



Spring 2007

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Viti, Elizabeth Richardson. "Ernaux's *Ce Qu'ils Disent* Ou Rien: Anne Makes A Spectacle(s) of Herself." *Dalhousie French Studies* (2007): 78

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Ernaux's *Ce Qu'ils Disent ou Rien*: Anne Makes a Spectacle(s) of Herself

Abstract

Ce qu'ils disent ou rien is arguably Annie Ernaux's most comical text, untainted by such serious themes like abortion, as is the case for *Les armoires vides*. Narrated from the perspective of the fifteen-year-old Anne - although she would describe herself as having "bientôt seize ans" (19) - the language of this "monologue intérieur accusateur" (Tondeur 176) is adolescent argot that ranges from the colloquial to the outright vulgar. Furthermore, it captures a period in a teenaged girl's life that many females recognize and remember with their own wry smile: the discovery of and sexual experimentation with the opposite sex, and the separation and distancing from the Mother that this period in a young woman's life necessarily entails. What is particularly intriguing about the work, one of only three books that can legitimately be labeled a novel and which Ernaux herself would willingly place in this category (Jeannet 21), is the way in which Ernaux enhances the comic character of the text through the use of metonymy. Anne's eyeglasses, or spectacles if you will, schematize the ups and downs that the teenager experiences in her effort to be noticed and found attractive to boys.

Keywords

Anne Ernaux, Treatment of Adolescent Females, Sexuality

Disciplines

French and Francophone Language and Literature | French and Francophone Literature

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Ce qu'ils disent ou rien is arguably Annie Ernaux's most comical text, untainted by such serious themes like abortion, as is the case for *Les armoires vides*. Narrated from the perspective of the fifteen-year-old Anne—although she would describe herself as having “bientôt seize ans” (19)—the language of this “monologue intérieur accusateur” (Tondeur 176) is adolescent argot that ranges from the colloquial to the outright vulgar. Furthermore, it captures a period in a teenaged girl's life that many females recognize and remember with their own wry smile: the discovery of and sexual experimentation with the opposite sex, and the separation and distancing from the Mother that this period in a young woman's life necessarily entails. What is particularly intriguing about the work, one of only three books that can legitimately be labeled a novel and which Ernaux herself would willingly place in this category (Jeannet 21), is the way in which Ernaux enhances the comic character of the text through the use of metonymy. Anne's eyeglasses, or spectacles if you will, schematize the ups and downs that the teenager experiences in her effort to be noticed and found attractive by boys. Anne understands that she must change her appearance: “Hier je me suis vue dans une vitrine de chaussures, il pleuvait à verse, j'avais des mèches partout, . . . Je suis laide avec mes lunettes” (10), and knows that taking off her glasses is essential—even if it means seeing nothing: “Ça m'a bien arrangée de ne plus voir les gens, je ne mettais rien sous ma robe à bretelles, collante en haut et décolletée . . . j'avais un peu honte mais je me sentais forcée de me montrer avec, on ne peut pas rester même tout le temps” (12). In other words, she must take off her spectacles in order to make a spectacle of herself.

In contrast to Anne's opinion of her appearance is, of course, that of her mother who values Anne's academic success above all else: “Elle me regarde partir pour le lycée mine de rien, tu es bien avec tes lunettes, très bien, ça fait sérieux” (10-11). In fact, as Anne tells us, the family thinks that she looks like a teacher—“j'ai déjà les lunettes au moins” (11), she adds. But Anne has another image of herself in mind, one which will attract male attention but will also distinguish her from her mother. She is afraid that there is too close a resemblance between her and her mother, and Claire-Lise Tondeur notes in “Relation mère/fille chez Ernaux” that this “aspect spéculaire de leur relation est une des sources des conflits entre mère et fille” (178)¹. Because Anne's efforts to change her appearance preclude wearing eyeglasses, what follows is the comedy of a teenager walking around in a fog, unable to recognize anyone, and developing a reputation for being either a snob or just plain rude: “je ne distinguais plus les gens de l'autre côté du trottoir, ils passaient dans un brouillard de lumière, la télé en couleurs mal réglée. Le problème, je ne pouvais pas dire bonjour puisque je n'étais pas sûre, sûre” (11). She even strategizes about what she will say if she runs into her parents, “il faut bien préparer ses défenses” (12), deciding that a dirty lens would be an appropriate excuse for not wearing glasses. On the other hand, waiting for the results of the B.E.P.C. exam, she resorts to superstition, something which Ernaux's narrators do often, and decides that her glasses will serve as a talisman, that “moche et polarde,” she says, “je serais reçue du premier

