

**“WRITING WITHOUT SHAME” — THE ISSUE OF FEMALE
SEXUALITY IN THE ANGLO-AMERICAN TRANSLATIONS OF
PASSION SIMPLE, L’ÉVÉNEMENT AND *L’OCCUPATION*
BY ANNIE ERNAUX ¹**

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Abstract

This article focuses on the rendering of the discourse on sexuality in *Passion Perfect* and *The Possession* and that on procreation in *Happening* in the Anglo-American translations of these three texts. Annie Ernaux conceives writing as a political activity, one of whose aim is to denounce male domination by means of the textual inscription of feminine sexuality and of female corporality. Indeed the author-narrator wishes to write “without shame” in order to break a code of silence imposed by society. The effort to objectify the discourse on the body which characterizes Ernaux’s writing is based on a style devoid of metaphors and marked by numerous repetitions. These textual stakes are simplified in the translation, while the prejudices against women are slightly intensified. Reasons for these modifications are analysed.

Résumé

Cet article prend le parti d’étudier le rendu du discours sur la sexualité dans *Passion simple* et *L’Occupation* et celui sur la procréation dans *L’Événement* dans les traductions anglo-américaines de ces trois textes. Annie Ernaux conçoit l’écriture comme une activité politique destinée, entre autres tâches, à dénoncer la domination masculine. Ce travail passe par l’inscription textuelle de la sexualité et de la corporalité féminines. Il s’agit en effet pour l’auteure de s’approprier la liberté d’écrire « sans honte » et de transgresser une loi du silence imposée par la société. L’effort d’objectivation qui caractérise l’écriture ernausienne s’appuie sur un style dépourvu de métaphores et marqué par de nombreuses répétitions. On constate une simplification des enjeux textuels assortie d’une accentuation des préjugés à l’encontre des femmes dans les traductions étudiées. Les raisons derrière ces modifications sont analysées.

Keywords: Style. Sexuality. Body. Censorship. Feminism.

Mots clés : Style. Sexualité. Corps. Censure. Feminism.

¹This article is the English version of “« Écrire sans honte » : la sexualité féminine en question dans les traductions anglo-américaines de *Passion simple, L’Événement* et *L’Occupation* d’Annie Ernaux” by Pascale Sardin. It was not published on the print version of MonTI for reasons of space. The online version of MonTI does not suffer from these limitations, and this is our way of promoting plurilingualism.

1. To write—to unveil, to transgress

“Writing *is*, according to me, a political activity, i.e. something contributing to the unveiling and changing of the world or on the contrary reinforcing the present social and moral order,” Annie Ernaux writes in *L'Écriture comme un couteau* (2003: 74). Such writing is seen to be “active” (“agissante”). This action is linked to the universal and collective value of “things told.” Thanks to it, “the reader is able to appropriate the text, to ask him/herself questions and to liberate him/herself.” (2003 : 80). She adds:

In *Passion simple*, *Happening*, even in *The Possession*, writing is political in so far as the point is to seek and unveil scrupulously what belonged to the actual experience of a woman, so that the way men see women, and the way women see themselves, may change. (2003: 79-80)²

This gendered political writing project is sometimes explicitly voiced within Ernaux’s texts. In *Passion Perfect*³ for instance a woman’s pleasure at the sight of a man’s body is connected with the sociopolitical issue of women’s subjugation:

In museums I saw only the works representing love. I was drawn to statues of naked men. In them I recognized the shape of A’s shoulders, his loins, his penis, and especially the slight hollow following the inner curve of the thigh up to the groin. I was unable to tear myself away from Michelangelo’s David, filled with wonder that a man, and not a woman, had portrayed the beauty of a male body so sublimely. Even if this could be explained by the oppressed condition of women, it seemed to me that something had been irretrievably lost. (39)⁴

Or again in *Happening*, a text in which the recounting of a clandestine abortion is an emancipatory experience partaking in the breaking of taboos: “if I failed to go through with this undertaking, I would be guilty of silencing the lives of women and condoning a world governed by male supremacy.” (44)⁵

Yet, more often than not, gendered power relations remain implicit and the “political activity” of Ernaux’s writing is mediated differently—namely through the inscription of female sexuality and corporality. Ernaux aims at “exposing reality—the reality of her working class

² My translation. The original reads: “Dans *Passion simple*, *L'Événement*, *L'Occupation* même, l'écriture est politique dans la mesure où il s'agit de la recherche et du dévoilement rigoureux de ce qui a appartenu à l'expérience réelle d'une femme, et, par là, le regard des hommes sur les femmes, des femmes sur elles-mêmes, est susceptible de changer.”

