

## Diegetic Biographism: Metanarrative Commentary and Referential Play Producing a Rhetoric of Authenticity in Three Books by Annie Ernaux

Karl Agerup  
University of Gothenburg

---

### Abstract

After publishing three relatively unnoticed novels, French writer Annie Ernaux stopped labeling her books as novels and adopted a documentary and autobiographical rhetoric. After this autobiographical turn, Ernaux won prestigious prizes and reached a wider audience. This article is an attempt to map out the narrative devices that instigated the impression of urgency, authenticity, and biographical referentiality that the critics praised. Positioning Ernaux's autobiographical project in relation to the concept of performative biographism, the neologism «diegetic biographism» is proposed for her systematic metanarrative commentary and referential play. Increased reader engagement is thus regarded as a function of Ernaux's anchoring her narration in an ostensibly biographical reference world.

---

### Keywords

Ernaux; biography; autobiography; authenticity

---

### Contact

karl.agerup@gu.se

---

### 1. Introduction

Following three relatively unnoticed novels, Annie Ernaux's (1940-) writing took a new turn with *La place*, published in 1983. As suggested by the title, its theme is the individual's struggle to find a place in society; the narrator feels her identity abraded by her change of class. *La place* interchangeably represents the narrator's father's life as an uneducated grocer and the speaking daughter's reflections on identity, heritage, class, and the process of writing.

Judging from the reviews, the metanarrative commentary conveys an impression of urgency and authenticity: most readers identify the narrator with the author. All nine French reviewers of *La place* expressed that they believed that Annie Ernaux was telling a story about her own father (Alliot; Bernstein, "Souvenirs"; D.D; G.P.; de Martinoir; Nourissier; Rinaldo; Sipiro; Wurmser). For example, the *Libération* reviewer described the narrative as documentary in that Ernaux «began writing the book a few months after she qualified as a teacher and right after the death of her father.»<sup>1</sup> («Ce livre, elle a commencé à le rédiger quelques mois après son CAPES, juste après la mort de son père.» ; Bernstein,

---

<sup>1</sup> All translations to English are mine unless stated otherwise. Since relevant grammatical detail, such as past participle gender agreements, are lost in translation, my analysis is based on Ernaux's original text in French even when English translations are available. The same goes for cover pictures, back cover blurbs, and other paratextual semioses. The English translations are only there to help non-francophone readers follow my reasoning and do not constitute objects of study.

“Souvenirs”). This information, provided by the narrator of *La place*, is thus perceived to be historically true.

In 1988, Annie Ernaux published *Une femme*, which presented an account of the mother’s life – and death – from the daughter’s viewpoint. Just as in the previous book, the question of similarity and difference in relation to the parent was discussed in the form of metanarrative commentary. Again, the reception was favorable and the critics particularly emphasized Ernaux’s capacity of verbalizing her feelings of guilt and otherness in relation to the mother. In France, four out of five reviewers clearly identified an autobiographical project (Savigneau; Melkonian; Balmer; Rossi-Dutheil). Only one reviewer took a neutral stance using expressions like «the mother» and «the daughter» instead of «Annie Ernaux» and «her mother» (Alphant).

Three years later, Annie Ernaux published *Passion simple*, a book about a love affair with a married man. Just like the two previous publications, *Passion simple* was understood to be autobiographical and contained extensive metanarrative commentary. Four reviewers identified the narrator and protagonist as «Annie Ernaux» (Josselin; Grainville; Bernstein, “Mémoire”; Savigneau, “Le courage”).

Although Ernaux had won critical respect prior to *La place* (see Charpentier 47), abandoning novel writing immediately advanced her career substantially. *La place* was awarded the prestigious Renaudot prize and initially sold 100,000 copies in France. *Une femme* and *Passion simple* were also successful, the latter reaching an even larger audience with about 175,000 copies sold by 1992 (see Charpentier 48). Siobhán McIlvanney asserts that Ernaux’s success in English-speaking countries may «be attributable to similarities between her confessional, autobiographical accounts of female experience written in the first person» (1). In France, 17 out of 19 reviewers accounted for undoubtedly autobiographical interpretations while two critics took a neutral position neither qualifying the texts as autobiographical nor as fictional. As Viart and Vercier have revealed, Annie Ernaux represented the same experience of class treason in her earlier works, but from *La place* and on, this experience was conveyed using a first person narrative without invented names (36). Identifying a similar evolution in Ernaux’s writing, Warren Motte has declared that *La place* «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» (55).

In other words, what was new about *La place*, rather than subject matter or theme, was the narrative structure, the concept of blurring the narrator with the author. While journalistic critics effortlessly characterized these texts as autobiographical, scholarly critics rather claimed the «generic status of Ernaux’s later works is uncertain» (McIlvanney 88), called Ernaux’s narrator «implicitly autobiographical» (Marson 70), or went in the direction of *autofiction*, emphasizing the hybrid reading mode instigated by the narrative strategies in play (see Motte 55–56).

