Annie Ernaux's Passion Simple and Se Perdre: Proust's 'Amour-Maladie' Revisited and Revised

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Keywords
Annie Ernaux, Marcel Proust, A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, Rememberance of Things Past

Abstract
At first blush it may seem that Marcel Proust and Annie Ernaux have little in common. The author a A la recherche du temps perdu depends extensively on metaphor and serpentine sentences which culminate in a three-thousand-page work while the more contemporary writer rejects prolixity and imagery and produces dramatically briefer texts. [excerpt]
At first blush it may seem that Marcel Proust and Annie Ernaux have little in common. The author of *A la recherche du temps perdu* depends extensively on metaphor and serpentine sentences which culminate in a three-thousand-page work while the more contemporary writer rejects prosody and imagery and produces dramatically briefer texts. Thus Claire-Lise Tondeur notes in *Anne Ernaux ou l’exil intérieur* ‘Dans les textes d’Anne Ernaux on découvre très peu de métaphores filées, aucune phrase complexe ou raffinée qui exploreraient les méandres de la mémoire comme le fait Proust’. For her part, when asked in an interview which writers had influenced Ernaux, she gave particular credit to American authors such as Ernest Hemingway, whose impact is clearly visible in Ernaux’s ‘écriture plate’, and to the *Nouveau Roman*, citing Robbe-Grillet’s credo ‘fuir le commentaire, fuir la psychologie’ 2 Sanda Golopentia observes in her article ‘Anne Ernaux ou le don réversé’ that with *La Place*, for example, ‘Il s’agit de rester délibérément au-dessous des “beaux livres” proustiens, de pratiquer une littérature démuni’ 3 Indeed, Ernaux confided to the translator of *Les Armures vides* that she wanted to go beyond all limits, to speak the unspeakable, to talk about the female body, but especially, she wished to avoid the refined style of a literature professor and to fight against the French tradition of the polite phrase, or simply put, good taste. 4 Not surprisingly then, when Denise Lesur, the quasi-autobiographical identity Ernaux assumes in, this, her first novel, mentions her teacher’s discussion of Proust, it is most unflattering ‘Quand Bornin et sa face crèmeuse discourant de Gide, de Proust, j’avais envie de dégueuler’ 5

On the other hand, it is the autobiographical nature of Ernaux’s work, and thus the crucial role of memory, of time recaptured, as well as an emphasis on childhood (the last frequently cited as a key reason to compare the two writers), which privileges a comparison between Ernaux and the author of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. In addition, Ernaux frequently uses a stream of consciousness, or ‘écriture fleuve’, reminiscent of Proust’s style, and her narrator, similar to *A la recherche du temps perdu*’s Marcel, is always in the first person singular. More importantly, both writers are interested in the role


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of class in society and the manner in which language marks these different worlds, although Proust is but a chronicler of linguistic idiosyncrasies who keeps his distance whereas Ernaux, the child of working-class parents, knows such anomalies intimately because she heard them in her family and had once spoken them herself ('Dans le système hiérarchisé la langue que j'employais reflétait une infériorité sociale') 6 As Warren Motte points out, glossing and commenting upon her parents’ language, Ernaux finds herself in the position of Proust,7 and in La Place Ernaux explicitly, and ironically, makes such a comparison 'Il se trouve des gens pour apprécier le "pittoresque du patois" et du français populaire. Ainsi Proust avait avec ravissement les incorrections et les mots anciens de Françoise. Seule l’esthétique lui importe parce que Françoise est sa bonne et non sa mère. Que lui-même n’a jamais senti ces tournures lui venir aux lèvres spontanément' 8 Furthermore, because both A la recherche du temps perdu and virtually every one of Ernaux’s texts are indelibly marked by her, it is the mother herself who privileges yet another link between Proust and Ernaux. Both writers are preoccupied with their mother, and although the two women were from contrasting social classes, they each, in their own way, doted on their child. It goes without saying that Marcel Proust was given every cultural advantage imaginable by a mother, and grandmother, who cherished education and the arts. But Annie Ernaux was also given every privilege possible to a child born to parents of modest means. Her mother made sure that she attended a school for ‘gens bien’ and unflaggingly bought her all that was needed to sustain a good education. Writing allows the writers to continue to live this relationship through memory, to live with the mother in a past miraculously recaptured.