³ References to pages of these three novels are given in brackets in the texts or within comparative tables. The editions used are the following: *Passion simple*, Paris: Gallimard, coll. Folio, 1991; *Passion Perfect*, tr. Tanya Leslie, London: Quartet Books, 1993; *L'Événement*, Paris: Gallimard, coll. Folio, 2000; *Happening*, tr. Tanya Leslie, New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001; *L'Occupation*, Paris: Gallimard, coll. Folio, 2002; *The Possession*, tr. Anna Moschovakis, New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008.

⁴ The original reads: “Dans les musées [de Florence] je ne voyais que les représentations de l'amour. J'étais attirée par les statues d'hommes nus. En elles, je retrouvais la forme des épaules de A., de son ventre, de son sexe, et surtout le léger sillon qui suit la courbe intérieure de la hanche jusqu'au creux de l'aîne. Je n'arrivais pas à m'éloigner du David de Michel-Ange, étonnée jusqu'à la douleur que ce soit un homme et non une femme, qui ait manifesté sublimement la beauté du corps masculin. Même si cela s'expliquait par la condition dominée des femmes, il me semblait que quelque chose était manqué pour toujours.” (49-50)

⁵ The original reads: “[S]i je ne vais pas au bout de la relation de cette expérience [de l'avortement], je contribue à obscurcir la réalité des femmes et je me range du côté de la domination masculine du monde.” (58)

childhood and of the acculturation process which [she] experienced as an uprooting from her background and a tearing away from her female sexuality” (2003: 77).⁶ If female sexuality is not the most important of her concerns, it is high up on her agenda, and its “exposing” (“mise au jour”) partakes in her political writing. Ernaux wants to appropriate the “right to write without shame” (“la liberté d’écrire sans honte”) (1996 : 26); she wants to express female desire and pleasure as well as physical and moral pain as experienced by the writer in the second half of the 20th century in France; physical pain due to an illegal abortion, and moral pain linked to passion and jealousy. This is a transgressive project. It results in the first-person narrator’s infringing upon what has been prohibited by her mother. Indeed the mother served as a “transmitter of religious law” (“relais de la loi religieuse” Ernaux 1997b : 107). The narrator is also led to challenge what has been prohibited by a patriarchal society which either distorts the discourse on female sexuality or silences it, and which does not grant it any social legitimacy outside the bonds of marriage.

During my adolescence I broke away from her and there remained only the struggle between us. In the world where she grew up, the very idea that young girls could enjoy sexual freedom was unthinkable. Those who did were doomed for life. Sex was either presented as a saucy business unfit for “virgin ears” or else it served to dictate moral standards—people behaved “properly” or “improperly.” She told me nothing about the facts of life and I would never have dreamed of asking her. In those days, curiosity carried the seeds of vice. I can remember the feeling of panic when I had to confess that I had my period and say the word in front of her for the first time. I can also remember her acute embarrassment as she handed me a sanitary towel, without explaining what to do with it. (Ernaux [1991] 2003: 47-48)⁷

In her texts Annie Ernaux intends to transgress this law of silence by using very precise words to refer to female and male bodies (in *Passion Perfect* and *The Possession*) and procreation (in *Happening*). In this latter text for instance, which is no longer than 95 pages there are at least 7 occurrences of the word *règles*, which is translated either as *period* or as *bleeding* in the English version: “Au mois d’octobre 1963, à Rouen, j’ai attendu pendant plus d’une semaine que mes règles arrivent” (17) / “In October 1963, in the city of Rouen, I waited for my period for over a week.” (13) ; “je savais que mes règles ne reviendraient pas” (18) / “I knew the bleeding would not come back” (14); “pensant sans arrêt que je n’avais pas mes règles” (18)/ “obsessed with the fact that I no longer had my period.” (14); “Il m’a tout de même prescrit des piqûres pour faire revenir les règles mais il n’avait pas l’air de croire qu’elles auraient de l’effet.” (21) / “He prescribed injections to bring back the bleeding although he seemed to doubt their effectiveness.” (16) ; “je n’avais plus mes règles” (44) / “my period was late” (33) “; “je l’ai supplié de faire revenir mes règles” (44) / “I simply begged him to make the bleeding come back” (33); “date de mes dernières règles” (79) / “my last period” (59). The point is to talk about sexuality and the body without resorting to any kind of euphemism or form of contorted language, as if to escape the oppressiveness of the “mother tongue.”

As I write, I see her sometimes as a “good,” sometimes as a “bad” mother. To get away from these contrasting views, which come from my earliest childhood, I try to describe and explain her life as if I were writing about someone else’s mother and a daughter who wasn’t me. Although I try to be as objective as possible, certain expressions, such as “If you ever have an

⁶ My translation. The original reads: “travail de mise au jour de la réalité : celle du milieu populaire d’enfance, de l’acculturation qui est aussi déchirure d’avec le monde d’origine, de la sexualité féminine.”

