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"Annie Ernaux's Passion Simple and Alain Gérard's Madame, c'est à vous que j'écris: That's MY Desire." *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* 25:2 (2001).

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Abstract

No two texts better exemplify the contemporary "he said, she said" phenomenon than Annie Ernaux's *Passion simple* (*Simple Passion*) and Alain Gerard's *Madame, c'est a vous que j'ecris* (*Madam, It Is To You That I Am Writing*). Ernaux's book, published in 1991, recounts the author's heretofore hidden affair with a foreign businessman living temporarily in France. Dissatisfied with Ernaux's account, Gerard assumes the lover's identity and chronicles events from his perspective, making *Madame, c'est a vous que j'ecris*, published four years later, an explicit response to *Passion simple*. The result is a rare literary "tac au tac" very much in the public eye, in which a man and a woman both wish to tell their side of the story about a past sexual relationship. Furthermore, as is so often the case in these disputes, the two stories simply do not jibe, and there are reproaches, recriminations, accusations, and counter-accusations. However, it seems to me that what is most intriguing about this unusual pair is their disagreement over the definition of desire, and thus, how they illustrate the fundamental feminist notion that gender informs writing as well as reading.

Keywords

Annie Ernaux, Alain Gerard, desire, feminism

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"That's MY Desire"

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No two texts better exemplify the contemporary "he said, she said" phenomenon than Annie Ernaux's *Passion simple* (*Simple Passion*) and Alain Gérard's *Madame, c'est à vous que j'écris* (*Madam, It Is To You That I Am Writing*). Ernaux's book, published in 1991, recounts the author's heretofore hidden affair with a foreign businessman living temporarily in France. Dissatisfied with Ernaux's account, Gérard assumes the lover's identity and chronicles events from his perspective, making *Madame, c'est à vous que j'écris*, published four years later, an explicit response to *Passion simple*. The result is a rare literary "tac au tac" very much in the public eye, in which a man and a woman both wish to tell their side of the story about a past sexual relationship. Furthermore, as is so often the case in these disputes, the two stories simply do not jibe, and there are reproaches, recriminations, accusations, and counter-accusations. However, it seems to me that what is most intriguing about this unusual pair is their disagreement over the definition of desire, and thus, how they illustrate the fundamental feminist notion that gender informs writing as well as reading.

For her part, Ernaux maintains that her narrative is not a betrayal of her former lover: "Il m'avait dit 'tu n'écriras pas un livre sur moi.' Mais je n'ai pas écrit un livre sur lui, ni même sur moi. J'ai seulement rendu en mots . . . ce que son existence, par elle seule, m'a apporté" "He'd told me "you will not write a book

about me.” But I didn’t write a book about him or even about me. I only put into words . . . what his existence alone gave me’ (76-77).¹ Her goal is not to locate the source of her passion nor to explain it, but simply to expose it, privileging, at the same time, a suspension of all moral judgment. To this end, she refuses to make literature and, instead, reports events in an “écriture plate” ‘expressionless writing’ which both avoids the literary and intimately links the “je” ‘I’ to the author herself (Golopentia 86). Although, as she reiterates in an interview, Ernaux rejects the stereotypical love story framework, “pas ‘d’histoire,’ avec coup de foudre” ‘no ‘affair,’ with love at first sight’ (Tondeur 40), the traditional fictional female posture of the narrator contradicts her disclaimer that *Passion simple* is not a literary text.² Ernaux portrays a woman with “un homme sans arrêt dans la tête” ‘a man constantly in her head’ (24) who falls victim to “l’éternel féminin” ‘the eternal feminine;’ and unexpectedly, the feminism found in her first novels, especially *La femme gelée* (*The Frozen Woman*), gives way to the demands of femininity (Morris 107):

Une nouvelle femme est née pendant cette liaison, elle est devenue coquette et narcissique, cherchant constamment à plaire. . . . Pour plaire à son amant, la narratrice retrouve les gestes de l’éternel féminin, qu’elle avait toujours dénoncés, ménage irréprochable, maquillage soigné, disponibilité illimitée, effacement de toute volonté propre, complaisance sans limite de femme-objet qui apprend à tolérer et même aimer ce qu’elle détestait auparavant.

