de révéler la trame significative d'une vie dans un ensemble de faits et de choix, j'ai l'impression de perdre au fur et à mesure la figure particulière de mon père" (45).

There is then a strange and massive phenomenon of displacement at work in *La Place*. What Ernaux tells in that text is not the story of her father. For she comes to see the impossibility of that project, based on the sober realization that words, even during their life together, had failed them miserably: "J'écris peut-être parce qu'on n'avait plus rien à se dire" (84). *La Place* is the story, rather, of Ernaux's literary apprenticeship, a *Künstlerroman* which, recounting an artistic itinerary, is intended to serve also as the guarantor of definitive franchise in the guild. The telling of that story must also be taken, I think, as the direct consequence of Ernaux's meiotic strategy. For in addition to its use in the language of rhetoric, "meiosis" has another meaning, which the *OED* defines as "The state of a disease in which the symptoms begin to abate." The evolution of Ernaux's work may be read in this pathological perspective as the chronicle of a disease commonly afflicting young writers. After the halting, uneven experiments of *Les Armoires vides*, *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*, and *La Femme gelée*, Ernaux finds in *La Place* a "cure," a voice of her own that will resonate with assurance and authority in her later texts, and a real sense of *place*.

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO, BOULDER

Notes

¹For the sake of economy, in discussing *La Place* I shall speak of the narrator as "Ernaux."

²See *Institutio Oratoria* VII iii 50: "We must also avoid *μειῶσις*, a term applied to meagreness and inadequacy of expression, although it is a fault which characterizes an obscure style rather than one which lacks ornament" (III, 239).

³See for example Frank Stella, speaking of his own work: "Maybe that's the quality of simplicity. When Mantle hits the ball out of the park, everybody is sort of stunned for a minute because it's so simple. He knocks it right out of the park, and that usually does it" (Glaser 164). See also the sculptor and performance artist Robert Morris: "Simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience. Unitary forms do not reduce relationships. They order them" (228).

⁴See Gregory Battcock: "An outstanding characteristic of Minimal Art is its clarity" (32).

⁵See for instance Robert Morris: "The quality of intimacy is attached to an object in a fairly direct proportion as its size diminishes in relation to oneself. The quality of publicness is attached in proportion as the size increases in relation to oneself" (230).

⁶See E. C. Goossen on minimalist plastic art: "Increasingly the demand has been for an honest, direct, unadulterated experience in art, (any art), minus symbolism, minus messages, and minus personal exhibitionism" (169).

⁷See Frances Colpitt: "Minimalism attempted, above all, the subversion of the artistic 'style'" (133). My reading of the oppositional character of Ernaux's writing has been informed by the theoretical model proposed by Ross Chambers in *Room for Maneuver*.

⁸Both books were recognized by the literary establishment in the form of prestigious prizes. *Les Mandarins* was awarded the Prix Goncourt in 1954, and *La Place* won the Prix Renaudot in 1984.

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