1 There is a certain irony in Anne's wanting to differentiate herself from her mother by making a spectacle of herself because this is exactly what she reproaches her mother. Anne's mother stands out from those of her friends because she does not adhere to the traditional model of femininity. Monique Saigal would find this similarity unsurprising because in her study of the mother-daughter relationship in Ernaux's work, she characterizes it as “un mouvement de vases communicants qui nous fait glisser de l'une à l'autre” (115).

coup" (20). But, in fact, Anne has been a diligent student and passes the exam with flying colors, which allows her to revert to her old behavior: "Je faisais des petites courses en ville, ma robe à bretelles sur mes épaules nues, les lunettes dans la poche et merde pour ceux que je rencontrais, je vivais sur mon succès" (24).

Nonetheless, to minimize parental policing, most notably that of the mother, and to preserve her own vision of personhood, Anne adopts two personae—as Siobhán McIlvanney points out in *Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins*. There is a domestic persona which consists of glasses, sensible clothes, no make-up or perfume as well as a childlike gait and which is designed to draw attention to her intelligence and moral uprightness. In other words, it conforms to her parents' ideal. Her public persona, once it escapes the censorious maternal gaze, is that of a sexually attractive, flirtatious woman (McIlvanney 40). Anne's eyeglasses are the crucial element because, worn or discarded, they clearly mark which of the two personae Anne assumes. Each time the adolescent takes them off she is defying and revolting against maternal authority. At the center of this rebellion is Anne's early fascination with sex, and as Claire-Lise Tondeur points out, Anne, in contrast to Denise Lesur in *Les armoires vides*, is "uniquement au stade du désamour, même de la haine" in the mother-daughter relationship, and her preoccupation with the only subject that her mother considers taboo is one reason for their estrangement (176). Anne appears to understand implicitly what Luce Irigaray explains explicitly: "Pour se faire désirer, aimer de l'homme, il faut évincer la mère, se substituer à elle, l'anéantir pour devenir même" (*Ethique* 101). Irigaray summarizes a few pages later: "Le lien entre mère et fille, fille et mère doit être rompu pour que la fille devienne femme" (*Ethique* 106). Lorraine Day notes that in *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* "filial repudiation of the mother has the violence of catharsis" (154). Simply put, sexual transgression is a way for the daughter to establish her own identity.

For her part, the mother remains silent on sexual matters because of a "quasi-pathological fear of the possible consequences any expression of her daughter's sexuality will entail. This fear also manifests itself in a subconscious desire that her daughter remain in childhood" (McIlvanney 111). Consequently, she monitors her daughter's behavior closely, and does not even want her to go to the municipal pool alone. She insists that if Anne wants to sunbathe, she can just as easily do so in their own backyard, throwing into relief the conflict between Anne's desire to be an object of the male gaze and her mother's effort to protect her from any type of voyeurism. Ironically, though, Anne's mother has overlooked their neighbor who, pretending to weed some bean plants, spends his time staring at Anne. Anne senses his presence but because she is not wearing her glasses, she does not actually see him and, consequently, is not particularly bothered—"il pouvait bien se rincer l'oeil comme dit mon père (41). Indeed, each time she is without her eyeglasses Anne systematically does something that her mother would find objectionable. When she runs into Gabrielle Bouvet (She recognizes her because they pass one another on the same side of the street.), she launches a friendship, although they have never been close at school, because she knows that the company of a girlfriend will allow her to do things that her mother would never permit otherwise. Thus, she is able to go to the Bastille Day celebration, but her mother is furious when she returns home a half hour late. At least Anne remembers to put her glasses back on, signaling that she is once again under maternal control: "J'ai épiluché des patates avec elle pour l'amignoter, qu'elle me permette de revoir Gabrielle . . . Elle s'était calmée. Peur du dehors pour moi, oui, mais d'une manière vague. Elle ne devait pas se douter que si une fille va à la foire, elle cherche à se faire draguer" (54).