⁷ The original reads: “À l’adolescence, je me suis détachée d’elle [ma mère] et il n’y a plus eu que la lutte entre nous deux. Dans le monde où elle avait été jeune, l’idée même de la liberté des filles ne se posait pas, sinon en termes de perte. On ne parlait de la sexualité que sur le mode de la grivoiserie interdite aux « jeunes oreilles » ou du jugement social, avoir bonne ou mauvaise conduite. Elle ne m’a jamais rien dit et je n’aurais pas osé lui demander quoi que ce soit, la curiosité étant déjà considérée comme le début du vice. Mon angoisse, le moment venu, de lui avouer que j’avais mes règles, prononcer pour la première fois le mot devant elle, et sa rougeur en me tendant une garniture, sans m’expliquer la façon de le mettre.” (Ernaux 1987 : 60)

accident...” will always strike a sensitive chord in me, while others remain totally abstract, for instance, “the denial of one’s body and sexuality.” (Ernaux [1991] 2003: 49)⁸

In Ernaux, the writing of sexuality is constructed against this mother-daughter relationship which is based on silence and the recourse to litotes. This wish to expose reality is pitted against what Michel Foucault called “screen-discourse” ([1978] 1990: 53) in the *History of Sexuality*. According to Foucault these conventional, repressive discourses on sexuality characterize “modern societies:” “What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the secret*.” ([1978] 1990: 35)

With the crudeness and bluntness of her writing Ernaux aims at transgressing traditional female ideals and attributes such as modesty, reserve and chastity. Ernaux also writes in a very neutral and distant style. In the three novels under study erotic scenes are depicted in a very analytic vocabulary, and with the distance of objectification, as if the female narrator were observing the life of another, as in *The Possession*: “When I do think of his cock, I see it the way it appeared to me the first night, crossing his stomach at the height of my eyes [...]. It’s like an unknown cock in a scene I might see in a film.” (59)⁹

As we can see with this example, Ernaux willfully writes in a gender-neutral way, using the epicene word *sexe*. In the same way, in the opening of *Passion Perfect*, the female narrator describes a scene in of porn film:

There were a close-up of the woman’s genitals, clearly visible among the shimmering of the screen, then of the man’s penis, fully erect, sliding into the woman’s vagina. For a long time this coming and going of the two sex organs was shown from several angles. The cock reappeared, in the man’s hands, and the sperm spilled on to the woman’s belly. No doubt one gets used to such a sight; the first time is shattering. Centuries and centuries, hundreds of generations have gone by, and it is only now that one can see this—a man’s penis and a woman’s vagina coming together, the sperm—something one could barely take in without dying has become as easy to watch as a handshake. (2)¹⁰

Thanks to this clinical epicene vocabulary the author avoids having to make a difference between the man and the woman in her objective description of their love making. This enables her to avoid any form of “hysterization” of the female body, that is to say, according to Foucault, “a process whereby the feminine body [is] was analyzed—qualified and disqualified—as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality” ([1978] 1990: 104)

What is more, despite the recurring erotic and sexual passages, the writer hardly ever has recourse to words that might stigmatize either partner. In the above quoted opening of *Passion Perfect* the slang word *queue*, is used; but as it is inserted in the textual web linguistically dominated by a neutral form, its derogatory power is lessened. Contrary to the reader’s expectations, no abjection can be felt in this depiction of a porn movie scene, which, instead, triggers a form of “suspension of moral judgment” (Ernaux, 1991 : 12).

⁸ The original read: “En écrivant, je vois tantôt la ‘bonne’ mère, tantôt la ‘mauvaise.’ Pour échapper à ce balancement venu du plus loin de l’enfance, j’essaie de décrire et d’expliquer comme s’il s’agissait d’une autre mère et d’une fille qui ne serait pas moi. Ainsi, j’écris de la manière la plus neutre possible, mais certaines expressions (‘s’il t’arrive un malheur!’) ne parviennent pas à l’être pour moi, comme le seraient d’autres, abstraites (‘refus du corps et de la sexualité’ par exemple).” (Ernaux 1987: 62)

⁹ The original read: « Quand il m’arrive de penser à son sexe, je le vois tel qu’il m’est apparu la première nuit, barrant son ventre à la hauteur de mes yeux [...]. C’est comme un sexe inconnu dans une scène que je regarderais au cinéma. » (72)