Moreover, both authors use the act of writing to separate from the mother, and it is here that a comparison of Passion simple and A la recherche du temps perdu is particularly pertinent because both writers wrote these works after the mother’s death, and for the same reason. Marcel Proust expressly wrote A la recherche du temps perdu after the loss of his mother to hide from Mme Adrienne Proust what was for its time a candid discussion of homosexuality and lesbianism (as well as an extraordinarily negative portrait of motherhood), 9 and Annie Ernaux could only have written Passion simple after her mother’s death because to do otherwise would have scandalized a mother who would have deemed the book a brazen portrayal of female sexuality. Michelle Bacholle states this clearly in ‘Passion simple d’Annie Ernaux vers une désacralisation de la société française’. ‘L’écriture de Passion simple après la mort de la mère de l’auteure est un autre point commun avec Proust qui n’a pu écrire qu’après la mort de sa mère en 1905. Jusqu’alors, il se sentait coupable envers elle de ses mœurs’ 10 Ernaux explained this reticience in her interview with Claire-Lise Tondeur ‘Tant que ma mère vivait, quelque part il y avait un frein. Ma mère, c’était la dernière censure. Une fois ma mère décédée,”

6 Claire-Lise Tondeur, ‘Entretien avec Annie Ernaux’, p 38
8 Annie Ernaux, La Place (Paris Gallimard, 1983), p 62
9 I discuss at length this negative view of motherhood in Mothers, Madams, and ‘Lady-like Men: Proust and the Maternal (Birmingham, AL Summa, 1994)
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je voulais aller jusqu’au bout”. Furthermore, as Claire Tondeur points out in her study of Ernaux, *Passion simple* is ‘une recherche du temps perdu, d’une passion passée qu’elle veut immortaliser par l’écriture’. Ernaux also understands as well as Proust that everyone continuously metamorphoses into a different person as she moves through life, from one set of circumstances to another, and equally significantly, that an individual’s personality is decided by those she encounters: ‘Le moi, notre moi, nous est révélé par la fréquentation des autres, non seulement par le regard qu’ils portent sur nous, mais aussi par l’intérêt, les souvenirs, qu’ils éveillent en nous’, echoing the celebrated Proustian aphorism ‘notre personnalité sociale est une création de la pensée des autres’. Both *A la recherche du temps perdu* and *Passion simple* represent the ‘deuil d’un moi vivant la passion’.

But particularly intriguing in a comparison of *Passion simple* and *A la recherche du temps perdu* is the resemblance between Ernaux’s account of her affair with A, an Eastern European working temporarily in France, and Proust’s description of Charles Swann’s love for Odette de Crécy, or Marcel’s single-minded desire for Albertine. Among the similarities is the extraordinary obsession that Swann and Ernaux alike display for their respective lovers. The author of *Passion simple* is forthright in her assessment. ‘A partir du mois de septembre l’année dernière, je n’avais plus rien qu’attendre un homme’

Like Swann who eventually finds himself at Odette’s beck and call, Ernaux must wait for the moment when A deigns to call and arrange an encounter. And so absorbed is she in the possibility of seeing her lover that she avoids all but the most necessary public obligations, comparable to Swann who ‘n’aurait pas eu le courage de quitter Paris un seul jour pendant qu’Odette y était’ (p 265) Absence from her usual social scene replicates Swann’s disappearance from his expected high society rounds. Also, like the Proustian dilettante who embraces a lesser social circle simply to be with Odette, Ernaux, the intellectual, immerses herself in popular culture that reminds her of A. She no longer listens to classical music but sentimental popular songs instead, although unlike Swann and Odette, Ernaux and A. do not have a piece of music which is ‘l’air national de leur amour’. Ernaux describes A as a ‘rustre’ while Swann has no illusions about who Odette is, a demi-mondaine. Anything associated with A., such as the terrycloth robe he wears after love-making or even a coffeepot burn in her rug left from one of his visits, becomes a sacred metonymic reminder of her lover, much in the way that the dried chrysanthemum preserved in a desk drawer reminds Swann of Odette. Also comparable to Swann and Marcel who spend freely to please Odette and Albertine, Ernaux throws her money away for A, usually on a new piece of clothing that he will only see briefly before their love-making, but also on extravagant gifts for her lover - a Dupont lighter, a book on Paris, an old engraving, cartons and cartons of Marlboros, and innumerable bottles of whisky.