A crucial question is how to interpret the metanarrative commentaries and interdiscursive references; are they to be viewed as a part of the main narrative or as a kind of inserted preface fragments? In other words, who is the reader supposed to identify as the speaker and thinker in Ernaux’s texts? The scholarly critics use different terms for this speaker. The passages dealing with the act of writing, for instance, can be attributed to either the «text» (Anderson Bliss 164), the «narrator» (McIlvanney 90) or to «Ernaux» (Motte 62). The aim of this article is thus to propose a theoretical approach to the works under discussion that takes into account both the empirical autobiographical readings and

the scholars' hesitation in determining the genre and in positioning the storyteller in relation to the author.

## 2. Theoretical and terminological premises

In his pioneering work *Le pacte autobiographique* from 1975, Philippe Lejeune defined the autobiography as a retrospective narrative that a person tells about her or his life. Autobiography, claimed Lejeune, «presupposes *identity in name* between the author, as represented by his name on the cover, the narrator, and the one being spoken of» (“The autobiographical contract” 200). An autobiographical contract is thus established when author, narrator, and protagonist have the same name. From the reader’s point of view, however, other factors can play important roles in determining whether the text is perceived as autobiographical or not. As Tonya Blowers has remarked, «we all know that many novels read like autobiographies and, indeed, much of the *frisson* of the writing depends on this close but unaffirmed identification” (105). However practical it may appear as an analytical tool, “Lejeune’s pact encourages the critic to ignore the fascinating points of intersection between the two genres” (Blowers 105). By the same token, Paul de Man, in an article from 1984 entitled “Autobiography as De-facement”, concluded that «the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but that it is undecidable» and that autobiography «is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts» (921). Analogically Monika Fludernik has argued that, technically speaking, no narrative aspect is typically fictional (60). Therefore it appears as necessary to consider all literary texts as fictional *and* autobiographical to varying degrees. Rather than studying identities in name and other details in the primary text, it appears as reasonable to first look for autobiographical reception and then study the primary text while paying special attention to patterns that could explain this reception. In other words, a way forward is to identify autobiography as function before retrieving autobiography as form. Annie Ernaux’s works lend support to this functional approach since they are mainly read as autobiographical although the name of the narrator/protagonist is not specified. As Warren Motte has shown, Annie Ernaux «has deliberately put the specificity of autobiography and fiction on trial, interrogating traditional notions about the possibilities and limits of those modes» (55).

While Lejeune’s identity criterion has been repeatedly questioned, his stressing of the importance of the paratext appears as less controversial. «Paratext» is Gérard Genette’s term for those texts and symbols that surround the main text: cover, motto, presentation of the author, etc. (*Seuils* 7-8). As Élise Huguény-Léger has demonstrated, Annie Ernaux and her French publisher had consistent recourse to numerous paratextual devices. On its back-cover, the *Folio* paperback edition of *La place* presents the work as a pared-down but universal story about a father and his daughter. The daughter is referred to as «Annie Ernaux» and she is the one who, according to the back-cover blurb, tells the story of her father, a laborer and small-scale businessman who fought to achieve a place in the sun. This creates expectations of a biographical narrative in which the author tells the story of the life of her father. Inside the book’s covers, the author’s name, the title, and the publisher are stated, but the genre is not identified. Neither a contract of fiction nor a contract of fact is established in any formal sense, even though the back-cover blurb tends towards the biographical. A brief presentation of the author on the pages following the title page indicates that Annie Ernaux lived throughout her childhood in Yvetot in Normandy, after which she qualified as a teacher of language and literature. This information reinforces the impression of a documentary approach, as the town where the narrator grows up is called «Y.» in the text, and as the narrator starts out by telling of the

practical test for the teaching qualification, specifically in language and literature. Moreover, the pages immediately preceding the start of the narrative quote Jean Genet as a motto: «I will hazard an explanation: writing is the last resort when you have betrayed» («Je hasarde une explication: écrire c'est le dernier recours quand on a trahi»). Thus the paratext, in several respects, establishes links between the narrator and author, and creates expectations of a story told by someone who regards herself as a traitor.