A new woman was born during this relationship; she became coquettish and narcissistic, constantly seeking to please. . . . In order to satisfy her lover, the narrator rediscovers the gestures of the eternal feminine that she had always denounced—irreproachable housekeeping, careful makeup, unlimited availability, disappearance of all willpower, the endless accommodation of a woman as object who learns to tolerate and even like what she detested in the past. (“Erotica/Pornorotica” 202)

Indeed, the first few words of this narrative of desire (after a brief explanation of the text’s purpose) illustrate unequivocally Ernaux’s dependence on a man: “A partir du mois de septembre l’année dernière, je n’ai plus rien fait d’autre qu’attendre un homme” ‘Last year, from the month of September on, I did noth-

ing else but wait for a man' (13). It is he who, with a phone call, decides when the two will meet. These calls are last-minute and infrequent and Ernaux's life revolves around waiting for the next one, her anxiety growing as the previous call/encounter recedes further into the past. So essential are they, and so fearful is she that an unforeseen event might prevent a call, that Ernaux superstitiously resorts to giving money to beggars or promises a donation to some charitable organization to ensure the ring of the telephone. When the phone does ring, Ernaux enters "une autre attente, sans pensée, sans désir même" 'another wait, without thought, even without desire.' Moreover, she later confesses, "J'aurais voulu n'avoir rien d'autre à faire que l'attendre" 'I would have wanted to have nothing else to do but wait' (17) . . . "je ne voulais pas détourner mon esprit vers autre chose que l'attente de A.: ne pas gâcher celle-ci" 'I didn't want to focus my mind on anything other than waiting for A.: not to spoil this' (18). Ernaux even admits that the thought of breaking up is intolerable because she cannot face a series of days without anything to wait for (45+), and in fact, once the affair is over, it is the memory of waiting that is most painful. Simply put, *Passion simple* quickly emerges as a narrative of desire that focuses on waiting and that privileges anticipation of the lover rather than the man himself.

Because he is virtual absence, Ernaux's portrait of her lover is shadowy, a vagueness she attributes to her desire to protect the identity of this married man. Thus, his name is never divulged and he is always referred to as A., although his true first initial is S. But it is also a function of Ernaux's inability to know her lover completely, despite efforts at intimacy: "J'avais le privilège de vivre depuis le début, constamment, en toute conscience, ce qu'on finit toujours par découvrir dans la stupeur et le désarroi: l'homme qu'on aime est un étranger" 'I had the privilege of living from the very beginning, constantly and in total awareness, what we always end up discovering in amazement and confusion: the man we love is a stranger' (36). The differences between Ernaux and her lover only serve to enhance this inevitable alienation. He is from an Eastern European country and not totally at home in the French language. In addition, at thirty-eight A. is

younger than Ernaux, his youthful appearance enhancing this age disparity. Finally, while A.'s material tastes are highbrow—Saint Laurent suits and Cerruti ties, for example—he is otherwise lowbrow, exhibiting no interest in the intellectual or artistic that is so much a part of the author's life. Ernaux herself refers to him as a “rustre” ‘boor,’ demystifying her lover and refusing to crown him with a romantic halo (Morris 107), while obsessing over him at the same time.

Furthermore, it is evident that A., the active agent who initiates the encounters between Ernaux and himself, becomes little more than the object of female desire once in her company. He is reduced to pure libido and the reader has no sense that Ernaux and A. engage in any activities other than lovemaking. There is no record of museums visited, concerts heard, films or plays seen, meals shared, or gifts exchanged. There is not even any record of conversation. The only time Ernaux puts words in A.'s mouth, they are, in what might be called reverse irony, “caresse-moi le sexe avec ta bouche” ‘go down on me’ (21). On the one hand, Ernaux appears somewhat embarrassed at being in thrall to desire: she makes sure her two sons never discover this liaison and never speaks of it to anyone for fear of being labeled crazy. But on the other hand, she wishes to exploit it for all it is worth because she knows it cannot last:

Je calculais combien de fois nous avions fait l'amour. J'avais l'impression que, à chaque fois, quelque chose de plus s'était ajouté à notre relation mais aussi que c'était cette même accumulation de gestes et de plaisir qui allait sûrement nous éloigner l'un de l'autre. On épuisait un capital de désir. Ce qui était gagné dans l'ordre de l'intensité physique était perdu dans celui du temps.

I calculated how many times we had made love. I had the impression that each time something more had been added to our relationship but also that it was this same accumulation of acts and of pleasure that was surely going to distance us from one another. We were exhausting our capital of desire. What was gained in physical intensity was lost in time. (20-21)

Ernaux appears content to limit her knowledge of A. to only one thing: the presence or absence of desire.

