



NETTA NAKARI

Écrire sa vie, vivre son écriture

The Autobiographical Self-Reflection of
Annie Ernaux and Marguerite Duras



ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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August, 2014
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NAKARI, NETTA: *Écrire sa vie, vivre son écriture. The Autobiographical Self-Reflection of Annie Ernaux and Marguerite Duras*

Tutkin väitöskirjassani ranskalaisten kirjailijoiden Annie Ernaux'n ja Marguerite Durasin omaelämäkerrallisissa teksteissä ja kirjailijakommentaarisissa esiintyvää itsereflektiota. Lähdän liikkeelle oletuksesta, että omaelämäkerrallisten tekstien ja niiden kirjoittajan välillä on symbioottinen yhteys, joka ei perustu pelkästään referentiaalisuuteen. Esitän, että omaelämäkerrallinen kirjoittaminen on kaikenkattava projekti, jossa omaelämäkerrallinen minä ja kirjailija ovat itsereflektiivisten eleiden kautta intensiivisessä, vastavuoroisessa suhteessa toisiinsa.

Kaikki omaelämäkerrallinen kirjoitus viittaa lähtökohtaisesti itseensä. Tämän lisäksi väitöskirjani tarkoitus on osoittaa, että Ernaux'n ja Durasin tekstit sisältävät monenlaisia itsetiedostavuuden ja itseensäviittaavuuden muotoja. Itsereflektio on moniulotteinen ilmiö, joka kattaa tekstin tason metatekstin, tietoisesti luodut yhteydet kirjailijan tuotannon eri osien välillä sekä kirjailijan julkisen kommentaarin kirjoittamisestaan ja työstään. Tutkin työssäni näitä kaikkia sekä erillisinä että toisiinsa vaikuttavina ilmiöinä. Tähän väitöskirjaan kohdeteksteiksi valitut tekstit voidaan nähdä esimerkkeinä kokeellisesta omaelämäkerrallisesta kirjoittamisesta tai jopa autofiktiosta, sillä ne hämärtävät kirjoituksen ja todellisuuden välistä rajaa ja ottavat kantaa omaelämäkerrallisen kirjoituksen mahdollisuuteen ja/tai mahdottomuuteen kuvata todellisuutta. Väitän kuitenkin, että Ernaux'n ja Durasin itsereflektiiviset tekstit myös kertovat elämäntarinaa. Subjektin kuvaus on heidän kirjoittamisensa väline ja tulos. Kaiken kaikkiaan elämäntarinan rakentaminen on oleellinen osa omaelämäkertoja, myös kokeellisia sellaisia.

Esitän myös, että itsereflektio, omaelämäkerrallinen kirjoittaminen ja elämäntarinan rakentaminen tapahtuvat erilaisissa kirjallisissa tiloissa. "Omaelämäkerrallisen tilan" teoreettinen käsite viittaa kirjailijan tuotannon omaelämäkerrallisten ja fiktiivisten osien väliseen vuorovaikutukseen. Väitöskirjassani tutkinkin näennäisen loppumattomia yhteyksiä kohdekirjailijoiden tuotantojen osien ja myös heidän julkisen kommentaarinsa välillä. Loppujen lopuksi esitän, että koko omaelämäkerrallinen prosessi tapahtuu yhdessä itsereflektiivisessä tilassa, joka on käsitteenä laajempi kuin omaelämäkerrallinen tila. Oleellista on myös kuinka Ernaux'n ja

Durasin elämäntarinan kertomisen projektit näyttävät intensiivisinä ja intohimoisina sekä muodon että teeman kannalta. Tämä johtuu esimerkiksi teosten jatkuvasta uudelleenkirjoittamisesta, heidän elämiensä ja kirjoittamisen välisen yhteyden painottamisesta, sekä heidän teostensa tietyistä kantavista teemoista, kuten eroottisista rakkaussuhteista.

Metodina hyödynnän deskriptiivistä poetiikkaa ja käytännöllistä lähilukua saavuttaakseni kokonaisvaltaisen kuvauksen ja analyysin omaelämäkerrallisen kirjoittamisen ja itsereflektion yhteispeleistä Ernaux'n ja Durasin valikoiduissa teoksissa ja heidän julkisessa kommentaarissaan. Tulkitsen tuloksia oleellisen kirjallisuudentutkimuksen valossa, johon kuuluu esimerkiksi omaelämäkerrallisen tilan ja yleisesti tilan käsite, elämäkirjoittaminen, uudelleenkirjoittaminen ja metatekstuaalisuus. Tämä laaja valikoima teoreettisia näkökulmia auttaa ottamaan huomioon omaelämäkerrallisen projektin moniulotteiset itsereflektiiviset eleet: sekä ne jotka esiintyvät teksteissä itsessään että ne jotka esiintyvät teosten ulkopuolella, eli kirjailijoiden julkisen kommentarin.

Asiasanat: Omaelämäkerta, itsereflektio, elämäntarina, intohimo, metatekstuaalisuus, uudelleenkirjoittaminen, omaelämäkerrallinen tila, itsereflektiivinen tila, omaelämäkerrallinen minä, kirjailija

Table of Contents

Introduction	11
Writing Life, Living Writing	11
Ernaux, Duras, and Autobiographical Writing.....	15
Reflection on Writing and the Self.....	26
Texts and Lives.....	32
Spaces of Autobiography and Reflection.....	40
Towards the Self-Reflective Space: Method, Construction.....	46
PART I Passion of Writing.....	48
1. Living Passion, Writing Passion: Ernaux's <i>Passion simple</i> and <i>L'Occupation</i>	49
1.1 'From September last year, I did nothing else but wait for a man.'.....	51
1.2 Reflecting on <i>Écriture</i> : Mode of Writing, Shame, Detachment.....	56
1.3 Autofiction, and Turning Possession into Narrative.....	61
1.4 Reflecting on <i>Écriture</i> : Desire and Story Intertwined.....	65
1.5 Not Another Self-Celebration?.....	67
2. Writing / Self in Duras's <i>La Vie matérielle</i> , <i>Écrire</i> and <i>C'est tout</i>	70
2.1 Writing about Writing: an Overview	72

2.2	Writing about the Self: the 'I' as the Sole Topic of Narration	75
2.3	From the Multitudes of the Self to the Unified Self: Project Duras.....	79
2.4	'Duras' and Duras: the Autobiographical 'I' and the Author.....	82
PART II Spaces of the Self.....		87
3.	Ernaux's Autobiographical Space.....	88
3.1	Web of Passion: Unity within the Oeuvre.....	90
3.2	Web of Social Writing: Reiteration of the Reflective Concerns of Earlier Works.....	96
3.3	No Individual Meaning? <i>L'Usage de la photo</i> and <i>Les Années</i>	102
3.4	Repetition as a Lifelong Process	109
3.5	Encapsulating Life in the Face of Death: the Final Chapter of Ernaux's Project?	112
4.	Rewriting in the Durasian World.....	114
4.1	Rewriting Youth.....	115
4.2	From the Lover Continuum to the Literary Network.....	122
4.3	'She sees herself.' Constructing a Self-Portrait	124
4.4	Intensity of the Repetition and the Life-Long Project of Constructing the Self.....	130
PART III Authorial Moves.....		133
5.	Ernaux's <i>façon d'exister</i>	134
5.1	Two examples: Authorial Self-Commentary	135
5.1.1	L'Écriture comme un couteau.....	136
5.1.2	Annie Ernaux: une œuvre de l'entre-deux	138

5.2	From Transsubjection to Personal ‘Truth’	141
5.3	Thresholds: Texts and Photographs.....	146
5.4	Writing as a Way of Life.....	149
6.	<i>La Duras</i> – the Image, the Myth, and the Author.....	152
6.1	Encountering Duras.....	154
6.2	Interviewing Duras.....	159
6.3	From Personal Politics to Self-Emphasis	162
6.4	An Heir of the Romantic Author?.....	166
6.5	Loneliness, Madness, Obsession.....	170
	Conclusion.....	174
	References.....	180
	Abbreviations and Editions Cited	180
	Works by Marguerite Duras	180
	Works by Annie Ernaux.....	180
	Secondary References.....	181
	Appendix.....	196
	Works by Marguerite Duras, Chronological Order	196
	Works by Annie Ernaux, Chronological Order	197

Introduction

Writing Life, Living Writing

Ecrire sa vie, vivre son écriture. These two fundamental acts – living and writing – are presented in parallel in the book-length interview *L'Écriture comme un couteau* (ÉCC, 111) between Frédéric-Yves Jeannet and the French author Annie Ernaux (born 1940). Constituting the heading of one particular section of the interview, these words refer to the way the author herself attests to exist in two places at once: both in her life and in her writing (ibid., 119).

Another renowned French author, Marguerite Duras (1914–1996), describes the relationship between the author and her work as being even more symbiotic:

Le seul sujet du livre, c'est l'écriture. L'écriture, c'est moi. Donc moi, c'est le livre.
(In Genova 2003, 56.)

‘The only subject of the book is writing. Writing – that is me. Thus, I am the book.’¹ The all-consuming presence of the process of writing in the author’s life is essential. Duras was famous for claiming that she had very little personal life, meaning that her profession covered all the aspects of her life.² The same applies to Ernaux, who has from the very beginning of her career depicted her life in her works, and often implies that the process of writing is intertwined with her day-to-day life. She has, for example, revealed details from one of her erotic relationships in a book which includes photographs of the couple’s clothes, scattered in the heat of love-making, all over the floors and furniture of such places as her private apartment and a hotel room (*L’Usage de la photo*, 2005). After recovering from breast cancer, she has begun to publish feverishly (three publications in 2011, for example; cf. Appendix), making it seem like she is in a hurry to tell everything there is to tell about her life before it is too late.

¹ My translation.

² Not to mention the somewhat narcissistic parable of her and the Sun King. She ‘is’ writing in the same way the King ‘was’ the state.

Allegedly, in the quote about being equivalent with her ‘book’, Duras is referring to all of her writing, which consists of both autobiographical and non-autobiographical works, whereas the parallel of life and writing describes Ernaux’s particular, thoroughly autobiographical enterprise.³ When one inspects the word *autobiographical*, however, it becomes apparent that both the depiction of Ernaux’s project as writing life, living writing⁴ and Duras’s declaration of the symbiosis between herself and writing are in close connection to the original genre:

Table 1.

autos	bios	graphie
auto	bio	graphy
<i>self</i>	<i>life</i>	<i>writing</i>

Although many authors whose work is not definitively or in its entirety autobiographical (for example Voltaire, Pushkin, Nabokov, Grass, or Roth) have played extensively with similarities between the author’s life and oeuvre, it is in auto – bio – graphical stories where the parallel is especially pronounced. Without yet going further into definitions of autobiography, it suffices here to state that the key concepts behind the connection between the author and her oeuvre are already inherent in the term: self, life, writing. This dissertation focuses on all these three essential aspects of autobiographical writing.

Another key aspect of autobiographical stories is that they are *self-reflective* by their very constitution. The autobiographical ‘I’ always carries an inherent reference to the author behind the text. Both Annie Ernaux’s and Marguerite Duras’s autobiographical works are examples of self-conscious texts in which the ‘I’ at times is more interested in pondering over the composition of the text and writing in general rather than in conveying any truths concerning the life that is being depicted. My claim in this dissertation is that the ‘I’ in these two authors’ autobiographical works nevertheless manages to tell a life story and depict her(self) – while simultaneously engaging in her self-conscious endeavor.⁵ Furthermore, I will note

³ It should be noted that Ernaux’s oeuvre is autobiographical to varying degrees, an issue which will be explicated further later on.

⁴ Please note the words *sa* and *son* in the original French depiction of Ernaux’s project: the *self* is emphatically present.

⁵ This also tallies with the broader trend towards re-narrativization in the French novel, which is a reaction to the high experimentality of literature that was so popular in the 1960s.

how Ernaux and Duras as authors participate in the processes of both questioning the autobiographical mode and the construction of a life story through a constant commentary on their works and lives. Both are adamant in proclaiming their deep connection to their writing, but they are also keen to talk about similar subject matter as their textual alter egos, such as love affairs – whether with human lovers or with *écriture* itself.

What characterizes both authors' autobiographical writing is *passion* as a theme and a topic in individual texts; as a continuing formal feature throughout their oeuvres; and as a part of their authorial image-forming process. Surely, one of the fundamental reasons for their popularity is that their works deal with passion and love affairs as their fundamental subject matter. 'Passionate' also well describes the attitude Ernaux and Duras as authors and their autobiographical alter egos as well share towards the topic of writing, which often rises as the central concern in their texts. Not only that, their writing is formally passionate as well, such as in the repetitive patterns in their works. The pervasive passion and the air of intensity in their works is one of the very reasons I first began to read, and later, apply academic analysis to these works.

Thus, this dissertation constitutes a discussion of self-reflection in Ernaux's and Duras's autobiographical writing and in their extratextual authorial self-commentary. I consider self-reflection a wide-ranging phenomenon, reaching from metatextual commentary to the consciously created connections between the works in the authors' oeuvres and to the explicit emphasis on the self. I will also discuss the construction of a life story and the depiction of the subject both as a means and as a product of their writing. I consider formulating a story of one's life an essential goal in autobiographies – even in fragmented, experimental ones as in those of Ernaux and Duras. Applying the concept of autobiographical space, I will propose that self-reflection, autobiographical writing and the construction of life stories all take place in literary and authorial spaces, and finally in one vast *self-reflective space*. I will, to an extent, clarify the admittedly ambiguous essences of these spaces both in this introduction and in the forthcoming analysis. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how the acts of constant rewriting, repeating oneself, emphasizing the connection between life and writing, and foregrounding particular topics, such as love affairs, enable Ernaux and Duras to present the telling of life stories themselves as intense and passionate in both formal and thematic terms.

To summarize, I will primarily strive to find answers to the following questions in the analysis:

- In what ways does self-reflection manifest itself in Ernaux's and Duras's autobiographical works?
- What is the relationship between autobiographical writing and self-reflection?
- What part does the telling of a life story and the depiction of the subject, and on the other hand, the specific contemplation on writing play in autobiographical writing and self-reflection?
- How does authorial self-commentary contribute to autobiographical writing and to the act of self-reflection?
- In what kind of spaces does the autobiographical act of self-reflection take place, and conversely, what kind of space is formed in the process?

In addition to answering these questions, the overall aim of this dissertation consists of a number of things. Analyzing autobiographies has been increasing in popularity in the field of Francophone and Anglo-American literary research for a few decades now. Before, research on autobiography leaned on mimetic understanding of the genre, and after that, on the deconstructionist view. More recently, the focus has been on constructivist theories that 'foreground (...) the creative function of autobiography with regard to individual identity, while, on the other hand, reviving the concept of autobiographical reference'. (Löschnigg 2010, 255.) This study starts out from the latter view, and strives to take a comprehensive view on autobiographical writing. I will consider as broadly as possible the nuances of Ernaux's and Duras's autobiographical texts and the subject depicted in them, the complex links within each author's oeuvre, as well as the author's role, the latter of which I consider a unique feature of autobiographies when compared to fiction. I will show how the autobiographical 'I' and the author share an intense, reciprocal relationship. So, this study represents the kind of research on autobiographies that allows for a versatile consideration of both textual and extratextual worlds.⁶ The object of study is the somewhat fragmentary and experimental autobiographical writing of two acclaimed authors. Nevertheless, I also wish to promote life's potential for story-making and writing as a lifelong process.

In this introduction, I will first map autobiographical writing both in general terms and in relation to Ernaux's and Duras's unique projects. Then, I will move on to shed light on self-reflection specifically in connection with such writing. After this, I will map the theoretical debate concerning the relationship between texts and lives, in particular the intertwining of identity and story-telling, and the ways in which the author is relevant in my discussion. I will also strive to elaborate the

⁶ Another differentiation which is far more taken advantage of in this dissertation is the one between the literary and the authorial. I will explain this later on.

spheres in which all this takes place, in other words the spaces that form from the complex links between different types of texts both within and outside the authors' works. To conclude the introduction, I will offer some remarks on the method and the construction of this dissertation.

Ernaux, Duras, and Autobiographical Writing

As authors, Ernaux and Duras are both similar to and yet different from each other. Marguerite Duras is obviously one of the most successful French authors, having won numerous awards (among them the Goncourt prize of French literature for *L'Amant* in 1984) and been translated into dozens of languages. While she started her writing career in a more conventional, romantic mode, she soon began to experiment with narration, concentrating especially on the ineffable, the so-called blank spots in writing. Before the publication of the autobiographical *L'Amant* (1984), she was considered a difficult, avant-garde writer.⁷ During her lifetime and throughout her literary career, she possessed a very audible voice: she appeared on television shows, wrote articles on political matters, wrote and directed film scripts⁸ as well as theatrical shows, and did all this by being unwaveringly aware of her own growing fame and notability. She was a cultural figure *par excellence*.

Annie Ernaux is generally regarded as being a voice of the people, since her books often deal with her rise up the social scale – from the daughter of working-class parents to a teacher of literature.⁹ As her career has progressed, she has been increasingly recognized in academic circles as well. She has also often appeared on literary TV shows such as *Apostrophes* and *Bouillon de culture*, given both critical and popular interviews regularly, and even been the sole topic of small conferences such as the one in Arras in 2002 and the one in Yvetot, her former home town, in 2012. She, too, has been translated into several languages and is especially well-known in the Anglo-American world: her books appear in various school syllabuses there.

⁷ For discussion on the avant-garde and women writers in France, see Suleiman 1991 (and on Duras in particular, *ibid.*, 185–186).

⁸ Duras's experiments with cinematic expression (while tremendously essential in her India Cycle) will, due to their vast scope, be left out of my discussion. In another kind of study, the broader concept of theater-film-text could shed further light on the dramatic and visual elements of her work.

⁹ One of Ernaux's unique characteristics is her status as a 'commoner' and her interest in depicting the working class in uncomplicated language. However, she is nonetheless a self-conscious, intellectual author.

Both Duras and Ernaux thus enjoy an unwavering position in the French literary and cultural scene – though Duras’s image both during and after her lifetime has been somewhat more notable and internationally acclaimed than Ernaux’s, partly due to the publication of *L’Amant* and her own active participation in the construction of the myth of *La Duras*.

In this dissertation, I discuss those facets of Ernaux’s and Duras’s work that are distinctly autobiographical. I wish to argue that both authors embark on quests for a comprehensive life story and a depiction of the self – endeavors which have not often been considered obvious in the case of experimental writing such as especially Duras’s. It is by no means irrelevant to this study that autobiography and the related genres (*memoir, journal intime, roman personnel, récit poétique*) have become notably popular in France. The phenomenon has been called ‘the renaissance of the literature of the self’. It has been interpreted both positively and negatively: either as a salvation from the far-too-experimental French modern novel or as an egoistic enterprise that forgets the community altogether (Kosonen 2008a, 28). A human willingness to write one’s personal identity in order to affirm one’s own existence is natural (Robinson 1980, 79–80; Eakin 1985, 275). The overwhelming centrality of the self in contemporary French literature might suggest egocentricity, but it may well also portray a more general willingness of the French reading public and the authors to anchor themselves in a changing world: to search for one’s own place in the world, to create a story and a history for oneself, and to find one’s roots. This could explain why the popularity of family chronicles and stories about childhood (such as J.M.G. Le Clézio’s *Onitssha*, 1991; Andreï Makine’s *Le Testament français*, 1995; and Amin Maalouf’s *Origines*, 2004) have increased in recent years. (Cf. Kosonen 2008a, 32–33.)¹⁰

The wider phenomenon of the return of the subject to French experimental literature in the 1970s and 1980s has been characterized as re-narrativization, or the narrative turn in the French novel (Davis & Fallaize 2000, 13–15; Vray 2004, 534–535; Meretoja 2010, 1–2).¹¹ The move is a counter-strike to the concentration on form and experimentality in the *nouveau roman* movement, which dominated the literary field in France in the 1950s and 1960s.¹² The popular-

¹⁰ More than ever, members of the ordinary public have been keen on writing their own memoirs and autobiographies. These are collected in designated ‘memoir banks’, such as *L’association de l’autobiographie et le patrimoine autobiographique*, and they are widely published by the writers themselves and by small publishing houses specializing in autobiographies. (Kosonen 2008a, 28.)

¹¹ For a more wide-ranging discussion on the phenomenon of ‘the return to the story’, see Kemp 2010.

¹² In general, the authors who can be considered as belonging to the movement do not share much (besides most of them being published by the Éditions de Minuit), but some common characteristics include ‘formal experimentation; disappearance of stable, easily distinguished characters as the center of

ity of autobiographies coincides with this overall move back towards the subject, history, and the telling of life stories. Autobiographical writing has searched for ways to depict human life in the form of more conventional stories than was the case with the movement of the *nouveau roman*. This has been the effort of a growing number of literary autobiographical authors as well.¹³

This interest in life writing is far from a mere contemporary phenomenon in France: some of the major works of the French literary canon are autobiographical. Michel de Montaigne discusses a variety of topics from a deeply personal perspective in his *Essais* (1580) which is almost a modern account in its recognition of the past and present selves and the positioning of the reader as the sympathetic ear (Burke 1995, 305). Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Les Confessions* (1770, published 1782) emphasizes the rise of the modern self, and according to Seán Burke, Rousseau's memoir highlights individuality to the extreme by organizing itself in terms of a unifying romantic ego (Burke 1995, 304).¹⁴ It asserts the characteristics of classic autobiography that still influence the writing of autobiographies today. Rousseau does this by depicting his own personality and development from childhood to maturity in as truthful a tone as possible.¹⁵ His tone naturally has its doubters. Paul John Eakin wonders whether Rousseau's attestation of a total revelation of human personality is a case of 'shameless magniloquence of a monstrous self-deception' (Eakin 1985, 54). In my opinion, it is not a question of self-deception – at least not an unintentional one. Despite the affirmation that everything he tells is the truth, Rousseau shows self-consciousness about the process of writing his piece, and admits to using 'ornaments' in the foreword to the work. He also addresses the reader on several occasions.

Burke raises the question of whether or not the classic autobiographies foregrounded rather than concealed the enigmatic boundaries of the subject, the

the novel, accompanied by the refusal of received notions of psychological coherence; disruptions of chronological sequence; elusive, untrustworthy, or inconsistent narrator' (Davis & Fallaize 2000, 10; cf. Thompson 1995, 9). For further discussion on what has taken place in French literary scene throughout the 1950s and 1960s, see Viart & Vercier 2005.

¹³ By 'literary' autobiographical authors I mean professional authors who have written autobiographies, yet do not simply recount the events of their lives and describe their personalities in them but also have artistic and/or experimental aspirations.

¹⁴ *Les Confessions* had an effect to the birth of Romanticism, which was especially interested in the human being as an individual. In the nineteenth century, autobiographical writing became more popular in France (as well as in other countries in Europe) and was manifested in Senancour's *Obermann* (1804), Madame de Staël's *Delphine* (1802), Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe* (1816), and François-René de Chateaubriand's *René* (1802) and *Les Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe* (1848–1850). I will discuss Duras as a 'Romantic' author in chapter 6.

¹⁵ A later work, Simone de Beauvoir's five-volume autobiography (1958–1972), is actually quite comparable with Rousseau's *Les Confessions* in that she depicts her personality and life comprehensively from an early age to the time of writing, and is very conscious of influential matters in her mental development.

author, and writing (Burke 1995, 303). By this he refers to the idea that despite their depiction of comprehensive life stories these works may have been already aware of the problems related to autobiographical writing that were raised by later authors. These later authors include Nathalie Sarraute, André Gide, Michel Leiris, Marcel Proust, and Alain Robbe-Grillet, some of whom were influential figures in the *nouveau roman* movement. They wrote about their own lives in modes drastically different from classic realist writing in order to explore the developed and changing ways of constructing an autobiography. These new ways of constructions included fragmented storytelling, playing with first and third person narration, and making use of psychoanalytic discourse.¹⁶ As with the *nouveau romanists*, form became the main content of their works (Jellenik 2007, 191).

While I wish to argue that both Duras and Ernaux embark on quests for a comprehensive life story that are perhaps strikingly similar to classic autobiographies, it is obvious that their writing is simultaneously quite different from that of Rousseau's. The most obvious difference lies in the mode of their writing. Whereas Rousseau and others wrote chronological life stories, Duras' and Ernaux's stories often consist of fragments, non-chronologically arranged moments, and events that might not at least at first sight seem to relate to one another at all.

Fragmented narration and the playing with the first and third person pronouns are distinctive features of *autofiction*, a subgenre of autobiographical writing that is dedicated to questioning the referentiality of classic autobiographies and to blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality.¹⁷ In addition to questioning referentiality, autofiction is tied to the tendency in French literature of the self to be quite obsessed about the theme of writing, *écriture*. It is not a question of mere Durasian obsession with the writing self or of the Ernauxian enterprise of constantly contemplating the autobiographical mode. This is a more general trait. A prime example of such self-conscious French contemporary literature (of the self)

¹⁶ See Robinson 1980 on the autobiographical nature of these authors' works, and *ibid.*, 52–74 on Gidean and Proustian semi-autobiographical acts. For theoretical discussion on the new ways of writing autobiographies especially in French, see Ramsay 1996 and Allemand & Milan 2005, and in general, Sturrock 1977, 52–61; Gusdorf 1956/1980, 31; Egan 1984, 2–3, 10; Evans 1999, 134–135; and Kosonen 2000, 14–17. Paul John Eakin aptly notes that the concept of the so-called coherent autobiographical self was questioned long before modern autobiographies took it as their topic (Eakin 1988, 37). On the other hand, Michael Sheringham asserts that there is no continuous historical development in French autobiography (Sheringham 1993, vii).

¹⁷ The term autofiction was coined by Doubrovsky (1977). See Lejeune 1975/1989, Cohn 1999, and Lecarme & Lecarme-Tabone 1997 on defining stories as autofictions. Philippe Gasparini delves deep into the polemics of autobiographical novels and autofictions in his *Et il je? Roman autobiographique et autofiction* (2004). His approach is based on the assumption that the autobiographical novel exists in between genres, and it is up to the reader to decide whether he or she is reading an autobiographical or fictional account. Thus, there is constant doubt. It should be noted that autofiction does not merely question the boundary between fact and fiction but sometimes includes fantastic and unnatural elements as well.

is the work of Michel Houellebecq. His *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994) is riddled with metatextual commentary on the book itself, on writing in general, and on the activities of readers, who are addressed on a number of occasions.

Most of Ernaux's works are not autobiographies per se, rather resembling autobiographical novels or autofictions. They do not clearly identify Ernaux and her main character, nor do they attempt to portray the self's life and personality in its entirety, in this way questioning the autobiographical mode. Thus, the exploration of love affairs in *Passion simple* (1991) and *L'Occupation* (2002) cannot be reduced to descriptions of what actually happened. They are also contemplations of the ways and possibilities of representing a taboo subject matter (a forbidden love affair) and emotions like jealousy.¹⁸ Marguerite Duras's autobiographical writing is similarly characterized by generic uncertainty.¹⁹ Her most famous work, *L'Amant*, has been at the center of generic debate from the moment of its publication: is it an autobiography or a fictional account? Did Duras really have an older Chinese lover as a teenage girl? (See for example King 1989, Hewitt 1990, Adler 1998/2000.)

Annie Ernaux in particular can be compared with two other contemporary French female writers. Catherine Millet offers readers a complete, graphic description of her sexual demeanours in *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (2001), and an account of jealousy in *Le Jour de souffrance* (2008). In both books, which are known for their sensational, almost taboo subject matter, it is essential how the self in question contemplates her career as an author as well as the process of writing. This is the case especially in *Le Jour de souffrance*, which comments on the writing of *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* Camille Laurens for her part blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction as well as between her own identity and that of her textual alter ego in her works. This is exemplified in the play with her authorial name: 'Camille Laurens' is Laurence Ruel's alter ego, which allows for the hovering between truth and making up of stories. The alter ego is a made-up name but originates from real life: 'Laurens' is her maiden name, and in *L'Amour* (2003) the name 'Camille' is revealed to be her grandfather's. In the book, the autobiographical 'I' refers to 'Camille' in paragraphs that are separated from the rest of the text, making it seem as if she is talking to another person – whether this is the author or not remains debatable.²⁰

¹⁸ Even works that can be more easily categorized as autobiographies do not necessarily revert back to the question of whether or not the events actually happened. They are often discussed more as textual artifacts than as representations of someone's life and personality.

¹⁹ See Macé 2005, 37–39 on autofictional tendencies in both Ernaux's and Duras's work.

²⁰ The autobiographical 'I' refers to her other novels and discusses her private life constantly. She describes a marketing trip to South America with her publicist, as well as refers to her husband Julien, their history and approaching divorce, and their son Philippe, who died as an infant and about whom she has written the book *Philippe* (2005). The 'I' states that in her other books she has named him Michel, thus

Considering that this study discusses self-conscious autobiographical writing, why did I choose Ernaux and Duras as objects of analysis and not Laurens or Millet? Duras differs from the others especially in the vast scope of her oeuvre, both in terms of subject matter and genre. She also represents an author of a slightly different generation. The choice between Ernaux, Laurens and Millet seems more random. Laurens is more or less obsessively self-reflective, and is tied up with the themes of writing as well as passion and love affairs that are at the focus of this study – as is Ernaux. However, Ernaux, although theoretically concerned with the possibilities and limits of the autobiographical mode (Motte 1995, 55), is more transparent in her career-long process of deciphering her own life, that is, her autobiographical project. In Ernaux's case, it is possible that the self-consciousness highlights the autobiographical nature of her work instead of unsettling it. As Lyn Thomas puts it: 'This kind of intervention in the text – to discuss her intentions as a writer and her experience of the writing process – is (. . .) an important aspect of its general evolution from autobiographical fiction to auto/biography.' (Thomas 1999, 33, 35.) Millet, for her part, is not as constantly self-reflective as Ernaux and her oeuvre is quite concise, thus not as interesting in terms of a life-project. Furthermore, Ernaux's work includes a deeply sociological perspective which profoundly influences her style of writing – this depth is lacking in the work of the others.²¹

Despite their obvious connection to autofictional writing, both Ernaux's and Duras's autobiographical works situate themselves on numerous points on the autobiographical spectrum, ranging from diaries, confessions, self-portraits and conventional autobiographies to fragmented autobiographical novels, autofictions, and episodic ponderings on writing and life in general.²² They definitely do not as such adjust to Philippe Lejeune's well-known, basic definition of autobiography.²³

emphasizing the constant unreliability of Laurens's writing. On the other hand, at the end of *L'Amour*, the autobiographical 'I' brings forth an old school friend who claims to know her and states her name: Laurence Ruel. The last sentence is the 'I's' response to the friend: Yes, I am her, followed by a signature Laurence Ruel, 31st December 2002. The identity of the author seems to have been revealed here.

²¹ All this rules out other contemporary autobiographical/autofictional/self-reflective authors such as Houellebecq and especially Marie Darrieusseuq, whose acclaimed *Truismes* (1996) emphasizes the fantastic and unnatural aspect of autofictional writing.

²² See Nakari 2010 on Ernaux's *Passion simple* as a confessional autofiction. I will note relevant subgeneric categories such as diaries or socio-historical autobiographies in the upcoming analysis. On defining Duras's writing as autobiographical in general, see Armel 1990 and Miller 2003, and on the question of genre in French literary theory, see Todorov 1982, 5–6.

²³ 'Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.' (Lejeune 1975/1989, 14; cf. Shen & Xu 2007, 44.)

In the analysis, I will generally refer to the texts under discussion as autobiographical writing (*écriture autobiographique*).²⁴

Defining writing is not merely a question of genre: it can be a question of style as well. Duras was prone to resist any attempts to define her writing or even analyze her works at all (Genova 2003, 45–46). She resigned from movements such as the Communist party and second wave French feminism in order to create her own artistic style, free from dogmatic thinking (Knuuttila 2008, 80). This (according to her) unique style was characterized by gaps, emphatic expressions, minimalism, and, more ambiguously, silence.²⁵ Some critics have been using the word *récit* especially of Duras's later works.²⁶ Duras herself, as well as many of her critics, preferred to refer to her works as *écrits* or as the even more general *écriture*. Ernaux, on the other hand, has been precise in defining her writing. In an afterword to the translation of *Les Armoires vides* (1974) she states that 'henceforth for me writing would be a deciphering of real life, something which is far removed from the lyrical, ahistorical and asocial literature' (CO, 125). In order to do that, she has chosen a style of *écriture plate*, a language that is plain, precise, even flat (Jellenik 2007, 198).

'Deciphering of real life' does not refer solely to Ernaux's project of autobiographically transcribing the events and experiences of her own life. Her unique project is that of transubjection, or *transubstantiation*, which signifies the kind of writing that strives to contemplate something general through personal experience. In other words, when Ernaux writes about her tortuous feelings as a love-sick mistress in *Passion simple*, she is actually discussing the difficulty of love affairs in general. Of course, taking the personal and making it general does not limit itself to intense emotional experiences such as love. Ernaux is famous for taking an interest in social issues. Her memoirs of her parents (*La Place*, 1984, and *Une Femme*, 1987) are depictions of contemporary French history and society, in particular the rise of the French middle class in the 20th century and the problems associated with social mobility. She binds all this together with her autobiographical aspirations (Meyer 2002, 33). Either way, it is real life experience that Ernaux seeks.

²⁴ The reader should not draw undue conclusions when the word autobiography or some other expression is used instead of autobiographical writing, or vice versa. In my opinion, there are no clear-cut boundaries between genres. Generic categorization is synthetic and conducted by literary scholars, and does not emerge from the books themselves. Our minds are completely capable of comprehending a blurred genre status as we negotiate texts (Lehman 1997, 23). On the other hand, the approach which promotes the existence of boundaries and differentiations (such studies include, without going into a long discussion of the history of narratology, Genette 1991/1993 and Cohn 1999) is useful when, for example, discussing the relationship between works that exist 'on different sides', highlighting, in other words, the relationship between textual and extratextual worlds.

²⁵ For discussion on silence in Duras's *L'Amant*, see for example Morgan 1989.

²⁶ Pamela A. Genova refers to Duras's earlier production, i.e. works prior to 1968, as *romans* (Genova 2003, 45), but prefers *récit* to designate the later ones.

Despite her reputation for being somewhat narcissistic and a 'difficult' author, Duras also contemplates social issues, such as unemployed Parisian immigrants in *La Vie matérielle* (1987). Even *L'Amant* contextualizes its depiction of family relations in racial, cultural, and social hierarchies (Vickroy 1998, 123). *La Douleur* (1985) recounts not only Duras's own devastating experiences during World War II as a wife waiting for her husband to return from the death camps, and as an interrogator (/torturer) working for the resistance movement, but also the more general human experience of war and occupation.²⁷ Straight after the war, Duras began writing about the tragedy of the modern human being. She definitely is one of the most recognized Western authors writing about both individual suffering and collective mourning (Knuutila 2011, 16). She wrote about the individual's experience of catastrophe: the trauma of colonialism, nuclear destruction, and concentration camps. However, media attention turned towards *L'Amant* and Duras as a priestess of sexuality, and the social and political aspects of her writing as well as her in-depth surveys of colonialism were left largely unrecognized (Knuutila 2008, 80; Knuutila 2011, 23).²⁸

What is most characteristic in Duras's oeuvre is the extreme subject matter she deals with: death, murder, darkness, silence, violence, loss, and passion. Her 'entire oeuvre may be seen as a sustained attempt to catch up in writing the inexpressible drama of all manner of extreme experiences' (Crowley 2000, 2). Her autobiographical writing, such as *L'Amant*, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (1991), *La Douleur*, and *Les Cahiers de la guerre et autres textes* (2006) is riddled with extreme emotions. She talks about such phenomena in her contemplative writing, as the headings of *La Vie matérielle* indicate: 'L'alcool', 'Les hommes', 'Les corps des écrivains', 'La télé et la mort', and 'La population nocturne' ('Alcohol', 'Men', 'The Writers' Bodies', 'Television and Death', and 'The Night-Time Population'). *Écrire* (1993) is centered on the overwhelming solitude which writing requires, and *C'est tout* (1995) is an intense account of Duras's thoughts during the months preceding her death, thoughts relating to the most fundamental emotions a person might have at the end of her life. The interest in extreme human experiences parallels and is often overcome by the obsessive attitude she has to herself as an individual and/or au-

²⁷ Duras's real-life husband, Robert Antelme (Robert L. in *La Douleur*), also wrote an account of his experiences in the death camp: *L'Espèce humaine* (1947). The book is specifically referred to in *La Douleur* as well, and the two share various significant echoes and cross-references, an issue which Colin Davis discusses in his article "Duras, Antelme and the Ethics of Writing" (Davis 1997).

²⁸ See especially Sirkka Knuutila's *Fictionalising Trauma: The Aesthetics of Marguerite Duras's India Cycle* (2011), where she delves deep into the narrativization of trauma in Duras's India Cycle. Her point of view is that of 'illuminating the imaginative, healing aspects of trauma's subjective experience', which are based on the 'embodied nature of traumatic memory', and she wishes to overcome the idea of trauma's causal circularity (Knuutila 2011, 17).

thor. In chapter 2, I intend to argue that no matter the subject of reflection, the end focus is on the reflecting self in Duras's contemplative writing. Ernaux, too, writes about an individual who is obsessively immersed in her own feelings and irrationality in *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation* (cf. chapter 1). In the case of both authors, one of the focuses of their projects is to thoroughly contemplate and affirm the self. The difference between Ernaux and Duras is that Ernaux is professionally more interested in the autobiographical act itself and the consequences of it.

There has been an increasing amount of critical interest in Ernaux's work despite her reputation for being a 'popular' author, especially in the Anglo-American world, which does not regard her in as controversial terms as the French might. Her works have been discussed from perspectives ranging from analyzing the first-person narration and her formal experiments such as transgressions in narration (e.g. Motte 1995, Willging 2007, Hugueny-Léger 2009) to the psychologizing the detailed descriptions of her parents (e.g. McIlvanney 2001, Meyer 2002) and noting the ethnographical aspect of her stories (e.g. McIlvanney 2001).²⁹ There is, obviously, a vast amount of research on Marguerite Duras, who is considered one of the most successful as well as talented authors of 20th century France. Her work has been considered from the point of view of her left-wing politics (e.g. Marini 1977), feminism (e.g. Marini 1977, Guers-Villate 1988), psychoanalysis (e.g. Gorton 2008), trauma studies (e.g. Kristeva 1987, Ames 1988, Knuutila 2011), and her biography (e.g. Vircondelet 1991/1994, Adler 1998/2000).³⁰ Clichés in the criticism of her oeuvre include concepts and themes such as *écriture durasienne*, blank spots, desire and painful love, distance, minimalist style, the essence of nothingness, and the pain of solitude. Research on Ernaux is also riddled with clichés such as definitive and explicit expressions, overall stiffness, transubjection, and an interest in the hovering between fiction and nonfiction in her writing.

One area of critical research that is particularly often associated with both Ernaux and Duras is feminist criticism. This is decidedly relevant to any female French author because of the tremendous influence of *écriture féminine*, made famous by Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Annie Leclerc. It must be admitted that both Ernaux's and Duras's works call for such interpretation. Duras's female char-

²⁹ See also Thomas 1999 for a general introduction to and Thumerel 2004 for a thorough collection of essays on Ernaux's work (especially Charpentier 2004 on the critical reception on Ernaux), and Mace 2004 on identity in Ernaux's writing.

³⁰ This is a very concise selection. Sylvie Loignon offers a systematic recap of Duras's oeuvre and writing in her work *Marguerite Duras* (2003). For an elaborate discussion on the critical reception of Duras, see Winston (1993), who discusses Duras's reception from the 1950s to the 1990s quite thoroughly.

acters are often accentuatedly objects of male desire (Selous 1988, 1).³¹ Both Duras and Cixous use the term *écrit* and some of Duras's works do coincide both with the peak of feminism and the *écriture féminine*. Duras definitely liked to write about emotionally torn yet powerful women in a style far from the classic realist mode usually associated with male writing. She has been widely studied from the point of view of both feminist criticism and *écriture féminine* by Trista Selous (1988), Adele King (1989), and Diana Holmes (1996), to name a few.³² Ernaux, for her part, does address issues that seem to be especially feminine and/or feminist, such as the loss of virginity, wifehood, motherhood, being the other woman, balancing a career and a family, being a daughter, and the historical and ideological suppression of women. Generic transgressions are associated with female writing (McIlvanney 2001, 4), as are fragmentary narration and the absence of chronology – all integral parts of both authors' work. Both can be seen as filling in the 'blank feminine spaces' left in the canon.

However, critics are often prone to turn away from these readings. Siobhán McIlvanney analyzes Ernaux's *La Femme gelée* (1981) and *Passion simple* from the point of view of feminism (McIlvanney 2001, 49–86) but is in the end forced to acknowledge that the author's work does not easily bend to such interpretation. Jane Winston puts it quite bluntly in Duras's case: '(. . .) thinking of Duras only in terms of her femaleness simply does not work' (Winston 1993, 479). While I will briefly note connections to feminist interpretation in the analysis, especially in Ernaux's case, in my opinion regarding either Ernaux's or Duras's writing from the viewpoint of 'feminine writing' and/or feminism limits the discursive power of its autobiographical aspects. Duras and Ernaux – the authors as well as their autobiographical alter egos – are more than 'women': they are selves.

Obviously, some of the critical viewpoints mentioned above are linked to my discussion, too. The particular mode of writing, whether empty, fragmented, or plain, is significant in terms of how the subject and her life story are depicted. It also contributes to the level of self-consciousness and the possible referentiality in the stories: deeply fragmented narration draws attention to its construction more profoundly than linear exposition which is often used to convey details of the actual world, such as those having to do with Ernaux's parents and their lives. Transubjection in Ernaux's case and the pain of loneliness in Duras's are relevant

³¹ Laura Mulvey's article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) was one of the first to apply Lacanian psychoanalysis in feminist research in connection with the objectification of female sexuality. One of the key ideas of the article is that in cinema, the female characters are the bearers of meaning (who are being looked at) and the male characters are the makers of meaning (who can be identified with).