11 Claire-Lise Tondeur, ‘Entretien avec Annie Ernaux’, p 40
12 Claire-Lise Tondeur, *Annie Ernaux ou l’exil intérieur*, p 122
13 Claire-Lise Tondeur, ‘Entretien avec Annie Ernaux’, p 43
15 Sanda Golopentia, p 87
17 Claire-Lise Tondeur, ‘Entretien avec Annie Ernaux’, p 40
More significant is the manner in which the five stages of Proust’s ‘amour-maladie’ subtly emerge in the relationship that the narrator of Passion simple has with A. She exhibits the same initial indifference to her eventual lover that Swann feels toward Odette when Charlus introduces the two one evening at the theatre, or when Marcel cannot decide which girl he prefers in ‘la petite bande’ Ernaux admitted to Claire-Lise Tondeur that she had already met this man before without giving him a second thought after their introduction. Instead, as was true for Swann and Marcel, imagination, the second stage of ‘l’amour-maladie’, plays the crucial role in the narrator’s desire for her lover. The infrequency with which she sees him obliges Ernaux to spend her time either fantasizing about what will take place or what has already happened. ‘Dans le R E R, le métro, les salles d’attente, tous les lieux où il est autorisé de ne se livrer à aucune occupation, sitôt assise, j’entrais dans une rêverie de A…’ I’avais l’impression de m’abandonner à un plaisir physique, comme si le cerveau pouvait jouir, qu’il soit un organe sexuel pareil aux autres’ (pp. 41-42). Indeed, absence, the third stage of Proustian love, plays a crucial role in Ernaux’s relationship because her lover is married. In contrast to an unexpected absence which heightens the interest of both Swann and Marcel, for Ernaux absence is ongoing. Similar to Swann who thinks obsessively about Odette’s itinerary when she is travelling with the Verdurins, Ernaux imagines fanatically where A might be on the weekends. ‘Je cherchais à être au courant de ses loisirs et de ses sorties pendant le week-end. Savoir me rassurait, j’avais l’impression que de pouvoir le situer dans tel endroit, à tel moment, me prémunissait contre une infidélité’ (p 47). Ernaux herself leaves Paris for a week-long vacation in Florence, a trip that two months earlier she had reluctantly planned. But like Swann, who frequently abstains from seeing Odette to prove that he is recovering from his ‘amour-maladie’, she hopes to use this voluntary separation from A. as evidence that she is not totally preoccupied with him. But knowing that she cannot simply sit in her hotel room and wait for her departure date, Ernaux forces herself to walk around the city and visit the requisite tourist destinations. In museums she only views images of love, particularly statues of nude males that inevitably remind her of A. (‘L’usage que je faisais des oeuvres d’art était seulement passionnel’ [p 49]) In fact, it is impossible not to compare Ernaux’s Florentine visit to Marcel’s Venetian trip where, preoccupied with Albertine, he sees her resemblance everywhere in other women and even reads her name, rather than Gilberte’s, on a telegram he receives. At the end of her trip Ernaux has the impression that she has literally written her passion in Florence, seeing in it the convergence of imagination and absence: ‘Une sorte de déesse supplémentaire, cette fois de l’imagination et du désir dans l’absence’ (p 51, emphasis added).

Most pronounced in Ernaux’s experience of ‘l’amour-maladie’ are the fourth and fifth stages, jealousy and the inevitable suffering it produces. However, in contrast to Swann whose jealousy with Odette increases once he realizes he has a rival in M de Forcheville and to Marcel whose jealousy emerges when he suspects Albertine of having lesbian lovers, Ernaux knows from the outset that A has a wife. She avoids going anywhere where she might see A and his wife together, not wanting to betray by some unwitting gesture the relationship that she and A have. But at the same time, although Ernaux judges A’s wife insignificant and believes that her lover sleeps with his wife simply because she is accessible, she finds the sight of the two together intolerable (p. 38). And because she sees
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Allons à Nîmes, doux de pins
qui est

e su bois de
nouvelle
qui est aussi
rendre tout
laissant fuyant :
se revêle
A. so sporadically, and only in her apartment, she resembles Swann and Marcel in her ignorance of what it is her lover does without her. The author is convinced that her lover’s position makes him attractive to all women and that his opportunities for sexual pleasure are limitless (p. 43). Nonetheless, Ernaux sees her jealousy as a privilege that only enhances passion for her lover because were she not to feel this emotion it would mean that A. was no longer in her life, a possibility that is unthinkable (pp. 45-46). Implicitly, she aligns herself with Swann whose obsession with Odette was, to his mind, inoperable and appears to live the formula that all Proustian men live, ‘aimer sans être aimé’. She is willing to continue the relationship at any price, even another woman or several other women, ‘c’est à dire une souffrance encore plus grande que celle pour laquelle je voulais le quitter’ (p. 45). The relationship quickly deteriorates into pure suffering:

Lorsqu’il téléphonait pour qu’on se voie, son appel cent fois espéré ne changeait rien, je restais dans la même tension douloureuse qu’avant… Tout était manque sans fin, sauf le moment où nous étions ensemble à faire l’amour. Et encore, j’avais la hantise du moment qui suivrait, où il serait reparti. Je vivais le plaisir comme une future douleur. (p. 45; emphasis added)

Each wait for A. is painful as are the moments which follow every encounter because once the afterglow has dissipated, she resumes her wait ‘avec de plus en plus de souffrance et d’angoisse au fur et à mesure que s’éloignait la date de la dernière rencontre’ (p. 22; emphasis added). Finally, she attempts to end her pain by revisiting the Passage Cardinet where she had her abortion, hoping that her former pain will somehow neutralize her current agony (p. 64).