When Alain Gérard responds to Ernaux in this “he said, she said” exchange, he first rejects her statement that *Passion simple* is not a betrayal. He appropriates A.’s persona and, free to break the silence, complains in a delicious play on words that hers is a transgression each had sworn to forego: “Nous nous étions promis de ne jamais rien *livrer* de notre secret” ‘We had promised one another never to *reveal* anything of our secret’ (16; emphasis added).³ Now compelled to reply, he writes a lengthy letter to Ernaux which eventually becomes *Madame, c’est à vous que j’écris*. Thus, in direct contrast to Ernaux, who uses reportage to describe impersonally the impact of their relationship on her, Gérard uses this epistolary form to personalize his narrative. He passionately targets his former lover who, to his mind, has misrepresented their relationship whereas Ernaux dispassionately examines a phenomenon in human relations. His is a traditional narrative where, instead of an inventory of the lover’s absence and presence, the reader finds references to events from their first encounter to their break-up. Most important, he wants to resuscitate in his text the very romantic model that Annie Ernaux eschews, seeing its absence as the source of Ernaux’s misrepresentation:

L’Autre de l’amour n’est plus alors un rêve refusant d’être réduit à une simple attente, il existe et veut survivre à la passion qu’il suscite. Ce fut donc sans doute aux amoureux du monde que j’eus envie d’écrire.

Love’s Other is no longer, then, a dream refusing to be reduced to simple waiting; he exists and wants to survive the passion he provokes. It was, thus, undoubtedly to the lovers of the world that I wanted to write. (12)

Not surprisingly, then, Gérard insists on providing the narrative with a full blown hero because Ernaux “ignorait la voix, le discours, les regards, les souvenirs de l’homme espéré” ‘disregarded the voice, the speech, the expressions, the memories of this longed for man’ (10). (In fact, exploiting Ernaux’s own words, he notes somewhat sarcastically that if more men recorded their sentiments “il existerait . . . des montagnes de mots superbes et

maladroits écrits par de faux *rustres*” ‘there would exist mountains of superb if awkward words written by fake *boors*.’ For women, “leur cavalier serait moins *étranger*” ‘their knight would be less a *stranger*’ [13; emphasis added].) First, he offers an explanation of his past reticence about himself and their relationship, saying that it was difficult to speak candidly because she did not understand his native language nor did he speak hers adequately for such a task. So it is that he wishes to explain himself now (32). Then, as is so often the case in these “he said, she said” scenarios, Gérard decides to set the record straight. For example, he disproves what she represents as seeming inattention by describing what Ernaux was wearing for their first encounter; he calls into question her memory by recounting time spent beyond her apartment walls—“des échappées superbes vers le Midi ou vers le froid. Souvenez-vous!” ‘superb getaways to the South or toward cold climes. Remember!’ (38); and he refutes Ernaux’s assertion that he never gave her gifts by recalling an African necklace: “vous le portiez toujours” ‘you always wore it’ (48). In short, Gérard wants to prove Ernaux’s lover to be much more than the lout of *Passion simple*.

To realize this project, however, he must release A. from the narrowly circumscribed confines of sex object:

Je ne suis pas cet homme sans âme, sans mots, sans rêves de vous, palpable mais inaudible, cet homme-là tout près mais virtuel, un homme d’une grandiose insignifiance, un moujik d’alcôve, la pièce manquante à votre échiquier de femme.

I am not that man without a soul, without words, without dreams of you, palpable but inaudible, that man so close yet latent, a man of spectacular insignificance, a love slave, the missing piece to your woman’s chessboard. (19)

Furthermore, Gérard is dismayed that Ernaux should now imply, by this impoverished portrait of her lover, that she wanted more than she got from the relationship. He appears to ask the traditional Freudian question “What does a woman want?” for he goes on to insist that the role of boy toy had nothing to do with him as a person and everything to do with the situation Ernaux created:

J'ai très tôt pensé que vous ne vouliez pas m'aimer, plutôt m'avoir. J'ai eu envie de vous parler de moi, de vous livrer mes lieux d'enfance, la couleur de mes jouets, l'histoire du cerf-volant. . . . Les mots de ma vie ne vous concernaient pas, vous vouliez autre chose.

Very early on I thought that you didn't want to love me, but rather to have me. I had the urge to talk to you about me, to reveal my childhood hiding places, the color of my toys, the story about my kite. . . . Words about my life didn't concern you; you wanted something else. (22)

But Gérard takes his reproach one step further: he sees in Ernaux's portrait of A. the lover's total emasculation. He claims that first Ernaux reduces the lover to pure sex and then she deprives 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, taisant la part la plus crue de notre vérité, vous l'avez affaibli" 'Choosing to forget that a man isn't reduced, even if he sometimes fears it, to that oblong protuberance that adorns statues, silencing the crudest part of our true nature, you weakened it' (63).