In this article, two types of narrative tropes that direct the reading towards the biographical will be discussed: metanarrative commentary and referential play. In the first category, I include passages in which the narrator reflects on her situation or activity, on language and style, or on the forthcoming publication of the book she is pretending to write. Although the narrator does not reveal her name, the feminine terminations of the past participles – and parts of the story – show that she identifies herself as a woman. In this article, «narrator» simply refers to the textual configuration of this female teller figure. The «author», or «Ernaux», on the other hand, signifies the real world person responsible for inventing, conceptualizing, and verbalizing the text. Moreover, I define metanarration with Olivia Santovetti as a subcategory to self-reflection that designates the «narrator's reflections on the act of narrating» (309). In support of my emphasis on metanarrative, although not referring to Ernaux's works specifically, Shlomith Rimmon's has reiterated that «the metadiegetic level is often more important than the primary narrative» (60). Along similar lines, Genette has remarked that metanarrative is also a narrative in itself and cannot be reduced to a narrative on narrative (*Narrative Discourse Revisited* 91-92). My view of metanarrative commentary as an integrated part of the literary work, a trope among others, is thus not a novel one. That said, metanarrative commentary also performs a distancing move from the story as it is preoccupied with questions of methodology and mood in the here and now of the *diegesis*. Metanarrative comments thus instigate pauses with regards to the tempo of the storytelling; they are anisochronies (Genette, *Figures III* 122-144).

In a second category of narrative tropes directing the reading towards the autobiographical, called «referential play», I include attempts to establish links with the historical world that are not performed through commentary but through references that the reader recognizes from the historical world preceding and surrounding Ernaux's literary universe. As will be illustrated below, some references are coded or poorly disguised, and some are obvious. Whether masked or not, the references attach the story and the metanarrative to the historical world. Thus, both kinds of devices – metanarrative commentary and referential play – are *interdiscursive*. The term «interdiscourse» refers to the fact that the text establishes multiple interfaces with other texts (in the widest possible sense of the word), even when they belong to other genres and discourses (see Maingueneau 324-326). In other words, an external reality, or historical discourse, is actualized by the literary text, with the narrative acquiring documentary weight and becoming historically relevant.

### 3. Metanarrative commentary

As mentioned, *La place* begins with the narrator's referring to the practical test for the teaching qualification. Sentences are short with few adverbs. The literary tense *passé simple* is used sparingly; instead *passé composé* is dominant, following Camus' model in *L'étranger*, giving the account a simple, documentary style. The death of the father occurs after a few pages and it is stressed that the narrator knows exactly when it happened, as if to say that

this is not *L'étranger*, even though the style and theme recall Camus' novel. I allude here to the famous opening of *L'étranger*: «Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know» («Aujourd'hui, maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas.»; Camus 9). About ten pages later, the story of the father is interrupted and the narrator explains, in the present tense, that her original plan of writing a novel about him now fills her with disgust:

I have known for a short time that this cannot be a novel. If I am to render a life so burdened by duty, I have the right neither to make it into «art» nor to create something «exciting» and «moving». I will collect what my father said and thought, his gestures and the things that characterized his life, all these objective signs of a life that I also shared.

Depuis peu, je sais que le roman est impossible. Pour rendre compte d'une vie soumise à la nécessité, je n'ai 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. (Ernaux, *La place* 24)

The narrator then resumes the story about the father but regularly returns with new commentary eager to convince the reader that the story is historically true or in search of truth: «I have devoted a great deal of time to this, because it is not as easy to remember as it is to invent» («J'ai mis beaucoup de temps parce qu'il ne m'était pas aussi facile de ramener au jour des faits oubliés que d'inventer»; *La place* 100). Writing is described as difficult and painful:

Naturally, there is no joy of writing in this project in which I strive to keep as close as possible to those words and sentences that I had heard, sometimes put in italics. Not to indicate a double meaning and give my reader the pleasure of secret collusion ... but simply because these words and phrases express the limits and the colors of the world in which my father lived, and where I also lived. And where we never mistook one word for another.

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. Et l'on n'y prenait jamais un mot pour un autre. (*La place* 46)

The narrative thus takes as its theme identity and difference in relation to the father, which is made explicit in the authenticity-creating commentary: «I often say “we” now, because for a long time that is how I thought and I don't know when I stopped doing it» («Je dis souvent “nous” maintenant, parce que j'ai longtemps pensé de cette façon et je ne sais pas quand j'ai cessé de le faire»; *La place* 61). The metanarrative contributes to the development of the theme, even though it interferes with the rhythm and description of childhood scenes. The comments relate to what has just been said, so that the scenes with the father acquire an additional layer of meaning, for instance, in the form of the sociological analysis that the well-educated narrator is able to add.

In the next book, *Une femme*, the same kind of metanarrative commentary is used, only this time the story is about the narrator's mother. As pointed out by Susan Marson, the book is «a form of play between the first-person narrator and the character whose story is told, involving both identification and differentiation» (70). Along similar lines, Laurence

Mall has emphasized that the narrative largely concerns the narrator's attempts to define herself (53). By turning the life of her parents into language, her own identity can be verbalized. Mall stresses that this is an enterprise fraught with guilt, since in doing this, the narrator demonstrates that she has defected to the enemy camp of writers for whom life is an object of knowledge (50).