³² Holmes attributes her writing as carrying 'an emotional charge, an unexpected, subversive energy', 'disruption', and 'disruptive power' that people have often liked to call feminine (Holmes 1996, 237).

'clichés' in my study. Desire, which has been recognized as one of the key forces in Duras's writing, is significant since I am discussing literature that regards passion and intensity both as its subject matter and as constructive tools.

Overall, this study views Duras's and Ernaux's writing projects as vast, complicated phenomena that cover individual works and their whole oeuvres, and also their profession as authors. Their autobiographical writing includes varying modes and often fragmented and incoherent storytelling. Seemingly unrelated experiences, feelings and moments are turned, twisted and rewritten over and over again. In spite of this, I intend to argue that these fragments create a story of a life which results from a decades-long project of writing. Self-reflection in its multitude of forms serves to emphasize the self in question and to tie together separate autobiographical stories, and link them with the author behind those stories. I also wish to argue that the selves as well as the stories about those selves in the two authors' autobiographical projects are unified in their multiplicity. So, this study of Ernaux's and Duras's autobiographical writing will touch upon several subgenres in which the works situate themselves; the ways in which autobiographical identity is constructed in individual texts, throughout the oeuvres, and in authorial self-commentary; and the ways of being self-conscious in all of these spheres.³³ Many other approaches to autobiographies, though they will be borne in mind, will thus receive slightly less attention, including the debate on referentiality,³⁴ the narratological approach to autobiography especially when it comes to unreliability,³⁵ autobiography as a means of expressing otherness,³⁶ and autobiography and postmodernism.³⁷

³³ These views are supported by the work done on the functions and the construction of autobiographies by, for example, Gusdorf 1956/1980, Horowitz 1977, and Smith & Watson 2001. Other such critics include de Man 1979, Starobinski 1971/1980, Mandell 1980, Renza 1980, and Best 2002, among many, many others. It should be noted that these theorists obviously have varying perspectives, and appear here only as general examples.

³⁴ I am interested in the narrativization of autobiographies, not fictionalization. For discussion on the fact/fiction debate and referentiality see for example Horowitz 1977, Olney 1980, Egan 1984, Eakin 1985 and 1988, Elbaz 1988, and Evans 1999. The most notable 'solutions' offered to the question of referentiality are Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact, the lifelikeness of autobiographical writing, and Elizabeth Bruss's work (Lejeune 1975/1989, 1986; Bruss 1976; on general theory on *vraisemblance*, see Barthes's 'The Reality Effect' (1968/1982)). The publishing dates indicate that the discussion was at its peak in the 1980's. It should be noted that even almost all of the above-mentioned theorists see autobiography as neither fact nor fiction but as something in between. More recently, the distinction between fact and fiction has become a marginal concern in autobiographical theory (Löschnigg 2010, 256).

³⁵ See for example Shen & Xu 2007. Some narratological viewpoints will be discussed later on in this introduction, such as the issue of the 'implied author'.

³⁶ For example, Rosenblatt 1980, Eakin 1985, 1988, 1992, Mason 1980, and Smith & Watson 1998.

³⁷ For example, Ashley, Gilmore & Peters 1994.

Reflection on Writing and the Self

As I stated at the beginning of this introduction, autobiographical writing is self-referential by its very constitution. But it can also include more specific forms of self-reflection, both in terms of the text and the self in the text. Linda Hutcheon, for example, distinguishes between five directions of reference: the textualized extratextual (reference to the real world), intertextual (reference to other texts), intra-textual (reference to the universe of reality of fiction) metatextual (reference to fiction as fiction, in other words, self-reflexivity), and a reference to the discursive situation of the reader (Hutcheon 1988, 154–156).³⁸

The analysis of Ernaux's and Duras's works in this dissertation takes note of self-reference on three levels: in *individual texts*, in the *author's whole (autobiographical) oeuvre*, and in the *author's commentary on her work*. In individual works, I will discuss the autobiographical 'I's self-awareness with regard to such key events in her life as tumultuous love affairs, or her personal history and her family background; the 'I's explicit and implicit commentary on the process of writing an autobiography; the borderline critical commentary on writing; more specified phenomena such as compiling a self-portrait; and recognizing one's own place in literature.³⁹ All of these form a network of references spanning the author's entire oeuvre, appearing as they do in more works than one. Self-reference at the level of the author's work can be based on themes, characters, formal characteristics, sentences, words, and even letters that seem to refer to one another, and these I will observe in Ernaux's and Duras's writing. I will also discuss the authors' commentaries on their lives and works. Basically, I will discuss the *literary self-reflection* that takes place in the authors' works, and the *authorial self-reflection* which takes place outside these works.⁴⁰ These

³⁸ It should be noted that Hutcheon discusses these manifestations of reference precisely in connection with her genre of interest, historiographic metafiction. For a more elaborate discussion on the problem of reference, see Hutcheon 1988, 140–157. For comparison, see Werner Wolf's more concise typology of metafiction (Wolf 1993, 220–65). Wolf has also striven to broaden the scope of metafiction to transmedial and non media-specific 'metareference' (Wolf 2009).

³⁹ Ernaux's and Duras's literary alter egos reflect upon their thoughts and feelings when it comes to their love affairs, but they also reflect upon the process of transforming their experience into the particular story they are contemplating. Self-reflection as understood in this study is both the act these alter egos perform and the content in its own right. Obviously, self-reflection could be approached via psychology as well. See Wallacher & Nowak 2000 on the connection between the self and the human consciousness and the cognitive processes the self can engage in.

⁴⁰ Ernaux and Duras as authors are players in the literary field which in theory covers both their works and their authorial self-commentary. In this dissertation I am using the terms 'literary' and 'authorial' to differentiate that which takes place in the autobiographical works themselves from that which takes place in the author's commentary. Another differentiation would be textual (within the text) and extratextual (outside the text). In both cases there is a definite overlap, which I will discuss in the analysis.

two overlap, and I will comment on this in the following paragraphs, later on in the introduction, and throughout the dissertation.

The first known use of self-reflection dates from 1652.⁴¹ Self-reference has obviously been present throughout Western literary history and its manifestations cover a vast variety of texts, from classics such as Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605/1615) and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767) to more contemporary self-conscious writing, such as Paul Auster's work. These are radical examples of self-consciousness in literature, and this study is specifically interested in autobiographical writing as a self-referring mode of writing. Indeed, Annie Ernaux does admit her debt to authors such as Auster by beginning her *La Honte* (1997) with a quote from him, stating that language is a way of existing in the world (H, opening words; Auster 1982/1992, 161; cf. Meretoja 2010, 329).

'Self-conscious' is one of the the most commonly used terms to denote writing that refers to itself, autobiographical or otherwise. Robert Alter defines such writing as '[writing] that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and that by so doing probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality' (Alter 1975, x).⁴² This can be brought about by highlighting the process of writing, by referring to the reflecting subject, whether as the narrator or as the authorial creator of the story, and by drawing attention to the author's act of composition.

Note that while self-conscious writing is often called metafiction,⁴³ Alter does not use the term. Metafiction and self-conscious writing are not necessarily synonymous. Rather, metafiction is fundamentally self-conscious in nature but a self-conscious novel is not a metafiction: metafiction is a quality in a text more than a genre of its own. Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning propose an essential distinction when it comes to 'self-reflexive utterances', in other words 'comments referring to the discourse rather than the story': that between metanarration and metafiction. Metafiction, according to them, describes the 'capacity of fiction to reflect on its own status as fiction', whereas metanarration refers to 'the narrator's reflections on the act or process of narration'. Metanarration is able to appear in non-fictional narratives as well, and does not necessarily destroy the aesthetic illusion of the text in the same way as metafiction does. (Neumann & Nünning 2014,

⁴¹ *Merriam Webster*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-reflection>, accessed 29 June, 2014.

⁴² Cf. Hutcheon 1980, 1; Waugh 1984, 13–14; and Currie 1995, 2.

⁴³ The term itself was first introduced in essays by Gass (1970) and Scholes (1970) (cf. Neumann & Nünning 2014, <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/metanarration-and-metafiction>, accessed 29 June, 2014).

<http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/metanarration-and-metafiction>, accessed 11 March, 2014.)

The kind of autobiographical writing I am discussing sometimes situates itself between non-fiction and fiction since some of Ernaux's and Duras's works strive both to depict reality and to question the very possibility of doing so. While I will discuss various practical types of self-reflection in the analysis and not make terminological distinctions beyond what is being made here,⁴⁴ it is essential to note at this point that the self-referential gestures in both authors' works are instances of metanarration, but they also draw attention to their possible fictionality. One of the most often-quoted passages in what might be Ernaux's best-known book, *Pas-sion simple*, pointedly illustrates the air of self-awareness that is present throughout the book:

Maintenant que je suis allée au bout de cette nécessité, je regarde les pages écrites avec étonnement et une sorte de honte, jamais ressentie – au contraire – en vivant ma passion, pas davantage en la relatant. Ce sont les jugements, les valeurs « normales » du monde qui se rapprochent avec la perspective d'une publication. (Il est possible que l'obligation de répondre à des questions du genre « est-ce autobiographique ? », d'avoir à se justifier de ceci et cela, empêche toutes sortes de livres de voir le jour, sinon sous la forme romanesque où les apparences sont sauvées.) (PS, 70.)⁴⁵

Self-conscious writing notices its own position as a piece of literature and as a linguistic construction, is aware of itself, and actively reflects upon its own ontological status. This is precisely what is happening in the passage above: the upcoming publication raises questions concerning the 'truthfulness' and the origin of the book, in other words, its generic status ('Is it an autobiography?'). Most of Ernaux's texts are highly aware of their own modes, and she goes to great lengths to question the boundary between autobiographical and fictional presentation. Marguerite Duras's works are also, albeit slightly more implicitly, aware of their own textual status and of their position between life writing and fiction. *L'Amant*, for example, blurs this boundary between life writing and fiction by undermining the alleged authenticity of the famous forbidden love affair (Genova 2003, 52). Self-consciousness is not

⁴⁴ Cf. my views when it comes to narratological concepts such as the implied author, discussed later on in this introduction ('Texts and Lives').

⁴⁵ 'But now that I have satisfied this need, I stare at the written pages with astonishment and something resembling shame, feelings I certainly never felt when I was living out my passion and writing about it. The prospect of publication brings me closer to people's judgement and the "normal" values of society. (Having to answer questions such as "Is it an autobiography?" and having to justify this or that may have stopped many books from seeing the light of day, except in the form of a novel, which succeeds in saving appearances.)' (PP, 57.)

limited to Duras's autobiographical texts. Sirkka Knuuttila suggests that the author's India Cycle includes varietangled metafictional techniques and overall textual self-awareness. According to Knuuttila, these draw attention to the (dis)ability of certain artistic conventions (such as traumatic disruption and discontinuity) to depict traumatic experience (Knuuttila 2011, 86–87).⁴⁶ In Duras's autobiographical works, it is often the (dis)ability of coherent and/or fragmented narration to depict a life story that is being emphasized with textual self-consciousness.

A relevant context for self-reflection in these texts is the postmodern trend towards 'the representation of unfixed selves, a desire to reevaluate literary legacies, and a willingness to explore the unreliability of language' (Jellenik 2007, 1) – which are all characteristics of self-conscious discourse. Unlike modernism, which centers on epistemological issues, a postmodernist text deals with questions of ontology, involving in other words metafictional deliberations on the essential nature of texts. Duras's and Ernaux's 'appropriation, cooptation, and transformation of their own work serves as an ironic, and often critical, commentary on the tradition of deliberately rewriting literary models of earlier times', suggests Cathy Jellenik (2007, 4), and I partially agree, though I do not consider their work nearly as ironic as she does. However, self-reflection is not regarded as a particularly postmodern phenomenon here, but more a characteristic of particular kind of (Ernaux's and Duras's) writing.⁴⁷

For most people, an essential example of self-reflection is seeing one's reflection in a mirror. Mirroring as represented by art is an old concept and was manifested, for example, during the Renaissance. Mirroring has wide-ranging applications in literary theory: one of them is *mise en abyme*,⁴⁸ which basically signifies the (possibly endless) mirroring and reduplication of images and concepts, and is not simply an instance of a frame and a sub-structure. Especially in Duras's work, mirroring has a very particular meaning. The beginning of *L'Amant*, in which Duras is constructing a self-portrait, resembles the act of examining one's face in a mirror (A, 9–10). According to Hutcheon, mirroring can also represent an endless process in terms of culture (Hutcheon 1980, xii).

The concept of the self's mirroring suggests that self-reflection is not simply self-consciousness or 'meta'text but a characteristic of the 'I'. Essential to the

⁴⁶ See Knuuttila 2011, 86–98 for further discussion.

⁴⁷ The postmodern has not been as popular a concept in French literature and literary criticism as in the Anglo-American tradition. Despite Lyotard's essay *La Condition postmoderne* (1979), postmodernism was quite unfamiliar to French writers and critics until the beginning of 1990's – they considered it suspicious because of its American background. In recent years, the concept has proved useful in the reassessments of the *nouveau roman*. (Gratton 1997, 243.)

⁴⁸ Lucien Dällenbach is responsible for theorizing the concept in his *Le récit spéculaire: Essai sur la mise en abyme* (1977). It was first used by André Gide.

kind of self-reflection and autobiographical writing I am discussing in this dissertation is that the reflecting self appears to be interested only in herself, highly exceeding the expected self-interest in self-conscious writing in general. One way of describing such a self-reflective text is to name it *narcissistic*. Linda Hutcheon offers numerous comparative terms for this kind of text in her *Narcissistic Narrative*, self-conscious and self-reflective being among them (Hutcheon 1980, 1–2). ‘Narcissistic’ is perhaps not applicable here directly as this kind of an ironic allegory of the Narcissus myth. Rather, it means quite literally an autobiographical story that allows for the author’s obsession with the self to manifest itself in the form of the literary self’s never-ending turning towards herself.

In the quote from *Passion simple*, the autobiographical ‘I’ contemplates *her* feelings and satisfying *her* need in addition to noting *écriture*. The emphatic self is evident in Duras’s contemplative writing as well, where the impression is that no matter the topic in question, the discussion reverts back to the autobiographical ‘I’. Also highly relevant is that in autobiographies, the ‘I’ is the alter ego of the author. Markku Lehtimäki notes that self-conscious writing tends to make the authorial-based ‘I’ a visible figure (Lehtimäki 2005, 82). Lehtimäki’s focus is on meta-fictional writing especially. However, his idea of nonfictional self-consciousness linking itself to the outside world through the self is revealing: the nonfictional effect emerges ‘in the way the author forces his readers to confront the factuality that grows out of the author’s actual experience’ (ibid., 84; cf. Lehman 1997, 181).⁴⁹ Similarly, even though concerned with the ‘meta’ possibilities of texts, pointedly self-aware autobiographical writing can never be fully separate from the experience of the actual author living in the actual world. Also, in addition to portraying and making use of literary self-reflection in their works, Duras and Ernaux are themselves reflective as autobiographical authors with regard to their work and the connection it has with their lives.

The different levels – the individual texts, the oeuvre, and the authorial commentary – of self-reflection are in close connection with one another. This is partly due to their thresholds. The various types of texts that accompany the literary story are called paratexts, the function of which is referential: they tie the text to the world around it and offer further information about the text and the author (Gasparini 2004, 62; Genette 1987/1997, 1, 4). For example, Ernaux’s and Duras’s

⁴⁹ Lehtimäki distinguishes between meta-fiction which refers to its own textuality and to the extra-textual reality, and self-reflexive metafiction, which can maintain its purely textual status (Lehtimäki 2005, 83–84). Lehtimäki’s position differs from the one taken here: he concentrates on the *reader* in his study on Norman Mailer’s self-reflexive meta-fiction (ibid., 10–11). Meta-fiction is close to self-conscious autobiographical writing – however, they are not the one and the same. Whereas meta-fiction draws its significance and uniqueness from its usage of historical events and documents, autobiographical writing is a more individual, intense and personal type of text.

comments on their works in published interviews offer further information about those works. Paratexts are thresholds since they are positioned in an undefined zone between the inside and the outside that does not incline to either side (Genette 1987/1997, 2). This is partly true: the exact position of the threshold is ambiguous. I will note the ambiguity when the discussion touches on particular kinds of texts such as Ernaux's *Retour à Yvetot* (2013) which cannot be defined either as autobiographical narration or authorial self-commentary.

Literary and authorial self-reflection share one essential characteristic. When the autobiographical 'I' obsessively ponders over her feelings after the ending of a love affair in Ernaux's *L'Occupation*, or when the 'I' refers to herself again and again in Duras's contemplative writing such as *Écrire*, a certain relentless intensity characterizes these reflective acts. This is manifested especially by repetition. Not only are some of the autobiographical stories about passion, they are more or less passionate themselves. The authors themselves also engage in an intense, repetitive contemplation of their oeuvres in interviews and other such venues. This intensity has something to do with the very construction of the autobiographical story and the autobiographical project as a whole. Not only do the concepts of 'living writing' and 'writing life' come together both in Ernaux's and in Duras's case, but the parallel is riddled with passion both as a theme of their writing, as a form their writing takes, and as their attitude towards writing: theme and form are intertwined.⁵⁰ Passion is not only something to write about, it is also a way of being an autobiographical author.⁵¹

The fundamental relationship between autobiographical writing and self-reflection cannot be characterized in simple terms. Both include a practically endless variety of forms, yet neither one would be enough on its own to characterize what is taking place in Ernaux's and Duras's literary and authorial projects. The variety of forms on one side influences the other. If an autobiographical text is highly self-conscious, it might either lessen or strengthen the straightforward refer-

⁵⁰ Loraine Day acknowledges the interlinkage of writing and passion in her *Writing Shame and Desire: The Work of Annie Ernaux* (2007). She quotes the psychoanalyst André Green, who has stated that writing and reading are passions, and Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot*, in which Brooks argues that readers have a need for stories and a passion for meaning-making (Day 2007, 15). Her approach differs from mine in that I do not discuss the reader's passion in meaning-making: the title of the introduction to her study, 'The Passion for (Textual) Meaning', does not resonate with my idea of 'passionate writing of passion'. The overall aim of Day's study, which relates to a psychoanalytical perspective on the interconnection of shame and desire, and the sociological context, does not fit into the framework of my dissertation. This being said, my position as the reader and interpreter of both authors' works is essential in regard to a passionate approach as well.

⁵¹ The other side of intensity and repetition is often the lack of ironical perspective, which is in my opinion visible in some instances of both authors' writing – perhaps even more so in Duras's case. This does not rule out them being specifically ironic on other instances.

entality that is a feature of classic autobiographies. On the other hand, if an experimental text which is conscious of itself includes autobiographical features, the reader is inclined to deduce that the text has also other than artistic (formal) aspirations, such as telling a life story of a real-life individual.

It is possible to discuss autobiographical self-reflection (the title of this dissertation) or self-reflective autobiographical writing. As has been pointed out, self-reflection is an inherent part of autobiographical writing and their mutual relationship is anything but hierarchical. Often the self-reflective aspect proves to be more relevant than the autobiographical one. This is apparent in authorial self-commentary: often the authors' comments are more self-referring than revelatory about the biographical facts concerning their lives. However, the ultimate aim of this study is to provide fruitful observations on the nature of autobiographical writing, not self-conscious writing.

Texts and Lives

In this dissertation, I view autobiographical writing as a process of constructing and presenting the self – a process in which self-reflection is both the way to create the self and an act the self engages in. Paul John Eakin, a renowned researcher of autobiographies, finds quite a useful definition of different types of self in Ulric Neisser's essay 'Five Kinds of Self-Knowledge' (1988): the ecological self (perceived with respect to the physical environment), the interpersonal self (engaged in human exchange), the extended self (existing outside the present moment, a person with memories), the private self (having unique experiences), and the conceptual self (self-information that posits the self as a category) (Neisser 1988, 36–50; cf. Eakin 2004, 22–33 and Eakin 2008, xii–xiii). The self I am discussing consists of all such selves positioned on several semantic levels, perhaps least essentially the extended self and most essentially the conceptual self which, Eakin suggests, entails the conception of one's identity (Eakin 2008, ix). The conceptual self is the object and the result of reflection. In addition to 'self', in the analysis I will refer to the autobiographical 'I', which would in these conceptual terms be associated with the extended self (*ibid.*, 3), and is the subject who reflects.

The self, like any other conceptual entity, is at least partly a construct of language. People form their identities in and through language. People's willingness to reflect upon themselves and the natural need to construct their identity is a fertile breeding ground for the kind of writing that allows for putting the act of self-creation into words. Without words, a person is not able to reflect at all (Ekman 2009, 43). Mark Freeman suggests that human action is itself a kind of text (Freeman 1993, 7; cf. Brooks 1984, 3–4). Jerome Bruner states that according to the

constructivist view, stories do not take place in the real world but are constructed in people's minds – '[o]r as Henry James once put it, stories happen to people who know how to tell them' (Bruner 1987/2004, 691). He further sceptically asks, '[d]oes that mean that our autobiographies are constructed, that they had better be viewed not as a record of what happened but rather as a continuing interpretation and reinterpretation of our experience?' (Bruner 1987/2004, 691–692.) He quotes the philosopher Nelson Goodman's argument that physics or painting or history are 'ways of world making' (Goodman 1978), and concludes that autobiography should be viewed as a set of procedures for 'life making' (Bruner 1987/2004, 692).⁵² So, it is not that there is no experience, only stories, but that stories actively participate in the process of living one's life.

One of the most relevant critics promoting the connection between words and identities in autobiographical writing is Eakin. After considering autobiographies in terms similar to those other researchers who promoted the fictionality of autobiographies in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he turned towards viewing such texts as fundamentally different from novels. Already in an early study Eakin states that '(. . .) autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of *self-discovery* and *self-creation*' (Eakin 1985, 3; my emphasis). More recently he has gone even further, suggesting that autobiographies are only the most tangible manifestation of the phenomenon of the construction of identity (Eakin 2008, x). He has come to consider autobiographical writing as identity formation, which is based on the idea that individuals constantly tell stories about themselves to themselves, thus constructing their identity on a daily basis. More relevantly, they form the stories of their lives while doing so. Selves displayed in autobiographies are doubly constructed: not only in the written life story, but also in a lifelong process of identity formation. Their identity is narrative identity.⁵³ (Eakin 1999, ix; Eakin 2004, 122; Eakin 2008, x–xi; cf. Freeman 1993, 9.) Thus both Eakin and Bruner disagree with the constructivist view. According to them, in the end all people become the stories which they tell about their lives.⁵⁴ The autobiographical project becomes the main, if not the sole, project of the author's life.

⁵² Peter Brooks also notes that in a canonical example of autobiographical writing, Rousseau's *Les Confessions*, identity can only be discovered by narrative means, by striving to tell a whole life (Brooks 1984, 33). Olney (1980, 22) discusses how research has come to the conclusion that the self disappears completely in the act of writing (fictionalizing) an autobiography, and even that self can be deconstructed until it no longer exists. See also Kelly 2006 on social self-production and mirroring, and Schmidt 1996 on the construction of identity of prototypes.

⁵³ See also Löschnigg 2010, 260–263 and Neumann, Nünning and Petterson's (eds.) *Narrative and Identity* (2008) on the relevance of narrativity to identity construction.

⁵⁴ Bruner suggests that the act of telling one's own life story is an ancient and universal trait which has perfected itself over time (Bruner 1987/2004, 694–695, 698). For further discussion on subjects becoming

Eakin does not seem to separate textual analysis from approaches applied from cognitive sciences. His stance truly advocates seeing literary minds as inseparable from mental processes,⁵⁵ which is a somewhat more far-reaching hypothesis than what I intend argue in this study. On the other hand, Eakin's view that autobiographical writing is a wider process than a mere act of writing an autobiographical book supports my idea that there is a profound reason for the words self – life – writing constituting 'autobiography', and that the author needs to be taken into consideration when analyzing such texts. Applying Eakin's ideas, the processes of reflecting upon oneself in reality and writing an autobiography to form an image of oneself intertwine fundamentally. Both in Ernaux's and Duras's cases, a tendency to use writing to construct their textual alter egos as well as to make use of their own lives and personalities to produce stories is clearly detectable. I also agree with Eakin that in a lifelong process of identity formation writing is a comparatively late phase, as in Duras's case (she published her first truly autobiographical work, *L'Amant*, at the age of 70).⁵⁶

Martin Löschnigg states that autobiography is 'a poetic rather than a mimetic genre' (Löschnigg 2010, 261), however, I am prone to believe that it is both. It constructs identity through narrative means, but it also refers to the extra-textual self that exists separate from the act of writing. The narrative act consists not only of the one autobiographical story, but of the author's whole autobiographical oeuvre and her authorial manoeuvres.

If writing autobiographically is a lifelong process of identity formation, the self inevitably appears to be a developing subject who changes over time. Even if one considers the self that exists separately from the self that is constructed in the act of writing, it is obvious that this self, also, develops and changes. The philosopher Galen Strawson regards 'narrative identity' simply as a trend among academics, and promotes a sense of self that is based on a discontinuous identity: one exists only in the present, and the past is of no consequence to the contemporary person (Strawson 2004, 433, 439). Experience thus consists of episodes and fragments that have no connection to one another (Marrone 1994, 78).⁵⁷

their stories, see MacIntyre 1981/1984, Sacks 1987, and Polkinghorne 1988. For a more sceptical perspective, see Hyvärinen 2008, who questions the idea of regarding narratives as metaphors for life.

⁵⁵ Eakin justifies his assertions with social and somatic theories, and recollects a case of 'Mr. Thompson' who could not remember who he was for more than a minute or two at a time. Thus, 'Mr. Thompson' obsessively kept making up stories about his identity over and over again. It seemed that he was nothing without a story. (Cf. Eakin 2004, Eakin 2008.)

⁵⁶ When it comes to Ernaux, the formation of identity through writing autobiographically has been present throughout her career, though the recent burst of publication suggests an inclination towards depicting one's life at a later stage, retrospectively.

⁵⁷ Autobiographical authors have had varied opinions on the matter: whereas Henry James, Malcolm X and Christa Wolf regard themselves as not being what they were in the past, Vladimir Nabokov, Marcel

Overall, 'change' is represented in both Ernaux's and Duras's works through the act of rewriting. Both authors rewrite the stories such as the ones of their lovers. Jellenik states in her work *Rewriting Rewriting: Marguerite Duras, Annie Ernaux and Marie Redonnet* (2007) that '[i]n general terms rewriting represents a shift away from a time-honoured aesthetics of permanence and authority and towards an aesthetics of transience and doubt' (Jellenik 2007, 3). Accordingly, she promotes the relational nature of autobiographical writing in the aftermath of postmodernism throughout her study.⁵⁸ To her, the autobiographical self is transient and relational.

I am prone to believe that the sense of self is both changing and continuous in Duras's and Ernaux's writing. The self and memory are admittedly emergent, in process, and we do become different persons over time (cf. Eakin 1999, 20). However, despite this, the process of constructing identity is continuous. Like a significant number of especially more recent and experimental autobiographical works, Ernaux's and Duras's writing consists of fragments and episodes, and these fragments and episodes can form an identity that spans a vast body of works and moves across time. The continuous does not rule out the fragmentary and the fluctuating and does not suggest any kind of essential self as opposed to the relational self. In chapter 2 I intend not only to analyze the emphasis on the self in Duras's writing, but also to note how this self changes and/or does not change over the course of the writer's career. As for Ernaux, although her writing has been autobiographical from the beginning, the self presents herself in a varied way in her work, especially since she has written in such a variety of forms and perspectives. Ernaux's writing does explore a relational and unstable self that exists in a network and is both fragmented and historical (Thomas 1999, xi).⁵⁹ However, identity and also the written version of it are obviously continuous, and the totality of this continuum is a unified construction of a versatile self. The different selves in time

Proust and Nathalie Sarraute think that people are capable of reliving their past (Eakin 2008, 10). However, many Episodics (Strawson's term) such as James, Virginia Woolf and Stendhal do take a narrative interest in their experience (ibid., 13).

⁵⁸ Jellenik introduces four reasons as to why the works of Duras and Ernaux (and Redonnet) are fundamentally different from other modernist and postmodernist rewritings such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, Angela Carter's *Bloody Chamber*, and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (to name a few): 1) Duras and Ernaux rework their own texts rather than borrow from the canon; 2) they rewrite complete texts; 3) they engage in an endless revisionary gesture; and 4) they approach their own texts with an attitude of distrust. (Jellenik 2007, 2–3.)

⁵⁹ Her books resemble the tradition of *Bildungsroman* (Thomas 1999, 4) in that they depict stages in Ernaux's life from childhood and youth to adulthood, and her as a mature and an ageing woman. Thomas notes that Ernaux's *Les Armoires vides* is actually an anti-*bildungsroman* in that it discusses the negative aspects of education (ibid., 6).

form entities that are the lives of either ‘Annie Ernaux’ or ‘Marguerite Duras’ – deriving from the lives of Duras and Ernaux.

As stated, I will not limit my analysis to ‘Ernaux’s and ‘Duras’s self-reflection but will discuss Ernaux’s and Duras’s authorial gestures as well.⁶⁰ This is done to analyze the autobiographical project in all its complexity. Authorial self-commentary can be valuable to literary studies if it does not only rely on biographical data but is relevant in its own right and precisely in connection with the matter analyzed, which in this case is the autobiographical, self-reflective practice. My belief in general is that the author is a fundamental part of her autobiographical project (cf. Shen & Xu 2007, 45) and to leave her out of the analysis is to leave crucial stones unturned. Although research has attempted to overcome the difficulties this conception raises by such concepts as the autobiographical pact (Lejeune 1975/1989) and by bypassing the question of referentiality altogether, the connection is the very driving force behind the specialized interest in autobiographies in relation to other genres.⁶¹

The relationship and the gap between the autobiographical ‘I’ and the author is a commonly articulated problem. In autobiographies, the usual way to approach the question is the identification of author – narrator – protagonist (the autobiographical author, the autobiographical narrator, the autobiographical ‘I’). The protagonist of the story, who is simultaneously the narrating ‘I’, can be identified with the author of the story. (Lejeune 1975/1989, 5, 21; cf. Genette 1991/1993, 68–79.) Self-reference is a multilevelled phenomenon in this respect, too: the ‘I’ refers to herself in the story, and since she is identified with the author, the reference to self is directed at the extratextual author. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson divide the autobiographical self into four figures, which are the ‘real’ or historical ‘I’, the narrating ‘I’, the narrated ‘I’ and the ideological ‘I’ (Smith & Watson 2001, 59–60). Narrative theorist James Phelan regards the historical ‘I’, from whom the autobiographical writing originates, as inaccessible. If this is true, and since the narrating ‘I’ may also adopt multiple voices, it is necessary according to Phelan to include another agent, ‘the one who determines which voices the narrator adopts on which occasions – and the one who provides some guidance about how we should response to those voices’. This agent is the (in)famous implied author. (Phelan 2005, 68–69.)⁶² Phelan does suggest that the ‘real’ and the ‘implied’

⁶⁰ For reasons of clarity and scope, I will concentrate on authorial self-reflection in its textual, written form and leave out the authors’ numerous TV performances on *Apostrophes* and *Bouillon de culture*.

⁶¹ In general, I endorse Seán Burke’s (1998) suggestion that after the much-acclaimed ‘death of author’ (Barthes 1968/1995) the ‘return of the author’ is inevitable.

⁶² Cf. Phelan 2011. As is well known, the concept originates in Booth 1961/1983 and has been contemplated further, for example in Chatman 1990. For a full-scale discussion, see Kindt & Müller 2006.

author are not far from each other but are metonymically connected: the implied author is a 'streamlined version' of the real author. It is not a product of the text, but is, rather, responsible for bringing the text into life. (Phelan 2005, 45.) Phelan thus renounces Ansgar Nünning's (1997) proposition that the concept of the implied author is a hindrance to the narratological enterprise.⁶³

McIlvanney similarly suggests a metonymic relationship, but that between the autobiographical narrator and the author, and proposes that the narrator connotes the author (McIlvanney 2001, 6–7).⁶⁴ Dan Shen and Dejin Xu suggest that 'in autobiography, the (implied) author and the narrator often collapse into one' and that there often is no effort to make a distinction between the narrator and the implied author. They further note that the narrating 'I' is often referred to as 'persona' or the author's 'second self'. (Shen & Xu 2007, 47.) One could, thus, pose a question of whether the autobiographical 'I', or the second self of the author, differs in any way from the implied author or not.

This study discusses a self in the text (the 'I') and the self outside it (the author). The narrator-protagonist is named simply 'Ernaux', 'Duras', the self, or the autobiographical 'I'. As the denotations 'Ernaux' and 'Duras' imply, the 'I' can be interpreted as being the textual alter ego or other self of the author, as Shen and Xu note. In any way that matters here, the autobiographical 'I' and the implied author do not differ from each other, making the concept of the implied author irrelevant in this study. From the two, the latter carries within itself such a tremendous theoretical baggage that it would complicate my discussion. And even if one regards the two as having some minor distinctions, in the scope of this study the concept of the implied author remains unfavourable because of the said baggage. The autobiographical 'I' is enough to denote the self operating in one or more of the author's works. Naturally, Shen and Xu's study which discusses unreliable narration in autobiography can and does make ampler use of concepts that are more sensitive to a hierarchical approach. Autobiographical studies which do not discuss unreliable narration do well without the concept of the implied author. Fiction studies are another matter entirely.

⁶³ Phelan states that his definition moves away from Booth's model and distinguishes itself radically from Nünning's, Rimmon-Kenan's (1983) and Chatman's models. See, however, the moderating view offered by Nünning in his later discussion (Nünning 2005).

⁶⁴ According to McIlvanney, the relationship is simply connotative, whereas I regard it as more symbiotic. I strongly disagree with Roland Barthes, who stresses that all content in his anti-autobiography *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* should be regarded as spoken by a character, and not by him (Barthes 1975, inside cover).

Conceptually, the term ‘author’ I am using in this dissertation follows the lines of Gracia’s (2002) historical author and Hix’s (1990) creative author.⁶⁵ According to my interpretation, an author is a public figure who has written one or more literary works, is the creative authority behind these works, and who, as an individual, has a past, a present and a future. An author has a private life and a private personality which may or may not be available to the reading public. This author is an extratextual one.⁶⁶

The boundary between the private person and his or her life and the public author is highly relevant in autobiographical writing, since such writing reveals details of the private person’s life. Where should the focus of the analysis turn, then – to the oeuvre or to the person herself? Duras has been read mostly by turning towards the literary, though earlier some critics have discussed her persona as well. Arguments have been presented for it being wise to reintroduce her politics and biography into the analysis of her works, claiming that this move would allow for the texts to be anchored to the concrete, and for the texts to be read in all their complexity and not merely from the feminine point of view (Winston 1993, 480).

A number of researchers have noted the connection between the author’s oeuvre and the authorial image in the context of autobiographies, such as James Olney (1972, 3–4) and Michel Beaujour (1980/1991, 2–3, 14). Some have discussed precisely the mixing of the author’s private life and biographical details with both his or her public image and his or her oeuvre. Vladimir Nabokov questions the essentiality of the biography of the poet by claiming in his 1937 essay, ‘Pouchkine, ou le vrai et le vraisemblance’ that the images the general public had in its mind of the poet Pushkin as well as of the *biographie romancée* based on the poet’s life are both deluded. The ‘real life’ and personality of the poet just cannot be grasped. The image which results from the delusion is, Nabokov admits, a delicious one.⁶⁷ However, in his opinion, understanding the poet requires an intimate, personal encounter with his works – such as the almost impossible process of translating Pushkin’s

⁶⁵ There is an author figure that is constructed in the process of reading the author’s writings. This figure is named ‘the author’s metatext’ by Pekka Tammi in his dissertation *Problems of Nabokov’s Poetics: A Narratological Analysis* (Tammi 1985, 237; cf. Irwin 1999, 28.) Researchers have coined terms to signify these ‘authors within the text’. These include, among others, Gass’s (1985) artificial author, Irwin’s (1999) author construct, Nehemas’s (1981) postulated author, Levinson’s (2003) hypothetical author, Couturier’s (1995) author-effect, and Hix’s (1990) created author. (Cf. Bennett 2005, 128–129.)

⁶⁶ Still separate from this extratextual author figure is Booth’s (1961/1983, 431) career author which signifies an author that operates on the level of the whole oeuvre (as opposed to the implied author that operates in one text). The career author is able to move and/or reflect outside the boundaries of one particular text but is not the extratextual author. ‘Writer’ on the other hand is considered to be a more pragmatic concept in this dissertation, signifying simply a person who produces textual material.

⁶⁷ The image begins from the famous duel and ends up in the depiction of Pushkin as a gentleman, and is in connection with the image one has about the era Pushkin lived in (Nabokov 1937, 368, 370).

poems into French which Nabokov himself embarks upon. Through the intense encounter one feels as though he or she can actually touch the poet through the poet's work. (Nabokov 1937, 372–373, 376.)⁶⁸

Another Russian critic, Boris Tomaševski, continues this line of enquiry. The author's life *may* have significance in his literary heritage, but in the specific sense that and the author is able to create a biographical legend for himself, serving as the background for his work. This artificial legendary biography is composed of intentionally selected real and imaginary events. (Tomaševski 1923/1978, 49.) What is essential and a literary fact is the poet's ideal biographical legend and not the actual curriculum vitae (Tomaševski 1923/1978, 52, 55). It is not a question of biographical data, the essentiality of which Nabokov questions, but of a myth of the life of the author which is often very well received by the public.

In the analysis, I will discuss the construction of Ernaux's and especially Duras's authorial images through authorial self-reflective gestures, and not through biographical details.⁶⁹ These are unnecessary for creating or discussing a certain image of an author, or even a legend or a myth.⁷⁰ However, since it is a question of autobiographical authors, some conception of a life story and a story of their personalities is a fruitful part of the discussion. This is especially apparent when it comes to Ernaux's lifelong project of writing out her life, whereas in Duras's case I will concentrate more on the author myth, *La Duras*. Perhaps more essential than the seeming boundaries between the private and public is how an autobiographical

⁶⁸ Consequently, according to Nabokov: 'La vie d'un poète est comme le pastiche de son oeuvre.' (Nabokov 1937, 367.) Pekka Tammi states that, quite similarly, Nabokov's private life remains unknown to the literary critic analyzing his work (Tammi 1985, 235). Tammi's view is text-oriented. He discusses how the events of Nabokov's life become public when they are transferred into the author's books, and notes how Nabokov himself commented on the problem that lies in the public manifestations of private events. (Ibid.) Ernaux, as I will show in the analysis, does something similar.

⁶⁹ My stance towards authorial intention, earlier a vastly discussed area of authorship studies, is equally sceptical. This study does not strive to take a standpoint for or against the relevance of the author's intentions in the interpretation of her works/literature in this case or in general, even though I acknowledge that questions concerning intentionality and interpretation may arise in Duras's and Ernaux's self-reflective commentary on their own writing. All in all, I am of the opinion that a work of art, in this case a piece of literature, can obviously have various meanings besides the one related to the author, which is one of the views adopted in this study. This applies to autobiographical writing as well. For a summary of the far-ranging discussion on intentionality and interpretation, see Bennett 2005, and for one of the core texts of the debate, Wimsatt & Beardsley's 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1946/1976).

⁷⁰ Biographies such as Laure Adler's *Marguerite Duras: A Life* (1998/2000), despite their inclination for excessive admiration of Duras and the use of crowd-pleasing language make good use of paratextual material, and can offer valuable insight on the subject of the ideal biographical legend as well. This insight must be, however, separated from the actual biographical curriculum vitae. When objective, extratextual biographical data is cast aside, the inspection of the autobiographical author's reflection can grasp this private human being only as far as she herself allows, meaning that her literary work can show further glimpses of the private person if she so wishes.

author forms an image of herself by publicly commenting on herself and her work. What especially concerns me here is the way in which this act of image-forming can be paralleled with what takes place in this work.

What is essential in the image-forming process, especially in Duras's case, is the author's way of emphasizing her own talent and uniqueness. Tomaševski argues that during eras of intensified individual creativity, the interest of the reader extends outside the artistic work and towards its author (Tomaševski 1923/1978, 48). Particularly during the Romantic period, the author's – or the poet's, as was often the case – ideal was a divinely talented individual immersed in his loneliness and inspiration to reach sublime dimensions in his work. His personal life was the essence of his poetry, as in the case of Byron, who created the canonical image of the poet. (Ibid., 49.) The emphasis on the author's image is a phenomenon which has been around as long as there have been authors. In addition to the Romantics, the modernists (such as Vladimir Mayakovsky), the authors of the Beat generation (such as Jack Kerouac), and postmodernists (such as Bret Easton Ellis) have all in their own ways been at the forefront when the essentiality of the authorial image is concerned. The branding of the author is also a vast contemporary phenomenon, though it is not as visible in literary research as one might expect.⁷¹

Spaces of Autobiography and Reflection

Another essential theoretical concept requires attention before turning to the methodological choices and the construction of the study. I have implied that literary and authorial self-reflection take place in both multiple smaller spaces and in one comprehensive space. 'Space' can signify so much that it is virtually impossible to grasp all its meanings. (This is underlined by the fact that it is a troublesome task to find corresponding terms to signify something even remotely similar.) In addition to the opposition between philosophical and existential spaces, similar polarity exists between semiotic and phenomenological and/or cultural spaces. Space can be a phenomenon or a setting. Then there are also the formal, mental and bodily aspects of spatiality, not to mention mimetic spatiality and spatiality in visual images as opposed to literary works of art.⁷²

⁷¹ For a discussion of the author's brand, image, and identity, see Joe Moran's *Star Authors* (2000). See also Hägg 2005, Toker 2012, and Grishakova 2012.

⁷² As a primal act, perceiving the world as spaces is quite natural. Nelson Goodman suggests that we build worlds from our experience and cultural models, and he investigates how this takes place in texts, art, and images in his *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978). Building spaces is not so very different from building worlds: they form both from our day-to-day grasp of existence and from cultural models.