Furthermore, Anne's eyeglasses are synonymous with two important life lessons which are themselves recurrent themes in Ernaux's work—the rules of the game in both sexual relations and social class. The two are, in fact, inextricably linked. For Ernaux, the portrayal of female sexuality cannot be read without reference to the formative

parameters of social class (McIlvanney 17), and it is the significance of social class that Anne encounters first. When Anne and her mother go to Rouen to have a celebrated ophthalmologist examine Anne for new glasses, Anne does not see the need because she is simply near-sighted. It is evident that the ophthalmologist is of the same mind because he hastily puts a pair of glasses with replaceable lenses on Anne's nose, changing each lens so quickly that it is hard for Anne to decide which one corrects her eyesight most efficiently. The doctor's irritation, much to Anne's dismay, reveals the degree to which her mother respects class differences: "Ma mère disait, répondez au docteur. C'était horrible, elle ressemblait à une gosse . . . elle aurait pu au moins prendre ma défense, dire qu'il fallait le temps pour essayer des verres de lunette, et on le payait après tout. Au lieu, elle avait voulu lui plaire, gentille-gentille" (58). Thus, refusal to wear her glasses is not only a rejection of maternal constraints but becomes a refusal of class restrictions as well. When Anne pursues her quest for a boyfriend, it is always for someone of a superior social class. In contrast to her mother who believes that ingratiating herself with those socially above her is the manner in which to win their approval, paying the doctor on the spot or siding with Anne's teachers each time her daughter voices a complaint, Anne wants to forego these niceties and prove herself their social equal instead. Even Anne's mother senses that she has been overly obsequious with the eye doctor: "Ma mère a senti quelque chose, faut pas t'en faire, il est un peu brutal le docteur, il a raison, faut que tu les portes tes lunettes, à quoi ça sert alors de venir, si tu crois que ça m'amuse" (59).

However, shortly after this costly trip to the ophthalmologist in Rouen, Anne selfishly overlooks the extraordinary expense of her glasses, paid for by her parents' financial sacrifice, and says, "Pauvre femme, j'avais décidé de les fourrer au fond de mon sac ses belles lunettes à vingt mille balles" (61). Thanks to Gabrielle, Anne has met some young men who are counselors at a local summer camp ("S'il y avait eu un autre moyen pour connaître des garçons intéressants, je m'en serais bien passée de l'amitié" [84]), and so crucial is it to meet them again that the day after her grandmother's funeral, Anne jumps on her bike and, along with Gabrielle, heads straight for the camp. Moreover, because it is her maternal grandmother who has died, Anne's rush to see these young men perfectly illustrates Irigaray's notion that the maternal must be expunged in order to be desirable to men. Anne takes off the blouse under her sundress to reveal as much skin as possible but delays taking off her glasses for practical reasons: "Je comptais retirer mes lunettes juste avant le château de la colonie, il valait mieux les garder pour faire du vélo, superstitieuse, si je m'étais cassé la figure parce que mes parents ignoraient ma balade" (85). Once there, she listens, somewhat ill at ease, to the boys' risqué jokes and songs, one of which provides a type of mise en abîme so perfectly does it capture Anne's goal of sexual initiation — "Maman qu'est-ce qu'un pucelage, c'est un oiseau mon enfant, un oiseau qu'on met en cage, jusqu'à l'âge de quinze ans" (87). But this fifteen-year-old knows that to realize her ambition she must somehow divert maternal attention from the task at hand. Because the teenager understands the degree to which they reassure her mother, Anne's eyeglasses have the greatest significance and she makes certain to wear them as conspicuously as possible the next time she intends to go to the summer camp: "Je portais fièrement mes lunettes. La fixer sur les dangers de rouler à vélo, fais attention, arrête-toi bien au stop oui, je descends même, bon. Tant qu'elle n'a peur que de la route, il n'y a pas eu de pet" (88).

Anne knows as well that she could never ask her mother the question featured in the song, and thus, her exploration into the world of the opposite sex is, in part, inspired by what she sees as a lack of information at home: "La vie te dressera disent mes parents, ça leur évite de m'apprendre quoi que ce soit" (89). Her mother remains silent on the subject because she, herself, is extraordinarily uncomfortable with sexuality and is even unable to use the standard term for the vagina: "Ma mère lui donne un drôle de nom, son crougnounous, objet innommable" (113). Because Anne's mother designates her