It is only when her lover has left France for good that the narrator’s lengthy convalescence from this passion for A. begins. Like Swann, she documents the small steps she takes toward recovery, but initially she finds herself grasping at any remaining connection to her lover. She even voices the short-lived hope that she has contracted AIDS from A.: ‘Il m’aurait au moins laissé cela’ (p. 54), reminding the reader of a Swann who thought it easier to be gravely ill than to suffer unrequited love. However, when Ernaux wakes up one morning without immediately thinking of her former lover, she understands that her recovery has begun, although, as is true for Swann and Marcel, she cannot pinpoint the moment that this transformation occurs: ‘je ne peux rendre compte de l’exacte transformation de ma passion pour A., jour après jour, seulement m’arrêter sur des images, isoler des signes d’une réalité dont la date d’apparition – comme en histoire générale – n’est pas définissable avec certitude’ (p. 67). On the R.E.R. she overhears two girls mention Barbizon and wonders why the word means something to her. Remembering that A. had gone there with his wife, she realizes that this particular memory is like any other to her now. More importantly, she notes that the network of signs that constituted her passion is coming undone (p. 69). Her recovery is complete when A., unexpectedly back in Paris, calls. It is their last encounter. A. arrives and, apparently drunk, trips in the hallway and staggers somewhat as he embraces Ernaux. His nails seem dirtier and his hands are rougher. He is not the man who formerly dominated her days. She notes with a hint of incredulity: ‘L’homme qui est revenu ce soir-là n’est pas non plus celui que je portais en moi durant l’année où il était là, ensuite quand j’écrivais. Cet homme-là je ne le reverrai

39. Her disappointment resembles that of Swann who, once cured of his ‘amour-maladie’, makes his celebrated comment, ‘Dire que j’ai gâché des années de ma vie, que j’ai voulu mourir, que j’ai eu mon plus grand amour, pour une femme qui ne me plaisait pas, qui n’était pas mon genre!’ (p. 375) Inevitably, both Ernaux and Swann conclude that even a seemingly inoperable ‘amour-maladie’ ultimately has a cure.