When dealing with texts specifically, the meanings of space are equally versatile. It has been a much discussed topics for decades now: Robert T. Tally Jr. notes in his recent overview of spatiality in literature that after the Second World War began a *spatial turn*, a specific interest of literary studies in the reassertion of space in critical theory. The spatial turn was aided by postmodernism and post-structuralism but quickly expanded further. (Tally 2013, 3, 11–43)⁷³ According to the Finnish researcher Harri Veivo, literary texts have throughout the modern and postmodern era sought expressive means in their own spatial extension, and they have used spatial themes for narrative construction and for exploration of their own position. Space is relevant in all levels of literature, from the material form of the book to narrative structures and thematic content. (Veivo 2001, 11–12.) It is admittedly a vague and an ambiguous expression. Veivo, too, is aware of this and even suggests that it might be impossible to ‘go over the border from language to space’, in which case space would remain forever alien to writing (ibid., 20). Even if some kind of conception of space is achievable, it needs to be created, since it does not exist on its own: it needs representative and discursive practices – the subject’s meaning-making processes – to turn it into a particular form (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1945/1997, Jacob 1995). The two fundamental questions are, according to Veivo, ‘how [is] the sense of space ... read into the text?’ and ‘how [is it] articulated in language and in particular texts?’ (Veivo 2001, 20.)⁷⁴

I will use the term space to designate both abstract and concrete phenomena in Duras’s and Ernaux’s works. In Duras’s *Écrire*, her house in Neauphle and especially one of its upstairs bedrooms are depicted as fundamentally important places, providing both physical and abstract conditions for writing.⁷⁵ Some of our authors’ literary alter egos inhabit a particular feminine space, as in Ernaux’s *La Femme gélée*, where the autobiographical ‘I’ feels trapped in her role as a housewife and a mother, and in *Passion simple*, where her whole existence and physical surroundings are turned into a space governed by her obsessive passion towards a man. In addition, photographs that Ernaux has attached to her more recent works *L’Usage de la photo*, *L’Atelier noir* (2011) and *Retour à Yvetot* depict authentic real-life spaces such as town views of her childhood surroundings, rooms in her apartments, and houses she has lived in throughout her life.

⁷³ Tally’s focus is specifically on ‘mapping’ and on the ancient connection between cartography and narration (Tally 2013, 4).

⁷⁴ For an overview of the French critical discussion concerning space, see Tally 2013, 112–145. From the French critics, Blanchot reflects the space of literature in terms of the process of reading as well as of the nature of artistic creativity, considering the relation of the literary work to time, history, and death in his *The Space of Literature* (1955/1982).

⁷⁵ See Bachelard (1957/1994, for example 4–10) and chapter 2 of this thesis on the house as a particular space.

Joseph Frank was one of the first to postulate that (modernist) texts have spatial form. His idea that fragments scattered throughout the book can share a spatial dimension (Frank 1991, 19) goes well together with Ernaux's and Duras's fragmented, non-chronological writing. The basic idea is that experiences and events situated in various points in time, and in the case of my authors, also in various books, can belong to a same comprehensive sphere – or even multiple spheres simultaneously. One of those spheres is the autobiographical space. The both abstract and concrete spaces mentioned above will be noted in the analysis, but the autobiographical space is even more relevant to autobiographical writing and self-reflective gestures. It is a common concept in the research on autobiographies, and it refers to an entity that covers parts or all of the oeuvre whose author writes partly or entirely autobiographically. According to Philippe Lejeune, the autobiographical space (*l'espace autobiographique*) forms when two or more texts establish a contact of contrast with one another:

It is no longer necessary to know which of the two, autobiography or novel, would be truer. It is neither one nor the other; autobiography will lack complexity, ambiguity, etc.; the novel, accuracy. So it would be one, then the other? Rather, one *in relation* to the other. What becomes revealing is the space in which the two categories of texts are inscribed, and which is reducible to neither of the two. This effect of contrast obtained by this procedure is the creation, for the reader, of an “autobiographical space”. (Lejeune 1975/1989, 27; emphasis original.)

According to Lejeune's view, it is not the truth value of either the novels or autobiographies belonging to the oeuvre but their intermittent contrast and comparison that makes them function as one.⁷⁶ Still, the theoretical definition of autobiographical space remains, in my opinion, highly unsatisfactory. This is mostly due to similar problems that arise when the concept of space in general is concerned: it might be impossible to thoroughly depict the general autobiographical feel in the author's oeuvre by means of language.

Thus, I do not propose a comprehensive definition of autobiographical space, but I do wish to offer one possible way of grasping it. In my view, the space within the (autobiographical) author's oeuvre is formed via a complex web of internal references between the works in this oeuvre. The idea of relations between texts is rooted in intertextuality.⁷⁷ It is possible to identify an infinite number of

⁷⁶ See Marcus 1994, chapter 7 for a discussion on the autobiographical space from a different point of view from mine or Lejeune's, that of regarding feminism and ethnicity.

⁷⁷ Intertextuality itself is rooted in Saussurean linguistics and the relational nature of meaning and thus of texts, in Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the existence of language in specific social situations, and especially in Julia Kristeva's coinage of the actual term 'intertextuality'. Roland Barthes developed the idea further and suggested that the text is never an isolated object, and that readers are able to find an infinite

random themes, characters, formal characteristics, sentences, words, and even letters that seem to refer to one another.⁷⁸ Mary Orr, who adopts perhaps a more critical stance towards intertextuality than her predecessors, suggests that the basic terms of intertextuality – influence, imitation, and quotation – ‘are not categories but springboards to deeper and wider cultural understanding and dialogue’ (Orr 2003, 181). Orr prefers to use the terms ‘self-citation’ and ‘self-quotation’ rather than ‘intertexts’ (ibid., 138) which resonates well with my understanding of textual references being a form of self-reflection.

Classic examples of authors who have made a special use of the potential of the references include, for example, Vladimir Nabokov and Philip Roth. The relations between texts – intra-intertextuality – within an autobiographical oeuvre have been mapped by Brian T. Fitch, who makes use of the concept in his study on Albert Camus’s fiction (1982). One example includes Camus’s play *Le Malentendu* (1944), the fictive events of which repeat those in an episode from his first novel, *L’Étranger* (1942). The events are thus a part of a fictional universe, which is far more polymorphic than any single novel indicates. With this and several other examples, Fitch argues that the novels in Camus’s production are all parts of a vast literary web. (Fitch 1982, 89–90.)

I will suggest that the links construct formal and thematic continua and other entities within Ernaux’s and Duras’s oeuvres. The connections cover all kinds of references from repeating motifs, topics, and characters to a controlled rewriting of complete stories (cf. Miller 1982, 1–2)⁷⁹. ‘[I]nternal correspondences, references and cross-references that are independent of the time sequence of the narrative’ is what Veivo also vouches for when in search for the comprehension of spaces (Veivo 2001, 17). Other continua, besides the thematic, include the recur-

number of connections between texts. Gérard Genette took a pragmatic perspective: in his opinion there can exist a relationship of co-presence between two texts or among several texts. Thus, manifested as quotations, plagiarism and allusions, intertextuality is not concerned with semiotic processes of cultural and textual signification but with a ‘very pragmatic and determinable intertextual relationship between specific elements of individual texts’ (quote in Allen 2000/2011, 98). The relations are often intended and self-conscious. For a concise compilation of Bakhtin’s, Kriseva’s, Barthes’s and Genette’s ideas, see Allen’s *Intertextuality* (2000/2011).

⁷⁸ Intertextuality is not limited to texts: relations can occur between any kind of signs. In his compilation of theories presented on intertextuality, Graham Allen distinguishes four types of intertextuality: the radical plurality of the sign, the relation between signs and texts and the cultural text, the relation between a text and the literary system, and the transformative relation between one text and another text (Allen 2000/2011, 6). What most interests us here is the fourth type.

⁷⁹ Miller distinguishes between ‘Platonic’ repetition and ‘Nietzschean’ repetition. In Platonic repetition, ‘the validity of the mimetic copy is established by its truth of correspondence to what it copies’, whereas the Nietzschean mode of repetition ‘posits a world based on difference’ which is a world not of copies but of ungrounded doublings arising from ‘differential interrelations among elements’. (Miller 1982, 6.)

rence of settings and characters; fragmentation and disintegration; continuous abstinence from chronology; blurring of the first and third person pronouns; references to the autobiographical nature of the stories as well as the questioning of it; and explicit references to writing, whether as a general practice or as a project of writing the story in question.

Above I suggested that the references within the author's work may constitute an elaborate act of rewriting. According to Christian Moraru, rewriting includes canonical genres, textual relations, and textual techniques which are manifested in the text by references, allusions, and narrative parallelisms (Moraru 2001, 19). He emphasizes the connection the rewritten work has with earlier works and the intentional 'presence' of the author, which enables rewriting to include criticism towards its own constitution (*ibid.*, 19–20). The rewriter is 'a critical reader in the deepest sense' (*ibid.*, 4).⁸⁰ Ernaux's recreation is a constant process of reflecting critically on her own writing as a continuing practice. Jellenik suggests that both Ernaux's and Duras's rewriting, in addition to that of Marie Redonnet, signifies 'a trend toward the representation of unfixed selves, a desire to re-evaluate literary legacies, and a willingness to explore the unreliability of language' (Jellenik 2007, 1). While I recognize some of this in Ernaux's case, when it comes to Duras's works, I am prone to view rewriting as a more practical case of reshaping certain stories.

Roman Jakobson, too, notes that the whole of the author's work might be crucial in determining the meaning of individual texts or symbols. In the famous essay 'The Statue in Puškin's Poetic Mythology' (1937/1987) Jakobson discusses the author's individual mythology. He eloquently argues that there are 'certain constant, organizing elements' in the poet's oeuvre that bind the multiplicity of the works together (Jakobson 1937/1987, 318). These elements function in cooperation with and produce the fixed mythology of the oeuvre (*ibid.*, 319), and one should not artificially treat one symbol as separate from the other symbols – on the contrary, the whole system of the poet's work should be taken into consideration (*ibid.*, 320). Jakobson thus acknowledges the presence of both fixed, recurring elements and a certain mythology that is the author's individual trademark. This is not

⁸⁰ Moraru continues that rewriting has come to signify 'virtually any operation of reevaluation, emendation, and working over of a subject, image, motif, style, aesthetic or political model, author or authors in more or less coherent series; a work or set of related works; a cultural period, narrowly or broadly defined; even "life" and "reality"' (Moraru 2001, 11–12; cf. Cornis-Pope 1997, 258). It has been regarded as the rethinking and rewriting of modernity (Silverman 1990, Readings & Schaber 1993, Lyotard 1991), and as cultural recycling, and thus by its nature revisionary and ideological (Moraru 2001, 7). Moraru himself regards rewriting as a specifically 'postmodern rewriting that intentionally sets off its relation to specific "previous writings", as opposed to generic writing-as-rewriting' (*ibid.*, 14). For further discussion, see Moraru 2001 and Schiff 1992 on rewriting the canon; Barthes 1974/1991 and Scholes 1989 on rewriting and reading; and Kroeber 1992 and Ong 1999 on rewriting and retelling.

far from Nabokov's view, cited above, of the author's life as 'a pastiche of his oeuvre'. Autobiographical motifs such as the statue in Pushkin's and suicide in Mayakovsky's work (Jakobson 1931/1987) are small elements which, when combined and repeated, function as parts of the legend the author constructs about himself – they are not only repeated, but carry further meaning. Autobiographical motifs signify the lover in Duras's case, and an abortion in the case of Ernaux.

The connections also reach beyond the authors' literary oeuvres. This is especially apparent in Ernaux's case, who as an author has been zealously writing about her own writing: in addition to *L'Écriture comme un couteau*, in *L'Atelier noir* and *Retour à Yvetot*. These works situate themselves in between the 'real' world and the literary world – they are thresholds, as I suggested earlier. Whether in complete works (in Ernaux's case, *Retour à Yvetot*, and in Duras's, *C'est tout* would be appropriate examples) or in interviews, such commentary on one's own work expands the connections between works. They come to include the ambiguous space that can be understood as a part of the author's oeuvre, as a complement to it, or residing completely outside it. The autobiographical nature of Ernaux's and Duras's works inherently links them to the outside world, and thus the concept of autobiographical space that covers their oeuvres is no longer sufficient. I will therefore introduce a further concept, which is *the self-reflective space* I brought forth at the beginning of this introduction. This one sphere covers all the autobiographical and self-reflective gestures occurring both within and outside the autobiographical author's work. The ambiguity of certain texts that seem to belong to both fields at the same time underlines the concept of 'one space'.⁸¹

It is relevant that mapping the intertextual connections is in the end a limitless endeavor that reaches beyond the individual author and her work.⁸² Ernaux's oeuvre includes an immense amount of references to literature, music, popular culture, magazines and newspapers, and to both historical and contemporary

⁸¹ The overall autobiographical and self-reflective spaces I am introducing cannot be concretized fully, or at least such an endeavor would require a study that far exceeds the scope of this dissertation. However, I do not wish to stop simply at stating that the author is 'present' in her texts or that there is 'some kind of a relationship' between the self-awarenesses of the author and the autobiographical 'I'. I will consider the reflection at different levels, such as the network of references within the author's oeuvre, as opposed to reflection on one work or the reflection of the author, and point out their cross-overs, such as those occurring as paratexts. However, one of my key arguments is that despite the possibility of separating the autobiographical 'I's and the author's self-conscious gestures on the basis of their belonging to different 'levels', such as the literary and the authorial, there is a site at which all the forms of self-consciousness, self-commentary and self-creation take place: the above-mentioned self-reflective space.

⁸² Regarding the connections on a more comprehensive scope can have practical effects on the analysis of individual stories, as James Phelan suggests in the context of 'global referentiality' which 'ties both implied author and authorial audience more closely to people and events external to the narrative itself' (Phelan 2007, 217).

events. With these references, she situates her work in an even wider sociological, historical, and cultural space. (Cf. Orr 2003, quoted above.) I will look at writing about the self and self-reflection as phenomena belonging to the contemporary culture at the end of my study, but an endeavor to analyze them comprehensively is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Towards the Self-Reflective Space: Method, Construction

The aim of this study is to focus on the texts and the authors themselves as practical case-studies. I will strive to achieve a comprehensive depiction and analysis of the interplay of autobiographical writing and self-reflection⁸³ in Ernaux's and Duras's selected works and their authorial self-commentary. All findings will be interpreted in comparison with relevant theoretical material: the two will engage in a dialogue with each other. As this introduction has shown, the study covers a vast number of theoretical approaches. One of my aims is that the variety of critical perspectives allows this study to serve as a functional platform for an even more precise theoretical classification, especially in regard to the spaces in which autobiographical writing and reflection take place – which perhaps due to their inherent qualities are somewhat ambiguous. I will not delve too deeply into the analysis of specific word plays and double-meanings expressed via the particularities of the French language which are a fundamental characteristic of especially Ernaux's writing – though in another study these kinds of analyses would undoubtedly prove fruitful and intriguing.

The application of theoretical concepts in my discussion is partly inspired by the works themselves: For example, self-consciousness – in other words discussing the limits and possibilities of autobiographical writing – is a key characteristic of Ernaux's (autofictional) writing. The more abstract concept of space has been applied because the connections between individual works, on the one hand, and between the works and the 'real' world, on the other, demand some kind of descriptive tool. The kind of close reading I am embarking upon entails taking into account other contexts as well. These include certain aspects of the French society, such as the working-class environment and the sociological and cultural conditions,

⁸³ Since one of the topics of this study is self-reflection, I cannot avoid having to comment on my own reflective stance towards this study. It is a distant one: in other words, I will not get personal in the manner of Nancy K. Miller (Miller 1991, 14).

most particularly in Ernaux's case. Also, different critical approaches themselves can be considered a kind of context in this study.

The study is organized as follows: Part I, 'Passion of writing', explores what takes place in individual works and on the concrete narrative plane. In chapter 1, I will concentrate on textual self-consciousness and autofictional qualities in Annie Ernaux's *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation*, but suggest that they still emphasize the self. Chapter 2 approaches Duras's *La Vie matérielle*, *Écrire* and *C'est tout* from the point of view of the emphasized 'I'. Both of these analyses already imply some kind of connection between the individual works, which is what Part II, 'Space of the self', will deal with. In chapter 3, I will discuss Ernaux's works with regard to the links they form between one another and suggest that there is more than one continuum at work in her oeuvre. The same applies for Duras's autobiographical works, and in chapter 4, I will analyze them in terms of rewriting and the formation of a self-portrait. As I have suggested in this introduction, the author is of key relevance in autobiographical writing, and it is her authorial self-commentary I will discuss in Part III, 'Authorial moves'. Chapter 5 discusses Ernaux's commentary on her work and suggests that writing autobiographically and reflecting on this endeavor represents a complete way of life for her. Finally, chapter 6 approaches the almost mythical character *La Duras* from viewpoints such as her alleged narcissism and her comparison with the Romantic genius. By recognizing unique features in each author's works and commentary, I hope to shed light on different characteristics of autobiographical writing and self-reflection. Naturally, the topics in each chapter resonate with and complement those in other chapters.

PART I Passion of Writing

1. Living Passion, Writing Passion: Ernaux's *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation*

J'ai tout attendu du plaisir sexuel, en plus de lui-même. L'amour, la fusion, l'infini, le désir d'écrire. Ce qu'il me semble avoir obtenu de mieux jusqu'ici, c'est la lucidité, une espèce de vision subitement simple et désentimentalisée du monde. (O, 59.)⁸⁴

In this first chapter, I will focus on two of Annie Ernaux's autobiographical stories from the point of view of passion and writing. *Passion simple* recounts the progression of the all-consuming love of Ernaux's alter ego, who is a literature teacher living somewhere in Paris, towards a married eastern European man. It is the very first of her novels which can be considered truly personal and intimate (the exception being perhaps *La Femme gélée*), since so far she had written only both in the third person about her past and practically biographical accounts of her parents. *Passion simple* is personal and intimate in the extreme, almost to the point of banality. The same applies to *L'Occupation*, which returns to the subject of passion, but from a different angle: the focus is on the alter ego's neurotic jealousy towards the lover's new mistress after the end of their affair, in other words, on her obsession. What makes the described obsession in both books intriguing from the point of view of a literary scholar is the 'I's self-consciousness: it is not only obsession that is depicted, but also the reflection on that obsession. Furthermore, it is in these texts in which passion – as a theme, as a topic, as the autobiographical 'I's attitude, and as a formal characteristic – is the most obvious in Ernaux's writing.⁸⁵

The beginning of *Passion simple* is provocative. The autobiographical 'I', addressed here as 'Ernaux' to distinguish her from the author Ernaux, commences with a graphic description of an X-rated film she recently saw on Canal Plus. The reception is poor due to the lack of a decoder, but details soon begin to form on the screen:

⁸⁴ 'I had expected everything from sexual pleasure, especially from him. Love and connection; access to the infinite; the desire to write. The best I seemed to have acquired so far was lucidity: a new vision – suddenly simple and de-sentimentalized – of the world.' (Po, 51.)

⁸⁵ The emphasis on passion and erotic affairs is one of the enticements for new readers in particular to become interested in the works of Ernaux.

On distinguait une silhouette de femme en guêpière, avec des bas, un homme. L'histoire était incompréhensible et on ne pouvait prévoir quoi que ce soit, des gestes ou des actions. L'homme s'est approché de la femme. 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 sous plusieurs angles. La queue est réapparue, entre le main de l'homme, et le sperme s'est répandu sur le ventre de la femme. (PS, 11–12.)⁸⁶

This kind of graphic sexual content is otherwise scarce in the book, including only a few allusions to the lover's private parts and the autobiographical 'I's erotic fantasies about him. Why, then, the provocative beginning? 'Ernaux' reveals the purpose of the detailed description of the pornographic movie quickly: 'Il m'a semble que l'écriture devrait tendre à cela, cette impression que provoque la scène de l'acte sexuel, cette angoisse et cette stupeur, une suspension de jugement moral.' (PS, 12.)⁸⁷ It is not the graphic description of intercourse but what the scene reminds 'Ernaux' of that is relevant. She parallels the act of making love with the act of writing. Both acts leave one stupefied, perhaps unable to totally comprehend what just happened, but also free from moral condemnation. The parallel is of tremendous importance here, since the autobiographical 'I' returns to it several times both in *Passion simple* and in *L'Occupation*.

It is with a description of a sexual act that *L'Occupation* begins as well, and similarly to *Passion simple*, it is complemented with a musing on writing:

J'ai toujours voulu écrire comme si je devais être absente à la parution du texte. Écrire comme si je devais mourir, qu'il n'y ait plus des juges. Bien que ce soit une illusion, peut-être, de croire que la vérité ne puisse advenir qu'en fonction de la mort.

Mon premier geste en m'éveillant était de saisir son sexe dressé par le sommeil et de 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

⁸⁶ 'One could make out the figure of a woman in a corset and stockings, and a man. The story was incomprehensible; it was impossible to predict any of their actions or movements. There was a close-up of the woman's genitals, clearly visible among the shimmerings 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.' (PP, 1–2.)

⁸⁷ 'It occurred to me that writing should also aim for that – the impression conveyed by sexual intercourse, a feeling of anxiety and stupefaction, a suspension of moral judgement.' (PP, 2.)

signifiait, il me semble que je voulais dire qu'il n'y avait rien d'autre à souhaiter que cela, avoir le main refermée sur le sexe de cet homme. (O, 11–12.)⁸⁸

The 'I's possessed state is described bluntly: albeit an intelligent woman, 'Ernaux' admits that at the time of the affair the only thing in the world she wished for, the only thing that meant anything to her, was to wrap her hand around her lover's cock. As ridiculous as it may sound, the mature, academic teacher/writer felt lost without the object of her passion. However, the woman consumed by passion reflects on the act of writing in quite a sophisticated way just before the embarrassing revelation. 'Ernaux' speaks about how she would like to write as if there were no judges around to criticize her writing. This section reveals another characteristic of both stories, that is, the recognition that there is a 'then' and 'now', a time of writing, and the 'today'. Already at the very beginning of both books the autobiographical 'I' is extremely conscious of the act of writing, going as far as determining what the aim of writing in general (and, undoubtedly, of the books in question) should be.

In the following, I will begin by analyzing the autobiographical 'I's obsessive attitude towards her own passion in the two books and then move on to discuss the contemplation of writing, the various ways of overlapping between the two, and the implications of the overlap.

1.1 'From September last year, I did nothing else but wait for a man.'

As I suggested in the introduction to this dissertation, the generic status of Duras's and Ernaux's autobiographical writing is vague. Depending on a particular work, the definitions given by critics for Ernaux's writing range from autobiographies and autobiographical novels to autofictions, and from self-portraits to ethnobiographies. In *Une Femme*, Ernaux herself dismisses the narrow aesthetic definitions of literature and describes her writing as situated between literature, sociology and

⁸⁸ 'I have always wanted to write as if I would be gone when the book was published. To write as if I were about to die – no more judges. Even if it's an illusion, perhaps, to believe that truth comes only by way of death.'

The first thing I did after waking up was grab his cock – stiff with sleep – and hold still, as if hanging on to 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.' (Po, 7–8.)

history (F, 106). Elsewhere, I have defined *Passion simple* as a confessional autofiction (Nakari 2010). Here I wish to pause and consider the act of confessing.

Confession is not only a story of one's life, but an in-depth survey of that life or a part of it that goes to the core of the personality in question. The overall genre of autobiographical writing is rooted in confessions, as the hallmarks of the genre, Rousseau's *Les Confessions* and St. Augustine's *Confessiones*, suggest. St. Augustine's writing is a basic example since his work is an authentic, Christian sinner's confession to his God. Rousseau's work is generally considered the origin of modern autobiography, and the title is no coincidence. Rousseau's aim is to confess every little detail in his past life, leaving no stone unturned. He truly wishes to discover the profound truth about himself, and regards the use of 'ornaments' along the way simply as necessary tools for narrative construction. In addition to confessing, he strives to offer a thorough autobiographical account of his life.

Entertaining confessional stories became popular in France in the 1980s and 1990s. Ernaux's work includes topics and forms that resonate with such writing. The autobiographical 'I' in *La Femme gélée* feels trapped in her role as a housewife and mother despite her brilliance in literary studies and writing, and confesses her private anxieties about the matter – on page after page after page. *L'Usage de la photo* uncovers a currently on-going love affair with Marc Marie, with photographs showing both Ernaux's and Marie's clothes, shoes, and other accessories discarded – seemingly – in a random way after lovemaking. In addition, there are reflections by both parties on the photographs. The common denominator of many of Ernaux's stories is that of a highly emphasized female perspective, and a concentration on the so-called affairs of the heart in approximately half of her texts. *Les Armoires vides* and *L'Événement* (2000), though somewhat differing in their formal construction, describe the previously mentioned illegal abortion. *La Place* and *Une Femme* deal with Ernaux's parents and working class background, and so on and so on. The list of Ernaux's confessions is as long as her literary career.

Both *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation* can be regarded as confessions. The subject matter differs from the canonical works: the autobiographical 'I' does not try to offer an account of her whole life and personality, but to describe in detail her intense feelings about her love affair and its end. *Passion simple* in particular is closely connected to the genre of erotic confession, as the Barthesian reference to de Sade on the front leaf of the book suggests.⁸⁹ Although descriptions of the erotic encounters between 'Ernaux' and her lover are scarce and by no means comparable to the one in the pornographic movie at the beginning of *Passion simple*, there is a certain sexual air surrounding the story. This is not uncommon in contempo-

⁸⁹ 'Nous deux – le magazine – est plus obscene que Sade. ROLAND BARTHES.' (PS, front leaf.)

rary French writing, nor in French autobiographical writing, despite Ernaux's work having received a negative reception precisely for being too provocative and demeaning towards women. Yet, on the other hand, it has been praised for its daring (McIlvanney 2001, 3–4; Thomas 1999, 17).

Perhaps one of the most shocking and controversial examples of an erotic confession is the former museum executive and art reporter Catherine Millet's *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* In this book, Millet recounts a period in her life in which she experimented with almost everything one possibly can when it comes to sex: group sex and orgies, partner swapping, and anal sex while suffering from gastroenteritis, to mention but a few. The description of the incidents is pornographic in nature, and there has been some discussion on whether the book has any literary value. Camille Laurens, in a manner completely different from Catherine Millet's, has dedicated most of her literary career to pondering autobiographically over her own intimate relationships, love, and men in general in *Quelques-uns* (1999), *Dans ces bras-là* (2000), *L'Amour* (2003) and *Ni toi ni moi* (2006). Even though she discusses her sexual life, her approach is more subdued than Millet's. She discusses romance and men also from a more general perspective through her alter egos. In *L'Amour*, 'love' is seen as a historical and intertextual phenomenon: the 'I' refers to great depictions of love in Western and in particular French literature, as well as in many popular love songs.

Even though *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation* carry similarities (subject matter, contemporariness) to Millet and Laurens, they do not actually resemble Millet's graphic stories about her sexual endeavors, nor do they resemble Laurens's quite romantic takes on love and relationships. There is something peculiar about the depiction of passion and obsession in Ernaux's books. The peculiarity I am referring to is tediousness. Even if this were not so-called high quality literature, one would expect entertaining confessions at least when reading autobiographical revelations on erotic life.⁹⁰ However, the autobiographical 'I's' obsession with her subject, in other words the love affair and/or the resulting jealousy, borders on unbearable reading. An apt example is 'Ernaux's' absurd wish, depicted in one of the quotes above, to be able to hold her lover's cock constantly in her hand so that she would be fulfilled.

Ridiculousness is an even more widespread phenomenon in the books. In *Passion simple*,⁹¹ 'Ernaux' is obsessed about revealing every possible aspect of her love affair, especially the details of what she did while waiting for the erotic encounters and her feelings that almost approach insanity in their intensity. The rant-

⁹⁰ Though what constitutes 'high quality literature' is debatable, to say the very least.

⁹¹ I feel a depiction of tediousness in *Passion simple* is enough. Moreover, it somewhat spares you, reader.

ing goes on throughout most of the book, giving the impression that during the year the affair lasts, ‘Ernaux’ not only refuses, but is unable, to lead a normal life. She concentrates on irrelevant things and objects: she projects her anxiety over her obsession onto a material object, the lover’s bathrobe. The robe reportedly has been a part of the encounters between the ‘I’ and her lover, a metaphor of their affair, so to say. She describes how the robe will in the end be reduced to a bundle of rags, and how by writing about it she hopes to save it, in other words to save her love, from oblivion (PS, 61–61). The robe is a detail in the process of remembering in the same way as Proust’s *petite Madeleine* cake – however, in the case of Ernaux, the question is of a rather banal and mundane object as opposed to Proust’s image of a romantic cake.

The language used emphasizes the fundamental break from normality: C. Marrone equates Ernaux’s use of the imperfect (‘the passion tense’) and her habit of breaking grammatical and narrative boundaries with the separation of the autobiographical ‘I’ from any kind of normal behaviour (Marrone 1994, 81–82; cf. Thomas 1999, 18). In general, ‘Ernaux’ describes the immense intensity of her all-consuming passion towards her lover as covering all the aspects of her daily life:

À partir du mois de septembre l’année dernière, je n’ai plus rien fait d’autre qu’attendre un homme : qu’il me téléphone et qu’il vienne chez moi (. . .) Je n’ai plus d’ailleurs qu’un souvenir vague de mes activités, des films que j’ai vus, des gens que j’ai rencontrés (. . .) Les seules actions où j’engageais ma volonté, mon désir et quelque chose qui doit être l’intelligence humaine (prévoir, évaluer le pour et le contre, les conséquences) avaient toutes un lien avec cet homme (. . .). (PS, 13–14.)⁹²

The absurdity of the woman’s obsession grows to ridiculous proportions:

Je n’avais pas d’autre avenir que le prochain coup de téléphone fixant un rendez-vous. J’essayais de sortir le moins possible (. . .) craignant toujours de manquer un appel de lui pendant mon absence. J’évitais aussi l’utiliser l’aspirateur ou le sèche-cheveux qui m’auraient empêchée d’entendre la sonnerie. Celle-ci me ravageait d’un espoir (. . .). (PS, 16.)⁹³

⁹² ‘From September last year, I did nothing else but wait for a man: for him to call me and come round to my place (. . .) In fact I have only vague memories of the things I did, the films I saw, the people I met (. . .) The only actions involving willpower, desire and what I take to be human intelligence (planning, weighing the pros and cons, assessing consequences) were all related to this man (. . .).’ (PP, 3–4.)

⁹³ ‘I had no future other than the telephone call fixing our next appointment. I would try to leave the house as little as possible (. . .) forever fearing that he might call during my absence. I would also avoid using the vacuum cleaner or the hairdryer as they would have prevented me from hearing the sound of the telephone. Every time it rang, I was consumed with hope (. . .)’ (PP, 5–6.)

What makes the woman's attitude towards the affair even more absurd is that similar instances occur on almost every page of the novel: the examples presented above are simply the most lengthy and explicit ones.

Not only does the depiction of passion appear as banal and boring, it is shameful, too. Ernaux's obsession borders on the loss of all self-worth in both books. This is especially apparent in *L'Occupation*. Most people have obsessed about their new lovers and thought about them twenty-four hours a day, but not necessarily about the unknown person who has taken their place as the lover's companion. Or, more likely, they have obsessed about that person as well, but the whole subject is such a taboo that it appears ridiculous in Ernaux's writing. The autobiographical 'I' is desperate to find out everything about the woman: her age, her profession, her address. Most of all, it is the woman's name that haunts her. Neither one of Ernaux's books paints a picture of either a romantic or sexually exhilarating experience – it is more a question of obsession, frustration, and being emotionally unfulfilled.

The other side of the story lies in 'Ernaux's' freedom to act in a way she wants and also to reveal the details of her conduct. Siobhán McIlvanney regards Simone de Beauvoir as one of Ernaux's most important literary and theoretical predecessors (McIlvanney 2001, 14). She ties Ernaux's work in to the tradition of ground-breaking feminist literature, such as de Beauvoir's multi-volume memoir (*Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (1958), *La Force de l'âge* (1960), *La Force des choses* (1963), *Une Mort très douce* (1964), *Tout compte fait* (1972)), in a positive way (ibid.).⁹⁴ Cathy Jellenik regards Ernaux's confession (and similar confessions in Marguerite Duras's and Marie Redonnet's writing) not as exhibitionism, but as 'a search for female agency and autonomy' which is a characteristic of *nouvelle écriture féminine* (Jellenik 2007, 204).

Some aspects of *Passion simple* support the view: 'Ernaux's' sexual desires have free rein, she is free to choose or not to choose to have the affair, and she may be in a subordinate position but is not oppressed, since she is free to make up her own mind. Among Ernaux's other works, *La Femme gélée* touches a topic that has been dear to writers such as Virginia Woolf, who in spite of not wishing to be categorized as a 'feminist' author certainly addressed issues close to the ideology. Personal space, which is held in high regard in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, is not available to Ernaux's alter ego. In the book she describes the autobiographical 'I's' anxiety when household chores and wifedom stifle her intellectuality and creativity. *La Femme gélée* does address the issue of the importance of authenticity and autonomy for women, and can be regarded as a feminist *bildungsroman*, although the

⁹⁴ Ernaux herself refers to de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième sexe* (1949) in *La Femme gélée* (FG, 150).

narrator's self-awareness does not result in a feminist triumph (Thomas 1999, 10–11).⁹⁵ I will come back to the idea of personal space as a condition for writing in the following chapter on Duras's thoughts about writing.

Rita Felski, a well-known feminist literary theorist, regards women's confessional autobiographical writing in rather negative terms. She distinguishes a particular genre, feminist confessional literature, which 'explicitly seeks to disclose the most intimate and often traumatic details of the author's life and to elucidate their broader implications' (Felski 1989, 88). In her opinion, the act of confession may seem a liberating step for women, which 'uncovers the political dimensions of personal experience, confronts the contradictions of existing gender roles, and inspires an important sense of female identification and solidarity', but is, in fact, an instance of a 'narcissistic soul-searching' (ibid., 86) and an 'uneasy struggle to discover a female self' (ibid., 121). McIlvanney notes that it is the self that is the center of attention in *Passion simple*. Everything else is subordinate to 'Ernaux's personal desires. (McIlvanney 2001, 51.) The affair could be interpreted as a traumatic event in her life and *Passion simple* as a means of narcissistically re-living the passion and turning towards herself without any consideration of the surrounding world and the context in which both the affair and writing about it occurred. This is emphasized by her constant introspective reflection: her feelings, thoughts and her experience of the affair are what ultimately interest her, not so much her actual lover. The relevance of the confession at first glance thus lies in the profound self-emphasis and in the constant interest that the autobiographical 'I' has with herself.

However, Ernaux's works are not vulnerable to Felski's negative assessment of this sort of writing. 'Ernaux' does constantly refer to the events of contemporary society and popular culture and literature (see chapter 3 for further remarks on this). Admittedly, the references are in her obsessive mind usually connected to her personal situation, but fundamentally the self-emphasis is connected to the autobiographical 'I's consciousness of the world around her and especially to her awareness of the process of writing, which I will discuss in the following section.

1.2 Reflecting on *Écriture*: Mode of Writing, Shame, Detachment

The description of the obsessed search for the 'other woman's' identity mentioned above gives rise to a particular formal structure that is worth noting. When 'Er-

⁹⁵ See Felski 1989, 128–129 for a definition of the genre.

naux' claims that she has given up on trying to find out the name of the other woman, she adds a small note in brackets, '(autant prévenir que je décline d'avance la sollicitude d'éventuels informateurs)', and then a footnote to the statement in brackets, 'Qui auraient, par exemple, décodé le système de décalage que j'ai employé – par discrétion, ou quelque motivation plus ou moins consciente – pour les initiales et les localisations trop précises.' (O, 70.)⁹⁶ The author Ernaux has, seemingly, had a 'system' for hiding the identity of anyone involved in her life, and makes her literary alter ego 'Ernaux' not only comment on this system in the book, but also engage in this in a highly self-conscious way. The act carries implications for the discussion of truth in autobiographical writing in general.

Self-reflective writing is an old phenomenon, originating from the early classics of Western literature. In contemporary autobiographical writing, self-conscious tendencies have become more and more explicit, as in J.M. Coetzee's works *Boyhood* (1998), *Youth* (2002) and *Summertime* (2009). In autobiographical writing, textual self-consciousness often includes references either to the reality of the author or to the process of writing which is performed by someone: usually by the materialized voice of the autobiographical 'I'. In postmodernist texts, the boundary between fiction and reality becomes blurred when real-life characters such as the author appear among imaginary ones. In autobiography, the real-life character that signifies the autobiographical 'I' is the main character.

French literature of the self has in particular been interested not only in the self but also in the theme of writing, *écriture*. Michael Sheringham states in his study, which maps French autobiography from Rousseau to Perec, that one of the key features of French autobiographical writing throughout history has been the authors' acknowledgement of the problems the particular mode of writing entails and the insertion of those problems into their works with self-conscious lucidity and critical insight (Sheringham 1993, ix). The same goes for Ernaux: although these two books are on the surface about the depiction of emotions (passion, frustration, obsession), they are, and not at all implicitly, also about *écriture*. An autobiography is a textual artefact in addition to being a means of self-exploration (ibid., viii), and Ernaux is very much aware of this, and of a process of construction being what creates this artefact. (Cf. Kemp 2010, 48.)

The frequency of those passages where the author's alter ego contemplates the act of writing in *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation* is staggering. The following passage in *Passion simple* is perhaps one of the most memorable:

⁹⁶ '(warning: I will decline up-front the sollicitude of any potential informers)' and '(Who may have, for example, decoded the system of substitutions I have used – for the sake of discretion, or some basically conscientious reason – for the initials and any precise locations.)' (Po, 60.)

Ce sont les jugements, les valeurs « normales » du monde qui se rapprochent avec le perspective d'une publication. (Il est possible que l'obligation de répondre à des questions du genre « est-ce autobiographique ? », d'avoir à se justifier de ceci et cela, empêche toutes sortes de livres de voir le jour, sinon sous la forme romanesque où les apparences sont sauvées.)

Ici encore, devant les feuilles couvertes de mon écriture raturée, illisible sauf pour moi, je peux croire qu'il s'agit de quelque chose de privé, de presque enfantin ne portant pas à conséquence – comme les déclarations d'amour et les phrases obscènes que j'inscrivais en classe à l'intérieur de mes protégé-cahiers et tout ce qu'on peut écrire tranquillement, impunément, tant qu'on est sûr que personne ne le verra. Quand je commencerai à taper ce texte à la machine, qu'il m'apparaîtra dans les caractères publics, mon innocence sera finie. (PS, 69–70.)⁹⁷

'Ernaux' reflects on the act of writing in a similar manner as in the quote from *L'Occupation* (the third quote in this chapter). In that quote, she speaks about how she would like to write as if there were no judges around to criticize her writing: 'I have always wanted to write as if I would be gone when the book was published. To write as if I were about to die – no more judges.' She acknowledges that the 'judges', in other words, society's so-called normal values, may have awkward questions for her when the book she is writing is published. She also comments on how the choice of genre affects the reception of her writing. If she wrote the book as a novel, she might be able to 'save appearances' (in other words, avoid shame) and not be forced to comment on the authenticity of the love affair. Even in this short example it is obvious that the autobiographical 'I' definitely recognizes what she is writing and is aware of the production of literature in general. She knows that her writing is addressed to someone – even with autobiographies, there is always a presupposition of the reader. As Sheringham states, autobiographical writing is always a private activity that is conducted in the public eye and in the presence of the – at least imaginary – Other (Sheringham 1993, ix, 137–139). Paul John Eakin notes that since autobiographical writing positions itself in relation to the world, it

⁹⁷ 'The prospect of publication brings me closer to people's judgment and the "normal" values of society. (Having to answer questions such as "Is it an autobiography?" and having to justify this or that may have stopped many books from seeing the light of day, except in the form of a novel, which succeeds in saving appearances.)

At this point, sitting in front of the pages covered in my indecipherable scrawlings, which only I can interpret, I can still believe this is something private, almost childish, of no consequence whatsoever – like the declarations of love and obscene expressions I used to write on the back of my exercise books in class, or anything else one may write calmly, in all impunity, when there is no risk of it being read. Once I start typing out the text, once it appears before me in public characters, I shall be through with innocence.' (PP, 57–58.)

invites the public's scrutiny (Eakin 2008, 21). 'Ernaux' acknowledges something similar to Eakin's conception and presupposes the question that will arise in the moment of publishing: Is it an autobiography?⁹⁸

Comments on writing often appear in connection with a reflection on passion, lessening the seeming banality of 'Ernaux's' ranting. One of the key characteristics of Ernaux's self-reflection overall, and particularly in the instances analyzed in this dissertation, is the comparison of writing to life. I will return to the manifestations of this in *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation* later on in this chapter, but here I would like to introduce an example of the comparison which leads to other intriguing conclusions. In *Passion simple* 'Ernaux' compares her passion to a novel:

Tout ce temps, j'ai eu l'impression de vivre ma passion sur le mode romanesque, mais je ne sais pas, maintenant, sur quel mode je l'écris, si c'est celui du témoignage, voire de la confidence telle qu'elle se pratique dans les journaux féminins, celui du manifeste ou du procès-verbal, ou même du commentaire de texte. (PS, 30–31.)⁹⁹

Here 'Ernaux' ponders over the mode in which she is writing her story. Even though her life (or at least a part of it) seemed like a novel at the time, while writing she is uncertain in which genre she is writing the story. The voice's uncertainty about the mode is strange since one of Ernaux's characteristics as an author is the conscious effort to try out multiple genres. So, perhaps the seeming uncertainty is simply proof that there is awareness of the generic transgressions in the texts. It should be mentioned that the 'styles' mentioned in the quote (testimony, manifesto, critical commentary) differ conceptually from those genres Ernaux's writing is usually associated with. The 'style' relates more to the mode of expression. From the very beginning of her career, Ernaux has been very aware of how she writes about something in order to express it perfectly. *Une Femme* and *La Place* are written in a plain, exact language in order to describe Ernaux's parents accurately.¹⁰⁰ Ernaux's alter ego might be uncertain of the mode of *Passion simple* since she is in the middle of the writing process, and has not yet come to terms with her passion, and thus feels unable to depict it concretely. However, the coming to terms is on its

⁹⁸ According to Warren Motte, Ernaux's alter ego willingly invites the reader to join in the meditation on writing (Motte 1995, 55). The reader is both presupposed and given an active role in the self-conscious endeavor.