Early in the text, the narrator explains that she can feel the gestures of poverty that have been transmitted through generations «coming to a halt with me who is only their archivist» («Connaissant tous les gestes qui accommodent la pauvreté. Ce savoir, transmis de mère en fille pendant des siècles, s'arrête à moi qui n'en suis plus que l'archiviste»; *Une femme* 26). At the same time, the phrase expresses the narrator's sadness at no longer belonging to her parents' social class. Such brooding reinforces the impression of authenticity: sorrow at not being part of her family signifies seriousness; at the same time the story takes on universality, as it touches on the general phenomenon of social mobility. As Marson has underscored, the «emphasis is not on her [the mother's] singularity, but on what she has in common with other members of the same social group» (76).

*Une femme* also returns to the narrator's musings on genre and her emphasis that the text is not a novel: «This is not a biography, nor, of course, a novel; perhaps it is a mixture of literature, sociology, and history» («Ceci n'est pas une biographie, ni un roman naturellement, peut-être quelque chose entre la littérature, la sociologie et l'histoire»; 106). The writing project, according to the narrator, has little to do with fiction but it rather amounts to «seeking a truth about my mother that cannot be reached other than through words». At the same time the narrator explains that she wants to remain «within literature» («Mon projet est de nature littéraire, puisqu'il s'agit de chercher une vérité sur ma mère qui ne peut être atteinte que par des mots ... Mais je souhaite rester, d'une certaine façon, au-dessous de la littérature»; 23). By emphasizing her own uncertainty about the genre and about literariness, the narrator hints that the account is guided by a logic that differs from what can be captured by any genre label. Exactly as in the previous book, the narrator here clearly states that it is a question of relating events, felt to be significant, from the life of her mother. The urgency is emphasized when, towards the end of the book, the narrator assures us that during the ten months of writing, she dreamt about her mother almost every night (104).

The device of emphasizing the duration of the writing and introducing this dimension into the narrative recurs in all three books, often in contexts in which varied feelings toward writing manifest themselves (*La place* 100; *Une femme* 21, 43, 104; *Passion simple* 13). In *Une femme*, the narrator speaks about «the horror of writing as an introduction to a book and not in a letter to somebody, “my mother is dead”» («Avant-hier seulement, j'ai surmonté la terreur d'écrire dans le haut d'une feuille blanche, comme un début de ivre, non de lettre à quelqu'un, “ma mère est morte”»; 21). As McIlvanny has highlighted (106), the incipit of *Une femme* echoes the incipit of *L'étranger*, only in Ernaux's book the narrator knows exactly when and where death occurred: «Mother died on Monday April 7 at the retirement home of the Pontoise hospital, where I had put her two years earlier» («Ma mère est morte le lundi 7 avril à la maison de retraite de l'hôpital de Pontoise, où je l'avais placée il y a deux ans»; *Une femme* 11). The repeated allusion to *L'étranger* is another way of making the story relevant and at the same time juxtaposing it to Camus' novel through invoking the pathos of the narrator.

In *La place*, the narrator expresses reluctance to finish writing the text: «I didn't think about the end of the book. Now I know that it is approaching ... Soon there will be nothing more for me to write. I would like to slow down the final pages so that they stay

with me» («Je ne pensais pas à la fin de mon livre. Maintenant je sais qu'elle s'approche. ... Bientôt je n'aurai plus rien à écrire. Je voudrais retarder ces dernières lignes, qu'elles soient toujours devant moi»; 101). In *Une femme* as well, the narrator agonizes over approaching the end of the text, and the writing becomes more hesitant when the subject is the mother's dementia (89). This is not the first time there has been a comment on the speed of the writing; instead, these interruptions keep recurring, as if to remind the reader of the hazards of recreating a biographical reality (*La place* 45; *Une femme* 43-44, 62). Marson reiterates that *Une femme* «almost exactly reproduces the structure» of *La place* (Marson 72).

Not only is the narrative form of the two books similar, but their project, as acts of mourning, is very much the same, and many events related in *Une femme* also appear in the earlier text. In this sense, the earlier text concerning the father appears as a mediating intertext in *Une femme*, introducing a tacit male presence between the female author and her character. The woman *sans histoire* finds her place in narrative through the mediation of a male figure. [...] The inscription of the intertext through the expression «la place» and other textual echoes – such as a description of the father and mother in their wedding photo, occurring in both texts, whether by design or by accident, at the same place (page 37) – thus seems closely related to the possibility of recounting the story of the mother who, as a woman, *une femme*, at first appears outside of time and, therefore, of narrative itself. (Marson 72–73)

Another effect produced by Ernaux's consistent intertextuality is that the authenticity of the story of the mother is reinforced by its echoing the story of the father – and vice versa. In *La place*, the narrator announces on page 45 that she «writes slowly» so as not to lose the thread that carries the meaning and risk lapsing into schematic biography. In *Une femme*, pages 43-44 contain a similar reflection: «In the beginning I thought I was writing fast. Actually, I spend a lot of time on putting what is to be said in the right order, on the choice of words and on structure, as if there existed an ideal arrangement that is the only one that can provide a true picture of my mother» («Au début, je croyais que j'écrivais vite. En fait je passe beaucoup de temps à m'interroger sur l'ordre des choses à dire, le choix et l'agencement des mots, comme s'il existait un ordre idéal, seul capable de rendre une vérité concernant ma mère»).