This points the way to what ultimately disturbs Gérard most in Ernaux's narrative. He understands that she can do without her lover (men's worst fear) and protests, "Je cherchais une histoire, la nôtre. J'ai trouvé l'onanisme de l'attente" 'I was looking for a story, ours. I found the masturbatory exercise of waiting' (17). And it is this fixation on waiting that the male author finds most intolerable, asking Ernaux if this is all that is worth talking about: "Ces moments de rencontre seraient-ils ineffables, seule l'attente serait-elle dicible?" 'Would these encounters be unutterable and would only waiting be speakable?' (18). The result is that Gérard himself comes back to this focus time and again, using the words *attendre* 'to wait' or *attente* 'wait' forty-five times in the course of his eighty-page text, almost twice the number of times Ernaux uses these same words. He accuses Ernaux of hiding herself, as well as the real story, behind the act of waiting and, of course, of making her lover essentially invisible. But his strongest criticism is reserved for what he sees as Ernaux's desexu-

alization of waiting and, consequently, her desexualization of desire:

De cette attente dont vous faites un livre, vous ne dévoilez qu'une face. Vous décrivez ses temps, ses mécanismes, et vous omettez le corps même de l'attente, la force intérieure énorme, violente, accumulée au cours des heures qui précédaient nos rendez-vous, la sensualité sourde, profonde, progressive, jusqu'au moment de la rencontre.

You only expose one side of this wait which comprises your book. You describe its stages, its mechanisms, yet you omit the very body of waiting, the enormous and violent internal force accumulated over the course of the hours that preceded our encounters, the silent, deep, and progressive sensuality until the moment of meeting. (29)

Thus, it appears that at the center of this dispute is a disagreement over the definition of desire. In fact, it appears that to Gérard's mind Ernaux's real breach of trust is to speak openly about female sexuality, a candor much more audacious than the revelation of a secret relationship with a married man and all the more compelling because of the straightforward oral quality of her "écriture plate." 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'ébruiter*" "If a woman has a right to pleasure, she must obtain it within *certain limits* if she doesn't want to be subjected to blame, if she wants to be respected, and she *must especially not let word get out about it*" (*Passion simple* d'Annie Ernaux" 125-26; emphasis added). And because women have so long been silent, it is no surprise that Ernaux, who as early as her first novel *Les armoires vides* (*Cleaned Out*) wanted to speak the unspeakable (Morris 102), depicts a female desire that does not meet male expectations—an outcome foreseen by Luce Irigaray in her essay "Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un" ("This Sex Which Is Not One" [25]). The key reason is that Irigaray's text does not focus on the phallus, around which desire has traditionally revolved ("L'attention quasi-exclusive—et combien angoissé . . .—portée sur l'érection dans la sexualité occidentale prouve à quel point

l'imaginaire qui la commande est étranger au féminin" 'The quasi-exclusive—and very anxiety ridden . . .—attention focused on erection in Western sexuality proves to what degree the imaginary that orders it is foreign to the feminine' [Irigaray 24]). Nothing makes this disappearing act clearer than the contrast between the book's opening pages and what follows. Ernaux is hypnotized by an X-rated film on Canal +, the image all the more compelling because, without a "décodeur" 'decoder,' she cannot make out the words. She describes a tight camera shot which privileges the penis, first moving back and forth in a vagina, but then reappearing "entre la main de l'homme, et le sperme s'est répandu sur le ventre de la femme" 'in the man's hand, and the sperm spilled onto the woman's stomach' (12). Subsequently, the male sex organ vanishes from the text, and in this way, Ernaux subtly announces a different discourse of desire, one which appears initially similar to the "*bruitage étrange, grésillements, clapotis, une sorte d'autre langage, doux et ininterrompu*" 'strange sound effects, crackling, lapping, a sort of *other language*, soft and uninterrupted' (11; emphasis added) that accompanies the X-rated sex scene.