⁹⁹ 'During all this time, I felt I was living out my passion in the manner of a novel but now I'm not sure in which style I am writing about it: in the style of a testimony, possibly even the sort of confidence one finds in women's magazines, a manifesto or a statement, or maybe a critical commentary.' (PP, 20.)

¹⁰⁰ In *L'Occupation*, 'Ernaux' brings up the necessity of choosing the precise words to depict her parents: 'Je devais absolument saisir ces mots, c'étaient ceux qu'il me fallait pour être délivrée, il n'y avait pas des autres.' (O, 68.); 'I absolutely had to capture these words, they were the ones I needed to set myself free, there were no others.' (Po, 58.)

way: *Passion simple* was published in 1991, but the same subject is dealt with in the diary *Se perdre* and in *L'Occupation*, some ten years later.

The quote above implies that the autobiographical 'I' is quite aware of the progression of time: 'During all this time, I felt I was living out my passion in the manner of a novel but now I'm not sure in which style I am writing about it.' The word 'maintenant', 'now', or an equivalent of it comes up in various points in both books: 'Maintenant, c'est avril.' (PS, 66.); '[e]ncore maintenant, relire les premières pages (. . .)' (ibid., 61.); 'Aujourd'hui, il me fait écrire.' (O, 51.)¹⁰¹ What is significant in the word itself is that it refers to the moment of writing as opposed to the past, where the actual experience of passion took place. The word almost creates an image of the author Annie Ernaux sitting in front of her desk with a pen in her hand and a sheet of paper in front of her (in her books she has implied that the first draft of any of her texts is usually written by hand) and, thus, seems to refer to the actual author.

So, there is the time of the passion, and then there is the time of the writing – two temporal points that are brought about, according to Lyn Thomas, through the use of a particular tense, spacing on the pages, and narrative structure as a whole. As she puts it, 'both the form and content of *Passion simple* can be seen as an intensified version of the reflection on the relationship between writing and experience' (Thomas 1999, 18–19). Eakin attaches the double construction of telling the story of one's story to the history of autobiographical composition (Eakin 2008, 157). This kind of consciousness of the passing of time is one of Ernaux's specialities and reaches its full potential in the span of her whole oeuvre (cf. chapter 3).

What follows from the separation of the past and present – the experience and the moment of writing – is an absence of shame, especially in *L'Occupation* which is separated from the actual event by ten years: '(. . .) autant je n'éprouve aujourd'hui aucune gêne – pas davantage de défi – à exposer et explorer mon obsession.' (O, 45.)¹⁰² The same goes for the upcoming publication in *Passion simple*:

Je ne ressens naturellement aucune honte à noter ces choses, à cause du délai qui sépare le moment où elles s'écrivent, où je suis seule à les voir, de celui où elles seront lues par les gens et qui, j'ai l'impression, n'arrivera jamais. D'ici là, je peux avoir un accident, mourir, il peut survenir une guerre ou la révolution. C'est à cause de ce délai que je peux écrire actuellement, à peu près comme à seize ans et je m'exposais au

¹⁰¹ 'Now it's April.' (PP, 54.); '[e]ven now, rereading those first pages (. . .)' (ibid., 50.); 'Today, it makes me write.' (Po, 44.)

¹⁰² '(. . .) today I feel no embarrassment whatever – still less, any resistance – about exposing and exploring my passion.' (Po, 39.)

soleil brûlant une journée entière, à vingt faisais l'amour sans contraceptifs : sans réfléchir aux suites. (PS, 42.)¹⁰³

'Ernaux' is so aware of the detachment that the passing of time allows her that she feels no shame in writing about the intimate details of her love affair. The moment when other people will read her words is yet to come. Not only does time separate the actual experience and the moment of writing, it also separates the moment of writing and the moment of publication. This example of 'Ernaux's' contemplations on writing again relates to the publication of intimate material and the border between private and public – all quite central concerns of autobiographical writing, as has already been remarked. Eakin suggests that '[n]o autobiographer ever wrote more self-consciously about self-consciousness than [Henry] James did as he paced up and down his workrooms in Chelsea and Rye, dictating the story of his life to an attentive typist' (Eakin 2008, 155), and it seems Ernaux's self-consciousness is equally – if not more – pronounced than James's.

1.3 Autofiction, and Turning Possession into Narrative

'Ernaux' also discusses another kind of move in *L'Occupation*. Instead of a temporal one, she refers to a transformation that relates to the question of whose passion she really is discussing. She states that she is no longer suffering and that she is forcing herself to describe her jealousy towards the other woman in order to transform something intimate and individual into a sentiment that other people might relate to. It is not about her passion and her jealousy any more: 'Ce n'est plus mon désir, ma jalousie, qui sont dans ces pages, c'est *du* désir, *de la* jalousie et je travaille dans l'invisible.' (O, 46; emphasis original)¹⁰⁴ 'Ernaux's' story is transformed from private to public, from personal to general. The concept of transubjection signifies the transformation of a personal experience into something that is separate from its experiencer. The generalized experience exists 'completely outside' the autobiographical 'I's person: '(. . .) je sens l'écriture comme (. . .) la transformation de ce qui appartient (. . .) au "moi", en quelque chose existant tout à fait en dehors de ma

¹⁰³ 'Naturally I feel no shame in writing these things because of the time which separates the moment when they are written – when only I can see them – from the moment when they will be read by other people, a moment which I feel will never come. By then I could have had an accident or died; a war or a revolution could have broken out. This delay makes it possible for me to write today, in the same way I used to lie in the scorching sun for a whole day at sixteen, or make love without contraceptives at twenty: without thinking about the consequences.' (PP, 30–31.)

¹⁰⁴ 'It is no longer my desire, my jealousy, in these pages – it is of desire, of jealousy; I am working in invisible things.' (Po, 39.)

personne' (ÉEC, 112).¹⁰⁵ *L'Occupation*, though autobiographical, does not in this case depict 'Ernaux's' jealousy towards the other woman but, rather, a general feeling of jealousy.¹⁰⁶ The jealousy she has experienced is transformed into something immaterial and logical that others can reclaim as their own experience. As Nicole E. Meyer states, Ernaux seeks to speak to both herself and others, and 'thus to find a way of "rendering a female life" not merely in fiction but at all' (Meyer 2002, 33). Ernaux strives to depict a female experience that, admittedly, was and is hers, but is shared by women everywhere. The 'I' that makes the depiction is 'je transpersonnel', meaning that she is a representative and a mediator of other people's experiences.¹⁰⁷ The issue of publication and shame can quite feasibly be avoided by writing the story as a general example, detached from personal experience. *Passion simple* is fundamentally not written even for the lover as retribution, which he appears to have been afraid of, but for other people:

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 un 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. (PS, 76–77.)¹⁰⁸

The explicit affirmation that the writing is based on generalization enforces the impression that it is not the autobiographical, in the end, that is aimed at. It is further supported by the lack of autobiographical markers. That the autobiographical 'I' is generally not identified as Annie Ernaux in her stories (though *La Honte* almost identifies the 'I' by referring to her as 'Annie D.') is an example of a lack of such a marker. Generally speaking, if the identification or other signs of autobiography are missing from the book, it is defined as an autobiographical novel or autofiction. In autofiction, the main point is often the questioning of the autobiograph-

¹⁰⁵ '(. . .) I see writing as (. . .) a transformation of something that belongs (. . .) to me, to something that exists completely outside me.' (My translation.)

¹⁰⁶ The literal translation would use the definitive: *the* jealousy. However, the transsubjective practice signifies something general, thus *a* depicts the idea more aptly. Even though these kinds of equivocal points are plentiful when it comes to translations of Ernaux's writing, I note them quite scarcely. My analysis concentrates more on the thematic domain than on meticulous wordplays – though, I admit, Ernaux is skillful at these and a lot goes unnoticed when they are left mostly untreated. However, this kind of analysis is a matter of another study.

¹⁰⁷ The need to generalize becomes more pressing if the personal subject the experience needs to be removed from is named Ernaux, and not merely 'Ernaux'. See Thumerel 2004, 19 and McIlvanney 2001, 5 on the representativeness of Ernaux's first-person account and of her experience.

¹⁰⁸ 'He had said, "You won't write a book about me." But I haven't written a book about him, neither have I written a book about myself. All I have done is translate into words – words he will probably never read; they are not intended for him – the way in which his existence has affected my life. An offering of a sort, bequeathed to others.' (PP, 64.)

ical mode and not so much the depiction of an actual life and personality. Motte admits that Ernaux has been the depicter of the personal from the very beginning of her career, but concludes in the same breath that she deliberately questions the possibilities and limits of autobiography and fiction (Motte 1995, 55).

Autofiction is mentioned in *L'Occupation* when 'Ernaux' states that the word refers to a 'film intérieur' playing inside her head that anticipates happy moments to come.¹⁰⁹ Considering Ernaux's literary education, her knowledge of generic variations of autobiographical writing, and the self-conscious devices in her writing, it is highly unlikely that the use of the word autofiction is coincidental. In my opinion, autofiction refers to the illusory image 'Ernaux' admits having constructed in her head about her affair: some of it might have been true, but most of it is less so. She is no longer the autobiographical subject, the identity of the subject is blurred: 'Je n'étais même plus le sujet de mes représentations. J'étais le squat d'une femme que je n'avais jamais vue.' (O, 21.)¹¹⁰

As I already stated, Ernaux's works have gone through generic transformations over the years. *Les Armoires vides* is a third-person account of the abortion the main character Denise Lesur has to resort to during her college years. In an afterword to the book, Ernaux states that Denise is, in the end, a fictitious character (CO, 124). Only later on has it become obvious that 'Denise' is Ernaux's alter ego, since she has written about her own abortion in works that are more convincingly autobiographical. Her following work, *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* (1977), creates an even more fictional setting and more distance in between the adolescent narrator and the author. McIlvanney classifies her works as historically specific auto/biographical accounts that have ethnographic resonance (McIlvanney 2001, 6), and Ernaux has suggested something similar through the voice of her autobiographical alter ego (F, 106). *La Place, Une Femme, Journal du dehors* (1993), and *La Vie extérieure* (VE, 2000) would represent these kinds of texts. However, especially from *Passion simple* onwards, Ernaux has turned towards a more autobiographical expression (*Se perdre*, 2001, is quite a conventional diary), while simultaneously blurring the generic status of her writing.

¹⁰⁹ 'Dans le film intérieur que je me déroule habituellement – la figuration de moments agréables à venir, une sortie, des vacances, un dîner d'anniversaire – toute cette *autofiction* permanente anticipant le plaisir dans une vie normale était remplacée par des images jaillies du dehors qui me vrillaient la poitrine. Je n'étais plus libre de mes rêveries. Je n'étais même plus le sujet de mes représentations. J'étais le squat d'une femme que je n'avais jamais vue.' (O, 20–21; my emphasis) 'In the private film that was constantly playing inside me – featuring happy moments to come, a night out, a vacation, a birthday dinner – all of this *autofiction* anticipating the pleasures of a normal life was supplanted by the images that were rushing in from the outside to stab me in the chest. I was no longer free in my daydreams. I was no longer the subject even of my own fantasies. I was being inhabited by a woman I had never seen.' (Po, 15–16.)

¹¹⁰ See the previous note for translation.

The autobiographical foundation of the stories is also shaken by a remark that after life events have been turned into literature the connection between the two is no longer there. ‘Ernaux’ states in *L’Occupation* that by writing she has transformed something that was once a part of her life into a separate literary entity: ‘Écrire a été un façon de sauver ce qui n’est plus déjà ma réalité, c’est-à-dire une sensation me saisissant de la tête aux pieds dans la rue, mais est devenue « l’occupation », un temps circonscrit et achevé.’ (O, 70.)¹¹¹ The story of ‘Ernaux’’s obsession is removed from reality, from what actually happened, and turned into a completed narrative. In another incident, she goes as far as renouncing truthfulness, excepting her most carnal emotion: ‘La seule chose vraie, et je ne la dirais jamais, c’était : « Je veux baiser avec toi et te faire oublier l’autre femme. » Tout le reste était, au sens strict, de la fiction.’ (O, 55.)¹¹² Passion and obsession are real, fundamental, almost primitive sensations: all the rest is fiction. McIlvanney suggests that the whole topos of *Passion simple* is the intrinsic inferiority of art to life and the inability of art to capture the intensity of real-life experiences. The dominance of life attributes to the needlessness of applying any kind of morality to writing or of feeling shame for what has been written and published. (McIlvanney 2001, 76.) She adds that writing, however, can be a way for the autobiographical ‘I’ to experience the passion again (ibid., 80). The air of doubt and self-questioning in the books supports this, but at the same time the complicated construction of the narrative enforces its artistic potential.

Turning experience into literature is a matter of rhetoric. In *L’Occupation* it becomes apparent how ‘Ernaux’ is capable of taking it slightly too far. She describes how she began carefully forming a plan for winning back her loved one. It was no more a question of the beautifully satisfying images of lovemaking that she saw in her mind’s eye during the affair, but of a sterile approach to construct a perfectly plausible argument. ‘Ernaux’ refers to a ‘rhetorical fever’ in which the argument flowed seamlessly. She even describes coming up with the perfect sentence with which she would definitely win back the lover and is completely satisfied with the choice of words and the concise formulation. (O, 54–56.)¹¹³ She also wonders whether giving titles to the moments of one’s life is a way to master them (ibid., 68). According to Lyn Thomas, it is a question of ‘an almost clinical depiction of nuances of feeling’ (Thomas 1999, 18). I wish add that bringing up the rhe-

¹¹¹ ‘Writing has been a way to save that which is no longer my reality – a sensation seizing me from head to foot, in the street – but has become “the possession”, a period of time, circumscribed and completed.’ (Po, 60–61.)

¹¹² ‘The only thing that was true, and I never said it to him, was “I want to fuck you and make you forget the other woman.” All the rest was, literally, fiction.’ (Po, 48.)

¹¹³ This can be compared to ‘Ernaux’’s wish to find perfect words to describe the parents in *La Place* and *Une Femme*.

torical fever has not so much to do with the arguments to win the lover back than with 'Ernaux's desire to discuss one of the most qualitative aspects of her writing style. The control the author has over her work often results in the distortion of truth: the order of the story appears to be more important than what is revealed.

1.4 Reflecting on *Écriture*: Desire and Story Intertwined

'Ernaux' makes one statement in *L'Occupation* with regard to rhetoric that particularly catches the eye since it equates fiction and life: '(. . .) j'aurais voulu préférer sur-le-champ ma phrase « qui tue », transporter ma réplique travaillée, parfaite, du théâtre de l'imaginaire à celui de la vie.' (O, 56.)¹¹⁴ The parallel of imagination and life brings further dimensions to the usage of sterile rhetoric. 'Ernaux' wishes she could transport her perfect rhetoric from the realm of fiction into that of real life, and make the construction of a story from a certain experience revert back to the world where all experiences take place. Art is, again, inferior to life: the autobiographical 'I' wishes that with the help of rhetorical talent she could construct perfect sentences which could be used in real life, but is in the end unable to. What I want to point out, however, is the close connection the 'I' makes between writing and life, mentioned in this chapter in the context of 'Ernaux's ponderings about the mode she is writing in.

The ending of *Passion simple* includes a supplement to the actual story, written approximately nine months after the book was supposedly finished. The beginning of it reads:

Je pourrais m'arrêter à la phrase qui précède et faire comme si rien de ce qui se produit dans le monde et dans ma vie ne pouvait plus intervenir dans ce texte. Tenir celui-ci pour sorti du temps, en somme prêt à lire. Mais tant que ces pages sont encore personnelles, à portée de main comme elles le sont aujourd'hui, l'écriture est toujours ouverte. Il me paraît plus important d'ajouter ce que la réalité est venue apporter que de modifier la place d'un adjectif. (PS, 71.)¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ '(. . .) I would have liked to drop my "bomb" of a sentence right then, to transport my well-crafted, perfect retort from the theater of the imagination to the theater of real life.' (Po, 48.)

¹¹⁵ 'I could end to book here and pretend that nothing that goes on in the world or in my life could affect this text. In other words, I could consider it removed from time and ready for publication. However, so long as these pages remain personal and within my reach, as they are today, the act of writing will be open. I feel it is more important to mention certain recent developments than to alter the position of an adjective.' (PP, 59.)

In this, yet another, contemplation on writing, 'Ernaux' is at the final stage of the writing process, so far in fact that the book seems to be removed from time¹¹⁶ and is ready for publication. However, something has taken place in her life that she feels is necessary to bring to the reader's attention. The story is thus not separate from life events: they continue to affect one another for months after the story has been concluded for the first time. It is even more important to acknowledge this than to change the place of an adjective – even though it is known that one of Ernaux's main attributes as an author is the search for precise, detailed language.

In *L'Occupation*, 'Ernaux' refers to the narrative she constructed inside her head about her own daily life during the love affair: 'Pendant ce temps je vivais en poursuivant inlassablement le récit intérieur, tissé de choses vues et entendues au fil des jours, qu'on destine à l'être aimé en son absence – la description de mon quotidien qui, je m'en rendais vite compte, ne l'intéressait plus.' (O, 48–49.)¹¹⁷ This is yet another example of the autobiographical 'I's embarrassing behaviour. It seems ridiculous to have at all times a ready-made story about one's life that one could recount to the lover who has already moved on in his own life. The interior narrative resonates with the so-called 'Emma Bovary complex' of the French tradition of passion stories: the romance, or the story of the romance, is merely an illusion in one's mind. One has an obsession with creating a story of romance, whether it exists or not – and often, it does not.¹¹⁸

Such an interior narrative somewhat parallels Eakin's argument about people constructing their own autobiographies on a daily basis (cf. Introduction, "Texts and Lives"). 'Ernaux's interior narrative about her own life as well as the constructed illusory image about the affair, and the sterile discourse of argumentation that were discussed previously would all be, according to Eakin, identity forming structures. Identity forming fuses with writing about one's life. Living one's life and writing about it are, in the end, inseparable. In *L'Occupation*, the autobiographical 'I' discusses how she needed to write so that she could make sense of her obsession, in other words, to write jealousy as she lived it: 'J'écris d'ailleurs la jalousie comme je la vivais (. . .)' (O, 40; cf. PS, 23.)¹¹⁹ She needed to track down all the sensations

¹¹⁶ Time plays an essential role in the parallel of passion and writing: 'Le temps de l'écriture n'a rien à voir avec celui de la passion' (PS, 61); 'Living in passion or writing: in each case one's perception of time is fundamentally different' (PP, 49), states 'Ernaux'. As was stated earlier, time separates the experience of passion from the act of writing about it but according to 'Ernaux', one similarly loses a normal conception of time in both cases.

¹¹⁷ 'During this time, I relentlessly carried on that interior narrative, woven together from things seen and heard throughout the day, that one constructs for the beloved in his absence – the description of my daily life which, I quickly realized, no longer interested him.' (Po, 41.)

¹¹⁸ The discrepancy between the banal reality and literary illusions in Emma Bovary's case has been well noted, for example, by Mäkelä (2003, 66).

¹¹⁹ 'And anyway, I am writing jealousy as I lived it (. . .)' (Po, 34.)

and actions of the period. This, again, shows how 'Ernaux's writing process involves a conscious effort to compare itself with the passion she experienced. Desire and writing – life and writing – are intertwined so that a final conclusion, a truthful story, can be achieved.

It is debatable what 'truthful' signifies. In Ernaux's case, it does not mean pure referentiality and life-likeness, the re-enactment of a complete life-story, but more a flawless description of a certain atmosphere, certain people, and certain events. An even more blunt comparison appears at the beginning of *Passion simple* where 'Ernaux' point-blankly compares love-making and writing: both of them leave one stupefied, perhaps unable to totally comprehend what just happened, but also free from moral condemnation (PS, 2). In 'Fragments autour Philippe V.', a short text published in *L'Infini* in 1996, Ernaux describes the beginning and the sexual fulfilment of a relationship with 'Philippe V.', a younger man, and describes one of the first physical gestures, her hand in his hair, being of the same nature as the act of writing the opening sentence of a book. She goes even further and explicates that a trace of an orgasm, the date and time of which she and her lover wrote down, would remain with her in the same way as a work of art. There is an essential link between writing and making love. (Ernaux in Thomas 1999, 178.)

Here it becomes apparent how the seemingly tedious description of the autobiographical 'I's repetitive and banal attitude towards the love affair and her lover actually becomes attractive reading. When the feelings of passion and jealousy are explicitly paralleled with writing, the story appears not as a banal description of a middle-aged woman's obsessive behaviour, but as a self-conscious sphere where it is possible to discuss both the affair and the task of writing about it delicately. Description of passion is relevant when combined with the reflection on writing: the pornographic description at the beginning of *Passion simple* and the absurd desire to hold on to the lover's cock in *L'Occupation* gain meaning when juxtaposed with and discussed in the context of writing. It is meaningful that the love affair and writing about it are depicted as equally intense, passionate practices in Ernaux's writing. Form and content are entangled with one another, and endlessly complement each other. (Cf. Davis & Fallaize 2000, 142–143.)

1.5 Not Another Self-Celebration?

A work that is about writing – or in other words confessing – about one's desires and, at the same time, about contemplating that very same writing may seem like quite a narcissistic enterprise. This impression may remain even despite the inter-

textual references to literature, pop culture, and world events which are multiple in both of Ernaux's works.¹²⁰ Quite possibly, the kind of pronounced self-consciousness that takes place in some autobiographical writing might at the surface level seem more like exhibitionist self-emphasis than critical insight into the conventions of autobiographical writing. Irving Louis Horowitz sees writing about oneself at its best as 'filtered self-awareness', at its worst 'unrefined mysticism', and 'akin to self-celebration' (Horowitz 1977, 176–177). The ultimate word for self-interest, narcissism, appears famously in Linda Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narrative*, which discusses self-conscious literature in general. Hutcheon underlines that the heading of her famous work is not intended as a derogatory but rather as a descriptive notion (Hutcheon 1980, 1).¹²¹ In my opinion, the heading is suggestive and ironic.

Ernaux's autobiographical alter ego is quite literally so wrapped up both in her own passion and in her own writing that there is no life outside the two. The intensity of her feelings, as well as the repetitive nature of the act of reflection itself, underlines her self-centeredness.¹²² However, since Ernaux is known for her awareness of the conditions and tradition of self-writing, it is unlikely that the behaviour of her alter ego does not suggest an ironic take on the obsession. There is an ironic edge to *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation*, no doubt. In addition, 'Ernaux' views autobiographical writing as far from a narcissistic endeavor in *Passion simple*: '(C'est donc par erreur qu'on assimile celui qui écrit sur sa vie à un exhibitioniste, puisque ce dernier n'a qu'un désir, se montrer et être vu dans le même instant.)' (PS, 42).¹²³ She does not wish to associate someone writing about her own life with an exhibitionist, 'since the latter has only one desire: to show himself and to be seen'. This implies that there is more to the occupation with the self than meets the eye. Marie-Anne Macé states in her article on the depiction of identity in Ernaux's and Marguerite Duras's selected writings that Ernaux is striving more towards a clinical truth in her writing, whereas Duras concentrates on the autobiographical subject. The 'I' is of differing relevance to them: Ernaux uses the 'I' to get what she wants, Duras embraces the 'I'. (Mace 2005, 39).¹²⁴

Horowitz suggests that the autobiographer's occupation with one's self does not preclude an orientation towards communication with others:

¹²⁰ The references will be discussed slightly further in chapter 4.

¹²¹ Hutcheon writes about narcissistic *fictions* – the connection that is relevant here lies more in the self-consciousness than in the genre.

¹²² Narcissism can also be tied with repetition and references within the author's oeuvre, as Fitch's study *The Narcissistic Text* (1982) implies.

¹²³ '(It is a mistake therefore to compare someone writing about his own life to an exhibitionist, since the latter has only one desire: to show himself and to be seen at the same time.)' (PP, 31.)

¹²⁴ However, what unites them both is *écrire* (Mace 2004, 39).

(. . .) the game of autobiography becomes one with life itself, rich with moral, aesthetic, and epistemological implications in which the real purpose of autobiography is to construct a meaningful mosaic for others, while subtly insuring a place in the cosmos for one's self. (Horowitz 1977, 176.)

I agree with 'Ernaux', Macé and Horowitz. *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation* concentrate on the self, but they are also much more than that. As I have striven to show in this chapter, they include contemplation of topics attached to autobiographical writing, such as generic categorization, matters of publication, and the border between private and public, moral and ethical concerns, and detachment. They also explicitly question their own autobiographical nature through the use of autofictional characteristics and by discussing the transformation of life events into literature. Furthermore, they ensure their relatability by emphasizing the willingness to express something general through the depiction of personal experiences. The intertextual references also imply that the 'I' is not the only issue worth writing about. While the concentration on the self is definitely present, it is most certainly not the sole purpose of Ernaux's writing. The lucidity and the new vision of the world 'Ernaux' refers to in the quote that began this chapter is a product of a multifaceted, careful act of self-conscious writing.

2. Writing / Self in Duras's *La Vie matérielle*, *Écrire* and *C'est tout*

Y. A. : Vous êtes qui?

M. D. : Duras, c'est tout.

Y. A. : Elle fait quoi, Duras?

M. D. : Elle fait la littérature. (CT, 24–25.)¹²⁵

This dialogue between Marguerite Duras's autobiographical alter ego and her life partner Yann Andréa in *C'est tout* makes abundantly clear what the then dying author thought about herself: she is Marguerite Duras, an author. Writing books and being an author defines her to the core. This is nothing new to the research on Duras, which has continually emphasized the essentialness of writing to her character (for example, Winston 1993, Genova 2003). In *Écrire*, 'Duras' herself refers to writing as the one thing that filled her life and has never deserted her: 'Écrire, c'était ça la seule chose qui peuplait ma vie et qui l'enchantait. Je l'ai fait. L'écriture ne m'a jamais quittée.' (E, 15.)¹²⁶ The impression throughout this contemplative text is that she was almost unable to separate herself from her profession.

What makes the alleged symbiosis between writing and Duras relevant in this particular chapter is the way in which writing is constantly brought up and considered in her stories. *L'Amant*, the prize-winning story of forbidden passion between a young French girl and an older Cantonese man, offers constant reflection on the early development of the author's aspirations towards writing. Its sequel, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, includes explicit metatextual references to its own construction in a manner that resembles Ernaux's textual self-consciousness. The books are in two ways about passion as well: firstly, great parts of them deal with the author's love affairs, and secondly, in their entirety they depict the passionate approach to writing, which is a key factor in the self-reflection of both Er-

¹²⁵ 'Who are you?

Duras, no more.

What does Duras do?

She creates literature.' (NM, 35.)

¹²⁶ 'Writing is the only thing that populated my life and made it magic. I did it. Writing never left me.' (W, 3.)

naux's and Duras's autobiographical writing. All in all, the books are reflections on life, writing, and passion.

In the introduction I stated on numerous occasions that it is the authors' *whole* autobiographical oeuvres which will be under consideration when it comes to their self-reflective practices. This does not mean that each of their works will be analyzed. Duras's autobiographical oeuvre includes phases. One of them comprises of texts (such as *La Douleur*) written about her war-time experiences, which will gain less attention than others, such as the group of texts that describe the affair with the Chinese man.¹²⁷ In this chapter, the works discussed are not even strictly speaking autobiographical. Here, I will focus especially on the symbiosis between the self and writing in three books that seem more like reflective collections or essays than autobiographical stories: *La Vie matérielle*, *Écrire* and *C'est tout*.¹²⁸ In spite of this, the three books are discussed as autobiographical writing here since they do depict some details of Durasian life and personality. As descriptions of the self's aspirations towards writing and passion they might in some ways even surpass the ability of more conventional autobiographies to depict the self in question. I will discuss how writing is reflected in these books and especially how this reflection is filtered through the autobiographical 'I'.

The differences between the books as well as the different times they were written in (the two former in the aftermath of Duras's highest moments of literary glory and the latter a few months before her death) have some important consequences. *La Vie matérielle* considers several topics that are not directly related to Duras herself, in contrast to *Écrire*, which is an intense emotional account of the most personal subject matter imaginable. In *C'est tout*, it is highly relevant that it was written with, or through, Yann Andréa and approximately one sixth of the book is governed by his voice. One could thus easily imagine that the autobiographical 'I' changes and develops from one book to the next. However, in addition to the analysis of the reflection on writing I will show that the reflecting, multidimensional 'I' is more unified than it appears.

¹²⁷ It should be noted that my approach to Ernaux is a somewhat more comprehensive account on her whole oeuvre, whereas with Duras I will concentrate on these more specific groups of texts. This is partly due to the immense extent of her (autobiographical) writing, and partly because I wish to draw specific attention to the details of the "concentration on the self" in her self-reflective project. The socio-cultural connections thus gain less attention in the analysis of both her writing and her authorial commentary.

¹²⁸ These three books have been examined in criticism somewhat less than the famous *L'Amant* (and, when it comes to Duras's non-autobiographical writing, less than for example *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, 1964 and *Le Vice-consul*, 1965).

The 'I' that is being analyzed here is Duras's textual counterpart 'Duras', in other words the autobiographical 'I' speaking in the three texts. However, the line between the two is precarious, and I will discuss this at the end of the chapter.

2.1 Writing about Writing: an Overview

La Vie matérielle is perhaps the most wide-ranging of the three books discussed here, consisting of dozens of small essays on various aspects of life: Duras's residence in Neauphle-le-Château and her apartment in Rue Saint-Benoît in the quarter of Saint-Germain-de-Prés in Paris, grocery shopping, fashion and especially the 'M.D. uniform' (which consists of a black vest, a straight skirt, a high-collared sweater and short winter boots), films, Duras's alcohol addiction, nature, immigration politics, and so on. In the foreword to the book, Duras describes the process of writing the short texts. She wrote drafts, let her friend from the French cultural scene, Jerome Beaujour, read them, and at the final stage concentrated on reviewing and refining the texts. She emphasizes that not one text is a comprehensive overview of the topic in question despite the lengthy process of writing: they are random thoughts that have occurred to her on random days. (VM, 9–10.) The book somewhat resembles Ernaux's *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure*, which are diaries that recount the everyday occurrences of contemporary Paris, but it is also fundamentally different from them. In the foreword, Duras defines the book's genre: it is not a diary nor journalism, but a reading book, *un livre de lecture* (ibid.). Duras's approach is decidedly more personal than Ernaux's (though Ernaux's two works definitely have a personal edge to them; cf. chapter 3) since every topic appears to revolve around her and her oeuvre: most texts are in the end about writing and about her individual books, to which her alter ego constantly refers. For example, she describes Vietnamese cities as settings for *L'Amant*, and mentions *La Maladie de la mort* (1982) in the middle of reflection on the inevitable homosexuality of men. At the surface level, an individual text in *La Vie matérielle* might seem to discuss something else entirely, but in reality it comments on Duras's writing.

In addition to constantly bringing up her own work, Duras subtly treats writing as a vaster cultural phenomenon of *écriture* and art in general by mentioning other authors such as Michel Foucault, Robert Musil, Maurice Blanchot and Roland Barthes (whom she had been reading while writing *La Vie matérielle* and whose opinions on her work she quotes), and other prominent cultural figures such as Serge Daney (editor of *Cahiers du cinéma*), Serge July (founder and editor of *Libération*) and André Fontaine (former editor of *Le Monde*) (VM, for example 124). At a more personal level, writing is considered both mundane (finishing scripts and taking them to the publisher) and something profoundly mystical (stemming from

a dark place deep inside oneself). First and foremost, writing is attached to the material building blocks of everyday life such as the author's clothes, her house, hotel rooms, trains, photographs, and the forest – but the book shows how materiality is only a veil for a more profound level of *écriture*.

Duras may not be as consistent as Ernaux in bringing up the question of writing, and especially writing autobiographies, by means of metatextual constructions in her other works, though she is commonly acknowledged as being experimental and self-conscious with language. She 'rewrites language in order to expose its limitations and negate notions of its authority' (Jellenik 2007, 195). When it comes to these contemplative works, it is suddenly all about writing. Already the title suggests that *Écrire* is obviously the most prominent example of the concentration on *écriture*. In this book, Duras not only discusses the most essential thing in her life (in addition to political aspirations, love affairs and drinking, perhaps) but also makes use of allegories and symbols to contemplate the complicity and the meaning of writing.

The most essential of these is the figure of the house in Neauphle, a place where the author used to retreat to write and to drink. This house is also a specific kind of *space*: an essential condition for writing in the manner of Virginia Woolf's 'room of one's own'. Gaston Bachelard views 'house' as 'our corner of the world' and as a space that allows for day-dreaming and memories to flourish in his work *The Poetics of Space* (Bachelard 1958/1994, 4, 6). On a vaster scale, house is a place which is 'one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind' (*ibid.*, 6). One of the most integral characteristics of a house is that it provides shelter, and above all, solitude. According to Bachelard, a place of solitude is not necessarily that of desperation but, more, is enjoyed and desired, a space in which creativity can flourish (*ibid.*, 10).

In *Écrire*, 'Duras' describes how writing requires solitude. The house both provides the perfect surroundings for this and begins to represent solitude itself. The solitude in which 'Duras' has draped herself functions similarly to the house: in it one can write. And, 'Duras' notes, as solitude represents writing, the house that provides the solitude ends up representing writing (E, for example 13–17).¹²⁹ It should also be noted that it is by no means an accident that the author retreated to the house both to write and to drink. Throughout *Écrire*, Duras implies that one is able to lose oneself in the intoxicated state provided by alcohol in the same way

¹²⁹ 'Duras' also depicts the garden, the furniture and everything else in the house precisely, such as the blue wardrobes in the room upstairs where she wrote *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* and *Le Vice-consul* (*Ecrire*, 14). The detailed description highlights the importance of the house. Bachelard discusses the metaphysical and philosophical aspects of the smaller units of the house, such as the attic, the closets, and so on, throughout *Poetics of Space*.

as when writing. One can also make use of the state, in other words, the mental space one achieves after drinking in order to write. Thus, space is not simply something material, but also an abstract condition that allows for the act of writing to take place.

In addition to more concrete figures, writing is paralleled in *Écrire* with madness, the passing of time, the endings of things, and even death (E, 52–53). Death is what most profoundly unites the two, the concrete and the abstract. This is evident when the autobiographical ‘P’ describes lengthily the death of a fly on the wall of her house. The struggle, though long-lasting and cruel, is not in the end what moves her. The death of the fly gains further meaning when it is discussed in comparison to writing. Recording the exact moment of the fly dying and the horror of it represent the eternal displacement in literature, in other words, writing without not knowing yet that one is doing it. (E, 38–45.)

Écrire ends in paralleling writing and wind: ‘L’écrit ça arrive comme le vent, c’est nu, c’est de l’encre, c’est l’écrit, et ça passe comme rien d’autre ne passe dans la vie, rien de plus, sauf elle, la vie.’ (E, 53.)¹³⁰ Here *écriture* again represents both something concrete and more profound, as in *La Vie matérielle*. Wind, a natural phenomenon, and life are familiar concepts, yet as metaphors they suggest further existential and philosophical dimensions that the autobiographical ‘P’ appears to attach to her lifelong project of writing. Ink, on the other hand, refers to a very concrete substance, and reminds us of the material nature of texts. The sheer amount of symbols and allegories signifying writing in the book is overwhelming. For Duras, writing is everything, and anything can be used to signify it.

C’est tout was actually compiled by Duras’s life partner Yann Andréa, although Duras is credited as the author. It entails strands of conversation the couple (supposedly) shared during the last year of Duras’s life. What first strikes the reader in *C’est tout* is its form: it is partly the ‘P’s monologue and partly a dialogue between ‘M.D.’ and ‘Y.A.’, signifying Duras and Andréa. The book has been perceived as containing little substance and having hardly any literary value. ‘Covering standard Durasian themes like absence, solitude, love and writing already explored at length elsewhere, it seemed a relatively insignificant, even slightly distasteful, coda to the corpus, and was discreetly ignored’, notes James S. Williams (Williams 1997, 497). I do not wish to participate in the evaluative discussion on the merits and demerits of *C’est tout*, but it should be stated that the work does continue the path set by the other two books, in other words the discussion on the problematics of writing and its meaning to the author’s life, though the insight of the autobiographical ‘P’ offers is not nearly as multidimensional as in the two other books.

¹³⁰ ‘Writing comes like the wind. It’s naked, it’s made of ink, it’s the thing written, and it passes like nothing else passes in life, nothing more, except life itself.’ (W, 45.)

What perhaps most aptly characterizes *C'est tout* is, again, the presence of death. So does its position as a sort of a reckoning of a decades-long enterprise of *écriture*, which appears less a career than a way of life. Williams notes that the book gained its full meaning only after Duras's actual death (Williams 1997, 497). Death ceases to be a metaphor of writing and becomes the very driving force behind it. While coming to terms with the inevitability of death, 'M.D.' seemingly rambles on about self-evident philosophical clauses – clichés that are uttered on one's death bed. However, she yet again weaves an intertextual web in between her works by referring to them in the midst of the clichés. She makes the connections profoundly autobiographical since they are deeply intertwined with her memories and the experience of her own life passing away.

It is worth noting that all three books emanate the air of repetition and intensity, especially when it comes to love affairs and writing. Duras definitely repeats themes, motifs and metaphors, and if one reads the books consecutively, one is both struck and almost nauseated by the endless emphasizing of such phrases as 'writing is solitude and madness', 'writing is life', 'writing is death', 'writing is everything', and the constant returning to the author's love affairs and drinking habits. However, in the repetition there lies an essential point about writing. In a text titled 'Le dernier client de la nuit', 'The last client of the night', in *La Vie matérielle* 'Duras' describes an intense phase of a love affair with an anonymous man. Lovemaking, drinking and aimless wandering along the seaside promenades all fuse into one passionate insanity. The last sentence of the text reads: 'Après encore j'ai écrit *Moderato Cantabile*.' (VM, 22.)¹³¹ Love-making and drinking lead to writing. Thus, the text precisely highlights the imminent connection between passion, destruction and writing. The interconnection is evident in these three contemplative texts and in the author's more literary writing and her own commentary, which are discussed in chapters 4 and 6.

2.2 Writing about the Self: the 'I' as the Sole Topic of Narration

We are left with a figure, the site of a powerful investment; a voice, a style: not quite a presence, but much more than a name. (. . .) A self who writes her madness, her banality, the extraordinary minutiae of her everyday life, who contradicts her self and so opens her self up to our love of the multitudes within. (Crowley 2000, 271.)

¹³¹ 'And afterwards, I wrote *Moderato Cantabile*.' (My translation.)

Martin Crowley, who discusses writing and self lengthily in his book *Duras, Writing and the Ethical: Making the Broken Whole* (2000), states that in Duras's writing there is a 'figure', a 'site of powerful investment', a 'voice', a 'style', a 'self'. When one speaks about autobiographical writing and self-reflection in connection with one another, one inevitably encounters the question of who or what is this self reflecting herself. Self-reference is a multilayered phenomenon in autobiographies: the autobiographical 'I' refers to herself in the story, and since she is identified with the author, the reference to the 'I' is also directed at the extratextual author. The autobiographical 'I' can be interpreted as being an alter ego or another self of the author, a sort of a textual version of her. In the kind of autobiographical writing I am discussing, it quite soon becomes obvious that the agents are so infused with one another – more, the infusion serves a purpose – that it is pointless to separate them. Here it suffices that the reflecting subject is treated simply as the 'self', the 'I', or as the alter ego named 'Duras'. And, obviously, 'Duras' carries implications for the actual author.¹³²

The autobiographical 'I' is the emphatic voice in each of the texts. This is a given in any autobiographical story. Even in *C'est tout*, seemingly a work created through collaboration, most of the narration is conducted by 'M.D.' (though she remains unnamed in passages in which there is no dialogue, only monologue). And not only is the autobiographical 'I' the dominating narrator in the texts, she is often an explicit object of her own contemplation in the books. 'Duras' or 'M.D.' discusses her writing as I showed above, but also herself. Similarly to writing, the self often emerges even though the text on the surface deals with another topic entirely.

An apt example is the additional story to *Écrire*: 'La mort du jeune aviateur anglais', 'The Death of a Young English Pilot'. The story is about an English pilot, who died in the village of Vauville on the last day of the Second World War. The 'Duras' of the story goes to visit the village, learns the story of the young pilot and wishes to mediate it to her readers. It becomes evident quite early on that the story is about the 'I' and her feelings and experiences, and not about the young pilot per se. Amidst describing the funeral the local villagers arranged for the pilot, 'Duras' begins to tell about her own brother Paulo's death during the Japan War and the grave he is resting in on the outskirts of Saigon. Even though she describes the death of the young English pilot and relates it to more general issues, such as the

¹³² The parameters of these concepts seem vague. Again, this is because of the impossibility of exact borders in defining the manifestations of the autobiographical subject. The lack of the borders becomes even more paramount where the author is concerned, and I will discuss this in chapters 5 and 6. See the Introduction, 'Texts and Lives', for my abandoning of the concept of the implied author in favour of the autobiographical 'I' and the author.

unfairness and the destructive power of war and the traumatic events of the 20th century, which was one of the author's great concerns throughout her oeuvre, this action takes place through the self's experience. The dead body of the pilot is equated with her brother's body, and his eyes to the eyes of Paulo. In the end, it is a question of her feelings towards her dead brother. She also states quite bluntly that she is writing the story because she can meddle with the story of the pilot's death and because she has a chance herself to actually stand on the metaphorical battlefield of the war: 'J'écris à cause de cette chance que j'ai de me mêler de tout, à tout, cette chance d'être dans ce champ de la guerre, dans ce théâtre vidé de la guerre, dans l'élargissement de cette réflexion (. . .).' (E, 81.)¹³³ Duras is not making the personal into the general like Ernaux, but the general into the personal.