¹⁰ “Il y a eu un gros plan, le sexe de la femme est apparu, bien visible dans les scintillements de l’écran, puis le sexe de l’homme, en érection, qui s’est glissé dans celui de la femme. Pendant un temps très long, le va-et-vient des deux sexes a été montré sur plusieurs angles. La queue est réapparue, entre la main de l’homme, et le sperme s’est répandu sur le ventre de la femme. On s’habitue certainement à cette vision, la première fois est bouleversante. Des siècles et des siècles, des centaines de générations et c’est maintenant, seulement, qu’on peut voir cela, un sexe de femme et un sexe d’homme s’unissant, le sperme – ce qu’on ne pouvait regarder sans presque mourir devenu aussi facile à voir qu’un serrement de mains.” (11-12)

In *The Possession* the aforementioned good/bad mother split is to a certain extent doubled by the contrast between by the narrator’s and society’s respective discourses on sexuality. While descriptive passages remain neutral as far as register is concerned, reported speech is filled with colloquialism and crudeness, as when the narrator wishes to get rid of her frustration and pain: “The ‘purging of passion’ that I often hope for from the sexual act—and which a Caribbean (sic) song seemed to explain so well: ‘Ah! Just stick your prick inside me/ Ah! (etc.) / Let’s not talk about it anymore’—did not occur.”¹¹

2. To translate—to simplify, to embellish

From a translative vantage point, the translation of *Passion simple*, *L’Événement* and *L’Occupation* first and foremost poses the question of the rendering of Ernaux’s neutral and objective style. As we will see in the translations of these three novels, this aspect of Ernaux’s style has been somewhat overlooked. Published in Gallimard’s prestigious “Collection blanche,” Ernaux’s texts were translated into English after she was awarded the “prix Renaudot” for *La Place* in 1984.

Quite a few of Annie Ernaux’s book have been translated into English. These translations are for the most part published in the United States by Seven Stories Press and in Britain by Quartet. Many were translated by Tania Leslie, sometimes a few years after having appeared in France (see table).

In the three texts under study the translation of the French word *sexe* to designate the sexual partner’s genitals is quite striking. Let us compare the opening pages of *Passion simple* and *Passion Perfect*:

Il y a eu un gros plan, le sexe de la femme est apparu, bien visible dans les scintillements de l’écran, puis le sexe de l’homme, en érection, qui s’est glissé dans celui de la femme. Pendant un temps très long, le va-et-vient des deux sexes a été montré sur plusieurs angles. La queue est réapparue, entre la main de l’homme, et le sperme s’est répandu sur le ventre de la femme. On s’habitue certainement à cette vision, la première fois est bouleversante. Des siècles et des siècles, des centaines de générations et c’est maintenant, seulement, qu’on peut voir cela, un sexe de femme et un sexe d’homme s’unissant, le sperme – ce qu’on ne pouvait regarder sans presque mourir devenu aussi facile à voir qu’un serrement de mains. (11)

There was a close-up of the woman’s genitals, clearly visible among the shimmering of the screen, then of the man’s penis, fully erect, sliding into the woman’s vagina. For a long time this coming and going of the two sex organs was shown from several angles. The cock reappeared, in the man’s hand, and the sperm spilled on to the woman’s belly. No doubt one gets used to such a sight; the first time is shattering. Centuries and centuries, hundreds of generations have gone by, and it is only now that one can see this – a man’s penis and a woman’s vagina coming together, the sperm – something one could barely take in without dying has become as easy to watch as a handshake. (1)

In the excerpt, if the neutrality of the tone is well rendered in English—*le sexe de la femme* becomes *the woman’s genitals* in the incipit—, the recourse to the words *penis* and *vagina* in the underlined passages underscores the biological difference between man and woman. Such “non-

¹¹ “La ‘purgation des passions’ que j’avais souvent espérée de l’acte sexuel — et qu’une chanson de carabin me semblait bien exprimer : ‘Ah ! fous-moi donc ta pine dans le cul/Et qu’on en finisse/ [...]’ — ne s’était pas produite.” (62) In this excerpt of *carabin*—meaning “medical student”—is mistranslated as Carribean.

concordance” (Meschonnic, 1999: 27) in the translation for the word *sexe* is also to be found in the following passage of the same novel:¹²

Il ne connaissait pas de mots français obscènes, ou bien il n’avait pas envie de les utiliser parce que ceux-ci n’étaient pas pour lui chargés d’interdit social, des mots aussi innocents que les autres (comme l’auraient été pour moi les mots grossiers de la langue). Dans le R.E.R., au supermarché, j’entendais la voix murmurer « caresse-moi le sexe avec ta bouche ». (21)

He didn’t know any coarse words in French or maybe he chose not to use them because they were not suggestive of social taboo; they were innocent words, just like the others. (The same would have applied to me in the case of obscene words belonging to his language.) In the underground, at the supermarket, I would hear his voice whisper to me: “Stroke my penis with your mouth.” (11)