Indeed, Ernaux examines an elsewhere, an *ailleurs*, that is both more consistent with female speech—it is useless to pin women down because "elles sont déjà ailleurs que dans cette machinerie discursive où vous prétendiez les surprendre" 'they are already somewhere other than in this discursive machinery where you were claiming to surprise them' (Irigaray 28)—and with what Irigaray sees as the plurality of female desire: "Sa sexualité, toujours au moins double, est encore *plurielle*" 'Her sexuality, always at least double, is, what is more, *plural*' (27). Stylistically, she creates an elsewhere by fusing traditionalist and progressive elements and by using romantic clichés to create a text diametrically opposed to romance (*Thirty Voices* 203-04). Moreover, this explains a narrator who is both sex object and sexual subject, caught somewhere between woman as victim, seduced then abandoned, and the woman who affirms pleasure as a luxury, and perfectly illustrates Irigaray's fundamental notion that woman resists definitive characterization. As Claire Marrone points out:

Ernaux . . . grapples with the revisionary task of granting the modern-day heroine a new narrative role. Just as Ernaux situates her protagonist somewhere in between our dependent foremothers and our sexually liberated sisters, she endeavors to express through narrative a moment between past and present. Likewise, she recounts not a life story from beginning to end, but a lyrical moment “somewhere in the middle.” (85)

More important, this elsewhere is evident in the exclusive female space of Ernaux’s apartment where all her encounters with A. take place. There, time as well as space are abolished: once her lover arrives, she immediately takes off her watch and her home becomes a “territoire exigu de leurs ébats passionnés . . . le lieu clos par excellence” ‘restricted territory of their passionate reveling . . . the quintessential self-contained world’ (*Thirty Voices* 201). Rather, Ernaux creates “le temps de la passion” ‘passion time,’ a time which embodies and expresses amorous desire and which is beyond both past and present (Ernaux 66).

Furthermore, this *ailleurs* privileges the female imaginary—and demonstrates that women are as libidinous as men. Ernaux is no longer living in the world of the real but rather in a dream world: the lover becomes a screen on which desire is projected and reality is nothing more than the triumph of the imaginary (*Thirty Voices* 202). That is why Ernaux makes a point of citing a *Marie-Claire* interview in which the daughter of a spouseless parent says that her mother’s lovers only serve to make her dream. Ernaux comments, “Quel meilleur service?” ‘What better favor?’ (26). For her part, Ernaux sees it as her god-given right to avoid whatever prevents her from giving herself up unreservedly to the imaginary sensations and narratives of her passion:

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. A la seconde juste où je tombais dans cet état, il se produisait dans ma tête un spasme de bonheur. J’avais l’impression de m’abandonner à un plaisir physique, comme si le cerveau, sous l’afflux répété des mêmes images, des mêmes souvenirs, pouvait jour, qu’il soit un organe sexuel pareil aux autres.

On the commuter train, the subway, in waiting rooms, all the places where it’s permissible, once seated, to do nothing, I began

dreaming about A. Right at the second that I fell into this state, a flash of happiness came over me. I had the impression that I was giving myself over to a physical pleasure, as if the brain, under the repeated rush of the same images, the same memories, could reach orgasm, were a sex organ similar to the others. (41-42)

Ernaux also has a remarkable ability to conjure up the details of A.'s body from head to toe, whether the lock of hair which falls on his forehead or the slope of his shoulders. Interestingly enough, in view of the importance of touch in female sexuality ("La femme jouit plus du toucher que du regard . . ." 'Woman takes more pleasure in touching than in looking' [Irigaray 25]), she is also able to feel her lover: "Je sentais ses dents, l'intérieur de sa bouche, la forme de ses cuisses, le grain de sa peau" 'I felt his teeth, the inside of his mouth, the shape of his thighs, the texture of his skin.' Most noteworthy is the way in which this activity leads her to the onanism of Gérard's complaint: "Une fois, à plat ventre, je me suis fait jouir, il m'a semblé que c'était sa jouissance à lui" 'Once, flat on my stomach, I made myself come; it seemed to me that it was his orgasm' (54).

Significantly, *Passion simple* appears to be a superb example of what Peter Michelson, in *Speaking the Unspeakable: A Poetics of Obscenity*, calls pornorotica, a term that combines pornography and erotica to describe works which are sexually explicit but which examine the female libido for a female audience—in other words, yet another elsewhere.⁴ In fact, the text quickly becomes an epistemological tool for the investigation of female nature. Ernaux's emphasis on the female imaginary demonstrates how "to acknowledge one's fantasies—whether it is telling one's lover or neighbor or *publishing them in a book*—is for women not only to assert their sexual will but to help present their terms for the continuing sexual dialectic" (Michelson 190; emphasis added). This dialectic has an ontological focus that explores the nature of female being and a political focus that explores power relations between (or within) genders. Ernaux exploits her role as sex object to explore *her* sexual identity. Thus, she never feels her metamorphosis as submission but, instead, as a means of exploring *her* sexual identity, contradicting the notion—held by many femi-