La Vie matérielle for its part often strives to touch upon issues that are not as close to their reflecting self as the contemplation on writing in *Écrire*, or coming to terms with her own death, as in *C'est tout*. As was stated, the topics cover several aspects of life. However, it is the autobiographical 'I' around whom the issues eventually turn. When 'Duras' contemplates men in general, drawing her own relationships into the debate as well as the notorious love affair described in *L'Amant*, it is not simply the use of this personal material that makes the reader think that the contemplation is all about her. Her emphatic presence is evident in other ways as well, as in this passage:

Je me souviens de la présence des mains sur le corps, de la fraîcheur de l'eau des jattes. Qu'il fait chaud, chaud que c'en est inimaginable maintenant complètement. Je suis celle qui se laisse laver, il n'essuie pas mon corps, il me porte, trempée, sur le lit de camp – le bois lisse comme de la soie, frais – il allume le ventilateur. Il me mange avec un force et une douceur qui me défont. (VM, 48.)¹³⁴

After discussing the general male approach to her book *L'Amant*, the autobiographical 'I' slips into a memory of her own, clearly concerning the same scene as depicted in the book – the scene in which the young girl and her Chinese lover make love for the first time. She suddenly begins talking about how she herself remembers the incident, and not how the incident is depicted in *L'Amant*, or in the re-written version (*L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*), for that matter.

¹³³ 'I write because of the good fortune I have to get mixed up in everything, with everything; the good fortune to be in this battlefield, in this theater devoid of war, in the enlargement of this reflection (. . .).' (W, 73.)

¹³⁴ 'I remember the touch of the hands on the body, the freshness of the water in the pots. It is hot, so incomprehensibly hot that one cannot fathom it now. I am the one who lets the man wash my body, he does not dry me, he carries me, soaking wet, onto the camp bed – the wood is soft like silk, fresh – he puts on the air conditioner. He devours me with such force and softness that he tears me apart.' (My translation.)

C'est tout is actually compiled by Yann Andréa, since Duras was on her sickbed – which later became her deathbed – and physically unable to write. As was already stated, ‘Y.A.’ participates in the dialogue. Despite this, it is the voice of ‘M.D.’ that penetrates through the seemingly equal dialogue and takes its place as the narrator, after all. ‘Y.A.’ assumes the role of an interviewer and his function is to help her to express herself, as in this passage:

Y.A. Vous voulez ajouter quelque chose?
M.D. Je ne sais pas ajouter. Je sais
seulement créer. Seulement ça. (CT, 54.)¹³⁵

‘Y.A.’ is merely supporting ‘M.D.’ in her declaration to everyone that she is gifted in the act of creation (in other words, writing). The project they embark upon together has one goal, to let ‘M.D.’’s voice echo after death: ‘Dites donc, ça se confirme Duras, partout dans le monde et au-delà.’ (CT, 37.)¹³⁶ An unknown voice, who can be interpreted being ‘Y.A.’, ‘M.D.’, or someone else entirely, suggests that ‘Y.A.’ is dependent on Duras (ibid., 31). And even without the aid of ‘Y.A.’, ‘M.D.’ emphasizes herself throughout the book. The emphasis on ‘M.D.’ is evident in an instance where she notes that she is ‘without identity’ (ibid., 7). Again, even though ‘M.D.’ renounces her identity, it is through her voice that the renouncement is made. She validates her existence through the act of denying it.¹³⁷

The assumption made here is that the narration in Duras’s three reflective books is emphatically filtered through the consciousness of the reflecting self even when she seemingly ponders another issues entirely or lets ‘Y.A.’ speak in *C'est tout*. Naturally, all autobiographical narration is filtered through its narrator. In this case, the narrated material is pronouncedly infected by the perspective of the ‘I’ and ends up dealing almost solely with the ‘I’ herself, no matter what the narrated issue. This tendency is not unique to Duras alone: contemporary autobiographical authors often take their own personality as the ultimate focus in a more pronounced manner than previously – indicating that they are thoroughly conscious of themselves as authors, narrators and protagonists throughout the process of writing, and do not settle for simply describing their lives. Christopher Robinson’s note on the figure of Narcissus is relevant here. According to him, ‘Narcissus stands for the figure of the writer as one whose task is *by definition* autobiographical, since his perception of existence passes through, and is transformed by, his individual con-

¹³⁵ ‘Y.A.: Do you want to add something?
M.D.: I don’t know how to add. All I know how
to do is create. Only that.’ (NM, 67.)

¹³⁶ ‘You know, that’s a confirmation of Duras, everywhere in this world and the next.’ (NM, 48–49.)

¹³⁷ Cf. ‘Duras’'s assertion in *L'Amant* that the story of her life does not exist (A, 14).

sciousness” (Robinson 1980, 53; emphasis original.) In that sense all writing would be autobiographical (ibid.). Brian T. Fitch’s conception of a narcissistic text for its part signifies an autobiographical oeuvre in which the individual parts constantly refer to one another in an almost endless loop (cf. Fitch’s *Narcissistic Text*, 1982, and chapters 3 and 4 of this study). What characterizes both conceptions is pronounced self-consciousness, which inevitably brings us back to Linda Hutcheon’s ‘narcissistic narrative’ and perceiving texts as metatextual constructions (1980; cf. Introduction, ‘Reflection on Writing and the Self’) – though Hutcheon, admittedly, discusses narcissistic *fictions*.

2.3 From the Multitudes of the Self to the Unified Self: Project Duras

I noted above that ‘Duras’ might not be a completely stable self, after all. In *La Vie matérielle*, ‘Duras’ notes how she ‘should have been in the book’:

Il aurait fallu entrer dans le livre avec mes bagages, mon visage ravagé, mon âge, mon métier, ma brutalité, ma folie, et toi, tu aurais dû rester de même dans le livre, avec tes bagages, ton visage lisse, ton âge, ton oisiveté, ta brutalité terrible, ta folie, ton angélisme fabuleux. Et ça n'aurait pas été suffisant. (VM, 102.)¹³⁸

The passage is a part of a composition called ‘Le livre’, which discusses Duras’s *L’Amant*. There are multiple selves present in the passage. The contemporary, older ‘I’ thinks that she should have incorporated herself into the book written earlier. She addresses a young girl, who is the primary autobiographical ‘I’ of the book, and states that she would have stayed in the book despite the older ‘I’s’ presence. In order to be acceptable, the book must entail the self completely – both ‘I’s’ from different points in time, the older and the younger one. And even this is not enough, which indicates that the self is so essential in the construction of the book that she can never be fully incorporated into the text. The passage both brings up the insertion of the self in writing and comments on the inevitable lack in autobiographical writing: such writing can never depict every point in the author’s or the

¹³⁸ ‘I should have gone into the book with my baggage, my ravaged face, my age, my profession, my brutality, my madness, and you, you would have been yourself in the book, with your baggage, your smooth face, your youth, your idleness, your terrible brutality, your madness, your fabulous angelic character. And even that would not have been enough.’ (My translation.)

author's alter ego's life. Most importantly, it highlights the multitudes of the autobiographical subject.¹³⁹

Paul Smith notes that autobiographies may strive to offer a coherent image of the subject, which is emphasized by the identification of the author's and the narrator-protagonist's names with one another (Smith 1988, 104) – however, they often fail. More often than not the readers of autobiographical writing are faced with the difficulty of defining the essence of the autobiographical subject. This is evident even when it comes to conventional autobiographical writing in which the self's aspiration is often to present a coherent story of his or her life and personality, as in *Les Confessions* – and even Rousseau's autobiography is not as coherent and stable as it seems.¹⁴⁰ It has been a key motivation especially for contemporary autobiographical writers, as well as for the critics of autobiographical writing, to question the possibility of presenting a solid self.¹⁴¹ Roland Barthes, among many others, is an example of an autobiographical writer who questions cohesive subjectivity in his *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975). The autobiographical self is often split in two: the writing self and the self written (Crowley 2000, 257; Smith 1988, 105; Elbaz 1988, 5–6), and cannot be conceived as an essentialistic entity which precedes its description (Bruner 1990, 99; Bergland 1994, 161).

What is evident is that the autobiographical 'I' does not remain the same in Duras's three books under discussion here: she develops and changes from one book to the next. She gains in self-affirmation and narcissism moving from *La Vie matérielle* to *Écrire*, and perhaps even more so in *C'est tout*. She turns from more general topics (such as taking photographs) towards more personal and intense emotional subject matter (such as her own approaching death). My claim is that despite its diverse manifestations, the autobiographical 'I' maintains her emphatic presence. However, it does not suffice just to state that the reflecting self is 'emphatic' in Duras's contemplative autobiographical writing, no matter how deftly she manages to turn everything around to deal with herself. I suggest that 'Duras' simultaneously constructs at least some kind of a story of her life and an image of her personality, even though she may not try to do so – at least not coherently. The

¹³⁹ Crowley discusses the split in Duras's *L'Amant*. In his opinion the autobiographical subject is characterized not only by 'je', but also by 'vous'. (Crowley 2000, 257.) The same goes for the three books here. Depending on a particular essay and its topic in *La Vie matérielle*, 'Duras' might be closer or more distant from herself.

¹⁴⁰ However, compared to newer forms of autobiographical writing, such as autofiction and works by the *nouveau roman* authors, *Les Confessions* and the like are in some aspects conventionally chronological and seem to depict the personality in question coherently and rationally.

¹⁴¹ For an overview of the dissolution of the self in the *nouveau roman* movement in particular, see Meretoja 2010, 2–23. Meretoja's dissertation, especially its introduction, is an in-depth survey of the dissolution of the subject in post-war France.

self has been constructing itself throughout Duras's career, and especially in the later texts it reaches further dimensions. Such development and multiplicity of the self (also during the course of one autobiographical text) has been a common concern in studies of autobiographical writing.¹⁴² This is not surprising, since one of the key issues of autobiographies is the depiction of not only the self's personality, but also its progression throughout his or her life. When autobiographical writing is begun earlier in life, the description of the development does not happen retrospectively but is embodied in the process of writing. In Duras's case, the development has happened both during and after a process of writing which lasted for more or less five decades.

In addition to the depiction of the self, it is the self's self-conscious reflection that constitute the core of Duras's contemplative stories. Their essential feature is the double function of autobiographical writing: memory and identity formation construct the autobiographical story, and the autobiographical story respectively constructs memory and identity formation. The autobiographical 'I' in *La Vie matérielle*, *Écrire* and *C'est tout* does not attempt to tell a story of her life per se, but forms the story by constructing an image of herself by telling about things through her own perception and interpretation. In other words, she creates herself through her own reflection and thus fulfils Eakin's proposition of autobiographical writing as identity formation.

Geoffrey Galt Harpham suggests that autobiographers live in continual expectation of life writing throughout their lives, and that they are always aware of the narrativity of their lives (Harpham 1988, 42). In Duras's case, the construction of the self in her stories is always closely connected to writing. 'M.D.' states the same in the quote at the beginning of this chapter: 'Who are you? Duras, no more. What does Duras do? She creates literature.' The main trait of 'Duras' is *écriture*. 'M.D.' notes that she has written all her life, and that one learns writing throughout one's life (CT, 38). The implication is that writing is not a mechanical process but a part of the author throughout her life. As proposed, in *Écrire* 'Duras' suggests that the self and writing are closely connected especially with regard to solitude, which is an essential precondition for writing (E, 15). 'Duras' specifies that solitude cannot be found: 'On ne trouve pas la solitude, on la fait. La solitude elle se fait seule. Je l'ai faite. Parce que j'ai décidé que c'était là que je devrais être seule, que je serais seule pour écrire des livres.' (E, 17.)¹⁴³ In order to write, the self needs solitude. But the solitude has to be created for the self by writing about it. At the same time,

¹⁴² The tendency to write multiple selves over and over again has been noted by John Barth in context of Jorge Luis Borges's work and the doubles his characters 'run afoul' (Barth 1967, 34).

¹⁴³ 'One does not find solitude, one creates it. Solitude is created alone. I have created it. Because I decided that *here* was where I should be alone, that I would be alone to write books.' (W, 4-5.)

solitude creates itself. Thus self, writing, and solitariness are all inextricably linked. This implies that there truly is only one, solitary voice that reflects upon herself by writing. To make the matter even clearer, 'Duras' states that '[p]ersonne n'a jamais écrit à deux voix. On a pu chanter à deux voix, faire de la musique aussi, et du tennis, mais écrire, non. Jamais.' (E, 22.)¹⁴⁴ Unlike in playing music or tennis, one needs only one voice to write.

Although the construction of the self in autobiographical writing may result in multiple selves, it is possible to interpret Duras's contemplative texts as having only one voice – in other words, some kind of a coherent self. To fulfil herself, the self needs writing, and thus the voice which the self-reflective texts construct is bound with the concept of writing. The unity of the self is achieved by identifying the self with writing: it is the glue that keeps all selves together.

2.4 'Duras' and Duras: the Autobiographical 'I' and the Author

I have proposed that the reflecting self is a highly emphatic and influential figure in Duras's contemplative writing and that each topic passes through her consciousness. Obviously, nothing is this simple. I may accept the conclusion that the life-writing parallel is discussed by the self in Duras's contemplative stories, and that this emphasis on writing is what keeps the selves somewhat unified. I may even suggest that this is because the double-connection of life-writing is detectable inside an autobiographical story (or stories) as well. However, it is quite difficult to distinguish the relationship between writing and life from that of text and reality. When 'Duras' discusses the connection between solitude and writing in *Écrire*, the ambiguity is forever present – is it the solitude of the reflecting textual self that is the prerequisite of writing, or is it the solitude of the autobiographical author that allows the reflecting textual self to discuss 'solitude' and 'writing'? Similarly, is it the textual self's reflection that makes it possible for autobiographical identity formation to take place, or does the birth of the textual self stem from the autobiographical project of the author? The fact that the reflecting textual self is named 'Duras' or 'M.D.', and is thus a direct reference to the autobiographical author Duras, far from lessens the anxiety.

Crowley implies that the powerful figure present in Duras's writing is not quite a presence (Crowley 2000, 271). 'Presence' is admittedly an ambiguous con-

¹⁴⁴ 'No one has ever written in two voices. One can sing in two voices, and make music, and play tennis; but write? No, never.' (W, 10–11.)

cept (even if quite an alluring and poetic one), but autobiographical 'I', self, or even 'Duras' does not seem to cover the essence of the influential personality by itself. It might be that the self named 'Duras' in the reflective texts cannot be reduced to the textual self no matter how sternly one sticks to the analysis of what takes place in the books. Who is reflecting herself, 'Duras' or Duras? There is an inevitable slippage between the textual and extra-textual levels of self-reflection and self-creation.

In *Écrire*, 'Duras' takes up the issue of writing books in general:

Il y a encore des générations mortes qui font des livres pudibonds. Même des jeunes : des livres charmants, sans prolongement aucun, sans nuit. Sans silence. Autrement dit : sans véritable auteur. Des livres des jour, se passe-temps, de voyage. Mais pas des livres qui s'incrument dans la pensée et qui disent le deuil noir de toute vie, le lieu commun de toute pensée. (E, 34.)¹⁴⁵

In the passage, the autobiographical 'I' expresses her opinion on what kind of books should be considered valuable and what kind of books do not fulfil her personal requirements. Since we know that 'darkness' and 'silence' are Durasian trademarks, or at least characteristics that researchers are prone to note in Duras's writing, one could argue that 'Duras' is referring to the author Duras's stories as the valuable ones. Essential is the phrase 'sans véritable auteur'. The 'I' clearly states that, in her opinion, books require a real author. Obviously, she may not refer precisely to the real author behind the text, but more to some sort of a governing figure. However, she still refers to some entity other than the actual narrator. She states that in some books there is no real author, but in this case there is one – Duras – so, at least in Duras's case, the author behind the books is relevant.

In *C'est tout*, 'M.D.' discusses what happens after the author Duras is dead. She states that writing is a 'confirmation of Duras' (CT, 37). The writing on the page validates the author in her life and in her death. 'M.D.' ponders the future of herself: 'Dans l'avenir je ne veux rien. Que parler de moi encore, toujours, comme une plate-forme monotone. Encore de moi.' (Ibid., 44.)¹⁴⁶ She admits that she wishes to discuss nothing else but herself, monotonously, eternally. And when she is dead, her voice remains, echoes, forever and forever. 'M.D.' does not herself pass away in the text, and she identifies herself as Duras by talking about 'Duras'

¹⁴⁵ 'There are still dead generations that produce prim books. Even young people: charming books, without extension, without darkness. Without silence. In other words, without a true author. Books for daytime, for whiling away the hours, for traveling. But not books that become embedded in one's thoughts and toll the black mourning for all life, the commonplace of every thought.' (W, 23–24.)

¹⁴⁶ 'In the future, I want nothing. Except to speak more about myself, all the time, monotonously. More about myself.' (NM, 56.)

and 'moi', 'me', in the same breath: this gives the impression that she both wishes to validate the importance of her own voice and to juxtapose herself with the dying author, or even see the two as the one and the same, inseparable.

Whether the 'I', the 'self', or 'Duras', the speaking subject in Duras's writing has an influence on the reception of her work, as has the author herself. Researchers have often discussed the emphatic presence of the author Duras in her writing. James S. Williams notes that critics have often been mesmerized by the fast production rate and the immense media attention Duras's each book has received. Consequently, they have linked Duras with her writing in an inconceivably symbiotic manner. (Williams 1997, 1–2.) A pronounced example is the following foreword to the collection of critical essays published two years after Duras's death:

Je n'ai jamais rencontré Marguerite Duras. Je l'ai vue. Une seule fois.

Je n'ai jamais parlé à Marguerite Duras.

J'ai lu tout ses livres. J'ai vu tous ses films. Je la connaissais. De l'intérieur. Comme une amie de jeunesse. Je savais tout d'elle. Il y avait ses livres. Il y avait elle dans ses livres.

Il y avait Duras au quotidien. Il y avait cela. Et le texte. (Alonzo 1998, foreword.)¹⁴⁷

On the one hand, as a commemoration the lines are mesmerizing and appropriate. On the other, it should be kept in mind that the passage is a foreword to a critical study on Duras, and as such an influential guideline to the approach the study is taking. The lines suggest that by reading her books (and by watching her films) one could get 'inside' her, since she is in her books. They characterize the 'critical' approach to Duras, which often consists of celebratory phrases and of at least implicit assurances that the critic in question has been in a meaningful contact with the intentions of the author. (Fortunately, the articles themselves in the collection in question are learned, critical and thought-provoking.) Williams adds that quoting Duras's comments on her writing is often the means of argumentation in the research on her oeuvre (Williams 1997, 1–2). This is true of Crowley's study.

¹⁴⁷ I never met Marguerite Duras. I saw her. Only once.

I never spoke with Marguerite Duras.

I read all her books. I saw all her films. I knew her. From the inside. Like a friend from my youth. I knew everything about her. There were her books. I found her in her books.

There was Duras on a daily basis. There was this. And there was the text.' (Alonzo 1998, foreword.)

Throughout the otherwise learned and well conducted study, the voice of Duras as well as that of her textual alter ego rings through. The last chapter and the conclusion of the study both discuss mostly the self, voice, and even actual Duras as an influential figure in her writing. Many pages in the conclusion are occupied by quotations from Duras's reflective texts and extra-textual commentary rather than actual criticism – in other words, both 'Duras's' and Duras's voices echo over Crowley's, and not even separately. So, while the critics want to analyze the 'Duras' in the texts they also emphasize that Duras herself is significant and that she can be detected in her books. I also sometimes walk a thin line between analysis and enforcing the phenomenon.

The autobiographical 'I' not only depicts her life and personality in Duras's contemplative texts and is deeply concerned with the concept of writing, but the writing is actually integral to the personality of the reflecting autobiographical author herself. This was already suggested in connection with Eakin's conception of autobiography as identity formation. According to Irving Louis Horowitz, autobiographical writing is based on the needs of the autobiographer himself or herself: the author has a 'need (. . .) for transcendence and ultimately for immortality' (Horowitz 1977, 174). He continues that '[t]he game of autobiography becomes one with life itself, rich with moral, aesthetic, and epistemological implications in which the real purpose of autobiography is to construct a meaningful mosaic for others, while subtly insuring a place in the cosmos for one's self'. (Ibid, 176.) Autobiography is, in addition to this, an act of self-confrontation, and even at its best it is only filtered self-awareness (Ibid.). In Duras's case especially, the self-confrontation often borders on pronounced narcissism in its intensity and repetitiveness. Even Crowley asks, and not perhaps in vain, with regard to *C'est tout*, 'What if it has all just been vanity after all?' (Crowley 2000, 281.)

Some critics have embraced the idea of Duras being the sole object and purpose of her writing with pleasure. In their article 'In Principio Erat Verbum... The Mysticism of Marguerite Duras' (1985), Doris Enright and Clark Shoukri discuss the so-called mystic writer, who in their opinion is the message herself, more than her oeuvre. Her act of writing is significant in its own and full of life regardless of what she is describing. According to them, Marguerite Duras has the characteristics of such a mystic writer: her image is strong to the point of being self-evident, and she also stated that she is almost possessed by writing. (Ibid., 54.) In any case, the emphasis on the self does not happen unconsciously or by mistake. Duras herself is a very determined, emphatic figure in between her written word and experience. The intensity of her output by no means leaves her passion towards writing unclear, either.

It has been said that a great artist lives for his or her autobiography (Gusdorf 1956/1980, 47). An adverse opinion supports the view of an autobiog-

raphy being a subsidiary and unrepeatable event (Sturrock 1977, 51). This view disregards the types of autobiographical writing that span several works and sometimes an entire oeuvre. In Annie Ernaux's case, it is evident that writing autobiographically is a lifelong project, and all her books are more or less autobiographical. This will be examined further in the following chapter. Duras, on the other hand, has a far more wide-ranging career; her oeuvre includes novels, plays, and films in addition to autobiographical novels. However, the reflective texts imply that writing is always related to Duras and her own life as well. All her writing reverts back to her, her books are never completely separate from the author Duras. And it is in these contemplative autobiographical books where the relationship between the textual self, the author, and writing becomes the most explicit.

PART II Spaces of the Self

3. Ernaux's Autobiographical Space

J'ai cherché une forme littéraire qui contiendrait toute ma vie. (UP, 27.)¹⁴⁸

In her first novel, *Les Armoires vides*, which is set in the 1960s, Annie Ernaux tells a story of a certain college girl, Denise Lesur. The girl is an intelligent student who is on her way to setting herself free from her working-class background by the means of education. Then the almost inevitable happens: the girl gets pregnant. Abortion is illegal in Catholic France, so the girl is forced to resort to dangerous methods to keep her life on the course she has safely followed until the unwanted pregnancy. The story, told in the third person, addresses the ethics of an abortion in the particular environment, and offers slight reflection on the act of telling about it.

L'Événement returns to the subject almost thirty years later, this time through the voice of the autobiographical 'I'. The abortion is described bluntly: the girl's resolve to do what is necessary, the panic, the blinding pain the girl feels when the probe that is to remove the foetus from her is inserted, how she walks around for five days with the probe inside her, and finally, the actual 'birth':

J'ai ressenti une violente envie de chier. J'ai couru aux toilettes, de l'autre côté du couloir, et je me suis accroupie devant la cuvette, face à la porte. Je voyais le carrelage entre mes cuisses. Je poussais de toutes mes forces. Cela a jailli comme une grenade, dans un éclaboussement d'eau qui s'est répandue jusqu'à la porte. J'ai vu un petit baigneur pendre de mon sexe au bout d'un cordon rougeâtre. Je n'avais pas imagine avoir cela en moi. Il fallait que je marche avec jusqu'à ma chambre. Je l'ai pris dans une main – c'était d'une étrange lourdeur – et je me suis avancée dans le couloir en le serrant entre mes cuisses. J'étais une bête. (Év, 100–101.)¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ 'I have searched for a literary form that would capture my whole life.' (My translation.)

¹⁴⁹ 'I was seized with a violent urge to shit. I rushed across the corridor into the bathroom and squatted by the porcelain bowl, facing the door. I could see the tiles between my thighs. I pushed with all my strength. 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. I couldn't imagine ever having had that inside me. I had to walk with it to my room. I took it in one hand – it was strangely heavy – and proceeded along the corridor, squeezing it between my thighs. I was a wild beast.' (Ha, 74–75.)

The nauseating, graphic description makes sure that the *l'événement* pops out from the rest of the text.¹⁵⁰ In addition to contemplating the violence of the abortion, *L'Événement* is characterized by a similar metatextual commentary, as found in *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation* and described in chapter 1. Compared to the other two, *L'Événement* actually goes to even further lengths in weaving together 'Ernaux's past, present, and the resulting transgressions of the boundary between reality and writing. The autobiographical 'I' discusses what is true in her story and what is not, the material versus the immaterial traces of the past, and not having the right to name the people involved in the illegal incident. The contemplations appear in numerous bracketed passages as well as in footnotes – a formal characteristic that is familiar from many other of the author's books.

It is relevant that the discussion on the abortion is not limited to the two books that revolve around the topic. Ernaux's abortion is mentioned in *La Femme gélée* and *L'Usage de la photo* as well. In a social diary, *La Vie extérieure*, Ernaux seemingly ponders the affair between Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton, a favourite topic of the media in the late 1990s. All of a sudden she brings up another issue entirely: 'Monica Lewinsky a fait partie d'une ligue contre l'avortement. Elle sait tout de la fellation, mais que sait-elle de l'avortement, de cette expérience-là, de sa profondeur?' (VE, 118.)¹⁵¹ The passage refers to an act of abortion itself, and also hints at the violence and the tragedy of it with the words 'experience' and 'depths', so intensely described in *Les Armoires vides* and especially in *L'Événement*.

The morality of abortion, the effect it has on a young girl and the process of writing about it and publishing the resulting story are, evidently, recurring themes in Ernaux's oeuvre. The abortion itself manifests itself as an autobiographical motif – a *biographème* – that recurs time and time again in the author's work, and in doing so constructs connections between works and simultaneously emphasises the autobiographical air of the oeuvre. Ernaux's abortion is a *biographème par excel-*

¹⁵⁰ The graphic description of bodily experience appears also in *Passion simple* in which 'Ernaux' describes a scene in a pornographic film. In the introduction, I briefly brought up Paul John Eakin's somatic perspective on narrative identity that goes beyond the scope of my discussion. However, 'body' is relevant in several ways: as a woman's body and as a sexual body, and most importantly, as a dying body. Duras has attached very concrete bodily sensations to experiences such as the first sexual encounters with the Chinese lover. In *La Femme gélée* 'Ernaux' feels trapped as a mother and as a housewife, but being a pregnant woman and a mother is very much a bodily experience. In Ernaux's case, the awareness of her approaching death, a trigger for writing, stems from a bodily experience, breast cancer, discussed in *L'Usage de la photo*. Duras's dying body is very much present in her *C'est tout*, and in *La Douleur* she depicts her husband Robert Antelme's, a survivor of concentration camps, malnourished body and his slow and torturous journey into recovery. However, the most graphic bodily experience in Ernaux's writing is the infamous abortion.

¹⁵¹ 'Monica Lewinsky belonged to an anti-abortion league. She knows everything about fellatio, but what does she know about abortion, of that experience, of its depths?' (IS, 73.)

lence. It is a simple event that is reproduced in the author's works, but the complexity of its textual manifestations simultaneously allows it to transmit an intricate contemplation on the ethics of abortion itself and that of writing and telling a story of one's past experience. The recurrence of the motif and the themes revolving around it suggest continuity in the author's oeuvre that goes beyond the interest of some particular subject matter.

This chapter develops this notion further and suggests that Ernaux's work is a literary mosaic, in the sense that it is an entity consisting of interrelated parts, of which the motif of abortion is only one part – albeit a relevant one. Although the whole of Ernaux's work could be discussed in terms of the vast amount of recurring features, I will limit my analysis mostly to particular works, such as the stories depicting the passionate love affair dealt with in chapter 1, and to the stories of her parents, in *La Place* and *Une Femme. L'Usage de la photo* and *Les Années* (2008) are treated as converging works in Ernaux's oeuvre, whereas her more recent publications show signs of a hurry to tell everything before it is too late. I will read her texts in close intra-intertextual relationship with each other and attempt to discuss their interrelatedness from the perspective of her autobiographical, self-reflective 'web of writing'. I will identify recurring elements in texts that might seem random, but are each relevant to the analysis. The following discussion is thus based on depicting the thematic kinship of texts, analyzing their multilayered connections, and discovering some recurring motifs and self-conscious qualities that have further interpretative value. Of course, the oeuvre in question is more or less autobiographical in its entirety. Theorists have brought up the concept of autobiographical space that pervades the author's oeuvre. Here, I will also offer my own suggestion of how it is constructed.

3.1 Web of Passion: Unity within the Oeuvre

Besides abortion, one of the most prominent *biographemes* in Ernaux's works is love affairs. The intra-intertextual potential of this motif is especially apparent in the case of *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation*, since the books actually depict the same relationship during and after it took place. The intensity of the obsessive feelings of the autobiographical 'I' is the same in both works, whether they are feelings of passion in the first or of jealousy in the latter. In *Passion simple*, 'Ernaux's' all-consuming passion towards her lover is described as covering all aspects of her daily life. The autobiographical 'I' is practically unable to lead a normal life: her every action revolves around either waiting for the lover's arrival or agonizing over his absence. In *L'Occupation*, the lover has become an ex-lover, and 'Ernaux's' obsession is transferred towards his new love interest. She is determined to find out

everything about her: her name, where she lives, her profession, and why the man chose her.

Besides *L'Occupation*, there are other works in Ernaux's oeuvre that convey an intense passion comparable to the one depicted in *Passion simple*. The reference to a subject of forbidden passion is ever so slight in *La Vie extérieure*, where Ernaux describes how she observes a woman flying from Marseilles to Paris. The woman is filing her nails carefully, looking at herself in the mirror, and finally orders champagne:

C'est une femme qui va retrouver un homme et qui se paie le champagne pour rendre parfait le bonheur de l'attente. Fêter l'attente elle-même.

Avant l'atterrissage, elle se regarde encore dans sa glace, rectifie son maquillage. C'est comme si j'étais elle. (VE, 13.)¹⁵²

In *Passion simple* the autobiographical 'I' devotes an immense amount of time to grooming herself and her home before the encounters with her lover: she chooses her clothes carefully, takes a long shower, prepares their meals perfectly, perhaps while sipping a glass of wine. The waiting for the lover is even more essential than the sexual encounters themselves. The reference may be implicit, but one who has familiarized herself with *Passion simple* and this thematic in Ernaux's work in general cannot ignore the connection. The autobiographical 'I's statement 'It is as if I were her' reinforces the familiarity since in both *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation* 'Ernaux' notes the relation of her individual experience to other people's experiences.

Abortion, a prominently figuring motif in Ernaux's oeuvre as we just saw, was considered a major taboo in the French society of the 1960s. It is interesting that the love affairs that Ernaux depicts are often taboo as well, such as the extra-marital relationships depicted in *Passion simple*, *Se perdre* and *L'Occupation*. Somewhat taboo also is the attitude of Ernaux's alter ego, the autobiographical 'I', towards the affair: the woman is compulsively obsessed with the man during and after the relationship. *L'Usage de la photo*, we remember, recounts an affair that is depicted in an unconventional, shocking manner. In the book there are photographs of the clothes Ernaux and her lover Marc Marie allegedly discarded in the heat of passion in surroundings that are usually considered private: hotel rooms and Ernaux's apartment. Roland Barthes notes that the division of private and public is inherently present when it comes to viewing photographs, but that he wishes to reconstitute it. A photograph reveals something, but Barthes suggests it is a question of

¹⁵² 'This is a woman going to join a man, treating herself to champagne to make the joy of expectation perfect. Celebrating expectation itself.

Before landing, she looks at herself in the mirror again, touches up her makeup. It is as if I were her.' (TS, 4.)

uttering interiority without yielding intimacy. (Barthes 1980/1983, 98.) In this case, the photographs do suggest that some level of intimacy is revealed to the public.

Dealing with taboo subject matters recurs in Ernaux's other stories as well. These include a woman's hate of her children and domestic life in *La Femme g el e*, a husband (her father) who loses his temper and tries to kill his wife (her mother) in *La Honte*, and the destructive force of her mother's Alzheimer's disease in 'Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit' (1996). What can be deduced from this is that Ernaux is interested in telling (autobiographical) stories with intense subject matter, but also in reflecting on the repercussions of telling, and writing, something that is considered taboo.

Reflection on writing in general is not only a peculiarity of *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation* but a constant feature in Ernaux's work. Especially tangible is the pondering over the possibilities and repercussions of writing about one's own life. Rousseau meditated on the process of representing something real about himself and his life already in the 18th century. Colette, George Sand and Simone de Beauvoir are examples of female writers who showed that an autobiography written by a woman can be equally self-conscious and multilayered. De Beauvoir, like Rousseau, was highly self-reflective in her multi-volume autobiography especially with regard to her own psychological development and also to putting that development into words. Sand for her part wrote numerous autobiographical volumes, ranging from novels using her own childhood as material to intimate journals describing the affairs she had with famous artists and philosophers, such as Alfred de Musset and Fr ed eric Chopin. De Beauvoir also described her tumultuous relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre in slightly more fictionalized accounts.

In addition to joining a historical continuum of autobiographical writing that is pointedly self-conscious and revelatory, Ernaux belongs to a group of 20th and 21st century female authors who write autobiographically while questioning the representational nature of their writing. As proposed, their works can be categorized as autofictions that openly situate themselves somewhere between fact and fiction (cf. Introduction, 'Ernaux, Duras, and Autobiographical Writing'). What distinguishes Ernaux from these authors is a more wide-ranging subject matter. Catherine Millet, Camille Laurens, and Marie Darrieussecq write about love, men, sex, and looks, while conjoining this seemingly superficial thematic material with an interrogation of the conditions and limits of writing about their own lives. Ernaux often concentrates on the feminine experience of passion, motherhood and sex, but reflects widely on social and political matters as well, along the lines of George Sand. Unique to her oeuvre is also the effort to capture the entirety of her personality and life, uncommon in most autofiction, and the emphasis on writing as a truly elemental function of her existence.

Reflection on writing occurs in almost every one of Ernaux's works, but in *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation* it is inherently connected to the depiction of the experience of passion. One of the key issues Ernaux's autobiographical 'I' discusses with regard to her passion and affairs is the parallel between life and writing. In chapter 1, it was suggested that the 'I' feels that her passion and her writing about it are intertwined. In *Passion simple*, the connection is underlined on several occasions, as when 'Ernaux' compares her passion to writing a book, and even meditates on the style of the so-called book, whether it be testimony, a piece in a women's magazine, or, most relevantly, a critical commentary (PS, 30–31). She is frank about her own position as a commentator of her own storytelling. The parallel is apparent in *L'Occupation* as well, where it is turned upside down – the autobiographical 'I' strives to describe the passion as she experienced it:

J'écris d'ailleurs la jalousie comme je la vivais, en traquant et accumulant les désirs, les sensations et les actes qui ont été les miens en cette période. C'est la seule façon pour moi de donner une matérialité à cette obsession. Et je crains toujours de laisser échapper quelque chose d'essentiel. L'écriture, en somme, comme une jalousie du réel. (O, 40.)¹⁵³

The 'I' reflects on the effort to track all the sensations relating to her experience and admits to being constantly afraid of letting something essential escape. Regarding writing as a 'jealousy of the real' suggests that writing is secondary to the actual experience. However, reflection emphasizing *écriture* so much suggests otherwise. Paralleling life and writing turns the attention back to writing in both books.

To take another example, the issue of time and its significance in the process of writing are recognized in both books. *L'Occupation* addresses the theme of exposure and the boundary between the actual experience and the literary manifestation of it. 'Ernaux' describes something that she considered shameful when it took place, but as the act of writing is to not be seen, she is safe when writing about it.¹⁵⁴ The present moment of writing is also mentioned in *Passion simple*, for

¹⁵³ 'I am writing jealousy as I lived it, tracking and accumulating the desires, sensations, and actions that were mine during this period. It's the only way for me to make something real of my obsession. And I am always afraid to let something essential escape. Writing, that is, as a jealousy of the real.' (Po, 34.)

¹⁵⁴ 'L'exposition que je fais *ici*, en écrivant, de mon obsession et de ma souffrance, n'a rien à voir avec celle que je redoutais si je m'étais rendue avenue Rapp. Écrire, c'est d'abord ne pas être vu. Autant il me paraissait inconcevable, atroce, d'offrir mon visage, mon corps, ma voix, tout ce qui fait la singularité de ma personne, au regard de quiconque dans l'état de dévoration et d'abandon qui était le mien, *autant je n'éprouve aujourd'hui aucune gêne* – pas davantage de défi – à *exposer* et explorer *mon obsession*.' (O, 45; emphasis original.); 'The exhibition that I am making *here* – by writing – of my obsession and my suffering is completely unlike what I feared in showing up at Avenue Rapp. To write, first of all, is not to be seen. As inconceivable, as atrocious, as it seemed to me to offer up my face, my body, my voice – everything that made up the singularity of my being – to the gaze of anybody while in the state of consumption and aban-

example when 'Ernaux' recognizes the rift between the present moment of writing and the moment of publishing. The 'I' meditates on the border between her 'indecipherable scrawlings' and the actual publication (set somewhere in the future) of the story. The distance allows her to not feel shame over the taboo subject matter. (PS, 42.) However, as was noted in chapter 1, the publication of the story will have repercussions. She takes up the issue of genre and asks what kind of an effect the possible autobiographical nature of the book might have on the readers' response to the story. (PS, 70.) Publication transforms the situation again, since the autobiographical nature of the story about obsessive passion exposes the author.

In addition to thematic links such as the forbidden love affair, the intra-intertextual clues may be formal or technical. Georges Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975) and *Je me souviens* (1978) are both the author's semi-autobiographical memoirs but in their fragmentary nature also resemble each another formally. In Ernaux's case, both *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation*, as her many other books, use footnotes and brackets mostly to convey thoughts that seem to come into the autobiographical 'I's' mind in the midst of the depiction of the theme or incident that is the focus of the particular story. Both texts are constructed in quite a fragmented way, consisting of paragraphs and/or subchapters of varying lengths and lacking conventional chapter headings. Particularly the separation of metatext from the actual story by positioning them in different paragraphs has a thematic dimension: it emphasizes the distance between the story told and the act of telling, in other words, the reflection on writing autobiographically which is one of Ernaux's constant topics in her works. Such formal similarities also underline the thematic unison of the texts since they emphasize the textuality of the stories, one of the themes Ernaux deals with in the works. This relates to Ernaux's way of commenting on the mode of autobiographical writing.

The basic motifs of *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation*, passion and the love affair, are also introduced in *Se perdre*. This work, published ten years after *Passion simple*, introduces a diary version of the same affair.¹⁵⁵ There is a direct reference to the earlier work in the early pages of the diary: 'Après son départ de France, j'ai entrepris un livre sur cette passion qui m'avait traversée et continuait de vivre en moi. Je l'ai poursuivi de façon discontinue, achevé en 1991 et publié en 1992 : *Pas-*

don I was in, *today I feel no embarrassment whatever* – still less, any resistance – about *exposing* and exploring *my obsession*.' (Po, 38–39; emphasis original)

¹⁵⁵ For discussion on the possible unreliability resulting from the depiction of the same events in various works, see Shen & Xu 2007, 60–75. The question they pose is if depicting same real-life events differently in multiple works means that the faithfulness to life, an essential condition of autobiographies, is hindered. They note that some readers believe that 'fictionalization is unavoidable in any genre and autobiography can fictionalize to a certain extent' (ibid., 75), and I agree with this. On the other hand, as I noted in chapter 1, self-consciousness does not necessarily lessen the autographical nature of a text.

sion simple?' (SP, 13–14.)¹⁵⁶ While the 'T' refers to *Passion simple* by name, she comments on the intermittent process of writing the work. In addition to the direct reference, the remark on the continuous passion of the 'T' who exists simultaneously in the textual worlds of both *Passion simple* and *Se perdre* binds the two works together. In addition, Ernaux's other works contain a number of references to *Se perdre*. The journal is referred to in *L'Occupation*: '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' (O, 24), and '[j]e notais dans mon journal, « je suis décidée à ne plus le revoir »' (ibid., 43).¹⁵⁷ Similar remarks recur in *La Honte* and in 'Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit'. *Se perdre* and 'Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit' are similar in that Ernaux at least claims that she did not know she would publish them while writing her personal diaries, from which the works seem to be excerpted. Siobhán McIlvanney finds some evidence to support the claim, such as chronological errors, repetition and the names of individuals (McIlvanney 2001, 117).

It is impossible to treat *Se perdre* separately from these other works. These may be physically distinct but simultaneously never allow the reader to disregard the existence of the diary. The sheer amount of the references further suggests that they are not random, and that 'Ernaux' intentionally constructs a web of intra-intertextual allusions between her works. According to Philippe Lejeune, the autobiographical space (*l'espace autobiographique*) forms when two or more texts establish a contact of contrast with one another (Lejeune 1975/1989, 27). He suggests that it is not the truth value of either the novels or autobiographies belonging to the oeuvre but their intermittent contrast that makes them function as one. Ernaux's works in question are not reducible to 'autobiographies' and 'novels' but suggest more ambiguous generic categories. It no longer matters that as an individual work *Se perdre* is more like a diary, and *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation* are autobiographical novels or autofictions. When the works are joined by a complex web of references, the autobiographical nature spills over the edge of the works and creates the autobiographical space – despite that as a diary *Se perdre* appears as more truthful than the other two that question the autobiographical mode. The connections make the generic category of individual texts obsolete. Lejeune's view of the unity forming within the author's oeuvre is somewhat limited, however. The autobiographical space is based on more than one of the texts being autobiographical and influenc-

¹⁵⁶ 'After he left France, I embarked upon writing a book about the passion, which I had gone through and which had continued to live in me. I wrote intermittently, finishing the book in 1991 and publishing it in 1992: *Passion simple*.' (My translation.)