daughter's genitalia by a euphemism, to Anne's mind, vulgar terms that inspire repulsion and which are intimately linked to her social class (Vilain "Le Sexe et la honte" 152), or makes no mention of them at all, she either alienates Anne from her body or refuses to legitimate its very existence. (Indeed, for those who accept the psychoanalytic perception of woman as lack, *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* provides its linguistic equivalent through the literal absence of signifiers of female genitalia [McIlvanney 43]. A psychoanalytic interpretation privileges as well an image of the castrating mother [Vilain "Le Sexe et la honte" 150]). Anne's mother is particularly obsessed with touching, implicitly drawing attention to what Luce Irigaray states explicitly in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, that touch is what gives women the most sexual pleasure (25). (This may also be a reason why glasses are totally unnecessary in Anne's pursuit of sexual initiation. On the other hand, the male narrator of *L'Usage de la photo* takes off his glasses before love-making and notes, "se débarrasser de ses béciles sans lesquelles, pourtant, il perdra une partie du spectacle" [103].) The narrator remarks, "Elle me nettoyait le carabi, seule, faut pas te laisser toucher Anne" (107). And from the time Anne begins menstruating, her mother goes through Anne's dirty laundry and wastebasket to be certain that her daughter's periods are regular, revealing the lengths to which she will go to monitor and control her daughter's sexuality. In short, she is one of those mothers that Jessica Benjamin describes as having "rejected sexuality and desire in favor of control and self-control" (98). She goes on to say that a daughter can sometimes differentiate herself from her mother by combating maternal power with paternal power (99), but this is not possible for Anne. She has never been a daddy's girl.

The result is that Anne also wants to use sexual freedom to punish a mother whom she detests, "l'impression que je ne peux bien la punir qu'en cavalant" (91). Anne arranges to be alone with Mathieu, dismissing the idea that he is the camp counselor that Gabrielle is interested in because, as she points out, "la première fois, il y a trop de ramdam au-dedans pour faire attention à la tête du client" (92), ironically proving that Gabrielle is as expendable to Anne as Anne will prove to be to males (McIlvanney 44). Furthermore, without her glasses, Anne has difficulty making out (so to speak) much of anything: "On s'est assis sur des souches au bord du sentier qui s'effaçait parce que je n'avais pas mes lunettes" (95) and is surprised by the order of events: "J'ai bien vu que pour parler vraiment, en confiance, il fallait commencer par s'embrasser et se toucher, pas l'inverse" (95). She wonders out loud what her mother would do were she to see her at that moment, a musing which is, in fact, a victory cry, "ça montrait que j'avais osé, que je lui disais crotte, un cri d'émerveillement en somme" (96). Anne feels that something between her mother and her is over: as Claire-Lise Tondeur notes, the adolescent feels a sense of triumph because her body has escaped her mother's control without her mother realizing it (176). Certainly, she could never tell her mother about the day's sexual exploration: "Comment lui dire, inimaginable . . . j'avais ma moralité, j'aurais pas voulu qu'on m'appelle un cul sans mains." She must guard against this at all cost, and the best way to do this is to "remettre mes lunettes cent mètres avant la maison" (99).

Yet, while the moments when she is without her glasses signal separation from her mother, they also underscore how blind Anne is to the rules of the game between the sexes. Mathieu not only initiates Anne physically, he also explains certain male attitudes, telling Anne that he and the other camp counselors see her and Gabrielle as doormats, "C'est Mathieu lui-même qui me l'a appris, que je m'étais comportée comme une chose, mais après" (92). The fifteen-year-old wonders whether she should have allowed her sexual initiation to take place so quickly: "Je ne sais pas si j'aurais dû laisser faire aussi vite, je n'ai jamais bien connu le code, la morale ça s'apprend sur le tas du moins pour moi, parce que mes parents ne m'ont rien appris" (100). Gabrielle, by the way, supports this reaction, subtly reminding Anne how little she knows about the sexual social code: "tu aurais dû le faire mariner plus longtemps, ton gars" (118). Anne is shocked when

Mathieu asks her about masturbation among girls and surprised again when he uses a word that she has never heard before, "vous êtes toutes un peu gouines" (102), he says.² And, of course, the manner in which Anne has imagined love-making and the experience itself are wildly divergent: "J'avais imaginé ça comme le reste, très doux, c'était le poignard . . . Et pendant une heure j'ai serré les dents avec des larmes, je rêvais d'anesthésie" (111). The deflowering accomplished, Mathieu places his hand on Anne's sex and says that it belongs to him now, a particularly significant gesture because it is to Anne's all-powerful mother that this has belonged till now—evidence of the physiological identification between mother and daughter (McIlvanney 43): "faut pas toucher à ça, jamais le montrer à personne tu entends. Qu'elle. Le laver, l'habiller de culottes fraîches. Sa propriété" (139).