nists—that a sex object necessarily cannot be a subject.⁵ Ernaux seems to agree with 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 but, instead, part of a cyclic rather than one-directional flow of power (226). For her part, Ernaux notes, “grâce à lui, je me suis approchée de la limite qui me sépare de l’autre, au point d’imaginer parfois la franchir” ‘thanks to him, I approached the boundary that separates me from the other, so as to imagine sometimes crossing it’ (76). Indeed, as Irigaray notes (and as Ernaux asserts from the beginning): “Le propre, la propriété sont assez étrangers au féminin. Du moins sexuellement. Mais non *le proche*. Le si proche que toute discrimination d’identité en devient impossible” ‘Ownership and property are quite foreign to the feminine. At least sexually. But not *closeness*. It is a closeness that makes all identity distinctions impossible’ (30). Finally, because it is a narrative that portrays masturbation alone (Ernaux seems to flaunt her onanism as the perfect, and symmetrical, response to the X-rated actor holding his penis to ejaculate), it boldly underscores female sexual autonomy, re-establishing for women a sexual identity that Irigaray notes as their birthright: “son sexe qui fait qu’il se re-touche indéfiniment lui-même, cette jouissance est déniée par une civilisation qui privilégie le phallomorphisme” ‘her sex which allows her to touch herself indefinitely, this orgasm is denied by a civilization which privileges phallomorphism’ (26). Ultimately it is a feminist narrative which empowers women through the medium that Irigaray calls upon women to use—*la parole*, the word (32).

Suddenly, in this “he said, she said” debate, the stakes are much higher than the simple telling of the other side of the story, or for that matter, the challenge by Gérard’s two female friends to create such a response. That is why Gérard addresses himself not just to Ernaux but to all the lovers in the world, saying, as the promotional red band folded onto *Madame c’est à vous que j’écris* defiantly cries out, that this simple passion is not so simple—“Pas si simple!” He reacts to Ernaux’s pornorotica, finding it hard to believe that a woman might describe the female libido in a way

that no longer places it at the service of the male. He refuses to believe that a woman could forego love in a sexual relationship, that she could enjoy sex in and of itself and, furthermore, that masturbation should play such an essential role. Ironically, he must convince this woman willing to do without love that A.'s lovemaking, seen by Ernaux as strictly physical ("Sans doute rien d'autre que cela justement, faire l'amour" 'Undoubtedly nothing other than exactly that, to have sex' [35]), was much more significant. Thus, there is a certain disingenuousness, not to mention presumption, in Gérard's claim that women want love first and foremost, and that is why he intends to return this missing emotion to the narrative of desire: "Il fallut à votre amant, pour vous aimer ainsi, bien d'autres sentiments intimes que ceux que vous prêtez à A.: Il fallait qu'il vous aime" 'Your lover needed, in order to love you in this way, many other intimate feelings than those you ascribe to A.: he needed to love you' (69). What he really wishes to do is use the paradigmatic love story to put women in their place. In short, Gérard, representing all men in this dialectic about desire, becomes the quintessential male reader and writes a querulous rejoinder to reinstate male power: "Ce que j'ai écrit ne vous plaira peut-être pas, tant pis" 'What I wrote won't perhaps please you, too bad' (70).

This is why instinctively, and ironically, he, too, wishes to place the lovers' story elsewhere: "Notre histoire fut ailleurs" 'Our story was elsewhere' (34). Of course this elsewhere is in direct opposition to the *ailleurs* that Ernaux describes. The first thing that Gérard must do is reappropriate for A. what is, to his mind, the lover's rightful role. To do this he must make the lover an active agent and re-establish his primacy in the sexual economy, making the woman "que support, plus ou moins complaisant, à la mise en acte des fantasmes de l'homme" 'only a support, more or less accommodating, for the realization of man's fantasies' (Irigaray 25). He must make the lover attractive enough to divert female attention from the masturbatory pleasure that is, as Irigaray notes, the very essence of femaleness simply because "La femme se touche" 'Woman touches herself' (24). Thus, he speaks, in particular, to "Les jeunes filles . . . repliées sur ce creux délicieux