¹⁵⁷ 'All I remembered the first moments of our affair, the "magnificence" of his cock, as I had noted in my diary'; 'I wrote in my journal "I have decided not to see him again"' (Po, 19; Po, 36).

ing other works in the same author's oeuvre. In Ernaux's passion stories, it is also the continuum created by reflections on writing, and the recurrence of a similarly obsessive attitude on formal and thematic levels that brings about the impression of a unified space. I will come back to this assumption with regard to Ernaux's whole oeuvre after introducing another essential group of stories that are linked to each other and to the works just discussed.

3.2 Web of Social Writing: Reiteration of the Reflective Concerns of Earlier Works

The other primary concern in Ernaux's writing besides passion and love affairs has to do with social commentary. Relevant themes cover the author's working-class heritage, most essentially Ernaux's relationship with her parents, as well as her own advancement on the social scale by the means of education. Parents or other parts of Ernaux's working-class background are referred to in most of her works. These include *La Femme gélée*, which discusses her social advancement and her conflicting feelings about her family, and *Les Armoires vides* which introduces the *biographeme* of the abortion to Ernaux's work and also ties the 1960s college girl's radical solution to her social background. Some later stories revolve even more tightly around the topic. *La Honte* discusses a painful incident of young 'Ernaux's' father lifting a scythe and threatening to kill her mother with it.¹⁵⁸ 'Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit' is a story of the mother's advancing Alzheimer's disease and her ensuing death. The thematic continuum of parent and family relations and social background expand even wider in the author's oeuvre than the passion stories.

There are two works by Ernaux with a special emphasis on the theme of family relations, even though they were not the first ones to touch upon the subject: *La Place*, the winner of the Prix Renaudot, and *Une Femme*. Each is an in-depth survey of a parent, and of the family circumstances. The books could at first glance be defined more as biographies than autobiographical writing per se.¹⁵⁹ In *Une Femme*, 'Ernaux' describes the relationship between a mother and a daughter but, most of all, wishes to capture her mother, the real woman: 'Je voudrais saisir aussi la femme qui a existé en dehors de moi, la femme réelle, née dans le quartier rural

¹⁵⁸ Moreover, the incident was 'shameful' – in the mind of the young 'Ernaux', at least. The girl's assumption is that in 'better' families something like this would never take place.

¹⁵⁹ Duras, too, lengthily discusses her family members in *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. Yet, she is more personal than Ernaux in *La Place* and in *Une Femme* – on the whole it is the 'I' and not the family that is emphasized in Duras's works. See Marcus 1994, 273–274 on auto/biography and their relationship.

d'une petite ville de Normandie et morte dans le service de gériatrie d'un hôpital de la région parisienne.' (F, 23.)¹⁶⁰ What especially characterizes *Une Femme* and *La Place* is the author's effort to find a particular language to describe her parents: words need to be precise, the style simple and almost bland. (Cf. Goure 1988.) Such stylistic choices have marked her writing ever since. Some critics have even argued that the desire to tell the truth is the guarantor of the authenticity of the text (Thomas 1999, 34; Marcus 1994, 3).

'Ernaux' does not appear to be particularly nostalgic about her past and doesn't romanticize it. Yet, *Une Femme* is perhaps the more personal of the two texts, since the figure of the mother is psychologically more important (Thomas 1999, 16). Ernaux has dealt with her mother and their relationship in several other works as well, such as in 'Je ne me suis pas sortie du nuit'. Thomas notes that in this work Ernaux moves from the 'painful search for the precise and perfect structure' in *Une Femme* to reproducing the 'disorder of a personal journal, written in the midst of the events described (. . .) rather than with the advantage and distance of hindsight' (ibid., 44). In my opinion, 'Je ne me suis pas sortie du nuit' is painfully self-conscious as well, and its seemingly more random construction is not as disorderly as Thomas suggests.

La Place begins with the death of 'Ernaux's' father at the age of sixty-seven. The death inspires her to recall his life and her relationship with him. They are two people joined in blood but separated in both social and temporal sense; this distance is a part of what she explores. Works dealing with the author's parents relate to a larger theme in her writing, namely the depiction of the French working class in the 1960s and the possibility of social advancement – in Ernaux's case, starting from a small household/café in a factory town and ending up in a Parisian suburb to become an educated teacher of literature. For Cathy Jellenik, Ernaux's writing is primarily an endeavor to rewrite 'a literary tradition which has tended to neglect the unique experiences of certain members of society', in other words, the working class and women (Jellenik 2007, 7, 197–198).¹⁶¹ Later on in her career, Ernaux described contemporary society in her diary-like works *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure* which, as noted, recount her observations of the everyday life in Paris: on the Metro, in a forest, in a shopping mall, at a cemetery, in a church, on a street. She mentions national and international events discussed in the media: the Lew-

¹⁶⁰ 'I would also like to capture the real woman, the woman who existed independently from me, born on the outskirts of a small Normandy town, and who died in the geriatric ward of a hospital in the suburbs of Paris.' (WS, 12.)

¹⁶¹ Ernaux's works can be seen as conveying and contemplating social memory. For discussion on social memory, see for example Schacter 1996, 106–107; Wagner-Egelhaaf 2005, 14; and in Ernaux's case in particular, Jellenik 2007, 19.

insky scandal, the inauguration of Boris Yeltsin, immigration and racism, a bomb at Saint Michel Metro station, and the war in Bosnia, to name a few. *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation* also include a number of references to world events, such as the Gulf War and the famous Concorde crash.

As was noted in chapter 1, Ernaux's works are densely saturated with cultural references. Thomas mentions that *La Honte* is affected by the magazines published in 1940s and 1950s (Thomas 2004, 139), and there are more explicit references as well. In addition to references to popular magazines and newspapers (*Marie Claire* in *Passion simple* and *La Semaine de Suzette* and *Le Nouvel Observateur* in *La Femme gelée*), 'Ernaux' refers to some classic novels and authors as well in *Passion simple*: Racine's play *Les Plaideurs* (1668), Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1875–1877), Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936), and Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* (1959), to name a few. Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée* ((Nausea) 1938) and Franz Kafka's *Das Schloß* ((The Castle) 1926) belong to a more general intertext in Ernaux's work (Thomas 2004, 139).

Ernaux often relates her personal experiences to pre-existing literary (and other cultural) models (Meretoja 2013, 100). Often the intertextual reference is linked with the theme dealt with in the particular book: 'Et où ai-je lu que Virginia Woolf faisait « aussi » des tartes, pas incompatible tu vois' (FG, 175)¹⁶², ponders the 'I' in *La Femme gelée* in the context of her struggle between household chores and her literary and academic aspirations. In addition to writing, which is mentioned in the 'Virginia Woolf' passage, the themes and/or focuses relevant to this study – passion and self-reflection – are emphasized by intertextual means in *L'Occupation*:

S'éclairaient pour moi la mansuétude des tribunaux envers les crimes dits passionnels, leur répugnance à appliquer la loi qui veut qu'on punisse un meurtrier, une loi issue de la raison et de la nécessité de vivre en société mais qui va à l'encontre d'une autre, viscérale: vouloir supprimer celui ou celle qui a envahi votre corps et votre esprit. Leur désir, au fond, de ne pas condamner l'ultime geste de la personne en proie à une souffrance intolérable, le geste d'Othello et de Roxanne. (O, 34.)¹⁶³

¹⁶² 'And where did I read that Virginia Woolf "also" baked pies? Not incompatible, you see.' (FW, 185.)

¹⁶³ 'Suddenly I understood the leniency of the courts toward so-called crimes of passion, their loathing to apply a law derived from reason and necessity but which runs counter to another more visceral one: the right to eliminate the man or woman who has taken over your body and your mind. Their desire, at base, not to condemn the final act of a person who is prey to an intolerable suffering, the act of Othello and Roxanne.' (Po, 28.)

Here Ernaux emphasizes the all-consuming nature of her feelings by referring to classic literary examples of destructive power of jealousy, Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603) and Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897).

Without delving into the presupposition that all literature is intertextual, one can safely state that Ernaux's oeuvre carries within itself the vast heritage of French and Western literary traditions – both explicitly and implicitly, consciously and presumably unconsciously, too. More specifically, intertextuality ties together with the thematic of self-reflection in Ernaux's writing. The opening words of *L'Occupation* quote Jean Rhys (the author of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 1966): 'Sachant pourtant que si j'avais le courage d'aller jusqu'au bout de ce que je ressentais, je finirais par découvrir ma propre vérité, la vérité de l'univers, la vérité de toutes ces choses qui n'en finissent pas de nous surprendre et de nous faire mal.' (O, opening words.)¹⁶⁴ The 'puzzling' and 'paining' and the 'truth about myself' are the exact tendencies that construct the reflection of oneself. The thematic characteristics of Ernaux's oeuvre are highlighted with the help of the union of textual reflection and intertextual references.¹⁶⁵ Intertextuality transfers self-reflection to vaster, cultural and/or historical grounds, and simultaneously serves to enforce the autobiographical veracity of Ernaux's works (McIlvanney 2001, 6).

As I stated above, *Une Femme* conveys both personal and social depiction and reflection: Ernaux's truth is both social and personal. In *L'Occupation* 'Ernaux' refers to the film *L'Ecole de la chair* (for the similarity between the film and her love affair), and the song *I Will Survive* (which she danced to in 'W's apartment). Popular songs or events brought her back to her relationship:

Continuellement, des chansons ou des reportages à la radio, des pubs, me replongeaient dans le temps de ma relation avec W. Entendre *Happy Wedding*, *Juste quelqu'un de bien* ou une interview d'Ousmane Sow, dont nous avions vu ensemble les statues colossales sur le pont des Arts, me serrait aussitôt la gorge. N'importe quelle évocation de séparation ou de départ – un dimanche, une animatrice quittant FIP, la radio où elle avait parlé durant trente ans – suffisait à me bouleverser.

¹⁶⁴ 'And yet I knew that if I could get to the end of what I was feeling it would be the truth about myself and about the world and about everything that one puzzles and pines about all the time.' (Po, opening words.)

¹⁶⁵ Patricia Waugh states that metafiction may comment, among other things, on the rewriting of a previous (often classical) work (Waugh 1984, 4). Linda Hutcheon points out that in metafiction the authority behind the text becomes more a role to be filled, and that the author's original writing becomes more or less an intertextual rewriting (Hutcheon 1980, xvi). According to Philippe Gasparini, intertextuality is the author's implicit commentary on the generic status of her text (Gasparini 2004, 103–104, 126). (Cf. Currie 1995, 4.)

Comme les gens fragilisés par la maladie ou la dépression, j'étais une caisse de résonance de toutes les douleurs. (O, 23–24.)¹⁶⁶

'Ernaux' not only feels that popular culture reminds her of her past lover, but also sees herself as the representative of 'all pain everywhere'. After the affair, the 'I' is able to comprehend other people's experiences more fully, which might be visible in Ernaux's subsequent book, *Journal du dehors* (McIlvanney 2001, 84).

This brings me back to transsubjectivity, first brought up in chapter 1. Even though *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation* depict the feelings of a woman deeply and obsessively in love, they take care to make the personal into general. 'Ernaux' strives to depict such passion and jealousy that can be common to all women in *L'Occupation*. *La Place* and *Une Femme* situate themselves in the tradition of social commentary in addition to depicting the emotional strains in an individual family's relations: the depiction of family relationships is a part of the social commentary. The works could be discussing any story of a working-class family in France from the 1950s onwards or any story of a child moving away from her origins and advancing in life. McIlvanney also stresses the representativeness of the stories of Ernaux's parents, and states that they are archetypes on 'which to base a sociological representation of the common values, tastes, customs and vocabulary of their classes' (McIlvanney 2001, 89). In McIlvanney's opinion, the books border on ethnographies (ibid., 88). Her opinion is endorsed by the motivation behind her whole study, which is to underline the origins of Ernaux's writing, in other words, her working-class background and childhood. This point of view often leads her to disregard other aspects of Ernaux's works which are equally intriguing.

Journal du dehors and *La Vie extérieure* are even more openly social diaries, dealing with both the autobiographical 'I' and the whole world around her. In this regard, they are examples of *journal extime* rather than *journal intime*, as McIlvanney employs Michel Tournier's phrases (McIlvanney 2001, 133; cf. Thomas 1999, 20). *La Vie extérieure* consists of scenes from the 'exterior life', even though the scenes are perceived by the author-observer (Evenson 2010, vii). It depicts the blurring of the borders between the 'I' and other people:

Aujourd'hui, pendant quelques minutes, j'ai essayé de *voir* tous les gens que je croisais, tous inconnus. Il me semblait que leur existence, par l'observation détaillée de

¹⁶⁶ 'Continually, songs or news reports on the radio, advertisements, would plunge me back into the time of my relationship with W. Hearing "Happy Wedding", "Juste quelqu'un de bien," or an interview with Ousmane Sow, whose colossal statues on the Pont des Arts we had seen together, put a catch in my throat. Any evocation of a separation or a departure – one Sunday it was a host leaving FIP, the radio station where she had worked for thirty years – was enough to wreck me completely. Like people made fragile by disease or depression, I was an echo chamber for all pain everywhere.' (Po, 18.)

leur personne, me devenait subitement très proche, comme si je les touchais. Si je poursuivais une telle expérience, ma vision du monde et de moi-même s'en trouverait radicalement change. Peut-être n'aurais-je plus de moi. (VE, 28–29; emphasis original.)¹⁶⁷

The autobiographical 'I' does not simply describe other people; she is so caught in a process in which she feels like she might disappear herself. Brian Evenson describes the autobiographical 'I' as 'an individual who deliberately isn't fleshed out to be a character, yet she still feels real', as 'someone who hesitates in the interval between the particular and the anonymous' (Evenson 2010, x). Such reflection of herself is familiar from Ernaux's other works: what would happen to her if she allowed herself to constantly be so close to others in her observation? Now the quote describing a woman on an airplane and 'Ernaux's' identification with her appears in a new light. The quote refers to *Passion simple* as was previously suggested and also takes up the position of the autobiographical 'I' in relation to others. It is quite surprising that the mode of writing one would consider the most private, a diary, is the mode that most promotes the dialogic relationship between self and other.

One segment of the features of Ernaux's writing concerns the second-wave feminism of the 1970s. Her writing of the time (and some of her later writing as well) has been interpreted as emphatically feminist in nature, in line with the famous phrase 'the personal is political', and authors such as Kate Millett, Ann Oakley, and Sheila McLeod (Marcus 1994, 279–280). More relevant to Ernaux's practice, however, is the tendency of some feminist writers of the 1970s to place their individual experiences in the broader context of all women's lives and experiences (ibid., 280). The feminist literary scholar Nancy K. Miller has stated that already French female authors of the 18th century need to be recognized for what they are, creators of 'realistic fictions of social life', rather than writers of sentimental novels (Miller 1988a, 412; cf. Miller 1988b). Depiction of social life is obviously not limited to the 18th century. Ernaux's deeply personal stories, whether about her background or the society around her, have a distinctive social and cultural edge to them. One of the aims of Ernaux's writing is to represent 'those groups that she hopes will be perceived as more "real", or less aesthetically based than has been the tradition' (Jellenik 2007, 197) – the working class and women. Ernaux can be seen as portraying the life of a modern French woman – autobiographically, but without the sentimentality and gossip usually attached to the femi-

¹⁶⁷ 'Today, for a few minutes, I tried to *see* all the people I ran into, all strangers. It seemed to me that, as I observed these people in detail, their existence suddenly became very close to me, as if I were touching them. Were I to continue such an experiment, my vision of the world and of myself would turn out to be radically transformed. Perhaps I would disappear.' (TS, 13; emphasis original.)

nine writing style. In that regard, her writing does not glorify subjectivity and intimacy, but instead strives to dismantle the illusion of the unique individuality of the modern human, along with her so-called ‘own’ feelings and their ‘unique’ and ‘individual’ features. (Kosonen 2008b, 179–180.)

Fundamentally, this mixing of the private and the public, the personal and the general, and the self and others allows for a discussion of the limits and possibilities of autobiographical writing. Ernaux reflects on writing in her social writing as well as in the stories about forbidden love affairs. As proposed previously in this dissertation (cf. chapter 1, ‘From September last year, I did nothing else but wait for a man’), in *Une Femme* the ‘I’ even goes as far as offering a ready-made definition of her own writing, ‘[c]e que j’espère écrire de plus juste se situe sans doute à la jointure du familial et du social, du mythe et de l’histoire’ (F, 23),¹⁶⁸ situated between family history and sociology, reality and history. Both *Une Femme* and *La Place* are characterized by commentary intersecting the flow of the story of the parents. Even the title *La Place* could be interpreted as referring both to the father’s social standing and to Ernaux’s position as a writer (McIlvanney 2001, 90, 94).

In *La Vie extérieure* there is a passage in which ‘Ernaux’ discusses a young man, David Beaune, who is accused of killing a boy his own age because of his race. Beaune meditates on the repercussions of writing about the incident in his diary, apparently made public. (VM, 60–61.) In addition to taking up the social issue of a racist hate crime, the passage discusses fictional writing as opposed to an autobiographical account, reproducing the concerns of *Passion simple* and *L’Occupation*, such as the border between fictionality and factuality, and the morality of writing the ‘truth’. So, not only does social writing introduce another thematic continuum in Ernaux’s oeuvre – that of social concerns and family background – and offer quite an authentic account of the everyday life in past and present France, it also reiterates the reflective concerns raised by her other works.

3.3 No Individual Meaning? *L’Usage de la photo* and *Les Années*

McIlvanney regards *La Honte* and *L’Événement* as the key works in Ernaux’s oeuvre and as depicitors of pivotal events in the author’s life. According to her, the former returns to Ernaux’s childhood by revealing the most horrifying incident in working-class family life and the latter offers the ultimate description of the definitive

¹⁶⁸ ‘The more objective aspect of my writing will probably involve a cross between family history and sociology, reality and fiction.’ (WS, 12.)

event in the author's life, the abortion. (McIlvanney 2001, 153–154.) She is correct in noting the inherent circularity in Ernaux's writing, present in individual works as well as in the oeuvre as a whole. Ernaux's first novel *Les Armoires vides* already shows signs of this circularity in that it first introduces the crisis (an abortion), depicts the preceding events by means of a flashback, and then returns to the original crisis in the final pages of the book (Thomas 1999, 5).

McIlvanney's proposition has already become dated, though. The two works McIlvanney discusses have later been followed by writing that further broadens the scope of Ernaux's oeuvre. Here I will concentrate on two works in particular: *L'Usage de la photo* and *Les Années*. I have already brought up some forms and modes of autobiographical writing the author has embarked upon: autofiction and/or autobiographical novel, the third person novel based on authentic experience, transsubjective autobiographical writing, auto/biography, diary, social diary, and ethnobiography. These modes of autobiographical writing overlap, and one work may include features of almost all of them.¹⁶⁹ What is consistent is the variety of forms Ernaux has written in. *L'Usage de la photo* and *Les Années* seem to incorporate even more forms and modes than the writing dealt with so far. And the two are not merely composites of the author's entire oeuvre formally – they join the thematic continua as well.

L'Usage de la photo is both a textual and a visual account of the love affair between Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie which took place in the early 2000s. It also addresses Ernaux's breast cancer. They wrote the text together, and this practice is not far from the accounts George Sand and Simone de Beauvoir wrote about their love affairs with famous cultural figures – de Beauvoir's long-term relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre being the most famous. As already noted, the work is explicit almost to the point of absurdity and banality: in addition to introducing photographs, usually taken in the following morning, of the clothes Ernaux and Marie have (supposedly) discarded in the heat of passion, the book offers their reflections in the context of each frame. As Philippe Gasparini notes, '[l]a photo seule a l'inconvénient d'être muette; il faut la faire parler' (Gasparini 2004, 107); the photo is mute on its own; it has to be made to talk. Both Ernaux and Marie offer their stream-of-consciousness-like thoughts on topics ranging from the composition of clothes and accessories and the state of their relationship to the breast cancer Ernaux was fighting during the affair. The seemingly random train of thought is a result of a premeditated process. Ernaux and Marie chose fourteen photos from a vast amount actually taken, and decided beforehand that they would write their remarks without any commentary from the other party – one would see the other's

¹⁶⁹ According to Lejeune's conception of the autobiographical space, it is not a question of a mere overlap: the autobiographical works in the oeuvre influence the interpretation of the other works as well.

texts only at the end of the project (UP, 12). This resembles Perecian writing according to a list of pre-set rules. An intriguing question is whether or not they consciously had an influence on the compositions themselves. Ernaux's literary alter ego herself states that when encountering the photos, their compositions were a surprise every time (U, 11).

The commentary Ernaux provides on the photographs is riddled with references to issues she has dealt with previously. When it comes to the passion stories, it is obvious that they are related to *L'Usage de la photo* in terms of love affairs and the contemplation on them. However, there are further thematic references as well. 'Ernaux' yet again brings up the question of death and writing in the first section of the book, 'Dans le couloir, 6 mars 2003' ('In the corridor, 6 March, 2003'), the example chosen as the object of analysis here. This time death is discussed in the context of jealousy as well: 'Comme naguère pour les signes de la jalousie, je voyais ceux de la mort écrits partout (. . .)' (UP, 26.)¹⁷⁰ The statement has a connection with *Passion simple*, but most of all with *L'Occupation* in which the parallel between death and writing and their connection to passionate feelings such as jealousy is even more underlined. What is unique to *L'Usage de la photo*, suggests Akane Kawakami, is the image of giving birth which Ernaux provides both at the beginning and at the end of the book. The book is both a description of the struggle with breast cancer, and through the act of writing, an act of metamorphosing into a new 'Ernaux', a survivor. (Kawakami 2010, 461–462.)

The *biographeme* of abortion reappears in *L'Usage de la photo*. 'Ernaux' discusses her recent breast cancer side by side with the abortion that took place in the author's life in the 1960s. She parallels the two, making it immensely difficult for the reader to ignore the historical dimension of the reference. She offers both a description of the way in which the actual Ernaux revealed her pregnancy to her Catholic boyfriend at the time and a recognition that the event took place in the 1960s, a time when abortion was not only heavily stigmatized but also illegal. (UP, 17.) Both the abortion and the breast cancer are paralleled with Ernaux's social advancement: she states that her mother, aunts or cousins, who did not educate themselves as far as she did, did not similarly fall ill, nor were they forced to abort an unwanted child (UP, 26) – it is as if the abortion is a punishment for her social advancement. As suggested above, she dealt with the issue of social advancement and education widely in her previous texts. The abortion has a very profound meaning in her oeuvre, and its significance includes and even exceeds that of her family background and the thematic of passion.

¹⁷⁰ 'Like the signs of jealousy recently, I saw the signs of death written everywhere (. . .)' (My translation.)

As was stated in connection with both the passion stories and social writing, one of the most essential of Ernaux's concerns in her writing has been the discussion of the relationship between writing and reality. In *L'Usage de la photo*, she does not abandon this endeavor, and so her literary alter ego reflects on the value and attractiveness of her and Marie's project, of which she is not quite certain. On the one hand, the images and the writing attached to them represent a very natural way of meditating on reality. On the other, 'Ernaux' contemplates possibilities of grasping of a non-representable and fugitive reality. She discusses 'unreal' sex as opposed to the 'real' traces of it, and notes that language seems to be dominating reality. She states that she has always been interested in the 'beautiful and destructive feeling', 'une sensation de douleur et de beauté', that the composition of clothes and accessories thrown all around in the heat of passion has evoked in her. She has wished to be able to photograph those compositions. (UP, 9, 12–13; quote in UP 9.) The clothes in the final compositions are situated in places such as the corridor in Ernaux's own apartment and the hotel room she and Marie shared. The borderline between 'actual' and 'textual' becomes blurred when the book includes photographic evidence in addition to a detailed description of such private matters as lovemaking and breast cancer.

According to Roland Barthes, a photograph 'always carries its referent with itself' (Barthes 1980/1983, 5) – the photograph itself is invisible, so it is the repeated object that is relevant (ibid., 6). The existential moment, already passed, is captured in the photograph. Barthes further offers two very distinct characteristics of photographs: 'tame' or 'mad'. The former term refers to those kinds of photographs that keep their realism relative, the latter to those the realism of which is absolute. One can thus encounter either perfect illusions or intractable reality when viewing photographs. (Ibid., 119.) Philippe Gasparini analyzes photographs specifically in autobiographical novels. In his opinion, an autobiographical novel which includes photographs does not represent reality per se but an image of that reality through the object, the photograph (Gasparini 2004, 107). As stated earlier, a photograph has to be made to talk.

In 'Ernaux's' case, both she and Marc Marie are definitely making the photographs talk with the help of their commentary. She further states that the photographs seem the only objective evidence of their love-making (UP, 9). Kawakami reads *L'Usage de la photo* as a 'proof of life', in which certain indisputed information, both verbal and photographic, proves that Ernaux is still alive despite her breast cancer. The ability of photographs to be direct inscriptions of reality supports this. (Kawakami 2010, 451–452; cf. Krauss 1981, 26; Walton 1984, 250; and Metz 1990, 156.) And, despite writing having been considered unable to function as proof, the

artefactual nature of the words provides ‘proof of life’ – according to Kawakami, words are used like photographs in *L’Usage de la photo* (ibid., 453).¹⁷¹ I would add that essential is both the ability of the text to make photographs to talk and the ability of photographs to refer to reality, in other words, the collaboration of text and photographs. It is both together functioning as a proof of life which, in the end, leads to what Kawakami suggests about the rebirth of the Ernausian self. He also emphasizes the circular movement from ‘Ernaux’s “reality” through a photo-textual medium back into a reader’s “real” life’ (ibid., 414): telling about her life in the end allows for her to stay firmly rooted in that life.

Objectivity of the photographs mentioned above is a doubtful concept, and Ernaux is very much aware of this herself since she so vigorously pursues an almost theoretical contemplation of the possibilities of representing the ‘real’. Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri note that the presence of photographs in literature ‘almost automatically challenges accepted distinctions between fiction and nonfiction’. This happens especially in fictional writing, since in illustrated nonfiction photographs are not as controversial – the reference to reality is already there. Furthermore, when placed in fiction, photographs may become fictional themselves. (Horstkotte & Pedri 2008, 8.) *L’Usage de la photo* belongs to an indeterminate generic category, but leaning towards definite nonfictional fictional writing. I would not question the reference to reality in the work as such. In my opinion, what is relevant is that the sheer existence of the photographs combined with reflections on their significance continue Ernaux’s oeuvre-long contemplation on the questions of representation and the relationship between writing and reality.¹⁷²

Les Années, for its part, is not the most recent of Ernaux’s works but it is perhaps the most ambitious. In it, she uses her own biography to tell the story of all her equals, in terms of generation, social class, sex, milieu, marital history or political affiliation (Kemp 2010, 19). It is twice as long as most of the author’s earlier books and its thematic scope exceeds them. In some respects, it is an example of a momentous autobiography that an author writes late in life, despite its effort to depict experiences that exceed those of an individual. The book opens with a long, fragmented list of images constructed of one or a few sentences at most, depicting scenes from popular culture such as Scarlett O’Hara descending the stairs of Tara or the marriage of a popular French actor, a woman battling Alzheimer’s disease, and city sceneries (An, 11–19). Soon the images are accompanied by reflec-

¹⁷¹ Horstkotte and Pedri suggest that many theorists actually seem to accentuate the similarities between word and image as opposed to the earlier view of the two as strictly distinct media (Horstkotte & Pedri 2008, 1).

¹⁷² For further discussion on photographs in literature, see Hughes & Noble (2003), and Jay (1993) who discusses the negativity towards photographs in French philosophy.

tions that seem to cover a whole life: reflections on the meaning of marriage, organizing thoughts into words, and one's whereabouts on the 11th September, 2001. The fragmented form continues throughout *Les Années*, although the fragments are not as short, as transformative, or as seemingly random as in these first pages of the book. The fragments are a formal characteristic in Ernaux's oeuvre, first manifested in metatextual commentary that was separated from the rest of the text in *La Place* and *Une Femme* and continuing with the fragmentation of the whole book in *Passion simple*.

The first pages set the mood of the story. Like the reflection in *L'Usage de la photo*, the fragments that consist of one or at most a few sentences refer thematically to most topics the author has previously dealt with. One could even argue that the first pages of the book are a mini-version of *Les Années*, and the summation of Ernaux's complete work up to that point. What aptly characterizes the phenomenon is the *mise en abyme* structure in which the text includes embedded and not merely repeated features from other texts (cf. Dällenbach 1977). 'Ernaux' refers to the earlier books – perhaps not by name, but implicitly by taking up themes and events familiar from them.¹⁷³ Due to the autobiographical nature of Ernaux's writing, the references to earlier books are references to her own past life as well. *Les Années* is a compilation of both memories of past life and of the textual representations of those memories. As a result, the book appears as the most complete entity in the author's oeuvre, gathering all the autobiographical fragments in the previous stories and the content of those stories together.

L'Usage de la photo and *Les Années* not only gather the thematic continua together, but are also compilations of the generic forms Ernaux has experimented with. The first section of *L'Usage de la photo*, 'Dans le couloir, 6 mars 2003'; 'In the corridor, 6 March 2003', begins with a photograph of the scattered clothes on the floor of Ernaux's apartment. The date implies that it is an entry in a journal. The actual diary is mentioned in the reflection: 'Dans mon journal j'ai écrit que je me sentais infiniment heureuse.' (UP, 19).¹⁷⁴ *L'Usage de la photo* is a kind of diary as well, since the sections are dated and involve descriptions of events as well as 'Ernaux's' (and 'Marie's') internal reflection. It is, however, something else as well: writing according to the set rules à la Percec, an autobiographical novel that describes a phase in the author's life but does so in a unique fashion, and social and cultural commentary since it also notes and comments on current events. Kawakami describes it also as an experimental work featuring various media, a meditation on the relationship between photography and writing, and a cancer narrative

¹⁷³ *Les Années*, like Ernaux's previous works, also includes intertextual references to culture and society and thus attaches itself in a vaster network of literary culture and society as a whole.

¹⁷⁴ 'I wrote in my diary that I was extremely happy.' (My translation.)

from a feminist perspective (Kawakami 2010, 451). It is also a collaboration with Marc Marie, which makes it Marie's autobiographical story as well – and both authors' biography. The interpretation of the work might take a wholly other direction from the point of view of Ernaux's lover and co-author. In *Les Années*, the variety of literary forms is more implicit. As in the case of the embedded topics and themes, the forms are latent rather than actual visible features in the book.

It can be argued that *Passion simple* is an especially relevant piece of Ernaux's oeuvre since it is referred to in so many of her other works, and since the same story is continued and/or reproduced in other works, such as *L'Occupation* and *Se perdre*. The references seem to create a sort of aura of significance around *Passion simple*, as if the work was somehow the key to the interpretation of the author's oeuvre (and life) as a whole. However, if there is such a key, *L'Usage de la photo* or *Les Années* are much more suitable candidates than *Passion simple*. They, for one, are later works in Ernaux's career, in other words in her journey to discover the perfect literary form. Secondly, while *Passion simple* does discuss a variety of topics, the other two include, in addition to the themes of *Passion simple*, an even greater variety of other themes, including the motif of abortion.

In *L'Usage de la photo*, 'Ernaux' points out that she has tried out several literary forms in order to find the one to best sum up her whole life:

Je me suis souvenue de Violette Leduc et j'ai cherché dans une biographie combien de temps elle avait survécu avec son cancer du sein : sept ans. C'était assez de temps pour écrire. J'ai cherché une forme littéraire qui contiendrait toute ma vie. (UP, 27.)¹⁷⁵

'Ernaux' proposes that there exists a certain kind of literary form that would make her life a unified and complete entity. She implies that the search for this form is not over: she is worried that her possible death due to breast cancer could end the project before it is finished. Evidence that Violette Leduc (1907–1972), a French author who had the same disease, survived for seven years and two operations after the initial diagnosis gives 'Ernaux' hope that she still has time to find that perfect literary form. So, thirdly, *L'Usage de la photo* and *Les Années* without a doubt consist of a greater number of literary forms than *Passion simple*. It can be argued that while *L'Usage de la photo* searches for the perfect literary form to sum up Ernaux's life as the 'I' in it confesses doing, *Les Années* finds it.

¹⁷⁵ 'I remembered Violette Leduc and checked from her biography how long she survived with her breast cancer: seven years. That is time enough to write. I have searched for a literary form that would sum up my whole life.' (My translation.)

3.4 Repetition as a Lifelong Process

In my analysis on Ernaux's writing, it has not been a question of Jakobson's 'variegated tangle of often divergent and unrelated poetic motifs' (cf. Introduction, 'Spaces of Autobiography and Reflection'), but rather of interrelated and repeated motifs. In the analysis I have noted elements that occur from work to work such as the motifs and themes the autobiographical 'I' is obsessed with (the forbidden love affair, the abortion, a working-class background and childhood, contemporary society); the reflective obsession itself; the metatextual commentary on the process of writing, publication, and autobiography as a mode of writing; the formal similarities; the use of seemingly diverse literary forms; and the emphasis on the autobiographical nature of Ernaux's oeuvre.¹⁷⁶ Her texts also carry popular, cultural and social references outside the oeuvre. They are a never-ending web of relations and meanings.

I have further suggested that *L'Usage de la photo* and *Les Années* function as key works that integrate most of the themes and formal experiments into manageable entities. McIlvanney notes that the common feature in all of Ernaux's works is the circular 'return to the origins' (which is also the title of her study) (McIlvanney 2001, 13). As I already stated, McIlvanney may be overly concerned with Ernaux's childhood background. Childhood is definitely a point of origin for the author but she and her work are not defined by it. Later events, the author's physical, mental and cognitive development, and the process of writing, add threads to the web that is Ernaux's writing. 'Ernaux' is more than her working-class background – just as she is more than a 'woman'. The circularity entails more than these, and is based on formal features in addition to a wider range of motifs and themes.

What still needs to be pointed out is that the nature of the repetition and the references between works is always intense, no matter what exactly is repeated or referred to. Ernaux's works never cease to repeat motifs, themes, and formal features, and the topics are often also about passionate, intense events and feelings. The intensity is even more emphasized when it is the never-ending obsessing over a lover that recurs in various works. The continuous obsessing is so all-consuming that it borders on banality, and it is difficult not to interpret especially *L'Occupation* as being ironic. However, this work is not necessarily just an ironic take on the obsessiveness of the feelings evoked by erotic passion. It is more a fusion of the actual description of this intense phase in the 'I's' life and a commentary on how

¹⁷⁶ It should be noted that, although often discussed in the context of intra-intertextuality and rewriting, the recurrence of *characters* is not as fundamental to Ernaux's intra-intertextuality as self-reflection on certain recurring themes. The recurrence of characters is more relevant in Duras's writing, for instance in the versions of the story of her Chinese lover.

and what to express autobiographically on the matter. In *L'Usage de la photo*, the banality of love affairs is emphasized through the post-coital photographs and endless reflection on them. The banality is countered by reflection on what the photographs seem to convey and on the actual rule-governed process of selecting the photographs and constructing an autobiographical work with their help.

Some of Ernaux's works are about love affairs and passion and also reflect upon their own constitution and the process of turning the retreating, ambiguous feelings and experiences into writing. More often than not, the main concern is the relationship autobiographical writing has with reality and 'truth'. As has been stated from the beginning of this study, all autobiographical writing is fundamentally self-aware in nature. In addition to reflecting upon her love affair in a particular text, and reflecting on the conditions of writing her autobiographical story, the autobiographical 'I' transports her reflection over the boundaries of individual works. It is immensely intriguing that the self-reflection in the texts is one of the things that can be reproduced in other texts. In fact, the repetitiousness itself is an example of self-reflection.

L'Usage de la photo and *Les Années* are both examples of the multiple forms Ernaux has experimented with and candidates for the ultimate form and for the last word on the author's life. However, in spite of the formal variety of some of Ernaux's works, no single text can encapsulate her life and identity, not even these two. Such encapsulating is possible only through a complex play with references between works. I am not suggesting that a book such as *Passion simple* could not be read as an individual work of art or as separate from Ernaux's other autobiographical writing (cf. Thomas 1999, 45). My claim is simply that it is as if her journey towards the ultimate literary expression to depict herself does not consist of individual experiments in form but more of one winding story. The works in the literary mosaic may have separate and wide-ranging meanings, but the meaning of the autobiographical enterprise becomes clear only in the light of Ernaux's whole production. Also, to grasp the complete meaning of the *L'Usage de la photo* or any other part of her production is to link it to Ernaux's autobiographical project as a whole.

Jellenik adds that '[t]he self in Ernaux's literature is not something to be discovered through introspection and reflection, but something to be observed as it comes into being across time through human and social interaction' (Jellenik 2007, 196; cf. Thomas 1999, xii). I agree with Jellenik in that the autobiographical 'I' is constructed through rewriting and juxtaposition with others, as the foregoing analysis of social reflection has shown. However, Jellenik fails to recognize the true nature of 'introspection and reflection' in Ernaux's writing. What is relevant is the acknowledgement that the narratorial interest in these books is not only in the Other, but is also anchored in the self (McIlvanney 2001, 11). The bio- and/or ethnographical aspect of the stories as well as the metatextual commentary on writ-

ing stem from the reflective self. *La Place* tells almost as much about Ernaux as her father (Motte 1995, 65; Thomas 1999, 31).

An essential question familiar from chapter 2 is ‘who is this self?’. The reader may have noticed especially in my analysis of *L’Usage de la photo* that the denominators Ernaux and ‘Ernaux’ seem to overlap. On several occasions they may very well switch places. In that work, it is both the author Ernaux and her alter ego ‘Ernaux’ who are defining her lifelong project of autobiographical writing as an endeavor to find a form to depict her life and allow her to define herself. In an autobiographical text, the speaking ‘I’ is always a representative of the actual physical person. The same is going on in Ernaux’s ‘properly’ literary works: it is Ernaux’s autobiographical alter ego that is telling the story, but the author’s voice interferes by means of metatextual commentary. This self-commentary is often fundamentally related to the author’s own life, including her life as the writer of other books than the one where the autobiographical ‘I’ is telling her story – thus, commentary must stem from a source that has knowledge of these other works as well, namely the author. Ernaux herself has stated that the reader is ‘implicated and interpellated by the use of the person’ and that the use of the first person is ‘an invasion of the text by the author’ (Ernaux 1994, in Thomas 1999, 48).

The author hovers in the background; the existence of the author gives meaning to the autobiographical oeuvre as well. The oeuvre can be understood as a construction made of the pieces of Ernaux’s own life, gathered from several temporal locations. Ernaux constructs the story of her life through different types of autobiographical writing, and her life can be extracted from these particular pieces of writing. For the reader, this means that he or she is able to grasp a definite ‘autobiographical feel’. (Kosonen 2008a, 18; Kosonen 2008b, 184.) The idea of an autobiographical feel sounds vague, but is actually quite pragmatic and logical. The individual parts of Ernaux’s oeuvre gain their final meaning in relation to one another and to the actual world. When an author constantly writes autobiographically and her work is a tangled web of references, the motifs are easily reproduced over and over again and also grow from the autobiographical project. The passionate intensity and repetitiveness is juxtaposed with the lifelong intense project of constructing the self through autobiographical writing, somewhat in the sense suggested by Paul John Eakin. And, as Irving Louis Horowitz notes, the ‘game of autobiography becomes one with life itself’, its purpose being the construction of ‘a meaningful mosaic for others, while subtly insuring a place in the cosmos for one’s self’ (Horowitz 1977, 176). The works in Ernaux’s oeuvre, the modes she has experimented with, and the complex web of references within the oeuvre form a meaningful mosaic, her very own autobiographical space, which sums up her life.

3.5 Encapsulating Life in the Face of Death: the Final Chapter of Ernaux's Project?

To end this chapter, I would like to bring up another theme that remains consistent throughout Ernaux's writing: death. Death is also a constant theme in Duras's writing, most explicitly in *C'est tout*, which practically constitutes her final words in life. Ernaux brings up death in 'Je ne suis sortie pas de nuit', in which she compares her dying mother and herself. The death of her parents is essential in *La Place* and *Une Femme*, as their stories are told in the light of their having passed away. Death has a tremendous impact on the mode Ernaux writes in as well. The intense search for the complete story makes 'Ernaux' feel that writing her life as truthfully as possible could be achieved by her dying. Dying in connection with writing is so essential to her that she even begins *L'Occupation* by asserting it: 'J'ai toujours voulu écrire comme si je devais être absente à la parution du texte. Écrire comme si je devais mourir, qu'il n'y ait plus de juges. Bien que ce soit une illusion, peut-être, de croire que la vérité ne puisse advenir qu'en fonction de la mort.' (O, 11.)¹⁷⁷ Like truth, death will set her free – an illusion or not. In *Passion simple*, 'Ernaux' compares the wish to die after writing her story of her consuming passion with living that passion to its end: 'Et jusqu'à la pensée que cela me serait égal de mourir après être allée au bout de cette passion – sans donner un sens précis à « au bout de » – comme je pourrais mourir après avoir fini d'écrire ceci dans quelques mois.' (PS, 23.)¹⁷⁸ Her approach to both passion and writing about it is so intense that only an experience as profound as death (or, to quote her own words, an orgasm which is often considered a 'small death') can compare with it.

As stated, Kawakami attaches the closeness of death to the meaning of the whole project of *L'Usage de la photo* – writing the book is a way of staying alive. In my opinion, the recurring theme of death in Ernaux's works spills over to her own life in the light of her desperate effort to achieve the perfect literary form. The intensity of the repetition referred to earlier is a reflection on the whole autobiographical project, which takes over 'Ernaux's' or Ernaux's whole life – and her coming death. The search for the perfect form has become an even more desperate project since she began thinking that if her time is equally limited as Violette

¹⁷⁷ 'I have always wanted to write as if I would be gone when the book was published. To write as if I were about to die – no more judges. Even if it's an illusion, perhaps, to believe that truth comes only by way of death.' (Po, 7.)