However, it is *Se perdre*, Ernaux’s personal journal, made public in 2001 and which chronicles her love affair with the man she refers to as S. (the Eastern European’s actual first initial), which confirms her debt to Proust. Published ten years after the appearance of her autofictionalised novel, this diary, Ernaux believes, contains a truth other than the one contained in *Passion simple*. Certainly the journal includes much more information about Ernaux and her lover, but more importantly, it appears that part of this truth is that Ernaux wishes to live the romantic love story that she rejects in *Passion simple*. And she does exactly what she refuses to do in her 1991 novel: she comments on the relationship, tries to make psychological sense of it, and even regrets the omission of details which would elevate ‘la vie à la mesure de la littérature romanesque’ (p. 188). To do so, she frequently relies on Proust and cites him nine different times, first referring to him when expressing regret at having shown her private journal to S (‘Ne jamais montrer trop d’amour, la loi proustienne.’ [p. 43]). Furthermore, if she is not directly citing Proust she is, instead, subtly suggesting scenes from *À la recherche du temps perdu*. When Ernaux agonizes over her exclusion from certain embassy events that would have allowed her to see S (Ernaux’s journal reveals that he is a government functionary at the Soviet embassy), what comes to mind is Swann’s unhappiness when denied an invitation to the Verdurin’s home where he would be sure to find Odette (p. 111). Later in her journal Ernaux recounts how she had stepped on the exposed root of a tree in front of Notre Dame de Pontoise, a misstep that jolted her involuntary memory and brought to mind the czar’s summer palace in Leningrad seen with S (p. 116). This inevitably evokes Marcel’s uneven flagstone experience as he enters the Prince de Guermantes’s courtyard and the memory of the Saint Mark baptistery in Venice that it produces. Most striking among the Proustian echoes, however, is the schema that Ernaux furnishes to illustrate the arc of her relationships with men (pp. 63-64). Like ‘l’amour-maladie’, it has five stages, the first of which is the very same indifference found in Proust’s outline of the love relationship—‘Qu’il soit à nouveau cet homme entrant chez Irène l’année dernière et auquel je n’avais pas pensé une seule fois pendant l’été’ (p. 165), she notes later in her journal. Although Ernaux uses the word ‘illumination’, in a physical sense, to characterize the second phase, it easily corresponds to Proustian imagination. She writes that she had somehow overlooked the dimple in S’s chin and wonders how she could be sleeping with a man and miss a detail such as this, concluding, ‘Mais au fond, c’est bien, c’est se fier à l’imaginaire, qu’importe une fossette ou une cicatrice, ne pas voir c’est la passion’ (p. 101). Ernaux labels her third stage happiness but a later comment belies this choice of words, or at least suggests that happiness is short-lived: ‘Qu’est-ce qu’aimer un homme? Qu’il soit là, et faire l’amour, rêver, et il revient, il fait l’amour. Tout n’est qu’attente’ (p. 241). The fourth stage, ‘douleur, manque sans fond’ (p. 63), seems to combine Proustian absence—the concomitant
So, once cured of his des années de ma femme qua ne me Emaux and Swann has a cure in 2001 and which is a European's actual truth other than the more information of this truth is that Ernaux and Swann: Ely has a cure after the appearance of details which (p. 188) To do so, she is referring to him when Ernaux notes in her journal that she's thinking about attending a writers' get-together simply because S will possibly be there 'Irène, côté Verdurin D'ailleurs, il y aura un orchestre, de la musique russe Un quatuor ou un septuor une sonate? Revivre Proust, ce serait très étrange Et S en Albertine' (p 90) She turns to the author of A la recherche du temps perdu to reassure herself that she understands her prodigious gift-giving. 'Je comprends ce désir de couvrir de cadeaux un être qu'on aime pour manifester l'appartenance (Proust, La Prisonnière) Tout en sachant que cela ne sert pas à vous l'attacher, puisqu'il en est seulement fier (de susciter autant d'amour), que cela renforce son narcissisme, lequel joue contre celui qui donne' (p 78) She bears witness to her unrelenting desire for S: 'ce qu'on appelle le destin et qu'on est qu'une suite d'actes dans lesquels on persévère dans la même direction Pour comprendre le génie de Proust, il faut avoir vécu cela, Albertine disparue Je revis vraiment La Prisonnière et Albertine disparue' (p. 206). Ernaux's jealousy haunts her with the notion that S. has other mistresses, and she turns to Proust to characterize her feelings in the face of a visiting Cuban dance troupe in Paris and the female dancers that her lover might know. 'C'est le gouffre de la jalousie, le chagrin violent, La phrase de Proust, notée à seize ans, me revient. "Les chagrins sont des serviteurs muets [...] contre lesquels on lutte, sous l'emprise desquels on tombe de plus en plus, et qui, par des voies souterraines, vous mènent à la vérité et à la mort Heureux celui qui a rencontré la première avant la seconde,"' (p. 158). And it is Proust who best captures her suffering. 'De nuit heures à dix heures, c'est le noir, il n'appelle pas et j'attends Volà Et je ne pense même pas à ce moment-là, comme Proust, qu'il suffirait d'un rien, d'un peu de volonté, pour ne plus souffrir' (p 68) Two pages later she notes. 'Je n'ai pas dormi vraiment, je suis tombée dans l'horreur pleurs, certitude d'être fichée doucement - rêves de mon ex-man qui voulait me baiser et c'était atrocement pour moi, hanté de S "Là où la vie emmure, l'intelligence perce une issue", dit Proust' (p 70) Unwilling to relinquish her suffering, she is delighted when she receives an invitation from the Soviet embassy to join in a celebration of the Russian Revolution. She knows that S. will necessarily be there, thus delaying his inevitable return home. 'La phrase de Proust sur ces délais qu'imaginé le soldat, vis-à-vis de la mort qui rôde, me revient en mémoire. L'espérance continue d'un nouveau délai, alors que tout, un jour, doit finir, pour tout homme' (p. 223). Ultimately though, she hopes to arrive at the moment when S no longer holds any significance for her. 'Arriver peut-être au moment où, comme Swann, je dirai que j'ai perdu mon temps et de l'argent (presque vrai) pour un homme qui, à l'inverse d'Odette pour Swann, était mon genre, mais ne le méritait pas' (p 146)

This comparison begs the question why Se perdre should be so explicit in its dependence on Proust while Passion simple's use of Proust is strictly implicit. In fact, in many respects Se perdre is a mirror, or reverse, image of Passion simple (PS) (Ernaux jealously - and suffering ('Et il arrive le moment - j'y suis - où la douleur est si prégnante que les moments heureux ne sont plus que de futures douleurs, accroissant la douleur' [p 63]) before Ernaux can arrive at her last stage, separation and indifference.