qu'elles espèrent et redoutent ouvrir, le moment venu, à l'homme" 'Young girls . . . folded up on this delightful valley that they hope and fear to open, at the right moment, to a man' (65). To this end, A. must also be made whole once again, and not simply by re-assuming his genitalia. His demotion to playing second fiddle to female desire limits his masculinity, dichotomizing him in the same way fictional females have been traditionally bifurcated and making him erotically meaningful while intellectually meaningless.⁶ He puts A. back together again and the result is a lover who is both sexually powerful—"fais-le-moi encore, fais-le-moi fort" 'do it to me again, do it harder' cries his lover (43)—and spiritually enriching—"Je voudrais, Madame, poémiser, non pas l'attente, mais la présence du désir" 'I would like, Madam, to poetize, not waiting, but desire' (27). Furthermore, he recounts moments the lovers spend together *beyond* her apartment walls, resulting in a space where the body returns to the body of this text—"le corps hermaphrodite que nous formions" 'the hermaphroditic body that we comprised' (44)—and where the male imaginary usurps the female. "Jouissiez-vous, ce jour-là, de l'idée de déchirure, de violence subie, d'assauts imposés?" 'Did you take pleasure that day in the idea of ripping, of violence sustained, assaults imposed?' (39), he asks—imposing on her the female degradation so essential to male pornography.

Indeed, Gérard must rectify the situation forcefully, so to speak, because he understands the power of this space which he labels Ernaux's "royaume" 'kingdom' (31) and where she is in charge of the "mise en scène" 'staging' (33) for each encounter: "Rien ni personne ne pouvait empêcher le libre déroulement de cet événement que vous aviez décidé" 'Nothing nor no one could prevent the smooth unfolding of this event that you had decided' (32-33). He concedes that it took him a long time to understand the pleasure that she took in waiting but then realized that "L'attente, en occupant vos pensées, irriguait votre ventre d'une passion simple" 'Occupying your thoughts, waiting supplied your loins with a simple passion' (34), and that the certainty of his arrival because he wanted her, and her alone, made her "maîtresse du monde" 'master of the world' (32). And in contrast to past

lovers whom he had to “vaincre” ‘vanquish’ (35), Ernaux welcomed him and wanted him immediately. Not surprisingly, then, Gérard suggests a spiderweb when describing desire within this female space: “Pris dans *la toile soyeuse du désir* que vous provoquiez, je fus sans doute pour le coup quelque peu *étranger*” ‘Caught in *the silky web of desire*, that you set up, this time I was undoubtedly somewhat a *stranger*’ (51; emphasis added). Clearly the female defines desire in this economy and because this is the case, the lover is in unfamiliar territory, a woven maze with no exit. He even hints through homonymy that within this space the lover is female himself, supporting the psychoanalytic notion that men and women alike look for the mother in the lover: “Dans l’amour vous jouiez comme une enfant avec la *mer*, plaisir de prendre en vous mes mouvements et mes vagues, de les retourner, de vous en remplir” ‘In love you played like a child in the *sea*, taking pleasure in welcoming within you my motion and my waves, returning them, filling yourself up with them’ (41; emphasis added).⁷ Finally, Gérard even seems to understand that, hoping to elicit a reaction, Ernaux explicitly addresses herself to other women in *Passion simple*, “comme si vous attendiez que d’autres parlent de l’attente” ‘as if you were expecting others to talk about waiting’ (71). And in fact, many women have reacted differently than men to Ernaux’s work, seeing it not as a simple confession but rather as an exculpatory text (Marrone 84).

Consequently, *Madame, c’est à vous que j’écris* quickly emerges as a settling of accounts in which each partner wishes to lay claim to desire. It gives the lie to Gérard’s claim that while together the lovers had spoken a common language of desire: “Nous avons, du désir, fait langue commune, sans rien en dire” ‘We had made desire our common language, without saying anything about it’ (56). That Ernaux and A. are incapable of real communication is not because his French is poor and she does not speak his native language but rather because Ernaux is speaking a new, feminine language of desire. As the text’s epigraph from Barthes suggests, *Passion simple* questions the terms in which passion can be represented, in particular by a woman (Fallaise 72). Ernaux underscores the circularity of female desire by her complete rejection