There are also repeated attempts to understand why the writing is being done at all. In both books this process starts early on, and is then followed up on a later occasion. In *La place* the narrator explains on page 23 that she «must explain all this, i.e., write about my father, his life and the distance that has developed between him and me» («il faudra que "j'explique tout cela". Je voulais dire, écrire au sujet de mon père, sa vie, et cette distance venue entre lui et moi»). In *Une femme* the narrator says on page 22 that she is forced to write as she «is incapable of doing anything else» («je ne suis pas capable en ce moment de faire autre chose»). These parallels suggest that there is a template for this metanarrative commentary, calling for early justification of why the book is being written and then requiring that the writing be questioned and slowed down around the middle of the book. Furthermore, Ernaux's rhetorical model demands that a hypothesis about the intention of the book be developed and a degree of hope generated that the narration in some way gives life to the material. Finally, both metanarratives include a separation phase in which the narrator is reluctant to finish the story. In this way, the metanarrative plane reflects the life story being told, in that it moves in a cycle of birth, pain, hope, anguish, and death. Ernaux thus repeated the rhetorical template in *Une femme* that had proved successful in *La place*.

The next book, *Passion simple*, tells the story of the narrator's sexual liaison with a married man. Like the previous stories this one is repeatedly paused and commented by the narrator who claims the project is one of «collecting signs» so as to «express the reality of the passion». The narrator declares that no irony is involved, since it is not a question of relating events to someone but rather of being able to relive what has happened in her life. It is for this reason, she claims, that she collects, describes, and enumerates individual events and facts: in order to re-experience a passion (31).

Authenticity is also claimed by the narrator's explanation in a note that she cannot describe the man in greater detail, as he «is still alive somewhere in the world. I cannot describe him any more closely, cannot provide signs that would reveal who he is» («Cet homme continue de vivre quelque part dans le monde. Je ne peux pas le décrire davantage, fournir des signes susceptibles de l'identifier»; 33, footnote 1). This book, too, investigates the reasons for writing, trying out different explanations. It is a question of «remaining in that time» («pour rester dans ce temps-là»), «of enduring the grief» («supporter le chagrin»), and of «understanding if others have done or felt similar things» («pour savoir si les autres n'ont pas fait ou ressenti des choses identiques»; *Passion simple* 61,63,65). The narrator also tells of her thoughts about when the book might be published, thoughts that make her feel ashamed: «I look at these pages with surprise and a kind of shame that I have never before felt» («je regarde les pages avec étonnement et une sorte de honte, jamais ressentie»; 69). She says that she is guessing that many autobiographical stories never see the light of day, or are disguised as novels. The implication is that this is not an autobiography in disguise but an open one, and that she is prepared to pay for this openness with her feelings of shame. From a rhetorical point of view, this statement serves the purpose of making the story look private and urgent. Like many other metanarrative comments, it encourages the reader to consider the text as a truthful account of a real life experience. At the same time the informed reader knows, and appreciates, the text in its capacity of a literary work, thus an aesthetical product destined to please its readers. The reader, then, must bring together these two evidences: the truth claims of the narrative and the packaging of the text as literature. While most journalistic reviewers resolve this tension by simply identifying the narrator with the author, some scholarly critics go to great lengths to keep the separation barrier intact between textual and real world enunciators. This is not an easy task as some thoughts and aims seem difficult, at least using the principles of traditional narratology, to attribute to a narrator, and inversely, some are not reasonable to attribute to the writer. For example, McIlvanney addresses the narrator's «awareness of certain tensions within her literary project» (90) and her «objectives in writing the work» (114). By the same token, Fell discusses the narrator's «failure» to write from a position of objectivity (28).