¹⁷⁸ 'I could even accept the thought of dying providing I had lived this passion through to the very end – without actually defining "to the very end" – in the same way I could die in a few months' time after finishing this book.' (PP, 13.)

Leduc's, she needs to keep on writing and publishing feverishly until her whole life and identity are recorded.

More than the dreaded seven years have passed since she wrote *L'Usage de la photo*, in which she began the search for the perfect form. In the meantime, she has written *Les Années*, which is her most ambitious effort to find the ultimate expression, yet she still keeps on publishing. Towards the end of her career the author's autobiographical project and a wish to articulate her thorough literary agenda may surpass her artistic aspirations. *L'Autre fille* (2011), *Écrire la vie* (2011), *L'Atelier noir*, and *Retour à Yvetot* all include entries from Ernaux's private journal or private photographs, or reflections on writing in a manner familiar from the author's other works. The relatively short *L'Autre fille* is a letter addressed to Ernaux's sister who died before she was born. *Retour à Yvetot* was recently published in connection with a conference held in Ernaux's honour in her childhood home town Yvetot, and entails her contemplation on writing, an in-depth interview with Marguerite Cornier, and a number of private photographs. *Écrire la vie* sums up her life and work perhaps most candidly since it includes most her works and is entitled 'Writing life'. *L'Atelier noir* is a part of her authorial testament, a meditation on writing.¹⁷⁹ The feverish writing and publishing are both parts of an endeavor to extend one's life¹⁸⁰ and a chance to leave behind a complete, consciously compiled literary testament.

¹⁷⁹ *Écrire la vie*, *L'Atelier noir*, and *Retour à Yvetot* entail both authorial self-commentary and introduce further autobiographical storytelling. The border between the literary and the authorial becomes hazy, as I will remark in chapter 5. It does not matter how these works are generically categorized: in the end they fuse into Ernaux's feverish attempt to both capture her whole life and leave behind a complete literary legacy before the end.

¹⁸⁰ See Boulé 2001 on the author Hervé Guibert, who also published numerous works during the last years of his life, while suffering from AIDS.

4. Rewriting in the Durasian World

Écrire, c'est ça (. . .) Remplacer. (EL, 23.)¹⁸¹

The most famous of Marguerite Duras's autobiographical motifs or *biographemes* is undoubtedly the forbidden love affair between her alter ego, a fifteen-year-old girl, and an older Chinese lover in the Indochina of the 1930s. Its notoriety is based on the success of one of the books depicting the story, the Goncourt-winning *L'Amant*, which transformed Duras into an international literary superstar (Davis & Fallaize 2000, 18). The story of the affair begins with the lovers meeting on a ferry crossing the Mekong River and culminates with steamy, passionate encounters in the man's city apartment, ending with the girl leaving her childhood in Saigon for studies in Paris. There has been much debate over whether the Chinese man actually existed or not.¹⁸² What is perhaps more interesting is how the story of the affair, fictional or not, has entered and been depicted in the author's work.

I will begin with a quote:

C'est le bac sur le Mékong. Le bac des livres.

(. . .)

(. . .) De la limousine noire est sorti un autre homme que celui du livre, un autre Chinois de la Mandchourie. Il est un peu différent de celui du livre : il est un peu plus robuste que lui, il a moins peur que lui, plus d'audace. Il a plus de beauté, plus de santé. Il est plus «pour la cinéma» que celui du livre. Et aussi il a moins de timidité que lui face à l'enfant.

¹⁸¹ 'Writing, it is (. . .) Replacement.' (My translation.)

¹⁸² Duras, certainly, spent her youth in Indochina. Laure Adler, a biographer of Duras, describes a journey she took to Vietnam to solve the mystery. She interviewed the last remaining relatives of the said lover, and concludes that the affair did indeed take place. According to her, the lover was not Chinese nor smooth and handsome, and he did not give the young Marguerite a diamond, but paid her mother to sleep with her. It was not a question of an erotic love affair, but of wretched prostitution. A more life-like description of the lover can, thus, be found in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* and not in *L'Amant*. (Adler 1998/2000, 9–12.)

Elle, elle est restée celle du livre, petite, maigre, hardie, difficile à attraper le sens, difficile à dire qui c'est (. . .). (ACN, 35–36.)¹⁸³

This passage appears in the last of Duras's books published in her lifetime dealing with the mysterious Chinese lover, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. The quote illustrates the multilayered references within Duras's autobiographical oeuvre: recurring motifs such as the ferry and the limousine, and comparisons such as both the lover and the girl with the characters in 'the book' – 'the book' being *L'Amant*. The quote thus hints at the process of rewriting and states that there are other works dealing with the same characters and events.

In the previous chapter, the basic assumption was made that referring to other parts of the oeuvre in one work is a form of reflecting on oneself. The assumption is maintained in the following, although more implicitly. The specific issue of rewriting was briefly addressed in the context of Annie Ernaux's *Passion simple* and *Se perdre*. In this chapter, I will broaden the scope of this discussion by suggesting that Duras's whole autobiographical oeuvre consists of rewriting. To conclude, I will suggest that rewriting participates in constructing an autobiographical space somewhat similar to the one that emerged in the former discussion of Ernaux. In her case, the space was a result of her intense life project. Something similar will be suggested with Duras, but I will concentrate on the emphasized self.

4.1 Rewriting Youth

The works focusing on the young Duras's difficult family relations and her subsequent affair with the older Chinese man are the most evident case of rewriting in her autobiographical writing. In addition to the recurrences of *biographemes*, self-reference at the level of an entire oeuvre may involve systematic recreation, meaning that the author renews her earlier works, making changes with varying degrees. With Ernaux, rewriting is a dubious concept since the most obvious instance of it

¹⁸³ 'This is the ferry across the Mekong. The ferry in the books.

(. . .)

(. . .) The man who gets out of the black limousine is other than the one in the book, but still Manchurian. He is a little different from the one in the book: he's a little more solid than the other, less frightened than the other, bolder. He is better-looking, more robust. He is more "cinematic" than the one in the book. And he's also less timid facing the child.

She, she has stayed the way she was in the book, small, skinny, tough, hard to get a sense of, hard to label (. . .).⁷ (NCL, 25–26.)

is not a rewritten version of an earlier story, but a diary (*Se perdre*) which was written before the actual autobiographical novel (*Passion simple*) but published some ten years after it. For Ernaux, rewriting constitutes at the most a constant process of reflecting critically on her own writing as a continuing practice, along the lines of what Cathy Jellenik and Christian Moraru suggest (cf. Introduction, ‘Spaces of Autobiography and Reflection’). Her rewriterly gestures, such as the publication of *Se perdre*, serve to highlight the self-conscious attitude she has towards writing in a particular. She does this with the help of varying autobiographical modes, more so than by simply repeating her life events in order to construct a life story – although the latter takes place in her writing as well.

In Duras’s works, I am prone to view rewriting as a controlled endeavor to reshape certain stories. One can detect a definite continuum in her autobiographical work. There are actually several continua, in a way similar to Ernaux’s oeuvre. Thematically, the most apparent is the story of the lover, starting from *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950) and making its way through *L’Amant* and *L’Amant de la Chine du Nord* all the way up to the posthumously published *Les Cahiers de la guerre et autres textes*. Another essential theme is the story of Duras’s writing, and especially of her becoming a writer and living her life as one. Other continua besides the thematic ones include, in general, the recurrence of settings and characters, fragmentation and disintegration which is evident in the quote with which I began this chapter, a continuous abstention from chronology, blurring of the first and third person pronouns, references to the autobiographical nature of the stories as well as the questioning of it, and explicit references to writing, whether as a general practice or as a project of writing the story in question. On a practical level, rewriting consists of Moraru’s references, allusions and parallelisms, textual self-consciousness such as formal transgressions, and explicit metatextual references such as footnotes.

Rewriting is also about rewriting identity and/or self, for example in the form of constructing a self-portrait. Rewriting self has to do with Moraru’s concept of the author being ‘present’ in her work.¹⁸⁴ However, the ‘presence’ is considered more from the point of view of what was discussed in chapter 2 of this dissertation on Duras’s appearances in her work, and on the intertwining of ‘Duras’ and Duras the author, than by relying on Moraru’s thoughts on metafictionality.¹⁸⁵ With this

¹⁸⁴ Rewriting, for Moraru, is also political and critical (which would apply especially in Ernaux’s case of being almost academically self-conscious and of rewriting French social history), although those aspects are not the key concern in this chapter. For all of Moraru’s conceptions, see Introduction, ‘Spaces of Autobiography and Reflection’.

¹⁸⁵ See Jellenik (2007, 4) on subjective narrators ‘wearing the skin of their authors’. In other words, the author can place herself into her self-conscious autobiographical writing via various metatextual devices.

narrowing down of what constitutes rewriting I will now inspect its occurrence in the works concentrating on Duras's youth.

Already Duras's early works showed signs of linearity and repetition. The lover does not appear in them, at least not in the form of the older Chinese man, but the texts still belong to the same continuum in terms of other characters and the setting. Duras's first book, *Les Impudents* (1943), created the so-called Durasian world, since this world was inhabited by characters that recur in later works (Adler 1998/2000, 107). The heroine Maud is clearly a predecessor of the young girl who has an affair her family does not approve of in Duras's later writing. Maud leaves her family, especially her reckless older brother Jacques, in order to marry Georges, her brother's formerly close friend. These motifs and characters recur in Duras's following books. *La Vie tranquille* (1944) depicts the main character Françoise's sadness over losing her younger brother Nicolas and her sleeping with the brother's enigmatic friend. The Durasian world constructed in these early novels thus embodies the incestuous relationship between the rebellious daughter and the sensitive younger brother, the mother's love of her gambling, degraded oldest son at the expense of her other children, the daughter's complicated and co-dependent relationships with her older brother and mother, and the daughter's intense desire to become a writer one day.¹⁸⁶

All of these are of central significance in *L'Amant*. The book is the most famous in Duras's oeuvre because of the scandalousness of the presumably authentic sexual experiences of the young girl, and for the author's literary achievements relating to the language and form used. *L'Amant* is often considered the basic text to which Duras's other (autobiographical) works are compared. According to Mary-Kay F. Miller, *L'Amant* incorporates fragments of previous works and the seeds of future works as well. Events, characters and emotions occur in the book either as partial reincarnations of previous works or as expansions of new details and perspectives. (Miller 2003, 82.) What is emphasized in this particular work is the first erotic experience of a young girl, and the secret love affair with the Chinese man. The scenes in *L'Amant* could be perceived as the 'real' scenes preceding, paradoxically, Duras's earlier writing. However, it is more probable that the work is yet another transformation, merely one manifestation of the Durasian world. The stimulus that Duras herself offered publicly lifted *L'Amant* to its cur-

The author and the narrator become almost indistinguishable. This allows for the pondering on the issues such as genre.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Hill 1993, 40–41. Leslie Hill maps Duras's childhood and youth in her work *Apocalyptic Desires*, drawing links between Duras's life and her works. Duras was born in 1914 in Saigon; she had an older brother, Paulo, whom she loved dearly and who was slightly retarded; an even older brother, Pierre, who behaved recklessly and spent the family money; and a widowed mother who had a tough and unforgiving character.

rent status. (Andermatt Conley 1988, 183.) Had this particular work not attained such success it might not have surfaced as anything unique from the midst of all the other works that relate to the same story line.

Pamela A. Genova claims that the writing of the famous *L'Amant* began thirty years earlier in Duras's third book, *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, published in 1950: the two share an unquestionable connection (Genova 2003, 50). What are common to both texts are elements that I already mentioned: family members and their agonizing interrelations. *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* does not contain scenes or (even less so) textual passages that would be precisely comparable with *L'Amant*. The setting – the family plantation – and the plot – struggling to maintain the plantation financially and battling against the floods – are not the same, but only serve as background in the later work. The main character is not the same first person narrator as in *L'Amant*, but a girl named Suzanne. It is almost trivial to mention that the style itself differs tremendously in these texts as well, since there is an over thirty-year gap between the two works. The first one belongs to Duras's earlier phase, and the other is an example of her mature works. *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* is written in a more classic realist mode whereas *L'Amant* is fragmented, non-linear and non-chronological, following the style of Duras's later books.

However, despite such distinctions, the description of family dynamics is similar in both works, following the lines drawn above in connection with *Les Impudents* and *La Vie tranquille*. There are actual references as well. The plantation and the dam that is built against the sea and later destroyed by it are mentioned in *L'Amant*:

Quand je suis sur le bac du Mékong, ce jour de la limousine noire, la concession de barrage n'a pas encore été abandonnée par ma mère. De temps en temps on fait encore la route, comme avant, la nuit, on y va encore tous les trois, on va y passer quelques jours (. . .) Les terres du bas sont définitivement perdues (. . .).

(. . .)

C'est un an et demi après cette rencontre que ma mère rentre en France avec nous. Elle vendra tous ses meubles. Et puis elle ira une dernière fois au barrage. (A, 35–36.)¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁷ 'When I'm on the Mekong ferry, the day of the black limousine, my mother hasn't yet given up the land by the dike. Every so often, still, we make the journey, at night, like before, still all three of us, to spend a few days there (. . .) The lower part of the land is lost for good and all (. . .).

(. . .)

Naturally one may debate whether the reference is to Duras's own life or to the earlier work. In spite of this, 'un barrage', a dam, is a distinct intra-intertextual reference to *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* first and foremost because of the title of the latter and because it is the main motif of the previous work both physically (the destruction of a dam ending the family's livelihood) and on a more abstract level (as the mental dams that family members build between one another). The plantation, the floods, and the struggle to pay the debts to the official who loaned the money for the plantation are one of the key subtexts in *L'Amant*.

The autobiographical story of the lover is further transferred into *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. The work refers specifically to *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* and does it in much more detail than *L'Amant*, and not simply by repeating similar subject matter and similar characters. The autobiographical 'I' declares that she will someday write 'everything', meaning the story of her mother's life. A footnote, which brings the voice of the older Duras retrospectively into the discussion, adds: 'Le pari a été tenu : *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*.' (ACN, 101.)¹⁸⁸ In addition to this, a B12 car is mentioned and compared to a vehicle described in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, again in a footnote: 'La B12 n'est pas la «ruine» du barrage contre le Pacifique.' (ACN, 157.)¹⁸⁹ Overall, the significance of footnotes is manifold: as metatextual clues they may convey both authorial self-commentary and/or textual self-consciousness in its multiple forms, and the above-mentioned explicit intra-intertextual references as well.

L'Amant de la Chine du Nord may refer to *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* specifically, but its most important relationship is with *L'Amant*. The work is a piece of rewriting *par excellence*: it retells the precise story of *L'Amant* with alterations, some of which are merely cosmetic, whereas some indicate more profound changes. Cosmetic changes include the slight alteration in the lover's personality and appearance. One of the most significant alterations is adding more precise details of the events surrounding the actual sexual encounters, the latter of which are highlighted in *L'Amant*. The scene in which the lover takes the whole family out to dine and dance (an indication of his distributing money to the family more or less in exchange for the relationship with the daughter) is scarcely mentioned in the former book, but in the latter it occupies a dozen pages. The dialogue is much more prolonged and in a greater role in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. The adding of details and dialogue is symptomatic of a transformation of style: *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* is somewhat fragmented and non-chronological, like *L'Amant*, but it also

It's a year and a half after that meeting that my mother takes us back to France. She'll sell all her furniture. Then go one last time to the dike.' (L, 26.)

¹⁸⁸ 'She kept her promise: *The Sea Wall*?' (NCL, 88.)

¹⁸⁹ 'The B12 isn't the "wreck" it becomes in *The Sea Wall*?' (NCL, 143.)

resembles Duras's earlier, more conventional, realist form of writing. Despite these changes, in addition to the similarity of the titles, the characters (the autobiographical 'I', family members, the Chinese lover, and the girl's close friend, Hélène Lagonelle) and the plot (the meeting of the lover, the love affair itself, the family's conflicting attitude towards it, and the family relations) almost completely correspond.

Jellenik states that authors who openly rewrite their works tend to approach them with attitudes akin to distrust. They pose questions such as 'What did I write?', 'What did I neglect to write?', and 'How might I write it better?' (Jellenik 2007, 3.) *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* is Duras's reaction to Jean-Jacques Annaud's film *L'Amant* (1992) which in her opinion did not capture the award-winning story in a way she would have liked. The book includes footnotes and other metatextual references to how the autobiographical 'I'/the author would want the scenes be depicted in a film version of the story with better quality. An apt example of such a footnote is the following:

Dans le cas d'un film tiré de ce livre-ci, il ne faudrait pas que l'enfant soit d'une beauté seulement belle. Cela serait peut-être dangereux pour le film. Il s'agit d'autre chose qui joue en elle, l'enfant, de «difficile à éviter», d'une curiosité sauvage, d'un manque d'éducation, d'un manque, oui, de timidité. Une sorte de Miss France-enfant ferait s'effondrer le film tout entier. Plus encore : elle le ferait disparaître. Le beauté ne fait rien. Elle ne regarde pas. Elle est regardée. (ACN, 73.)¹⁹⁰

In addition to an effort to influence the possible film version of the story, the footnote comments on the looks of the young girl. These are of tremendous importance in both books and which I will come back to shortly.

The footnotes number around fifteen. When their scarce number is combined with the script-like mode of the actual story, the reader is convinced that there is a subtext in the story that is not present in *L'Amant*. Furthermore, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* is written in a descriptive manner, much like the script to a movie:

C'est un livre.
C'est un film.
C'est la nuit.

La voix qui parle ici est celle, écrite, du livre.

¹⁹⁰ 'If this book is made into a film, the child can't just have a pretty face. That could jeopardize the film. There's something else at work in this child – something "hard to get around," an untamed curiosity, a lack of breeding, a lack, yes, of reticence. Some Junior Miss France would bring the whole film down. Worse: it would make it disappear. Beauty doesn't act. It doesn't look. It is looked at.' (NCL, 61.)

(. . .)

(. . .)

C'est un poste de brousse au sud de L'Indochine française.

C'est en 1930.

C'est le quartier français.

(. . .)

Devant nous quelqu'un marche. Ce n'est pas celle qui parle. (ACN, 17–18.)¹⁹¹

In addition to showing the motivation to turn the book into a movie, the example shows yet another reference to 'the book', *L'Amant*. It is noteworthy that not only are these footnotes and other metatextual clues an example of a textual intervention similar to what is taking place in Ernaux's *Passion simple* and *L'Occupation*; they are also an example of a definite instance of authorial intervention.

The lover, or a character resembling him, makes an appearance in some of Duras's other works as well – the story of the Chinese man was reworked in the 1977 play *L'Eden cinema*, for example. However, it is in the author's pointedly autobiographical texts where the lover gains the most meaning. Duras began writing more profoundly about the Chinese man later in life (she was 70 when *L'Amant* was published), and this underlines the autobiographical air surrounding the events, since it is typical for authors to embark upon writing about the history of their own lives at a mature age.

What still adds to the autobiographical nature of this story is the posthumously published *Les Cahiers de la guerre et autres textes*, a collection of texts Duras

¹⁹¹ 'This is a book.

This is a film.

This is night.

The voice speaking is the written voice of the book.

(. . .)

(. . .)

This is an outpost in southern French Indochina.

The year is 1930.

This is the French quarter.

(. . .)

Someone is walking ahead of us. It isn't the speaker.' (NCL, 6–7.)

wrote during the occupation of Paris in World War II, that is, already in the 1940s. The collection begins with a diary of an affair with a man named 'Leo', a story which greatly resembles the ones depicted in *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. The story of 'Leo' is presented in diary form, and this has some implications for its reception. The reading public had already been interested in the authenticity of Duras's girlhood relationship – the writer of Duras's biography, Laure Adler, went as far as travelling to China to track down the alleged lover's family, and in her own words succeeded (Adler 1998/2000, 9–12) – and the diary seems to verify what happened. Annie Ernaux's diary, *Se perdre*, also retrospectively adds to the authenticity of the story of her affair with a married man (it was published 10 years after *Passion simple*). What is common to both authors is the implication that the published diary is an excerpt from a more voluminous text that the author has written in private for years. This applies to Ernaux especially, since her oeuvre includes other works that resemble diaries (*Journal du dehors*, *La Vie extérieure*), and in the opening words of 'Je ne suis pas sortie de la nuit', she explicitly states that the text consists of spontaneous entries – as do diaries. In Duras's case, the story of 'Leo' in *Les Cahiers de la guerre et autres textes* also presents itself as a guarantor of authenticity, a supplement to her other works.

4.2 From the Lover Continuum to the Literary Network

Mapping the multilayered linkages between Duras's works is an arduous task – and here the selection is limited to only a few works. The lover continuum brings some order to the seemingly chaotic web of relations, but not much. Duras herself has noted that there is no organic link between her works, only phases. She claims that the topics of her earlier works did not interest her later on, and that the connection between earlier and later works depends, at most, on the elimination of old things. (Brée, Duras & Doherty 1972, 402–403.) The other famous Durasian cycle, the India Cycle,¹⁹² which Sirkka Knuuttila extensively discusses in terms of the narrativisation of trauma, is problematic with regard to relations between different parts of the cycle. The parts are not (chrono)logical and do not accumulate information. Knuuttila notes that in the cycle, the meanings of motifs and figures do not remain stable, and a 'certain dislocation of signification takes place in the network of mutually mirroring scenes' (Knuuttila 2011, 74). According to Umberto Eco, who

¹⁹² The cycle includes the novels *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (1964), *Le Vice-consul* (1966) and *L'Amour* (1971), and also the films *La Femme du Gange* (1973), *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert* (1976) and *India Song* (1974) as well as the play *India Song*.

discusses texts that are quite different from Duras's, this effect of experimental serialism is a 'neo-baroque pleasure', which is based on aesthetics that ceaselessly and creatively varies the same theme and the same elements but also dismantles the unity and does not adhere to restrictions (Eco 1990, 97–99).

The seemingly chaotic web of connections may be better understood, not when considering the linkages separately, but when viewed as a whole. Duras's whole oeuvre can be regarded as one complex story. In Leslie Hill's words: 'repetition in Duras gradually begins to exceed the confines of the single text and to function on a larger scale, assuming the status of a process of textual generation' (Hill 1993, 85; cf. Willis 1987, Jellenik 2007). The story obviously has several themes (the sexual awakening of a young girl, the aspirations towards writing, difficult family relations) and plotlines (the secret love affair, the life of the family in Indochina) and need by no means be coherent, chronological or otherwise progressive – no more than its individual parts, which are fragmented and non-chronological. Nevertheless, it can be viewed as an entity.

The lover continuum dealt with above supports the view of Duras's autobiographical writing as a continuous literary network. Although *L'Amant* can definitely be read as a separate text and valued for its literary accomplishments, as when one compares it with Duras's early works, and especially with *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, and *Les Cahiers de la guerre et autres textes*, it becomes clear that the book does not exist in a vacuum. This is especially evident in the case of the latter two, since the first explicitly establishes itself as a rewritten version/commentary of *L'Amant*, and the other is a diary of the same events, written closer to the time when they originally occurred. Each individual autobiographical text accentuates fragments and episodes that are present in other works as well, making it impossible to read Duras's texts without consciously or subconsciously recalling the other works. Moreover, the more one reads and, particularly, analyzes the texts, the more one begins to sense a certain continuous 'Durasian air' that characterises each of the works and their entirety as well.

The continuum, which was here discussed in terms of the autobiographical stories about the lover, permeates Duras's other works as well. I already mentioned *L'Eden cinéma*. *L'Amant* has specific connections with *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, and also with *L'Amante Anglaise* (1967; the name of the novel and theme). Stories relating to passion and sexuality are plentiful in Duras's oeuvre (though there are a large number of works that have nothing to do with these themes as well). *Moderato cantabile* (1958) revolves around the topics of murder and sexuality. *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* introduces a complex plexus of a woman's passions from the point of view of an obsessive admirer. Similar thematic characterizations occur in *Yann Andréa Steiner* (1992). All in all, passion is one the fundamental driving forces and themes in all of Duras's oeuvre.

Pamela A. Genova adds that the stories of the lover have connections with the works of the famous India Cycle, namely *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, *Le Vice-consul*, and *India Song* (1973). As an example, she mentions the recurring general symbols that stand for memory: mirrors, forests and water. (Genova 2003, 50.) The India Cycle plays with the recurring names Anne-Marie Stretter and S. Tahla. Knuuttila, despite noting that the meanings of figures do not remain stable, distinguishes recurring motifs in the cycle, such as passionate love, rejection, illness, and the effort to tell of the other person's traumatic experience (Knuuttila 2011, 74). She also recognizes analogical narrative structures that organize the stories through the stories of the protagonists (ibid., 75).¹⁹³ The India Cycle is left out of the present study because of my emphasis on autobiographical writing. However, the presence of the motifs both in the cycle and in the lover continuum demonstrates that the so-called network can be seen as an even vaster entity than the autobiographical one. Even though the concept of 'one story' is perhaps a somewhat simplistic way to understand the internal web of references in the author's oeuvre, Duras's works can be seen as a single entity and not merely as a potpourri of individual works.

4.3 'She sees herself.' Constructing a Self-Portrait

I would now like to draw attention to the most famous descriptive item in *L'Amant*, the young girl's figure and face. It is the autobiographical 'I' who describes her face, thus it is fitting to tentatively define the image as a self-portrait. *L'Amant* was originally supposed to be a commentary on a collection of family photographs (Hill 1993, 118).¹⁹⁴ At one point, the intended title of the book was 'L'Image absolue' (Sheringham 1993, 316). Photographs were then replaced by a series of verbal scenes or portraits. The self-portrait in *L'Amant* is formed bit by bit in passages that describe the famous ferry crossing. At first, the setting is described as being the crossing of the Mekong River, the girl introduces herself as being fifteen-and-a-half years old, and the concept of an image is brought up:

¹⁹³ See Knuuttila 2011, 74–85 for more discussion on repetition as a means of constructing Durasian trauma narratives.

¹⁹⁴ *L'Amant* has a cinematographic subtext: a 1955 film *The Night of the Hunter* by Charles Laughton, one of Duras's personal favourites (Hill 1993, 118–119). Although the book is intimately related to visual expression – *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* carries an even more pronounced relationship with cinematography, and Duras has excelled as a director of films – it is an area of study outside the scope of this dissertation.

Que je vous dire encore, j'ai quinze ans et demi.
C'est le passage d'un bac sur le Mékong
L'image dure pendant toute la traversée du fleuve. (A, 11.)¹⁹⁵

This is followed by a more thorough description of the girl, especially her outfit:

Je porte une robe de soie naturelle, elle est usée, presque transparente (. . .) Cette robe est sans manches, très décolletée (. . .) Ce jour-là je dois porter cette fameuse paire de talons hauts en lamé or. (Ibid., 18–19.)¹⁹⁶

Ce ne sont pas les chaussures qui font ce qu'il y a d'insolite, d'inouï, ce jour-là, dans le tenue de la petite. Ce qu'il y a ce jour-là c'est que la petite porte sur la tête un chapeau d'homme aux bords plats, un feutre souple couleur bois de rose au large ruban noir. (Ibid., 19.)¹⁹⁷

There is something significant in the girl's outfit: she is wearing an almost transparent, sleeveless, low-cut dress, which one would rather picture as a dress for an older woman. The seductive impression is highlighted by a remark in another instance that the girl is wearing red lipstick. Something significantly erotic is about to happen.¹⁹⁸ Hill states that the portrait that is being sketched is 'a 15-year-old girl embarking on a mythic journey across the Mekong River, travelling irreversibly down the path towards desire, sexual knowledge, prostitution, and subsequent exile' (Hill 1993, 119). The portrait thus predicts the upcoming erotic affair.

In *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, the girl's portrait is similarly the essence of a passage that began this chapter:¹⁹⁹

C'est le bac sur le Mékong. Le bac des livres.

(. . .)

¹⁹⁵ 'So, I'm fifteen and a half.

It's on a ferry crossing the Mekong River
The image lasts all the way across.' (L, 5.)

¹⁹⁶ 'I'm wearing a dress of real silk, but it's threadbare, almost transparent (. . .) It's a sleeveless dress with a very low neck (. . .) This particular day I must be wearing the famous pair of gold lame high heels.' (L, 11.)

¹⁹⁷ 'It's not the shoes, though, that make the girl look so strangely, so weirdly dressed. No, it's the fact that she's wearing a man's flat-brimmed hat, a brownish-pink fedora with a broad black ribbon.' (L, 12.)

¹⁹⁸ 'Though one might argue that the girl perhaps looks more peculiar than seductive in her dress, gold lame high heels and a man's hat.

¹⁹⁹ Fragmentation is evident in this passage as in many of the previous and coming ones presented in this chapter. Fragmentation is in itself one of the recurring forms in Duras's writing, similarly to Ernaux. However, the concern in this chapter is more in the thematic aspects of rewriting.

(. . .)

Elle, l'enfant, elle est fardée, habillée comme la jeune fille des livres (. . .).

(. . .)

Elle, elle est restée celle du livre, petite, maigre, hardie, difficile à attraper le sens, difficile à dire qui c'est (. . .). (ACN, 35–36.)²⁰⁰

This passage describes the girl as small, skinny, but also bold and difficult to grasp. The girl remains the same as in *L'Amant*: perhaps slightly awkward in her youth, but sexually confident and attractive as well. It is noteworthy that the 'other book', namely *L'Amant*, explicitly mentions the girl 'of the book'. The reintroduction of the girl's looks as well as the explicit reference makes it difficult to consider *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* as a separate entity: these remarks make it seem like it is the same literary portrait that is being formed despite the placement in different books.

According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, the 'self-portrait' has been commonly understood in literary theory as a self-narrative situated in the present moment, as opposed to autobiography, which would be retrospective (Smith & Watson 2001, 203). The definition does have its problems: the 'past' and the 'present' are not so easily differentiated in autobiographical or any other self-writing. Michel Beaujour writes in his study *Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait* (1980/1991) that the term 'self-portrait' brings to mind Rembrandt and Van Gogh rather than such canonical names of self-writing as Michel de Montaigne and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The operational formula for the self-portrait is, according to him: 'I won't tell you what I've done, but I shall tell you *who I am*.' (Beaujour 1980/1991, 3; emphasis original.) Thus, the point of self-portrait is not to tell the life story of the protagonist, it is more to describe the personality in question. There is no continuous account, and each portrait is presented as though it were the only text of its kind. (Ibid., 2–3.) However, the portrait of the young girl being formed in at least two

²⁰⁰ 'This is the ferry across the Mekong. The ferry in the books.

(. . .)

(. . .)

She is made up, the child, dressed like the young girl in the books (. . .).

(. . .)

She, she has stayed the way she was in the book, small, skinny, tough, hard to get a sense of, hard to label (. . .). (NCL, 25–26.)

different works speaks for some kind of a continuous construction of the girl's portrait, or even of a story of the portrait.

Regarding the denied/alleged continuity, it is crucial to recognize that the changing nature of the girl's face is noted upon in *L'Amant*. This is at first done from the point of view of an unknown man addressing the girl in her old age, and then from the point of view of the girl in her youth:

(. . .) « Je vous connais depuis toujours. Tout le monde dit que vous étiez belle lorsque vous étiez jeune, je suis venu pour vous dire que pour moi je vous trouve plus belle maintenant que lorsque vous étiez jeune, j'aimais moins votre visage de jeune femme que celui que vous avez maintenant, dévasté. »

Je pense souvent à cette image (. . .) Elle est toujours là dans la même silence, émerveillante. C'est entre toutes celle qui me plaît de moi-même, celle où je me reconnais, où je m'échante.

(. . .)

(. . .) Il a été mon visage. Il a vieilli encore bien sûr, mais relativement moins qu'il n'aurait dû. J'ai un visage lacéré de rides sèches et profondes, à la peau cassée. Il ne s'est pas affaissé comme certains visages à traits fins, il a gardé les mêmes contours mais sa matière est détruite. J'ai un visage détruit. (A, 9–10.)²⁰¹

At least three different faces/portraits are referred to in the passage: the face of the young girl, the destroyed face of the girl as an older woman, and the face that has gone through some intense destructive changes (alcoholism, we know) somewhere along the line. The retrospective viewpoint of the older 'Duras' is juxtaposed with the viewpoint of the young girl who is being described.

The construction of a self-portrait, or the change in the girl's face, resembles the act of examining one's face in a mirror:

²⁰¹ (. . .) "I've known you for years. Everyone says you were beautiful when you were young, but I want to tell you I think you're more beautiful now than then. Rather than your face as a young woman, I prefer your face as it is now. Ravaged."

I often think of the image (. . .) It's always there, in the same silence, amazing. It's the only image of myself I like, the only one in which I recognize myself, in which I delight.

(. . .)

(. . .) It has been my face. It's got older still, of course, but less, comparatively, than it would otherwise have done. It's scored with deep, dry wrinkles, the skin is cracked. But my face hasn't collapsed, as some with fine features have done. It's kept the same contours, but its substance has been laid waste. I have a face laid waste.' (L, 3–5.)

Entre dix-huit ans et vingt-cinq ans mon visage est parti dans une direction imprévue. A dix-huit ans j'ai vieilli. (. . .) Ce vieillissement a été brutal. Je l'ai vu gagner mes traits mes traits un à un, changer le rapport qu'il avait entre eux, faire les yeux plus grands, le regard plus triste, la bouche plus définitive, marquer le front de cassures profondes. Au contraire d'en être effrayée j'ai vu s'opérer ce vieillissement de mon visage avec l'intérêt que j'aurais pris par exemple au déroulement d'une lecture. (. . .) Ce visage-là, nouveau, je l'ai gardé. Il a été mon visage (. . .) J'ai un visage lacéré de rides sèches et profondes, à la peau cassée (. . .) (A, 9–10.)²⁰²

The autobiographical 'I' describes the stages her face has gone through in the process of aging, or, to put it more bluntly, its destruction.²⁰³ It is not merely the image supposedly reflected in a mirror or the portrait being drawn that is relevant. The story the autobiographical 'I' is telling about her life and personality is equally essential, or even more so. The passage of time is of crucial importance in both quotes: the 'I' (and also the nameless other 'I' who appears at the beginning of the first passage – not the autobiographical 'I' of the story, but the unknown man) does tell the story of who she is or looks like, but at various points in time. When the 'I' in *L'Amant* reflects on what has become of her face, she is going through her life story, the story of her aging, which has been a journey of physical facial deterioration and destruction.²⁰⁴ Self-reflection is thus not a simple description of the image one sees in a mirror or draws as a self-portrait. Linda Hutcheon's 'endless mirroring process' (Hutcheon 1980, xii), when transported to the level of the individual, is precisely that: a process and an act of reflecting upon oneself, and not only oneself as a static entity, but oneself across time.

This notion becomes more nuanced when one reconsiders the image of the young girl on a ferry from the point of view of photography. The photograph of the girl was never taken, and it is only retrospectively constructed in the text.²⁰⁵ The girl states: 'Elle n'aurait pu être prise que si on avait pu préjuger de

²⁰² 'Between eighteen and twenty-five my face took off in a new direction. I grew old at eighteen. (. . .) My ageing was very sudden. I saw it spread over my features one by one, changing the relationship between them, making the eyes larger, the expression sadder, the mouth more final, leaving great creases in the forehead. But instead of being dismayed I watched this process with the same sort of interest I might have taken in the reading of a book. (. . .) And I've kept it ever since, the new face I had then. It has been my face. (. . .) It's scored with deep, dry wrinkles, the skin is cracked.' (. . .) (L, 4)

²⁰³ In Ernaux's 'Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit', there is a similar kind of mirroring at work when the 'I' parallels herself and her mother's dying, decrepit body (McIlvanney 2001, 119).

²⁰⁴ A devoted reader of Duras knows that the details of this life story are revealed later on in *L'Amant*, and in her other works as well.

²⁰⁵ Michael Sheringham discusses the non-existence of the photograph from the point of view of memory: 'Yet the non-existence of the photograph, and the conditional tense it imposes, consistently maintain the ingredients of imagination, invention, and fantasy as part of the process through which a person relates to her memories, while it consistently denies the false implication that the moment is being considered as an objective determinant of subsequent events.' (Sheringham 1993, 317.)

l'importance de cet 'événement dans ma vie, cette traversée du fleuve. Or, tandis que celle-ci s'opérait, on ignorait encore jusqu'à son existence.' (A, 10.)²⁰⁶ The destroyed face the girl acquired years later through ageing, and accelerating the process by drinking, would already have been the girl's face had she or someone else known the significance of the context of the portrait – in other words, the crossing of the river on a ferry, the meeting of the Chinese man, and the subsequent affair. (Cf. Sheringham 1993, 316–317.) This suggests that it is not the deterioration of the 'I's face that is being described, for the portrait is frozen at the moment of the crossing of the river, as depicted in at least two books. The face of the girl in this portrait already incorporates the older 'face laid waste' – only no one knew this at the time. It is evident that the versions of the self-portrait are not separate from each other, nor are they the only texts of their kind. As Beaujour suggests, they are inextricably linked, producing one single image. Continuity definitely exists at least between the two works, and possibly between the images that produce the portrait, but not in the sense of a continuous life story.

The girl is quite self-aware in the short quote in which she alludes to the untaken photograph. The self-portrait in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* is accompanied by an even more self-conscious attitude from the older 'I':

Elle se regarde. Elle se voit. Elle voit le chapeau d'homme en feutre bois de rose au large ruban noir, les souliers noirs éculés avec les strass, le rouge à lèvres excessif du bac de la rencontre.

Elle se regarde elle – elle s'est approchée de son image. Elle s'approche encore. Ne se reconnaît pas bien. Elle ne comprend pas ce qui est arrivé. Elle le comprendra des années plus tard : elle a déjà le visage détruit de toute sa vie. (ACN, 87–88.)²⁰⁷

What takes place in this passage is that the girl looks at herself, regarding her newly acquired image after lovemaking. The girl does not yet know herself well: the image is not familiar to her. The portrait of the fifteen-year-old girl who has just had her very first sexual experience gains its full meaning only in retrospect, in the mind of the older 'Duras'. It has required the lived life as well as the several written versions for the events to unravel. Through those retrospectively written versions, the face

²⁰⁶ 'The photograph could only have been taken if someone could have known in advance how important it was to be in my life, that event, that crossing of the river. But while it happened, no one even knew of its existence.' (L, 10.)

²⁰⁷ 'She looks at herself. She sees herself. She sees the man's hat made of rosewood-colored felt with a wide black band, the down-at-the-heel black shoes with rhinestones, the overdone red lipstick from the ferry where they met.

She looks at herself – she has come up close to her reflection. She comes even closer. Doesn't quite recognize herself. She doesn't understand what has happened. Years later, she will understand: her face is already the ruin it will be for the rest of her life.' (NCL, 76.)

of the young girl before its deterioration and the already destroyed face of the older 'Duras' melt together.

The contemplation of the image of the young girl on a ferry resembles the scene in *La Vie matérielle* where the older 'Duras' notes how she would have wanted to incorporate both selves, the older and the younger, in 'the book', *L'Amant*. In both books there are at least two selves present, the addresser and the addressee. What is strikingly similar in the contemplative books *Écrire* and *C'est tout* and the books discussed here is that the 'I' is at the center of attention. 'Duras' might discuss some general topic such as immigration in *La Vie matérielle* but it is her feelings about the issue that are relevant. Similarly, the death of an English pilot depicted in *Écrire* is relevant with regard to Paulo, the author's brother, and especially with regard to her wish to 'meddle in' the cruelty of war. Here, the lover and the theme of passion are filtered through the autobiographical 'I', but, furthermore, it is in the end this 'I' that all the stories concerning the lover depict – the construction of the portrait and the reflection on the 'I's' appearance make the concentration even more explicit than in her contemplative books. The autobiographical 'I' herself, 'Duras', is the most constant *biographème*, perhaps in addition to writing, which characterizes all her autobiographical books. The 'I' as the topic of autobiographies is a prerequisite of such writing, but in Duras's case, the emphasis on the self is even further accentuated, especially since it recurs from one book to the next. The construction of the self-portrait in *L'Amant* is perhaps the most explicit example of elevating the self into the cohesive feature of the story.

4.4 Intensity of the Repetition and the Life-Long Project of Constructing the Self

In this chapter, I have attempted to underline that – in a theoretical sense, which is the only sense that matters here – not one of Duras's works precedes the other, not even *L'Amant*. As Moraru argues, rewritings are not mere 'footnotes' to available stories (Moraru 2001, 8). Rewritings are the essence and motivation of the kind of writing project that includes repetition and revision. We saw this in the examination of Ernaux's oeuvre, in which the regeneration sometimes takes a primary role over the actual subject matter. In Duras's case, the constant multiplication of texts shows that, in Hill's words, 'repetition in Duras is not a secondary or external phenomenon, but a primary one, integral to the texts it affects' (Hill 1993, 86–87).

It is obvious that rewriting is a conscious effort in both Duras's and Ernaux's work. Jellenik regards Duras's, Ernaux's, and Marie Redonnet's constant rewriting as a highly postmodern, critical, and self-conscious project (Jellenik 2007,

1). I agree with Jellenik in that all three authors have other agendas in their autobiographical repetitive writing besides just recreating their earlier works and selves. Redonnet, whose oeuvre is a bizarre blend of realism and fantasy, situating itself at the threshold of popular culture, is particularly interested in rewriting herself in order to rewrite language itself (Jellenik 2007, 7). Ernaux writes, and has written, in order to construct the story of her life in several autobiographical modes. She enlists the help of her alter ego's self-conscious attitude towards everything that has been written while maintaining that attitude as one of key motifs of her works. 'Duras's varied self-reflective gestures include metatextual clues, formal transgressions, and perhaps most conspicuously the sketching of her own portrait. Even the whole act of rewriting is a self-reflective gesture in its own right.