Indeed, it is the rarely-available lover, and the jealousy and suffering that his absence provokes, which unleash the express references to Proust. Ernaux notes in her journal that she's thinking about attending a writers' get-together simply because S will possibly be there. 'Irène, côté Verdurin. D'ailleurs, il y aura un orchestre, de la musique russe. Un quatuor ou un septuor une sonate? Revivre Proust, ce serait très étrange. Et S en Albertine' (p 90). She turns to the author of 'A la recherche du temps perdu' to reassure herself that she understands his prodigious gift-giving. 'Je comprends ce désir de couvrir de cadeaux un être qu'on aime pour manifester l'appartenance (Proust, 'La Prisonnière') Tout en sachant que cela ne sert pas à vous l'attacher, puisqu'il en est seulement fier (de susciter autant d'amour), que cela renforce son narcissisme, lequel joue contre celui qui donne' (p 78). She bears witness to her unrelenting desire for S: 'ce qu'on appelle le destin et qu'on est qu'une suite d'actes dans lesquels on persévère dans la même direction. Pour comprendre le génie de Proust, il faut avoir vécu cela, 'Albertine disparue' Je revis vraiment 'La Prisonnière' et 'Albertine disparue' (p. 206). Ernaux's jealousy haunts her with the notion that S. has other mistresses, and she turns to Proust to characterize her feelings in the face of a visiting Cuban dance troupe in Paris and the female dancers that her lover might know. 'C'est le gouffre de la jalousie, le chagrin violent. La phrase de Proust, notée à seize ans, me revient. "Les chagrins sont des serviteurs muets [...] contre lesquels on lutte, sous l'emprise desquels on tombe de plus en plus, et qui, par des voies souterraines, vous mènent à la vérité et à la mort. Heureux celui qui a rencontré la première avant la seconde."

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This comparison begs the question why Se perdre should be so explicit in its dependence on Proust while Passion simple's use of Proust is strictly implicit. In fact, in many respects Se perdre is a mirror, or reverse, image of Passion simple (PS) (Ernaux

21 This is an ironic statement in view of the well-worn cliché in Proustian criticism that Albertine is really a male - modelled on Alfred Agostinelli - in drag. 22 This particular quote appears twice in Ernaux's journal.
referred to the manuscript as PS while it was still a work in progress). One text, a private diary, was initially intended for an audience of one, Ernaux herself, and the other was written for public consumption. In the first case the identity of ‘je’ is unequivocally Ernaux and in the second it is more ambiguous, although Ernaux admits that all her work is autobiographical and that, beginning with La Place, her texts are based on what are real, verifiable facts and actual behaviour — though she might change small details. Furthermore, the use of an ‘écriture plate’ both intimately links the ‘je’ to the author herself and privileges a suspension of all moral judgment. Most importantly, the goal of each text is decided differently. In the epigraph of Se perdre, Ernaux announces what she hopes to experience in her relationship with S: ‘Voglio vivere una favola (Je veux vivre une histoire)’ In the journal’s first few pages she goes on to ask: ‘Est-ce la “belle histoire d’amour” qui commence?’ (p. 22), answering it just a few entries later with ‘De toute façon, S, c’est déjà une belle histoire (trois semaines seulement)’ (p. 30). Although S is clearly drunk when he calls — this is often the case — Ernaux is thrilled when he responds to her ‘I love you’ with the same words and notes: ‘Je suis très amoureuse, c’est la belle histoire’ (p. 51). This ‘belle histoire’ has a hero, one who seduces Ernaux by his difference. ‘Peut-être ce qui m’attache le plus à S., c’est mon incompréhension devant ses comportements, la difficulté que j’ai aussi à déchiffrer ses codes culturels, et même à le situer socialement, intellectuellement, toutes choses assez faciles avec un Français’ (p. 54) But as I point out in ‘P.S. Passion simple as Postscript’, at the same time Ernaux’s lover resembles her father (uncultivated and socially inferior), in an interesting twist to Marcel’s love for Albertine, who is in so many ways a substitute for the narrator’s mother, In Se perdre Ernaux makes this similarity unequivocally clear. ‘Je sais aussi pourquoi je suis fortement liée à S., modèle d’homme qui ne me domine pas vraiment, à la fois lointain et doux, père (tel que fut le mien) et prince charmant blond’ (p. 175, emphasis added). Moreover, in Ernaux’s documentation of her love affair, she refers frequently to well known literature that celebrates passion. She now relates to Tristan and Iseult and their fiery love which cannot be calmed ‘en dépit, à cause, des obstacles’ (p. 52) And at the end of her journal, when S’s departure is imminent, she describes how she pulled four strands of her lover’s hair from her comb and considered sewing them into a garment ‘comme le cheveu d’or d’Yseut dans une robe Vivere una favola’ (p. 218). But she also compares herself to Julien Sorel and, most understandably given her lover’s nationality, to Anna Karenina madly in love with Count Vronski. In short, she describes herself as ‘Plus romantique que la plus romantique des madinettes’ (p. 114)