In most cases it would seem more natural to refer to the *author's* aims, literary projects, and writing failures. Something in Ernaux's writing makes readers cease to view the narrator as product and upgrade her to an author-like position with responsibility for the literary work itself. The terminological problem becomes apparent when a critic suggests that the metanarrative comments «attest to the 'real-life' healing process of the narrator» (McIlvanney 114). If the *narrator* had *real life*, wouldn't we normally use a different term, such as author? It seems that Ernaux's narrative makes qualities and functions traditionally associated to the author 'spill over' to the narrator. What's more, the systematical blurring of author and narrator also causes spillover in the opposite direction. That is to say, critics attribute qualities normally associated with narration to the authorial position. When Motte, for instance, claims that Ernaux «carefully elaborates a critical dimension in the text

through which she examines her own writing» (55), the narrator's commentary is qualified as authorial: according to Motte it is Ernaux who examines her writing by means of these texts. The same goes for the father and mother characters: they are, according to Motte (56–57) – and to most reviewers, as seen above – identifiable as Ernaux's parents. It appears as crucial to stress in this context that the intermingling of narrator and author could hardly be classified as a misreading. On the contrary, it is triggered by the structure of relaying narrative and metanarrative commentary that plays an important part in Ernaux's poetics after 1983. The problem is theoretical or terminological: Ernaux's poetics runs counter to traditional genres. One solution to the narrator/author-hybridity is to simultaneously invoke author and narrator using expressions like «Ernaux's narrator». Marson, for instance, declares that «Ernaux's narrator also states that she wishes to remain “en dessous de la littérature” [underneath literature]» (Marson 75).

#### 4. Referential play

Another device that links these texts to writer's life world is the systematic referring to texts, objects, and people that are presented as historically real. This referential play is conducted through both explicit and implicit anchorage. To give an illustration of the latter, Ernaux abbreviates proper names and conceals the details of historical and geographical reality. Such details, precisely because of this masquerade, stand out from the narrative and create historical relevance. By electing, in *Passion simple*, to refrain from describing her secret lover, Ernaux's narrator indicates that he exists in historical reality. Similarly, the abbreviations of proper names signal that they have real-life referents that should be kept secret. By abbreviating the proper names, and writing «Y.» instead of «Yvetot» in *La place*, Ernaux reinforces the impression of a serious and highly charged project with a bearing on reality. As McIlvanney has highlighted, «the purpose of this narrative device has traditionally been to safeguard the anonymity of ‘real-life’ people and places, thereby demonstrating the authenticity and ‘realism’ of the text» (90). Allegedly, the parents are dead, but other relatives, neighbors, and friends are still alive; the lover in *Passion simple* has a wife somewhere among potential readers. In other words, the abbreviations fit well into the narrative model I described in the former section. Broadly speaking, an author has four possibilities when naming a person or a place: use a name from the historical world, abbreviate the name, refrain from naming, or invent a name. Many critics have propounded the view that historically accurate names create an effect of reality by linking the fiction to a highlighted referent (see Hamon 137; Fondo-Valette 263–264; Bechter-Burtscher 136; Harshaw 244–245). Nonetheless, Annie Ernaux's reception indicates that abbreviations and masquerade are just as effective. The abbreviation hints at the existence of an original that is in some sense secret – and therefore it appears to the reader as interesting and real. Then again, some of these places are not secret at all – they appear at the back-page blurb, in other texts by the same author, or in the biographical note on the pages that follow the title page. Ernaux sets up a game in which the reader is invited to decode the abbreviation. While McIlvanney proposes that the device «can be understood as reflecting her desire to make people and places representative of a shared social condition» or as «an acknowledgement of her intense emotional involvement with the text's subject matter» (90), it can also be understood as a means to link the text to a geographical and historical reality. Furthermore, a returning reader can compare the signs in *La place* and in *Une femme*, revealing several parallel characteristics. In addition to the above-mentioned lifecycle structure there are more specific connections, such as the year

when the father died, which both texts specify as 1967. McIllvanney underscores that the place name abbreviated as Y. in *La place* is written out fully in *Une femme* (90). This intertextuality creates further support for decoding Y. as Yvetot and for the impression of disclosure through concealment.

A final device linking the textual universe to a historical reality is the inserting of historical artifacts into the plot. For example, it is stated in *La place* that the father in his childhood read a book entitled *Le tour de la France par deux enfants* (roughly: «Two Children Travel Around France»). The narrator quotes the book, referring to page numbers and a specific edition, as if to emphasize to the reader that this book exists in historical reality and can be consulted by those who wish to do so (*La place* 30). In similar fashion, a connection is established between *Une femme* and articles from the local paper and *Le Monde* through mentions of dates (30, 84). *Le Monde* is also quoted in *Passion simple*, in which the story is also linked to the magazine *Marie-Claire* (26, 72).

## 5. Conclusion: diegetic biographism

Abandoning traditional novel writing, Annie Ernaux developed in the 1980s an autobiographical rhetoric that proved very successful. The style is formally simple and retained: sentences are short with few adverbs and adjectives; the colloquial tense *passé composé* is used instead of the literary *passé simple*. Moreover, an impression of urgency and sincerity is created through metanarrative commentary and coded referencing. As Warren Motte has reiterated, Ernaux's «anti-mannerist stance is in itself a 'manner', just as renunciation of rhetoric constitutes a new kind of rhetoric; one cannot escape from style» (57).