The same issue surfaces in the passing from *L’Événement* to *Happening*:

J’ai su que j’avais perdu dans la nuit le corps que j’avais depuis l’adolescence, avec son sexe vivant et secret, qui avait absorbé celui de l’homme sans en être changé – rendu vivant et plus secret encore. J’avais un sexe exhibé, écartelé, un ventre raclé, ouvert à l’extérieur. Un corps semblable à celui de ma mère. (109)

That night I knew I had lost the body I’d had since adolescence, with its secret, living womb which had swallowed a man’s penis without changing, becoming even more secret and living. Now my loins had been exposed, torn apart, my stomach scraped, opened up. A body not unlike my mother’s. (80)

Nevertheless, as we can see in the previous example, in the latter text the question is really about how to translate *sexe* when referring to the woman’s genitals rather than the man’s. Indeed in *Happening* *sexe* is indiscriminately translated as *loins*, *woman’s cunt* or *womb*:

Instantanément, il lui est venu un air de curiosité et de jouissance, comme s’il me voyait les jambes écartées, le sexe offert. (34)

His face instantly took on an intrigued, thrilled expression as though he could picture me with my legs wide apart, my vagina exposed. (26)

Rien n’empêchait donc un sexe de se tendre et de s’ouvrir, même quand il y avait déjà dans le ventre un embryon qui recevrait sans broncher une giclée de sperme inconnu. (53)

So, nothing could stop a woman’s cunt from stretching and opening, even when her belly already contained an embryo that would receive a stranger’s spurt of semen without flinching. (40)

Le lendemain, je me suis allongée sur mon lit et j’ai glissé l’aiguille à tricoter dans mon sexe avec précaution. Je tâtonnais sans trouver le col de l’utérus (58)

The following morning I lay down on my bed and inserted a knitting needle into my vagina. I groped around, mainly trying to locate the opening of the womb (44)

abandonner leur sexe et leur ventre (77)

entrust their stomach and their womb (58)

¹² Other examples are to be found: 35/25, 59/48 and 75/63.

fourrager dans mon sexe (81)

going to rummage around in my loins (61)

J’ai vérifié mon slip. Il était trempé de sang et d’eau s’écoulant le long de la sonde qui commençait à ressortir du sexe. (98)

I checked my panties. They were soaking wet, blood and water oozing down the probe, which was slipping out of my vagina. (73)

J’ai ressenti une violente envie de chier. [...] Cela a jailli comme une grenade, dans un éclaboussement d’eau qui s’est répandu jusqu’à la porte. J’ai vu un petit baigneur pendre de mon sexe au bout d’un cordon rougeâtre. (100)

I was seized with a violent urge to shit. [...] It burst forth like a grenade, in a spray of water that splashed the door. I saw a baby doll dangling from my loins at the end of a reddish cord. (74-75)

Loins and *vagina*, the more recurrent words, ring like euphemisms; the latter is more medical or anatomic, while the former designates the part of the body between the hips and the hipbone, and introduces a metonymic modulation; later on in the text it is used to translate the word *ventre*:

Je me savais dans une période à risques, selon le calendrier Ogino de contrôle des naissances, mais je ne croyais pas que « ça puisse prendre » à l’intérieur de mon ventre. (22)

According to the Ogino method for birth control, I was in a risky period but somehow I couldn’t imagine that it would « catch on » inside my loins. (17)

In the translations under study this simplification of these textual stakes goes along with a subtle yet significant heightening of gendered prejudices, especially as far as the traditional positioning of femininity on the side of nature and of man on that of culture is concerned. In *Happening* the female narrator remembers how anxious she felt when waiting for her period to come back: “La nuit je me réveillais, je savais aussitôt qu’il n’y avait ‘rien’” (17). This sentence is translated as: “I would wake up in the middle of the night and instinctively know that ‘nothing’ had happened” (13). The adverb *aussitôt* is translated as *instinctively*; with this modulation, the woman is associated with mere instinct, the body and nature. Similarly, the verb *pressentir* will become *instinctively* some pages further (64/49) while the phrase *tous seuls* becomes *naturally* in the following excerpt where naturalness has replaced automatism: “Les gestes de la nuit [de mon avortement] se sont faits tous seuls.” / “The motions we went through that night [of my abortion] came to us naturally.” (102/76). In *Passion Perfect* the same kind of distortion takes place: “C’est surtout en parlant que j’avais l’impression de vivre sur ma lancée.” / “It was when I spoke that I realized I was acting instinctively.” (13/3) Moreover, the female character is connected twice with compulsiveness and mental disease in the following passages where a psychoanalytic vocabulary is used in the English version contrary to the French one:

pensant sans arrêt que je n’avais pas mes règles. (18)

obsessed with the fact that I no longer had my period. (14)