of the *passé simple* and her determined use of the imperfect to sidestep any closure to her erotic narrative. Hence a privileging of waiting that even Gérard appears to understand: “Faire l’amour, c’est déjà se quitter. C’est pour cela, peut-être, qu’à l’acte vous préféreriez l’attente” ‘To make love is already to leave one another. It’s for that reason perhaps that you preferred the wait to the act itself’ (53). Furthermore, when he admits that waiting also privileges “le souvenir intemporel de tous les possibles, de toutes les promesses, l’espoir que nulle séparation n’existera jamais” ‘the timeless memory of all the possibilities, all the promises, the hope that no separation will ever take place’ (64-65), he inadvertently discloses another characteristic of the female sexual economy. Women desire both/and (consequently the narrator is both sex object and sexual subject), refuse to choose between either/or. This undoes linearity, explodes polarization, and undermines fidelity to a single discourse (Irigaray 29). He concedes that “L’un n’existe pas sans l’autre” ‘One doesn’t exist without the other’ (53), but for his part, Gérard makes an either/or choice, privileging physical pleasure. Thus, it is no accident that Gérard closes his narrative with “Je vous ai aimée” ‘I loved you’ (80). In this way, he both underscores the linearity of the activity that he prefers and a desire that ultimately must end: the *passé composé* marks this finality as well as the *passé simple* (*pas si simple!*) used throughout his narrative. Simply put, although Gérard pretends to take a certain satisfaction in “l’union de nos mots différents” ‘the union of our different words’ (73), in this “he said, she said” dialectic on desire Gérard wants to have the last word.

Notes

1. All translations are my own.
2. In truth, it is impossible for Ernaux to avoid certain literary commonplaces. The most obvious is her depiction of “un amour-passion” ‘passionate love,’ a cliché in all romantic literature. Furthermore, although, ironically, she wishes to remain “au-dessous de la littérature des ‘beaux livres proustiens’ ” ‘beneath the literature of fine

Proustian books' (Golopentia 85), she portrays a passion which parallels Proust's "amour-maladie" 'sick love,' one marked by jealousy and obsession: "Je vivais le plaisir comme une future douleur" 'I was living pleasure like a future pain' (*Passion Simple* 45).

3. A translation of this comment does not expose the play on words. The verb *livrer* can mean "reveal" but because it contains the word *livre*, or "book," Gérard is also suggesting that the revelation would never take this literary form.

4. On the one hand, the pornography thematic is clear, not only in the hard core, X-rated film which opens *Passion simple*, but in references to soft core porn as well, whether it is Oshima's *L'empire des sens* (*In the Realm of the Senses*) or a Harlequin romance. Her own narrative displays the very rudimentary story line so typical of pornography ("J'accumule seulement les signes d'une passion" 'I am only accumulating the signs of passion' [31]); exhibits a certain degradation of the female ("j'étais heureuse d'être unie à lui dans un début d'abjection" 'I was happy to be linked with him on the edge of abjectness' [34]); and includes a dream that is a pornographic commonplace: "On se retrouvait dans les toilettes d'un café, . . . il me prenait sans un mot" 'We were in a café restroom . . . he entered me without a word' (60). But on the other hand, because the act of lovemaking, and thus the male sex organ, never appear in *Passion simple*, Ernaux coopts pornography and circumscribes a sexual economy of her own design, bringing to mind a passage from Shere Hite's *Sexual Honesty by Women for Women* cited by Michelson: "Sex is intimate physical contact for pleasure, to share pleasure with another person (or just alone). . . . You are free to explore and discover your own sexuality, to learn or unlearn anything you want, and to make physical relations with other people, of either sex, anything you like" (187).

5. Michelson notes that "there is now developing a feminist voice that finds pornography a viable genre for probing the nature of sexuality." He goes on to cite a FACT (Feminists Against Censorship Taskforce) brief that states that even "pornography which is problematic for women can be experienced as affirming of women's desires and of women's equality" (186).

6. In fact Gérard addresses this dichotomy directly:

Les hommes souvent, pour survivre à leur enfance, ne cessent, leur vie durant, de dissocier la femme. Incapables de faire exister

en une même Dame la mère de leurs enfants et la femme de plaisir, ils partagent leurs amours.

Encombrée et ravie par le tumulte de vos sens, vous avez dû, impérativement, m'imaginer sans poésie, sans tact et sans amour: seul un rustre pouvait, quelques heures par semaine, régner sur votre alcôve. J'eusse aimé de vous, Madame, plus de perspicacité quant à la qualité exacte de ce qui vous a retenue.

Men often, in order to survive their childhood, never stop bifurcating women their whole life. Incapable of creating in one Woman the mother of their children and a sex partner, they split their attractions.

Hindered and thrilled by the turmoil of your senses, you, necessarily, had to imagine me without poetry, without tact and without love: only a boor could, a few hours a week, rule over your bedroom. I would have liked from you, Madam, more perspicacity as to the exact quality of what engaged you. (68)

7. Clearly the homonymy between mother and sea, between *mère* and *mer*, which works so beautifully in French is untranslatable into English.

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