However, Ernaux, a certified *professeure agrégée* of literature and prize-winning author published by the prestigious editing house of Gallimard, hardly tries to escape from style or literature. There are reasons to doubt whether the narrator's anti-literary stance is attributable to the writer and her project, as some critics seem to suggest. Does the fact that the narrator of *Passion simple* asserts that she typed her notes on the computer without cuts or modifications mean that Ernaux used this method (*cf.* Taylor 72)? Is the writer Ernaux «constantly writing *against* language and literature», as Motte concludes from the narrator's protesting against literary language in *La place* (Motte 62)? Taylor, after declaring that «Ernaux writes books which she consistently describes as painful to write and shameful to expose to the public», pertinently asks: «what power is it that compels Ernaux to write such books [...] and, moreover, to present them to the public as autobiographical» (Taylor 65)?

While Taylor goes on to link Ernaux's project to the foucauldian concept of the modern subject as a confessing animal, I would suggest that the paradox can alternatively be resolved by regarding the articulation of feelings of shame and hesitation as relative to the particular narrator and narrative rather than to Ernaux and her writing in general terms. This is not to say that a fictional reading is more reasonable than an autobiographical one – the one does not exclude the other. What I mean to suggest is that the two perspectives be kept in mind simultaneously. If the narrator's comments are not in anyway separated from the writer's, how do we view and name the commentary articulated by the writer in interviews and essays? All things considered, I agree with Warren Motte (62) that Annie Ernaux's project can appear as paradoxical since she, through her narrators, challenges the field of «Literature» while at the same time, and by the same act, i.e. by a poetics of authenticity, establishes a place for herself in this field. Rather than just reflecting the

writer's efforts to «undermine literature» (Motte 62), though, the metanarrative commentary can also be interpreted as a literary device that triggers reader engagement. What needs to be emphasized, then, is that autobiography – if the works under discussion are to be labeled this way – is not merely reference, but it is also *form*, *style*, and *function*. In Jakobson's terms, Ernaux's works are characterized by a tension between, and synergy of, referential and poetic functions. The frisson of autobiographical identification (see Blowers 105), whether based on historical truth or not, is an aesthetical quality. As Linda Hutcheon reiterates, «[a]rt has always been 'illusion', and as one might surmise, it has often, if not always, been self-consciously aware of that ontological status. This formal narcissism is a broad cultural phenomenon, not limited by art form or even by period» (17).

In order to emphasize the poetic function of Ernaux's works, and to balance her mediatized image of a sociological and autobiographical documentarian, I would like to suggest the neologism *diegetic biographism* to describe the kind of storytelling she developed in *La place*, *Une femme*, and *Passion simple*. The notion of diegetic biographism is best understood in relation to the neighboring concept of performative biographism that Jon Helt Haarder has developed referring to an artistic trend of the last decade whose primary characteristic is the touting of biographical referentiality (see Haarder 78). Haarder disconnects the term biographism from its traditional meaning in literary theory, i.e., a critical method that explains literary texts by referring to the author, instead using it to describe artful play with the biographical material, play in which the image of the author is constantly changing. Ernaux shares this touting of the biographical referentiality of art but her practice is mainly conducted in the realm of the diegesis. Rather than extratextual and medial performance, Ernaux uses diegetic devices to produce the (auto)biography-function. In conclusion, diegetic biographism refers to a poetics of urgency and authenticity that, using metanarrative commentary and referential play, situates a narrative in a discursive area that overlaps biography and fiction, thereby producing a hybrid reading mode where the aesthetical qualities of historical and biographical reference are exploited and perceived.

## Bibliography

- Alliot, Bernard. "L'ombre du père." *Le Monde* 3 February 1984. Print.
- Alphant, Marianne. "Une femme apparaît." *Libération* 21 January 1988. Print.
- Anderson Bliss, Jennifer. "Writing Flat as a Photograph: Subjectivity in Annie Ernaux's *La Place*." *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 24.2 (2013). Print.
- Balmer, Monique. Untitled article. *Femina Matin* 13 March 1988. Print.
- Bechter-Burtscher, Béate. *Entre affirmation et critique. Le développement du roman policier algérien d'expression française*. Paris: Centre international d'études francophones, Université de Paris Sorbonne, 1998. Print.
- Bernstein, Michelle. "Annie Ernaux. Souvenirs d'en Normandie." *Libération* 1 March 1984. Print.
- . "Annie Ernaux. Mémoire d'une jeune femme coincée." *Libération* 16 January 1992. Print.
- Blowers, Tonya. "The Textual Contract: Distinguishing Autobiography from the Novel." *Representing Lives* Eds. Allison Donnel and Pauline Polkey. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000. Print.