Je résistais sans pouvoir m’empêcher d’y penser [à cet événement]. M’y abandonner me semblait effrayant. (25)

Despite my efforts to fight it, I became obsessed with the idea. Obeying this impulse seemed a terrifying prospect. (19)

Furthermore, the distance in the recounting of facts is not taken into account in the English version. Ernaux's objective style—"I try to describe and explain her life as if I were writing about someone else's mother and a daughter who wasn't me"—is based on what she calls "flat writing"¹³ ("écriture plate" 1983 : 24) a style of writing which she defines in *La Honte* as a "material language" (1998: 58) ("langue matérielle" [1997b : 74]) This neutral way of writing is first and foremost devoid of metaphors. If in *Les Armoires vides*, the first novel published by Ernaux in 1974, there are a lot of metaphors, in *La Honte*, she writes that she will never experience the "enchantment of metaphors, the jubilation of style" ("l'enchantement des métaphores, la jubilation du style" 1997b : 74).¹⁴ The absence of metaphors partakes in the neutrality and objectivity of the writing. Yet in the English versions, as in the following extracts from *Happening*, the language is sometimes more colourful and the vocabulary richer than in the French versions:

Au moment où je descendais de la table, [...] le gynécologue m'a dit que j'étais sûrement enceinte. (21)

As I clambered down from the examination table, [...] the gynecologist informed me that I was most certainly pregnant. (16)

Lire dans un roman le récit d'un avortement me plonge dans un saisissement sans images ni pensées, comme si les mots se changeaient instantanément en sensation violente. (24-25)

Reading about an abortion in a novel immediately plunges me into a state of shock that shatters thoughts and images, as if words had metamorphosed into a maelstrom of emotions. (19)

Furthermore, Ernaux's language is often very repetitive, in contradistinction to the "beau style" inherited from French Classicism. Thus the aforementioned "non-concordances" probably partake in the desire to embellish the texts; they are adapted to the expectations of the targeted audience, who when opening a French novel probably expect to read a text conforming to the French "beau style."

3. To receive—to present, to review

These choices may well be due to the prejudices contained in every language and which are transmitted by translators more or less unconsciously (see Cameron and Don Kulick 29-31). They may also have to do with a form of self-censorship imposed by the British and American editors and publishers, especially in 1993 when *Passion Perfect* came out. By publishing *Passion Perfect*, it is likely they wished to profit from the controversy surrounding Annie Ernaux's work in the early 1990s. Indeed there were many negative reviews in the French press at the time, while the book was well received by the public and sold well.¹⁵ The book was rather ill-received by male journalists especially, who were keen to talk about it sarcastically and with much sexism (see Isabelle Charpentier in Danielle Bajomée, et al. 2007: 231-242). Yet, when the book came out with Quartet in Britain in 1993, it was presented as a sentimental love story rather than as a novel containing erotic scenes: « With artistry and immaculate simplicity, Annie Ernaux tells a moving and universal tale: that of a passionate love affair between a man and a woman. *Passion Perfect* is a concise and unsentimental testament to life and love. » [back cover].¹⁶ What is more, on the back cover of the 1993 edition blurbs taken from *Le Monde*,

¹³ This phrase is translated as *neutral way of writing* in *A Man's Place* (Ernaux 1992: 13).

¹⁴ My translation. This is translated as: "I shall never experience the pleasure of juggling with metaphors or indulging in stylistic play." (Ernaux 1998: 58)

¹⁵ 140,000 copies were sold in 6 weeks' time when the book first came out, a huge figure for a French novel in the French publishing industry.

¹⁶ In contrast, a contemporary review in *The New York Times* underscored the eroticism of the book in the first lines of the article, even though no link was made between the content's crudeness and the neutrality of the telling:

Télérama, and *Le Figaro*, three serious and prestigious French newspapers or magazines with a strong symbolic capital, were inserted.