23 Claire-Lise Tondeur, ‘Entretien avec Anne Ernaux’, p. 41
24 Ernaux makes a point of saying in the introduction to her journal that nothing has been changed — ‘Je n’ai rien modifié ni retranché du texte initial’ (p. 14) The only modification is the use of initials to protect people’s identity in instances where they might be hurt by her observations.
25 Claire-Lise Tondeur, ‘Entretien avec Anne Ernaux’, p. 38 I might add that a comparison of Se perdre and Passion simple demonstrates how details can change. In the 1991 text, Ernaux’s lover, A., is characterized as an Eastern European businessman working temporarily in France. In her journal S is identified as a Russian functionary working at the Soviet Embassy in Paris.
26 Sanda Golopentia, p. 86
27 Elizabeth Richardson Viti, ‘P.S. Passion simple as Postscript’, Women in French, 8 (2000), pp. 154-163, (p. 157)
Yet Ernaux’s wild romanticism is sorely put to the test. This love affair is necessarily rife with disadvantages if for no other reason than, as a married man, S is largely unavailable. Ernaux cannot see him when she wishes; she cannot contact him at will nor can she show any sign of their intimacy when the two are at a public event at the same time. Thus, Ernaux’s journal chronicles every moment actually spent with S, enumerating each phone call that announces her lover’s arrival and the number of hours he spends with her. She also makes a point of listing the number of times they make love and exactly what sex acts are involved. The result is a playing out of the Kamasutra (‘il ne reste plus grand-chose à faire du Kamasutra depuis hier’ [p. 48]) that puts to the test what is normally thought romantic. Little is left to the imagination. On 27 October 1988, Ernaux writes: ‘il désire tout faire (ainsi sa demande à propos de faire l’amour entre les seins, mes sens)’ (p. 36), and on 12 May 1989, she remarks: ‘Quatre fois l’amour, de manière différente (Chambre, sodomie, après beaucoup de lents caresses - canapé du bas, missionnaire tendre aussi - chambre, si émouvante, “je vais mettre mon sperme sur ton ventre” - le canapé, en levrette, si bien accordée.) Un Infini besom du corps de l’autre, de sa présence’ (pp. 135-136). But Ernaux is never sure what she really means to her lover and soon feels that S sees her simply as a woman entirely at his sexual service, clearly understanding, after meeting her lover’s wife, what role she assumes in the traditional virgin/whore dichotomy. ‘On ne pouvait imaginer femmes plus opposées par la taille, la couleur des cheveux et des yeux, le corps, les vêtements. La maman et la pute’ (p. 52). She complains in her journal that it is always S who decides when and where they will meet (p. 124) and that she might as well be invisible in their love-making so narcissistic and self-involved is S. ‘Il aime tout ce qui met en valeur sa virilité et son narcissisme (le branler par-derrière, fl regarde ma mère, je suis invisible)’ (p. 103; emphasis added). Ernaux decides that S. does not love her, has never loved her (p. 112), and that there is nothing original in this ‘belle histoire’. It is no more than a ‘simple coucherie’ (p. 131).

Passion simple is the response to this ‘simple coucherie’, a distillation of Se perdre that reduces Ernaux’s journal to about one quarter its length. Not meant to locate the source of Ernaux’s passion nor to explain it, the 1991 text is meant simply to reveal it (‘mais simplement l’exposer’ Passion simple [p 32]) and, furthermore, is a refusal to make literature, to recount a ‘belle histoire’, (‘Pour écrire cette passion, j’ai pris le contre-plein du romanesque’) 28 The book is neither about Ernaux nor her lover but, instead, about the relationship itself, ‘ce que son existence, par elle seule, m’a apporté’ (p. 77). Most importantly, it is a revisionist settling of accounts in which the narrator is no longer at the service of a man, and at the same time proves women to be as hideous as men. Ernaux turns on their head all the disadvantages documented in her diary and becomes the subject of an erotic economy of her own design. Although still a sex object,29 she refuses to crown her lover with a romantic halo30 and makes him assume the role of sex object as well. She
Elizabeth Richardson Viti