However, what best brings into relief the double standard in male/female relations is Anne's decision to sleep with Yan, Mathieu's fellow camp counselor. Anne is even unsure how it all came about: "je ne saurais jamais comment il aurait fait pour m'avoir, comment il m'aurait parlé, après, son mystère de garçon" (125). He is quick and rough, and Anne understands that he will always see her as promiscuous. Ironically, he, who will immediately relate his sexual encounter with Anne to Mathieu, insists that she never breathe a word of their encounter to the camp counselor who is his girlfriend: "il vaudrait mieux qu'elle n'apprenne rien, oh et puis c'était sans importance. Il y a eu pour la première fois un trou terrible entre les garçons et moi, jusqu'à présent il m'avait semblé qu'on était pareils au moins dans ces moments-là, quelque chose m'échappait" (127). When Yan tells Anne that she behaves as if she is available to everyone, she is stymied even further and realizes that the double standard that she has just discovered is even greater than suspected: "A penser, je ne me suis pas sentie comme un objet, ou alors, il m'avait servi aussi d'objet, malgré que visiblement il n'ait pas eu l'air de le soupçonner un seul instant,"³ and she summarizes her ruminations with "la logique vaut que dalle devant l'assurance des garçons" (128). The choice to liberate herself through sexual activity, she discovers, is fraught with pitfalls, and once again, it is her mother who has inadvertently misled her—not by her silence this time but by her behavior. Although Monique Saigal is speaking about Denise Lesur in *Les armoires vides*, her comment, nonetheless, also applies to Anne: "elle se trouve très vite victime du code de la supériorité masculine, autre différence avec son monde familial où la mère dominait. Elle est alors prise dans un 'double bind' car elle fuit son déterminisme familial et social pour retomber dans l'enfermement seul" (120).

On the other hand, Anne is using her personal sexual revolution as a form of class revolt as well, a class revolt first inspired by her visit to the eye doctor in Rouen and which underscores the notion that the portrayal of sexuality cannot be understood without the impact of social class. Ernaux speaks about this convergence in an interview with Philippe Vilain: "L'expérience sexuelle est aussi dans *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* le 'lieu' d'une découverte de l'inégalité homme-femme, classe intellectuelle-classe populaire, fin d'une espérance vague" (70). Mathieu not only introduces Anne to sex, but he also introduces her to Marxist ideas about the proletariat:

Mathieu disait aussi qu'il ne fallait jamais oublier que j'appartenais à la classe ouvrière, que c'était important, au début j'ai eu presque honte, et ce qui m'a étonnée c'est d'avoir toujours baigné dedans tout en ne m'apercevant de rien de particulier. Parce que tu peux comparer avec les bourgeois, tu en connais,

² McIlvanney points out that there is, in fact, a lesbian subtext to the novel. Anne's former friend mentioned briefly at the end of the text, Alberte, is clearly an echo of Proust's Albertine. In the narrator's childhood Alberte represents social transgression through sexual initiation (43).

³ Anne's sense that these boys have served as sex objects as well presages the attitude of *Passion simple's* narrator with regard to A.

vraiment? Connaître on pouvait pas dire, bonjour bonsoir, oui, l'oculiste par exemple. (124)

When Anne ultimately joins in singing *C'est un oiseau mon enfant*, the song about lost virginity that she had once found so risqué, she is proclaiming both her sexual liberation and her deliverance from the working class, for as Saigal points out, blood resulting from deflowering marks the narrator's entry into the world of intellectuals⁴: "on chantait des chansons, *C'est un oiseau mon enfant*, sous les yeux des péquenots muets. J'ai crié plus fort que tout le monde, j'étais contente de faire voir ma libération devant des gens qui ressemblaient à mes parents, méfiants, et il y avait moins de risques" (124). Having sex with Mathieu, her superior through age and a successful baccalauréat exam, she believes, makes her superior: "Peut-être que je me sentais supérieure d'avoir baisé avec un gars plutôt bien" (121).

Unfortunately for Anne, she eventually realizes that she has been exploited just like any other member of her social class. When Mathieu discovers that Anne has slept with Yan, he attempts to assert ownership of Anne by forcing sex on her: "Il pensait comme Yan, et Yan pensait comme lui, à l'infini, et moi au milieu, une crotte" (131). Indeed, it is this last encounter with Mathieu that reinforces what Anne has learned with Yan, yet so much more painful because she has believed in a real relationship with Mathieu:

Ils avaient des règles aussi, je ne les connaissais pas . . . C'est trop dur d'être hors d'un code que je n'avais jamais soupçonné . . . J'ai commencé à penser qu'il m'a manqué un code, des règles, pas celles des parents ni de l'école, des règles pour savoir quoi faire de mon corps . . . Comment supposer que les garçons pensent et sentent les choses autrement que moi. (132)