The “non-concordances”, embellishments and simplifications introduced in the English versions of these three novels can also be seen to reflect the ambiguity of the reception of these novels in Britain and in the US. Indeed, if *Cleaned Out*, Annie Ernaux’s first book published in English, is presented as the novel of a “leading French feminist writer, Annie Ernaux was born in Normandy in 1940” (Ernaux [1990] 1996), if Ernaux’s work quickly attracted the attention of academics working in the field of women and gender studies in Britain and the US, and if a text such as *A Frozen Woman* can easily be read as a “manifeste féministe” (Thomas 2005 : 224), the feminist discourse of the three novels under study is not immediately decipherable. Indeed, in a somewhat superficial reading, *Passion Perfect*, *Happening* and *The Possession* might appear as accounts of a woman’s dispossession of her autonomy; in *Passion Perfect* the female narrator is possessed by her passion; in *Happening*, she is possessed by the fetus she is trying to get rid of despite risks; in *The Possession*, she is possessed by her jealousy. As a result, these texts are not easily discussed in terms of Anglo-American feminism which is often focused on the notion of empowerment.¹⁷ If some kind of liberation is accomplished in these texts, this only comes from a mourning process resulting in the character’s accepting of the loss of the love object, of her youthful carefree life and of her autonomy.

The authority gained by the female narrator is essentially of a symbolic kind and is based on the very writing activity which is very frequently mentioned in metatextual comments. When in *Passion perfect* the narrator is totally subjected to her passion for sexual partner (“One day, lying on my stomach, I gave myself an orgasm ; somehow I felt that it was his orgasm,” (43)¹⁸ the writer on the other hand keeps total control over her account: “He had said, ‘you won’t write a book about me.’ But I haven’t written a book about him, neither have I written about myself. All I have done is translate into words—words he will probably not read; they are not intended for him—the way in which his existence has affected my life. An offering of a sort, bequeathed by others.” (64)¹⁹ The story, by being published, takes on a collective dimension: “Sometimes I wonder if the purpose of my writing is to find out whether other people have done or felt the same things or, if not, for them to consider experiencing such things as normal. Maybe I would also like them to live out these very emotions in turn, forgetting that they have once read about them somewhere.” (54)²⁰

When *Passion simple* came out as *Simple Passion* with Seven Stories Press, the New York based independent publishing house in 2003 in Tanya Leslie’s translation, things had changed; in 1996 Eve Ensler’s *Vagina Monologues* was performed to great acclaim, from 1998 to 2004 *Sex and the City*, Candace Bushnell’s famous *New York Observer* chronicle, had become the famous TV show. As a result, when the new edition of *Passion simple* came out with Seven Stories Press in 2003, the paratext and overall presentation of the book was quite different from that of the original British edition which had come out some ten years earlier. In 2003 the text was presented on the back cover both as a sexual affair and textual feat. What is more it was

« *Simple Passion*, a memoir of a writer’s obsessive affair with a shadowy married man, is part semiotic treatise and part Harlequin romance, and all the better for the combination of high and low. One of the hottest books in France last year, it embraces the crazed adolescent behavior that can crop up at any age, yet is intelligent enough to wrap those details in a taut literary shape and defiantly unemotional language.” (Caryn James, “Who Can Explain It? Who Can Tell You Why?,” Oct. 24th 1993)

¹⁷ Indeed if feminist studies in the Britain and the US have been greatly influenced by French Feminism as embodied by De Beauvoir, Kristeva and Cixous, it also developed a unique discourse based on the notion of *empowerment* (see Freedman 2006: 88).

¹⁸ The original reads: « Une fois, à plat ventre, je me suis fait jouir, il m’a semblé que c’était sa jouissance à lui. » (1991: 54)

¹⁹ The original reads: “ 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 – qu’il ne lira sans doute pas, qui ne lui sont pas destinés – ce que son existence, par elle seule, m’a apporté. Une sorte de don reversé.” (1991: 76-77)

²⁰ The original reads: “Je me demande si je n’écris pas pour savoir si les autres n’ont pas fait ou ressenti des choses identiques, sinon, pour qu’ils trouvent normal de les ressentir. Même, qu’ils les vivent à leur tour en oubliant qu’ils les ont lues quelque part un jour.” (1991: 65-66)

published accompanied by a reading group guide comprised of eleven *discussion questions* dealing with, among other points, Ernaux's style of writing and the reading and reception processes, thus performatively highlighting the self-reflexivity of Ernaux's writing.

In France as well at the beginning of years 2000 there was a turning-point in the public sphere as many women writers published erotic and sensual novels targeting a mainstream readership. In 2001 Ernaux published *Se perdre*, a diary recounting her relationship with the foreign lover of *Passion simple*, a much more open and precise account of her affair than the former text. In 2001 Catherine Millet's *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* came out, which was written in the same kind of crude realism. Nevertheless, this change did not mean that the translation of erotic passages in *L'Occupation*, which came out in 2002 and was translated in 2008, was more adequate; indeed this time the erotic passages underwent a form of vulgarization. Indeed, if this time the same word is used all along to translate *sexe*, it is a vulgar one that was chosen for it:

Mon premier geste en m'éveillant était de saisir son sexe dressé par le sommeil et rester ainsi, comme agrippée à une branche. Je pensais, « tant que je tiens cela, je ne suis pas perdue dans le monde. » Si je réfléchis aujourd'hui à ce que cette phrase signifiait, il me semble que je voulais dire qu'il n'y avait rien d'autre à souhaiter que cela, avoir la main refermée sur le sexe de cet homme.