seems to subscribe to a frequent lesbian feminist position that power is neither bad nor good but instead an existential reality demonstrating that conscious and consensual submission is not weakness. Rather it is part of a cyclic, not unidirectional, flow of power. Once preoccupied with the sex act in all its permutations, she emphasizes, instead, the act of waiting where she can fantasize about her lover and savour the anticipation of his imminent arrival. Indeed, the narrator of *Passion simple* is no longer living in the world of the real but a dream world instead. The lover becomes a screen on to which she projects a passion of her own invention, and reality is nothing more than the triumph of the imaginary. In fact, the lover himself all but disappears, and when he does arrive for a sexual tryst, the narrator is in charge of the mise en scène. Their sexual encounters are always in Ernaux’s apartment where she creates an elsewhere that abolishes time as well as space: once her lover arrives, she immediately removes her watch and her home becomes a ‘territoire exigu de leurs ébats passionnés,’ le lieu clos par excellence. Rather, Ernaux creates ‘le temps de la passion’ (p. 66), a time which embodies and expresses amorous desire and which is beyond both past and present.

So thoroughly does Ernaux reject the romantic model that she toys with in *Se perdre* that *Passion simple* provoked a male response in the form of Alain Gérard’s 1995 *Madame, c’est à vous que j’écris*. Assuming the role of her lover, Gérard accuses Ernaux of reducing him to pure sex object ‘Je ne suis pas cet homme sans âme, sans mots.. un moujik d’alcôve’ and then takes his reproach one step further, claiming that Ernaux reduces the lover to pure sex only to deprive him of his sex organ—‘Choisissant d’oublier qu’un homme ne se réduit pas, même s’il le craint parfois, à la protubérance oblongue qui orne les statues’ (p. 63). However, what ultimately disturbs Gérard is that Ernaux seemingly can do without men, labelling *Passion simple* nothing more than an onanistic exercise in waiting (p. 17). But this is exactly the point. Ernaux speaks openly about female sexuality, a candour much more audacious than the revelation of a secret relationship with a married man. As Michelle Bacholle points out, ‘Si la femme a le droit au plaisir, elle doit se le procurer dans certaines limites si elle ne veut pas subir le blâme, si elle veut se faire respecter, et surtout elle *ne doit pas l’embriter*’ (emphasis added). And because women have so long been silent, it is no surprise that Ernaux depicts a female desire that does not meet male expectations - an outcome foreseen by Luce Irigaray in her...

32 Ernaux suggests this preference for waiting in her journal. She complains when S calls at the last minute before he wants to see Ernaux, eliminating the pleasure of anticipating his arrival over several hours or even days ‘Mais pourquoi ne me laisse-t-il pas le temps de le désirer vraiment, de l’attendre plusieurs heures, voire plusieurs jours?’ (p 150)
37 Michelle Bacholle pp 125-126
Ernaux’s text is neither bad nor good, but it is neither bad nor good. The sexual, consensual, flow of desire is phallocentric, flow of desire is phallocentric, and when he does and when he does not enjoy it, and when he does not enjoy it, their sexual their sexual encounters are not just a screen on a screen on a screen on a screen on a screen.

In Se perdre, Ernaux enumerates ad nauseum every detail of her sexual encounters—oral sex, with particular emphasis on oral sex. When her lover ejaculates on her stomach, she even plays out the scene from the pornographic film that introduces Passion simple. The sexual economy of Se perdre is so phallocentric that when Ernaux loses a contact lens—itself so endemic to the masculine sexual economy—she finds it stuck to S’s penis. In stark contrast, Passion simple reveals a narrator who has no need of her lover’s physical presence because she has a remarkable ability to conjure up the details of his body from head to toe and even to feel her lover’s “Je sens ses dents, l’interieur de sa bouche, la forme de ses cuisses, le grain de sa peau” (p. 54). Masturbation takes centre stage and boldly underscores sexual autonomy, re-establishing a sexual identity that Irigaray notes as women’s birthright (son sexe qua droit qu’elle re-touche indéfiniment lui-même, cette jouissance est dénue par une civilisation qui privilégie le phallomorphisme).

Ernaux realizes at the end of her journal, and affair, that, in contrast to Swann who had wasted his time on a woman who was not his type, she had spent her time with a man who was her type but who was not worthy of her attentions. And while Proust’s perspicacity helps her understand her relationship with S while she as having it, by the time she writes about her affair in Passion simple, she assumes the upper hand and creates a narrative of female sexual autonomy. Ernaux does exactly what she had confided to the translator of Les Armoires vides she wanted to do: avoiding the well-turned phrase of a literature professor, she speaks the unspeakable. She understands that the traditional love story is a male invention and she rewrites it. It is true that Ernaux’s relationship with her foreign lover follows the five stages of Proust’s ‘amour-maladie’, but Ernaux makes certain that, in contrast to that of Swann and Marcel, her story is not a love story but, instead, one of female desire.