- Camus, Albert. *L'étranger*. Paris: Gallimard, 1942. Print.
- Charpentier, Isabelle. "De corps à corps. Réceptions croisées d'Annie Ernaux." *Politix* 7.27 (1994). Print.
- D.D. "Génération non spontanée." *Le Canard enchaîné* 7 March 1984. Print.
- De Man, Paul. "Autobiography as De-facement" *MLN* 94.5 (1979). Print.
- Ernaux, Annie. *La place*. Paris: Gallimard, 1983. Print.
- . *Une femme*. Paris: Gallimard, 1988. Print.
- . *Passion simple*. Paris: Gallimard, 1991. Print.
- Fludernik, Monika. *Introduction to Narratology*. New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.
- Fondo-Valette, Madeleine. "Le militant à l'ère du soupçon d'après *Tigre en papier* d'Olivier Rolin." *Fiction et engagement politique : la représentation du parti et du militant dans le roman et le théâtre du XXe siècle* Ed. by Jeanyves Guérin. Paris : Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2008. Print.
- G.P. "Le dialogue impossible." *Paris Match* 24 February 1984. Print.
- Genette, Gérard. *Figures III*. Paris: Seuil, 1972. Print.
- . *Seuils*. Seuil, 1987. Print.
- . *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988. Print.
- Grainville, Patrick. "Une sainteté du désir et du cœur." *Le Figaro* 13 January 1992. Print.
- Haarder, Jon Helt. "Ingen fiktion. Bara reduktion. Performativ biografism som konstnärlig strömning kring millennieskiftet." *TFL* 4 (2007). Print.
- Hamon, Philippe. "Un discours contraint." *Littérature et réalité* Eds. Roland Barthes *et al.*, Paris: Seuil, 1982. Print.
- Harshaw, Benjamin. "Fictionality and Fields of Reference." *Poetics Today* vol. 5, 2 (1984). Print.
- Hugueny-Léger, Élise. "Entre conformisme et subversion : la portée du paratexte dans l'œuvre d'Annie Ernaux." *Romance Studies* vol. 26, 1 (2008). Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *Narcissistic Narrative: the Metafictional Paradox*. Waterloo, Canada: Wilfred Laurier UP, 1980. Print.
- Jakobson, Roman. "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics." *Style in Language*. Ed. Thomas Sebeok. Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT P, 1960. Print.
- Josselin, Jean-François. "Un gros chagrin." *Nouvel Observateur* 9-15 January 1992. Print.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *Le pacte autobiographique*. Paris: Seuil, 1975. Print.
- . "The autobiographical contract." *French Literary Theory Today*. Ed. Tzvetan Todorov. New York: Cambridge UP, 1982. Print.
- McIlvanney, Siobhán. *Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2001. Print.
- Maingueneau, Dominique. "Interdiscours." *Dictionnaire d'analyse du discours*. Eds. Patrick Charaudeau and Dominique Maingueneau. Paris: Seuil, 2002. Print.
- Mall, Laurence. "'Moins seule et factice': la part autobiographique dans *Une Femme* d'Annie Ernaux." *The French Review* 69.1 (1995). Print.

- Marson, Susan. "Women on Women and the Middle Man: Narrative Structures in Duras and Ernaux." *French Forum* 26.1 (2001). Print.
- de Martinoir, Francine. "Annie Ernaux: La Place." *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 1 April 1984, Print.
- Melkonian, Martin. "Efficace et crue." *La Quinzaine littéraire* 1-15 March 1988. Print.
- Motte, Warren. "Annie Ernaux's Understatement." *The French Review* 69.1 (1995). Print.
- Nourissier, François. "Annie Ernaux: bouleversante." *Figaro Magazine* 10 March 1984. Print.
- Rimmon, Shlomith. "A Comprehensive Theory of Narrative: Genette's *Figures III* and the Structuralist Study of Fiction." *Poetics and Theory of Literature* 1 (1976). Print.
- Rinaldo, Angelo. "La mort du père." *L'Express* 27 January 1984. Print.
- Rossi-Dutheil, Maryse. "La catharsis d'une conscience." *L'Éveil Provence* 2 April 1988. Print.
- Santovetti, Olivia. "Introduction: Self-reflection in Italian Literature." *The Italianist* 35.3 (2015). Print.
- Savignieau, Joysane. "Annie Ernaux ou la femme blessée." *Le Monde* 3 February 1984. Print.
- . "Le retour d'Annie Ernaux." *Le Monde* 15 January 1988. Print.
- . "Le courage d'Annie Ernaux." *Le Monde* 17 January 1992. Print.
- Sipirot, Pierre. "Au nom du père." *Le Figaro*, 3 March 1984. Print.
- Taylor Merleau, Chloë. "The Confessions of Annie Ernaux: autobiography, truth, and repetition." *Journal of Modern Literature* 28.1 (2004). Print.
- Viart, Dominique, and Bruno Vercier. *La littérature française au présent*. Paris: Bordas, 2008. Print.
- Wurmser, André. "L'injustice majeure." *L'Humanité* 27 February 1984. Print.