Il est maintenant dans le lit d'une autre femme. Peut-être fait-elle le même geste, de tendre la main et de saisir son sexe. (11-12)

Je me rappelais par-dessus tout les premiers temps de notre histoire, l'usage de la « magnificence » de son sexe, ainsi que je l'avais écrit dans mon journal intime. (25)

l'image de son sexe sur le ventre de l'autre femme survenait moins souvent que celle (66)

Quand il m'arrive de penser à son sexe, je le vois tel qu'il m'est apparu la première nuit, barrant son ventre à la hauteur de mes yeux dans le lit sur lequel j'étais étendue; grand et puissant, renflé en massue à l'extrémité. C'est comme un sexe inconnu dans une scène que je regarderais au cinéma. (72)

The first thing I did after waking up was grab his cock—stiff with sleep—and hold still, as if hanging onto a branch, “I’d think as long as I’m holding this, I am not lost in the world.” Now, when I think about the significance of that sentence, it seems to me that what I meant was there is nothing to wish for but this, to have my hand wrapped around this man’s cock.

Now he’s in the bed of another woman. Maybe she makes the same gesture, stretching out her hand and grabbing his cock. (7)

Above all I remembered the first moments of our affair, the “magnificence” of his cock, as I noted in my diary. (19)

The image of his cock on the other woman’s belly came up less frequently than (54)

When I do think of his cock, I see it the way it appeared to me the first night, crossing his stomach at the height of my eyes, in the bed where I lay on my side: big and powerful, bulging like a club at the tip. It’s like and unknown cock in a scene I might see in a film. (59)

The fact that the neutrality of Ernaux's style was not taken into account in the translation of the word *sexe* is all the more surprising since in *The Possession* Ernaux only uses obscene words to

render repressed words expressing either spite or pain.²¹ Affectless vocabulary on the other hand is used to describe erotic gestures whenever the woman is an actor of her desire for her partner. Thus, despite the fact “there was an explosion of representations of and discourses on sexuality, more precisely of a form of transgressive overt sexuality with an emancipatory aim” (Marqué and Burch 2006: 10)²² in the years 2000, the subtleties of register of Ernaux’s writing continued to resist the translative process. As it appears, the translative process is always pregnant with traditional prejudiced gendered identifications which limit, to some degree, the translators’ “pouvoir-dire.”

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²¹ Elsewhere in the text language register in passages depicting love making in both the French and English versions is equivalent—the word *cul* is translated as *ass* (54 /44), *baiser* as *fuck* (58/48) and *sucer* as *give head* (62/51). As a consequence, there is no difference made between the passages where the female narrator speaks in a neutral language and the ones where she uses coarse language.

²² My translation. The original reads: « on constate [...] une explosion des représentations et des discours touchant à la sexualité, plus exactement à une sexualité exhibée se voulant transgressive, et s’affirmant par là émancipatrice »

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Annex: dates of the first publications in French and English of Ernaux's novels and diaries

<i>Les Armoires vides</i> 1974	<i>Cleaned Out</i> (1990) tr. Carol Sanders
<i>Ce qu'ils disent ou rien</i> 1977	∅
<i>La Femme gelée</i> 1981	<i>A Frozen Woman</i> (1995) tr. Linda Coverdale
<i>La Place</i> 1984	<i>Positions / A Man's Place</i> (1991) tr. Tanya Leslie
<i>Une Femme</i> 1988	<i>A Woman's Story</i> (1990) tr. Tanya Leslie
<i>Passion simple</i> 1991	<i>Passion Perfect (1993) / Simple Passion (2003)</i> tr. Tanya Leslie
<i>Journal du dehors</i> 1993	<i>Exteriors</i> (1996) tr. Tanya Leslie
<i>La Honte</i> 1997	<i>Shame</i> (1998) tr. Tanya Leslie
« <i>Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit</i> » 1997	<i>I Remain in Darkness</i> (1999) tr. Tanya Leslie
<i>L'Événement</i> 2000	<i>Happening</i> (2001) tr. Tanya Leslie
<i>La Vie extérieure</i> 2000	<i>Things Seen</i> (2010) tr. Jonathan Kaplansky
<i>Se perdre</i> 2001	∅
<i>L'Occupation</i> 2002	<i>The Possession</i> (2008) tr. Anna Moschovakis
<i>L'Usage de la photo</i> , avec Marc Marie 2005	∅
<i>Les Années</i> 2008	∅