Riding home on her bike, Anne reaches into her blouse for her glasses only to find that one of the lenses is broken. She realizes that this probably happened during the struggle with Mathieu on his bed. For the first time, Anne does not put her eyeglasses on before seeing her mother and father. Instead, she simply shows them to her parents—"Je suis entrée dans le séjour mes lunettes à la main" (133)—signaling officially her break with parental control, again, most notably her mother's, and the widening gap between their social station and the one Anne was progressively assuming because of her education. When her father sees the broken lens in this brand new pair of eyeglasses, he says, "on dirait qu'elle le fait exprès" (133). Of course, the most obvious symbolism is between the broken lens and Anne's recently broken hymen, subtly communicated to her mother in particular: "Tu devais pas avoir tes lunettes sur le nez, sinon, qu'elle a continué, tu veux faire des embarras, mademoiselle, plaire à qui, hein, j'ai craint qu'elle ait tout découvert" (134). Anne again punctuates her new identity with her glasses, doing something else that she has never been able to do before: "J'ai laissé mes lunettes sur la table, c'est la première fois que j'ai eu le courage de fiche le camp au moment des disputes. Avant, je restais piquée sur ma chaise, qu'ils disent ce que j'étais, mauvaise et tout" (135).

Nonetheless, this identity is not stable and Anne soon reverts to her earlier behavior. She wants to see Mathieu again but in order to leave the house she must have a clear errand and, more significant, she has to wear her "vieille paire de lunettes" (137). She looks for him to no avail and begins to wonder if she has ever really slept with Mathieu. Moreover, when Anne suffers from amenorrhea, it appears that she would like to return to the moment when she was still inexperienced: "j'avais perdu le carabi gentil, ignorant, des huit ans, la petite bête tapie malgré tout, on ne sait pas ce qu'elle veut, ça s'appelle la

⁴ Saigal is speaking specifically about *Les armoires vides* when she makes this observation but it seems equally applicable to *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*.

pureté, vite dit" (113). But it is also another way to escape her mother's control because without her period, Anne refuses to adhere to the physical, corporeal order that her mother insists upon. Siobhán McIlvanney agrees, saying: "This cessation may be viewed as signifying Anne's rebellion against the maternal policing of her body, as well as her desire to arrest her physical development and entry into womanhood, a desire fuelled no doubt by the negative repercussions of recent sexual experience" (36). In fact, her mother takes her to the doctor as soon as she discovers this irregularity and suggests that Anne must stay home, except for school, until she has her period again. For the opening day of classes, however, Anne is able to wear her new glasses that have been repaired in time, a sign that all has returned to good order. It seems that her disillusionment after the short-lived relationship with Mathieu has encouraged Anne to assume her domestic persona full time (McIlvanney 40). And while Anne describes one more tryst with the opposite sex—a friend of Gabrielle's—when he pulls out her glasses from her pocketbook, Anne cries out, thinking about her pair once broken and how she does not want to repeat that scene and all it represents: "d'ici là que je me raboule avec la paire cassée, la maison de correction" (150). Indeed, their sexual encounter was anything but satisfying: "Il me dégoûtait de plus en plus, je me suis écartée" (152).

The final reference to glasses emphasizes this change of heart. Reflecting back on her childhood friendship with an older girl named Alberte—her mother has just read the newspaper announcement of this same young woman's marriage—Anne remembers a day when the two of them were confronted by a neighbor masturbating. Alberte screams that she will report him to the police and then turns to Anne and says, "Viens Anne c'est pas des lunettes à ton usage" (153). Anne's eyeglasses are key to understanding the intermediacy of her identity. She "would prefer either to rewind her 'life narrative' to the beginning of the summer—a time which she retrospectively perceives as a period of innocence before the Fall—or to fast-forward it to when she is an adult, and her current suffering will be consigned to the past" (McIlvanney 38-39). Nothing better demonstrates this vacillation between spectacles, that is to say the security of her academic performance, and spectacle, the threat to that security posed by sexual activity, than the putting on and taking off of Anne's eyeglasses. This double persona presages the conflict found in an older narrator, most notably that of *La femme gelée*, who must confront the tension between intelligence, or subjecthood, and physical desirability (McIlvanney 59)—the tension between spectacles and spectacle. It will be up to later narrators to resolve this tension—with a simple pair of contact lenses.

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