However, in this chapter I have drawn attention more to the recurring subject matter and to the constant recreation of the Durasian self than to the admittedly interesting self-conscious efforts. The end result of these gestures is a self that is elusive and multi-layered, emphasized and unified, as manifested in the portrait of the young girl on a ferry that is duplicated in at least two works. However, despite the self being simultaneously situated in various points in time, she is also frozen as one single image. Self that is being formed in the process of rewriting consists of various manifestations, but is in the end 'one' 'Duras' – resembling an autobiographical oeuvre, which includes many works but, as suggested in this thesis, can be considered as an entity as well.

I wish to further point out the intensity of the repetition that is evident in Duras's oeuvre. As Hill states, Duras provides disturbance at almost every level of *L'Amant*: syntactic, discursive, and thematic. The result of this kind of writing is a peculiar and distinctive intensity. Greater emotional immediacy and density are valued over clarity of expression. (Hill 1993, 120.) This is a common, generally acknowledged perception of Duras's writing. As pointed out in chapter 3, Ernaux for her part links the passionate and/or obsessive subject matter with her fragmented, non-chronological mode of writing. It is especially the acts of rewriting and endlessly referring to the same characters, settings, and incidents create an air of density in Duras's writing. The form in the story of the forbidden love affair resonates with her depiction of her desire for the Chinese man, with the project of rewriting, and also with the process of revealing something from her past. The dramatic repetition or recreation of her past results in the realization that writing is the best enactment of desire (Hill 1993, 120). Moreover, the reciprocal relationship between desire and writing resonates well with the master idea discussed in this dissertation, namely intensity and passion as the substance, and as the way of expressing the self-reflective autobiographical practice.

'Intensity' describes the ways in which Duras's works are read as well. Susan Willis suggests that the best way to read her writing is based on intertextual

recycling: Duras's books are not for material consumption, thus, one cannot simply read them once and leave them be (Willis 1987, 3). This is because Duras's works are almost impossible to read without taking note of her other stories. Even though it is physically possible to read one book at a time, the act of reading is infiltrated by thoughts and sensations stemming from the reading experiences of her other works. The reading process is soon transformed into an endless circulation which follows the obsessive repetition apparent in the books themselves. In the end, it feels like one has already read beforehand everything that is being read.

The concept of autobiographical space discussed in Ernaux's case is perhaps more applicable here than the concept of one story after all. The intense circulation of both the subject matter, characters and the emphasis on the 'I'; the concept of the 'one work' the repetition leads to; the creation of the self-portrait; and the project of writing out one's identity; these all take place in one oeuvre-wide sphere. In both authors' cases, the space is not merely a literary one, consisting of concrete, recurring references and allusions in the texts. It includes an extratextual dimension as well. Even though the explicit referentiality of Duras's work has been discarded as being irrelevant, the autobiographical nature of the rewriting process is of key importance. It is a question of the author's lifelong project of constructing the self through progressive autobiographical writing. The project consists of an authorial career that was anticipated by the young Duras's interest in writing, a career that did not find its end even when the author lapsed into a coma from October 1988 until June 1989. Nor did it end on the author's death-bed, as *C'est tout*, dictated by Duras to her companion Yann Andréa during the last months of her life, demonstrates. During this career, Duras meticulously strove to write everything that was her. However, the fact is that Duras has passed away and is no longer able to continue constructing her identity or her self-portrait. One can pose the question whether her self is 'ready' since she can no longer write it. On the other hand, posthumous publications such as *Les Cahiers de la guerre et autres textes* (2006) and *La Beauté des nuits du monde* (2010) inevitably add still new layers to the story of 'Duras'.

PART III Authorial Moves

5. Ernaux's *façon d'exister*

J'ai parfois l'impression de vivre sur deux plans à la fois, celui de la vie et celui de l'écriture. (ÉCC, 119).²⁰⁸

Discussing Ernaux's and Duras's contemplative works separately and their oeuvres as a whole has provided intriguing insights into their self-conscious strategies and their autobiographical 'I's relentless self-emphasis, as well as into the multilayered connections between their stories. In this final part of the dissertation, I will move beyond the safe – yet ambiguous – boundaries of canonical literary works and discuss the authorial strategies of both Ernaux and Duras as players in the literary field. More specifically, it is their authorial self-commentary on their own writing that is under inspection in this and the following chapter. The vagueness of the boundary between the 'literary' and the 'authorial' will be discussed as well.

'Ernaux' mentions Duras in *La Vie extérieure*, where she describes the author's tombstone in Montparnasse Cemetery (VE, 116). But it is in Frédéric-Yves Jeannet's interview, *L'Écriture comme un couteau* where she makes one of the rare explicit comparisons between herself and Duras. It is the interviewer who first brings up the possible parallel between the two authors, which is interesting since he omits references to many contemporary authors who might be more appropriate comparisons to Ernaux in terms of writing autobiographies or subject matter. Ernaux's response is not lengthy and gives the impression that she does not appreciate the comparison. She is adamant that she and Duras are two distinctly different authors when it comes to writing lives: in her opinion, Duras fictionalizes her life, whereas Ernaux is opposed to 'all fiction' (ÉCC, 94). In her opinion, simply writing about – that is, narrativizing – one's life does not turn that life into fiction.²⁰⁹

In another passage, Ernaux states that she has the impression of living in two places at a time, in life and in writing (ÉCC, 119). These words do not underline the autobiographical nature of her oeuvre as such. However, they do reinforce the impression one has of Ernaux as an author whose life and writing are inextricably linked. Whether the topic is renouncing fiction or attesting the connection

²⁰⁸ 'I have the impression of living in two places at a time, in life and in literature.' (My translation.)

²⁰⁹ In this dissertation Duras's autobiographical writing is not considered fiction, and neither is it suggested that the author fictionalizes her life – just the opposite, in fact.

between life and writing, these two examples of authorial self-commentary in Jeanne's interview illustrate the way in which Ernaux the author engages in a commentary on her oeuvre and writing: honestly, intensely, and with pronounced self-awareness.

In this chapter, I will discuss how Ernaux reflects on writing and its significance to her life in selected examples,²¹⁰ such as in the interview mentioned above and in a preface to conference proceedings.²¹¹ Reflecting on one's writing is the main topic of any author's interview. In Ernaux's case, at first glance it appears that she is mostly concerned with the borderline theoretical discussion of autobiography as a mode of writing and the explicit assertion that her work is transsubjective. Revealing details of her personal life seem to receive far less attention in her authorial self-commentary. However, I will claim that not only is she suggesting that she is telling fundamental truths about her life, but also that both her commentary and her writing are self-reflective practices which turn her career-long autobiographical project into an actual, intense way of life.

5.1 Two examples: Authorial Self-Commentary

In 1988, Ernaux gave an interview related to the publication of *Une Femme*, a story about her mother. In her answers, Ernaux discusses the book and the one preceding it, *La Place*, which is about her father, and how the desire to write about her parents came about. As I stated in chapter 3 in connection with Ernaux's social writing, the story of the self often unfolds through the depiction of someone else's story. Even though the main topic is her parents and her books describing them, Ernaux does give away some aspects of her life in the interview. Ernaux describes her personal feelings when writing about her father's death in 1967 and that of her mother in 1986. The deaths made her want to write the truth about her parents: they triggered her whole motivation for writing. She states that she experienced a profound spiritual awakening by writing about her mother. She talks about catharsis in writing, and is undoubtedly referring both to the reader's catharsis and to her own. (Goure 1988, 50–51.)

²¹⁰ Obviously, the analysis will be limited to the public author's self-commentary. For further discussion on the boundary between the private person and the public author, see Introduction, 'Texts and Lives', and chapter 6.

²¹¹ The self-commentary which is referred to in this chapter constitutes mostly paratextual material, though its position is debatable, as I will remark later on. As for the limited quantity of material: this is a conscious decision. The intention is not to offer an in-depth analysis of all the interviews Ernaux has given throughout her career, but to discuss certain aspects of her authorial self-commentary with the help of examples that vary slightly from one another.

It is noteworthy that although Ernaux's comments relate to herself in addition to her parents or to the books concerning them, it is not a question of discussing the details of her life but of pondering her relationship to writing – admittedly, a deeply personal affair.

5.1.1 *L'Écriture comme un couteau*

Ernaux's and Jeannet's book-length interview *L'Écriture comme un couteau* was conducted via email from June 2001 to September 2002 between the two. Jeannet is well acquainted with the mode since he has embarked upon similar projects with other authors such as Michel Butor (*De la distance avec Michel Butor*, 1990). Although *L'Écriture comme un couteau* is published in a book form and credited primarily to Annie Ernaux, it is not an autobiographical story but a specific kind of an interview: it is Ernaux's in-depth reflection on what her writing is and what it means to her.

The topics Ernaux and Jeannet discuss in the interview relate mostly to writing and Ernaux's profession as an author. Specific stories are often referred to and discussed, such as Ernaux's slightly more realist works as opposed to the precisely autobiographical ones, but mostly the two discuss topics related to writing on a more general level. These topics include the trepidation one feels when writing something private and authentic, the search for new modes of writing, the politics of literature, the relationship between the world, culture and literature, her writing as addressing the position of women, writing as salvation, the interconnection of words and things, writing as transubjection, writing as a necessity, the relationship between her life and writing, and writing as a way of existing in the world.

Ernaux's oeuvre includes diverse generic modes, as has been noted throughout this dissertation. In general, the topic her readers seem to find highly appealing and Ernaux herself is the most occupied with is the relationship between fiction and autobiography. In *L'Écriture comme un couteau*, she characterizes her stories as *autofiction*, *roman*, *roman autobiographique*, *auto-socio-biographique*, and *journal* (ÉCC, 20–31). The variation between these modes stems from their position on the scale in between fiction and novels. She is unable to categorize any of her texts as one or the other, the result of which is precisely the abundance of modes present in her writing. She does, however, state that writing ultimately constitutes two modes:

(. . .) l'écriture a deux formes pour moi. D'une part, des textes concertés (. . .) et de l'autre, parallèlement, une activité de diariste, ancienne, multiforme. (. . .) Dans mon esprit, ces deux modes d'écriture constituent un peu une opposition entre "public" et "privé", littérature et vie, totalité et inachèvement. (ÉCC, 24.)²¹²

The two modes do not settle themselves exactly at the opposite ends of the fiction–novels spectrum, which is mostly because that the two intertwine in most of Ernaux's writing. However, she acknowledges that writing is both a public, literary effort and a private, close-to-life endeavor for her. The same is stated in *Une Femme*, where the author's alter ego 'Ernaux' characterizes the mode of writing in that particular text as a 'cross' between family history and sociology, reality and fiction (F, 23).

Ernaux is very aware of what kind of writing she needs to produce in order to achieve a particular mode. Jeannet and Ernaux discuss whether it was difficult to transform her writing from the earlier, more 'literary' approach into the one she later became known for, in other words, into *écriture plate, clinique, and blanche* – a writing that is placid, clinical, void of colour, so to speak.²¹³ Such a style began dominating Ernaux's work when she strove to depict her parents in as acute terms as possible. (ÉCC, 32.) All in all, Ernaux constantly reflects on the mode she is using as if she did not want to leave it to the readers to categorize her writing. Ernaux's depth of insight on her writing as autobiographical and/or fictional and her career-long awareness of generic modes are notable. However, the consciously produced variations from one mode to another and from one style to another are a part of the author's self-reflective practice, and not merely stylistic experimentations. It is not what she says about her personal mode or style of writing that is relevant in *L'Écriture comme un couteau*, but that she engages in a discussion on these matters. She is highly aware of what she is writing and eager to make use of this awareness.

The awareness goes beyond the author's own works. While in the main body of the interview Ernaux comments on her writing, in the preface to the interview she offers insights into the construction of the interview itself. She sharply distinguishes between oral interviews and this project. The situation differs from the one conventionally seen as an interview because of its temporal construction. Ernaux states that she rarely responded immediately and that there existed a gap

²¹² '(. . .) writing represents two forms for me. On the one hand, premeditated texts (. . .), and on the other, in parallel, a diarist's activity, ancient, multiformed. (. . .) In my mind, these two modes of writing constitute a slight opposition between "public" and "private", literature and life, totality and endlessness.' (My translation.)

²¹³ Though I would characterize Ernaux's writing as anything but 'colourless'. It is, of course, not what 'blanche' definitively signifies.

between the questions and the answer. The interview, which was conducted via email, lasted for months, and the goal of which was a published book, allows for exploiting that gap, and elaborating at great length on her thoughts, goals, and strivings as a writer. The answers are thus more considered than those given as responses in oral interviews. Ernaux does state that when the inspiration struck her, she went to the computer to type out every thought that had occurred to her as an answer to Jeannet's questions. She strove for immediacy, direct responses, and the avoidance of corrections. (ÉCC, 12.)

I would argue that even though Ernaux strove for a certain level of spontaneity, she still had time to either consciously or subconsciously reflect on each of the questions and responses Jeannet had sent her. This is implied by the book only consisting of approximately 150 pages, but it took over a year from Ernaux and Jeannet to come up with the material for it. Thus, my claim is that despite the seeming transparency and immediacy, the project of writing *L'Écriture comme un conteau* allows for more considered authorial self-commentary than conventional interviews.

The self-conscious practice is the driving force and the sole purpose of the interview and, it seems, of Ernaux's whole project of writing. Jeannet's interview gives the impression that the particular kind of self-reflection on Ernaux's writing and oeuvre supersedes the concern with her own personality and life. She does emphasize the deep connection her writing has with her life, but again, her life story is not addressed independently.

5.1.2 Annie Ernaux: une œuvre de l'entre-deux

An even more thought-provoking instance of self-analysis is Ernaux's attendance at the academic symposium that concentrated on her works, held at the University of Arras in 2003. She also wrote a preface to the conference proceedings (*Annie Ernaux: une œuvre de l'entre-deux*, 2004). At the symposium, Ernaux's role was to attend, to listen, and to comment on the papers presented on her writing.

In the preface, Ernaux discusses her attitude towards the criticism dealing with her oeuvre in general and also comments on her participation in this particular symposium.²¹⁴ She contemplates both academic and journalistic approaches to her writing. According to her, journalistic criticism and, even more, the attention she received at the time of the publication of her first novel, *Les Armoires vides*, intro-

²¹⁴ Ernaux's following remarks can all be found in Ernaux 2004 (i.e. in the preface she wrote to the conference proceedings).

duced her to a whole new world. This world was a ‘more serious one’, that is, the world of literature. In recognizing that she belongs to that world herself and that her work interests others, she discovered a new kind of obligation to writing. Thus, already during those early years, Ernaux’s attitude to writing seemed to evolve towards a somewhat professional take on literature and her own role in it. Her attitude to journalistic critique itself has transformed as time has gone by and as the number of her publications has increased: she states that it is now the analysis on the ‘how’ in her books that interests her more than simple discussion on their themes. She gains intellectual satisfaction in reading precise analytical scrutiny of her texts. This applies to academic criticism as well, which has increased in volume towards the later years of her career, and thus offers possibilities for her to gain insight into how others view her work at a more profound level. She admits that academic criticism has an effect on her writing. The same applies to her participation in the symposium in Arras: in the preface she describes how she was intellectually intrigued by the variety and the depth of the papers presented. She participated in the debates on her writing and was also able to make use of the ideas provoked by the discussions in her upcoming writing.

Of all specific observations in the preface, perhaps the most revealing are those concerning the basic quality of her writing, that is, a combination of literature, sociology and historiography – the term Ernaux herself uses is *auto-socio-biographique*, as mentioned above. Again, more interesting than what she actually says about the generic definition of her writing is that by affirming the above-mentioned definition, and by agreeing with the previous research on the matter, she places herself in the continuum of academic rhetoric. The preface of *Annie Ernaux: un oeuvre de l’entre-deux* thus advances the self-awareness of *L’Écriture comme un couteau* even further, towards the academic realm.

Ernaux has also commented on Lyn Thomas’s critical introduction to the author’s books up to the publication of *La Honte* (*Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer and her Audience*, 1999). Her contribution appears on the back cover of the first edition of Thomas’s book:

It’s difficult to put into words how impressed I was by the depth and accuracy of this book. It provides an in-depth analysis of the importance of the gaze, the mother/daughter relationship, my desire to return to the ‘text-world’ of my childhood. I have to hurry to forget what (Lyn Thomas) has written, in order to be able to write ‘innocently’. (Ernaux in Thomas 1999, back cover.)

One might almost suspect irony in such lavish praise, but evidently Ernaux regards Thomas’s analyses concerning her work as spot on. She brings up the notion of writing ‘innocently’, a theme her alter ego often ponders on in her books, as in *Passion simple*, when discussing publishing and the effect it has on the process of

writing. What is even more relevant than what she is actually saying is that she is quoted in the first place: even the academics themselves acknowledge her active role in the critical approach to her writing.²¹⁵

Ernaux assumably was quite an active participant in Thomas's writing process since the book includes references to an unpublished interview between Thomas and Ernaux, conducted on the 21st March, 1997. In this interview the author reveals her knowledge of current literary theory. She comments on the autobiographical pact in her writing by referring to the famous critic, Philippe Lejeune, who originally introduced it:

Ever since *La Place*, which is a real turning point in my writing (. . .) the 'I' and the name on the cover, according to Lejeune's definition, are the same, without there really being an explicit pact. But in my opinion the pact is self-evident in the mode of writing itself. (Ernaux in Thomas 1999, 30.)

Thomas engages Ernaux's and another critic's, Warren Motte's, opinions on Lejeune's ideas in a dialogue so that the author actually participates in an authentic academic discussion. Not only does the author participate in the theoretical debate, but the approach is weaved into her books as well. Ernaux herself states that 'I have always considered writing to be a form of research' (Ernaux in Thomas 1999, 37), revealing the theoretical motivation behind the reflective layers in her work (cf. chapter 1). Thomas notes that similar critical commentary appears in the author's statements and in her writing, such as *La Honte*, which resembles 'the systematic review of information and critical perspectives found in an academic essay' (Thomas 1999, 21). In *La Honte* 'Ernaux' herself brings up her borderline academic attitude towards writing and establishes herself as a kind of researcher who produces her results by describing how she processes the images she remembers as documents, examines them from different angles to give them meaning, and in the end carries out an ethnological study herself (H, 224). Ernaux's commentary in her literary works through the voices of her alter egos resembles her authorial one so much that it proves difficult to differentiate between them.

Thomas notes that besides her awareness of contemporary literary theory, Ernaux acknowledges her position as an established author: 'the need to attain perfection in a single text is perhaps mitigated by a greater sense of freedom, manifested in part by the intertextual links and self-referential commentary which are now possible' (Thomas 1999, 24). She is an established author, and this allows her

²¹⁵ For more discussion on the author's authority and control when commenting on her work, especially in interviews, see chapter 6.

to acknowledge the private and public aspects of writing and to control the scope in which she reveals private aspects of her life.

What we have learned from these examples is that Ernaux is extremely aware of what is discursively and thematically going on in her stories. This kind of authorial self-commentary is even more explicit than the self-consciousness of the autobiographical mode found in the reflection on the publication of the story in *Passion simple*. The type of borderline academic self-analysis is conducted in a continuous, motivated and pre-determined manner. The self-awareness which covers such a vast area of subjects related to writing undermines the fact that Ernaux does write autobiographically.

Boris Tomaševski's conception of a life story of the 'poet', mentioned in the introduction, does not signify a life story as commonly perceived, but more as the myth or the image of the author, the formation of which he himself participates in – in other words, deciding which aspects of his life he himself wishes to emphasize in connection with his authorial image. According to Tomaševski, this life story is relevant only when the play on the reality of these subjective comments is a part of the structure of a work. (Tomaševski 1923/1978, 52.) In Ernaux's case, the concentration on writing in her authorial self-commentary underlines her image as an author who, despite writing autobiographically, is more invested in the act itself than in revealing details of her life to the public.²¹⁶

5.2 From Transsubjection to Personal 'Truth'

There is a very particular motif in Ernaux's authorial self-commentary that reinforces the impression that it is not the autobiographical that she aspires to. In chapter 3, I suggested that one of Ernaux's main attributes as an author is that in addition to autobiographical recollections she is an analyst of the French society. *La Place*, *Une Femme*, and even *Passion simple* depict social, historical, and cultural conditions. The books describe such things as life in a French working town in the 1960s, the Catholic influence on the lives of young adults, and the position of women. Social commentary is even more evident in *Journal du dehors* and *La Vie extérieure*, where she seemingly recounts her day-to-day life, but is simultaneously describing and analyzing (Parisian) society. She contextualizes her personal life, depicted autobiographically, by attaching social analysis to it.

²¹⁶ For Ernaux's most recent more or less in-depth contemplation on writing, see the interview with Marguerite Cornier in *Retour à Yvetot* (RY, 56–67) and an exchange with a conference audience in the same work (RY, 68–73).

In addition to being quite explicit in her social commentary, Ernaux has extended it to cover the actual autobiographical aspects of her writing as well. In Goure's interview she mentions that while she was writing about her own life and her own parents in *La Place* and *Une Femme*, she felt as if she were only mediating something that did not belong to her, after all (Goure 1988, 50). At the time, Ernaux was increasingly turning towards the private and the personal in her writing. However, these aspirations were never unconditional. Ernaux's statement in Goure's interview would seem to suggest that in Ernaux's writing, 'real' experience is not an issue for her, rather the goal is to turn something private and personal into something public and general.²¹⁷

In *L'Écriture comme un couteau*, the author gives a more precise definition of the kind of writing she is aiming for, namely transsubjective writing. She already 'knows' at the moment of writing that she is not writing about her jealousy (depicted in *L'Occupation*), but about a jealousy which is immaterial, perceptible and logical. (ÉCC, 112–113.) As proposed earlier in this dissertation (cf. Introduction, chapter 1, and chapter 3), transsubjection signifies the transformation of a personal experience into something that is separate from its experiencer, or in the case of autobiographical writing, from the author of the story.²¹⁸ The generalized experience thus exists 'completely outside' the author's person. Ernaux states that she has used the method of transsubjection in *L'Occupation*, meaning that the story, even though it is autobiographical and seemingly presents an emphatic self, does not depict her jealousy but, rather, *a* jealousy (ÉCC, 113). Her literary alter ego formulates the idea in almost exactly the same words in *L'Occupation* (O, 46). Thus, the jealousy is something that others can perhaps relate to and reclaim as their own experience. She continues that it is not the mirroring of herself that results in transsubjective writing and that in this kind of writing, it is the truth of the story and not her own personal truth that matters. (ÉCC, 113.) Overall, Ernaux's aspirations towards transsubjection, expressed by means of both her authorial and literary reflection, make it quite difficult for the reader to go on believing that he or she is reading something transparently autobiographical.

In the light of what has been discussed in this chapter, it could be stated that the preoccupation with the self in the stories – whether the self is at the center of attention or not – is more a characteristic of textual self-consciousness than a

²¹⁷ One reason for this statement is that she is not primarily discussing her own past but that of her parents. The statement might also refer to a more general feeling of distance when writing about personal issues.

²¹⁸ Ernaux uses the word *transubstantiation* as well. In Christianity, it signifies the turning of the bread and wine offered in the Sacrament into Christ's body and blood. Particularly in Catholic theology (and it should be noted that Catholicism was of tremendous importance in the France of Ernaux's childhood and youth), the separation of 'appearances' and 'substance' is considered crucial.

sign of transparently autobiographical writing revealing something about the self. However, I have deduced (for example in chapter 2) that taking up the self as the object of reflection in the first place draws attention to that very same self. The dismantling of the unique individual is precisely what draws our attention to that dismantling self who in this case includes both the autobiographical author and the connection between the 'I' and the author. Similarly, writing autofiction which questions its own referentiality, often associated with Ernaux's stories, inevitably draws attention to the possible autobiographical nature of the story.

Returning to the symposium in Arras, what is notable in the preface to the conference proceedings is Ernaux's description of what happened when she began to protest against the interpretations presented on her writing. She states that she did have concerns that her position as a listener-commentator (she was expected to comment on each presentation instantaneously) would turn her into a 'professor-judge'. She, however, emphasizes that this was avoided in Arras. Her involvement resulted in animated discussions, and also had unforeseen outcomes. She states that she ended up revealing the motives behind the greatest dispute between her parents. The dispute was described in her autobiographical novel *La Honte*, but the original motives were not. In the preface she does not discuss the motives of her parents as such, but her confession that she opened up about them in the symposium is undeniable. Thus, she admits that the participation in the academic criticism of her oeuvre in the symposium led her, unwillingly perhaps, to make apparent the connection between her personal life and its textual representation. She revealed a fraction of the selective process through which she includes some but excludes other details of her life from her autobiographical writing, implying that she is very much aware that she is publishing personal material in her works.

Above, I already suggested that a change in the autobiographical approach occurred in Ernaux's work in the 1980s and culminated in 1991 with *Passion simple*, where she revealed almost ridiculous details of her obsessive conduct during a love affair. Of Ernaux's stories, *Passion simple* was perhaps most concentrated on the individual and also the landmark point in her autobiographical turn. Despite her ventures into the questioning of the mode per se and into social commentary, Ernaux has been quite autobiographical throughout her career. Her very first book, *Les Armoires vides*, whilst realist in mode, is based on an abortion she resorted to while in college. *L'Événement*, published later on in her career, depicts the same incident. *La Femme gélée* describes her intolerable position as a mother and housewife whose intellect and education seem to have gone to waste. *Une Femme* and *La Place* are the sincerest possible depictions of her parents and her childhood. *Les Années*, whilst written in the third person, is still a compilation of autobiographical topics that Ernaux has written about in previous books. *L'Autre fille* is a letter to Ernaux's sister who passed away before her birth, and *L'Usage de la photo, Retour à*

Yvetot and the compilation book *Écrire la vie* include authentic photographs that cover the author's life from childhood to maturity in addition to reflections on writing and entries from the author's private journal. Regarded as a whole, Ernaux's works appear primarily as parts of a single autobiographical project.

Ernaux is also quite sincerely autobiographical in comparison with other contemporary authors. The ambiguity of her identity in her narratives is almost negligible compared to Camille Laurens's play with her alter ego. Whereas Laurens goes to great lengths to blur her identity with the help of varying personal pronouns in *Dans ces bras-là*, Ernaux succumbs to such variation mostly from one story to another and not within the text of any one particular story.²¹⁹ Ernaux is more explicit in her autofictional tendencies, in the sense that she refers directly to the problematic relationship between reality and writing – this goes for both her autobiographical writing and authorial self-commentary. She feels no need to implicitly hide her aspirations in the midst of storytelling. In my opinion, these explicit comments on the autobiographical mode of writing are less prone to actually subvert referentiality and the identification of the protagonist, the narrator and the author than an implicit means of blurring the boundary between writing and reality. There is no reason why autobiographical writing could or should not entail consideration of its own constitution, or why authorial self-commentary would necessarily shake the autobiographical foundation of a story.

As mentioned, Ernaux aims for an authentic account of her parents and childhood conditions. In his interview Goure, similarly to Jeannet years later, asks how her distinctive mode of writing was born, referring to the style often associated with Ernaux: detailed, calculated, almost plain – as Ernaux herself puts it, *écriture placée*. Ernaux states that she wanted to find particular words to describe her parents in *La Place* and *Une Femme*. The language needed to be open and the words used precise. She says that she never accepted a phrase until she was certain that it was the only possible one – that not a single word or formulation could be changed. Ernaux's explanation for using the particular words is that writing about her mother and father and discovering the 'profound truth' about them required a specific language. In *Une Femme* she needed to reconstruct every little detail about her mother: the talks, the gestures, the silences, and all the objective signs of existence. (Goure 1988, 50–51.)²²⁰

²¹⁹ The exception being perhaps the hybrid forms of *La Honte* and *Les Années*.

²²⁰ Such as in the following description: 'La femme de ces années-là était belle, teinte en rousse. Elle avait une grande voix large, criait souvent sur un ton terrible. Elle riait aussi beaucoup, d'un rire de gorge qui découvrait ses dents et ses gencives. Elle chantait en repassant, *Le temps des cerises*, *Riquita jolie fleur de Java*, elle portait des turbans, une robe d'été à grosses rayures bleues, une autre beige, molle et gaufrée. Elle se poudrait à la houppette devant la glace au-dessus de l'évier, se passait du rouge à lèvres en commençant par le petit cœur du milieu, se parfumait derrière l'oreille. Pour agraffer son corset, elle se tournait vers le

Linda Hutcheon suggests that the distinction between critical and literary texts begins to fade when metafictional characteristics, here regarded as self-reflective ones, appear in texts (Hutcheon 1980, 15). It is interesting that yet again something similar is being said both in Ernaux's authorial self-commentary and in her writing. In *L'Occupation*, the autobiographical 'I' describes how she is striving to write everything essential about her experience:

J'écris d'ailleurs la jalousie comme je la vivais, en traquant et accumulant les désirs, les sensations et les actes qui ont été les miens en cette période. C'est la seule façon pour moi de donner une matérialité à cette obsession. Et je crains toujours de laisser échapper quelque chose d'essentiel. L'écriture, en somme, comme une jalousie du réel. (O, 40.)²²¹

Both the autobiographical 'I' and Ernaux the author speak of the need to bring out everything that is essential by using particular words and sentences, and to not let anything worthwhile not be said. This leads to the profound 'truth', whether it be about her mother or father, or about the reflective 'I's intense, obsessive jealousy depicted in *L'Occupation*. One simply cannot escape the hunt for the 'truth' in Ernaux, no matter how controversial and even forbidding such a concept might be for academic scholars. In the preface to *L'Écriture comme un couteau*, the author states that she could not 'teach' anyone anything general about her writing: her answers simply entail personal things that occupy most of her thoughts. Even though her writing designates something general, it is also an effort to mediate some of her individual truths. (ÉCC, 13.)

mur. Sa peau sortait entre les lacets croisés, attachés en bas par un nœud et une rosette.' (F, 45–46); 'The woman of that time cut a handsome figure, with a fine head of hair, which she dyed red. She had a formidable voice and would often shout in thunderous tones. She liked to laugh too – a deep, throaty laugh, which revealed her teeth and gums. She sang as she did the ironing – *Le temps des cerises*, Riquita Jolie Fleur de Java. She wore turbans and had two favourite dresses, a summer one with big, blue stripes and a soft, beige one made of seersucker. She powdered her face with a puff in the mirror above the sink and dabbed perfume behind her ear. When she put on lipstick, she always started with the heart-shaped bit in the middle. She turned to face the wall when she fastened her corset. Her flesh bulged through the criss-cross of laces, joined together at her waist by a knot and a small rosette.' (WS, 33.)

²²¹ 'I am writing jealousy as I lived it, tracking and accumulating the desires, sensations, and actions that were mine during this period. It's the only way for me to make something real of my obsession. And I am always afraid to let something essential escape. Writing, that is, as a jealousy of the real.' (Po, 34.)

5.3 Thresholds: Texts and Photographs

At this point I feel the need to pose a question many have uttered in connection with other authors before. Why is authorial self-commentary relevant in the analysis of their writing? What does it matter what the author has to say about her works? Why mix up the two, why not discuss stories and the author's actions separately? Mikhail Bakhtin is suspicious of the relevance of the 'author's confession' and of the author's observations on the process of his or her own creative activity. According to him, the process of creation resides in the product created, and all the author needs to do is to refer the readers to the work itself. (Bakhtin 1990, 7.) So, the artist cannot have anything further to say about the work of art that is not already in the work itself.²²² He does have a point in that the 'author's confession' is always given in retrospect. Authorial self-commentary is always temporally and sometimes physically separate from the writing it refers to. Caution, when it comes to including the author's comments and reflections on the analysis of her work is thus only sensible.

But being cautious does not mean that authorial self-commentary should be disregarded altogether. Even if the commentary is in some ways separate from its object, that is the writing, the two can still be fruitfully compared with one another. This is possible by taking into account the self-reflective practice which functions surprisingly similarly in both literary and authorial realms. Ernaux's attestations in *L'Écriture comme un couteau* and in Goure's interview that on the one hand she vouches for transsubjection, and on the other strives to represent something truthful in her writing, are replicated in *L'Occupation*. Paralleling the object and the comment applies to Bakhtin's other claim as well: even if the process of creation does reside in the created product, the self-consciousness which is both the means for creating this object and an innate part of the object is not limited to this object. The process only expands in authorial self-commentary (not to mention the spreading of this process from one story to another).

There is also another fruitful way to interlink authorial self-commentary and autobiographical stories, and this relates to paratextual thresholds. It was mentioned in chapter 3 that Ernaux's more recent publications, *Écrire la vie*, *L'Atelier noir* and *Retour à Yvetot* are borderline cases, since they entail both authorial self-commentary and introduce further autobiographical storytelling. In these cases, it is

²²² Bakhtin introduces reasons for this especially with regard to the author's creation of the hero in his or her work. In Bakhtin's opinion, it is given that the evidence provided by an author's comments on the process of creating his hero is unreliable. This is especially so because his own present world view may have changed, as may have his aspirations, pretensions, and various practical considerations. (Bakhtin 1990, 7.)

not a question of mere parallels but of outright overlaps between the literary and the authorial. *L'Atelier noir* consists of journal entries that deal with the process of writing via Ernaux's explicit contemplation on the subject. In the book, 'Ernaux' describes her daily life similarly to *La Vie extérieure, Journal du dehors* and *Se perdre* (though mostly in connection with writing). *L'Atelier noir* is a borderline case where it is difficult to determine whether it is a (literary) diary or the author's analysis of writing (or both).

Authorial self-commentary has been viewed in this chapter as Ernaux's specific verbal contribution that exists outside the literary contribution. However, as this commentary conceptually situates itself in the realm of paratexts, it is only natural that further contributions be taken into consideration. Paratexts are thresholds that exist both within the text (prefaces), outside it (interviews and academic contribution), and somewhere in between (cover texts). They serve both as a boundary and as a link between the literary and the authorial. The exact position of the threshold is often ambiguous. (Cf. Introduction, 'Spaces of Autobiography and Reflection', and Genette 1987/1997, 2.) Since *Écrire la vie*, *L'Atelier noir*, and *Retour à Yvetot* all comment on the process of writing as well as on Ernaux's other works, they fit the definition of a paratext – while simultaneously being individual works as well.

There is a special case of a threshold, and that is constituted by Ernaux's authentic photographs, already discussed in connection with *L'Usage de la photo*. These are included either in the commentary or in the autobiographical texts that are borderline cases between the literary and the authorial. Photographs are true thresholds, since they belong to both realms. As noted in chapter 3, it is essential that photographs carry their referents within themselves: in this case, they always refer to the world outside the text.²²³ The cover illustration of the conference proceedings to which Ernaux wrote the preface presents an old photo of Annie as a young girl posing with her mother in front of a shabby-looking wall. It is further explained that this is a private photograph. The key function of thresholds is that they tie the story to the world around it. Conceptually, the cover illustration is a paratext to the proceedings while the whole publication (including the photograph) is an epitext to Ernaux's autobiographical writing. The proceedings and Ernaux's preface function as a link between the conference and her stories (between the culture of the academics and literature, if you will). Through the photograph, the proceedings seem to take into account the specific autobiographical nature of Ernaux's writing, and her actual life history, too. The inclusion of the private photograph on the cover of the publication suggests that Ernaux acknowledges and em-

²²³ For theoretical contemplation on the issue of reference and further discussion of photographs in literature and the relationship between text and photograph, see chapter 3.

phasizes the connection between her life and writing and that she is quite happy to allow for the peaceful co-existence of her professional and private lives. Ernaux's mother (or her death) thus functioned as a trigger for her writing and has an intriguing role in bringing together Ernaux's theoretical aspirations concerning writing and her personal life.

Something similar is going on in *L'Usage de la photo* which consists of private photographs of Ernaux's and Marc Marie's clothes that are followed by their reflections on their relationship and other aspects of their private lives. As previously noted, the book has the ability to generate various modes. The book represents a particular threshold. Ernaux writes in different styles, while simultaneously forming linkages to the actual world through the photographs. Thus, the book mixes together literary aspirations and private lives. Life and writing, in multiple guises, seem to be fusing together.

Photographs also play an essential role in Ernaux's two recent publications, *Écrire la vie* and *Retour à Yvetot*. The former is a compilation of Ernaux's works which are preceded by a hundred-page section of private photographs and unedited extracts from a private journal. The latter (is it the last, even – one might wonder) is a text reflecting on the author's oeuvre. The text is complemented with photographs from the town where she grew up, Yvetot. Both books were discussed already in chapter 3 as parts of Ernaux's attempt to compile her life and literary legacy 'before it is too late'. Here, it is the photographs in the books that materialize as key elements bringing together the author and the story of her life.²²⁴ The photographs depict Ernaux's parents, her grand-parents, family friends, her two sons Eric and David as small children, houses, apartment buildings, stores and street views in Yvetot and Annecy where Ernaux also lived as a young mother, her room in a boarding school, and places around the world she has visited on her book tours. The photographs draw a picture of a complete life and are the most revealing of all the publications relating to the private details of Ernaux's life. The books include portraits of Ernaux herself as well. They may not be as iconic as Duras's face ravaged by alcohol or her implied portrait as a young girl, but they are clearly an essential part of Ernaux's authorial image. They document her development from the very early childhood through her adolescence and adulthood, into her old age, and even as a survivor of breast cancer who has lost all her hair during the treatments.

Like the various parts of her oeuvre, these photographs cover an entirety of a life, and they do so more directly since the photographs depict authentic cir-

²²⁴ Ernaux's other more recent publications also include non-textual material: *L'Autre fille* presents a few photographs of Ernaux's childhood surroundings, and in the first pages of *L'Atelier noir* there is a photograph of an extract of Ernaux's private journal, dated 17th August, 2002 (AN, 16).

cumstances and do not as such entail a self-conscious attitude that would hinder the authenticity in a way of Ernaux's reflective writing.²²⁵ They are obviously influenced by the author's literary aspirations in that they are personally selected by Ernaux. Thus, they convey a particular message that the author has formulated. Nothing is revealed that she herself has not agreed to. The decision to include the photographs in works that combine autobiographical reminiscence and reflection on writing in the first place is a conscious one and tells something about the author's motivation. For example, in chapter 3, I suggested that Ernaux's latest works are driven by her desire to compile her life and literary legacy. However, the strength of the photographs lies precisely in their way of affirming and broadening the scope of the (auto)biographical facts Ernaux's alter ego has revealed in her books. Combined with the photographs of her childhood surroundings, the portraits introduce an image of Ernaux that goes far beyond the self that is depicted mostly vicariously through the reflective voice of the autobiographical 'I' in her writing.

Authorial self-commentary and photographs also have the ability to form spaces by functioning as thresholds between the literary and the authorial. They form the above-mentioned connections between stories and the world, and constitute intrinsic links by introducing similar subject matter over and over again. The combination of the literary and the authorial reflective gestures is a *self-reflective space*, which I brought up in the introduction. In addition to references within the autobiographical oeuvre, this space includes every reflective gesture that is made outside the literary works – in other words, outside the autobiographical space that was discussed in chapter 3. 'Space' remains a theoretically vague concept, as I already noted in connection with the autobiographical space (cf. Introduction, 'Spaces of Autobiography and Reflection'). However, the actual connections are quite concrete and through them, thresholds function as anchors holding together the autobiographical stories, authorial self-commentary, and the author's life. One cannot deny the existence of a complicated and yet quite a precise realm of interlinking reflections.

5.4 Writing as a Way of Life

In this chapter, I have shown the following. First of all, Ernaux is quite frank about the symbiotic nature of the relationship between her life and writing. As noted, in

²²⁵ It should, however, be noted that *L'Usage de la photo* is a result of a pre-meditated process and thus there is an implication that the photographs in it might be staged.

L'Écriture comme un couteau she states that she lives in two places at a time, in life and in writing (ÉCC, 119). The last chapter of this interview is quite explicitly entitled 'Une façon d'exister', the way to exist, and more particularly, writing as a way to exist in the world. Here, Ernaux quotes Marcel Proust, according to whom the only explicable, real life resides in literature, and agrees with him (ÉCC, 150). She has a passion for writing, moreover, *écriture* is what she is – an intense part of her and of her life story which is depicted in her autobiographical stories and further constructed in paratextual material. Her authorial self-commentary emphasizes the impression the reader has already gotten by reading her stories – that writing autobiographically is an innate part of her very personality.

Secondly, the authorial self-commentary and self-reflection in the autobiographical stories carry similarities and parallel one another. The relationship between Ernaux's life and writing is symbiotic because she says so or writes autobiographically, but also because her reflection on her writing and the self-awareness of her stories work side by side.

Thirdly, Ernaux's stories and her authorial self-commentary interact with one another in the texts and photographs functioning as thresholds. Thresholds ensure that the autobiographical aspect of Ernaux's writing maintains its significance while simultaneously allowing for reflection on writing to take place: the two functions fuse with one another. The end result is a broadened version of the autobiographical space which I name the *self-reflective space*. It includes all reflective gestures made in the literary work, outside it, and in the texts and other paratextual material that hover somewhere in between - in fact, these gestures form the space.

Ernaux's authorial self-commentary participates in the creation of a life story even though she does not explicitly recount the story in interviews. Concentrating on writing in the commentary does not mean that her life story is disregarded; rather, all this underlines that the story of her life is intermittently linked with the act of writing. The centrality of writing in her life is emphasized while other biographical items remain disguised. Constructing a life story is tied to the author's acknowledgment that there is a referential relationship between her work and her life. The inclusion of photographs depicting different stages of her life broadens the scope in which her life story is depicted.

In the end, Ernaux's autobiographical project is turned into an actual way of life. This is achieved through the complicity of the reflective gestures, their occurrence both in her stories and in her undertakings as an author, and their assertion of the autobiographical nature of her oeuvre. As she herself admits, her whole lifestyle consists of writing and constantly reflecting on it. *L'Usage de la photo* aptly depicts the dynamics of writing as a lifestyle since the very process of making it was intertwined with the actual love affair Ernaux was having at the time, resulting in allegedly authentic photographs and anecdote-like autobiographical stories which

are infused with Ernaux's and Marie's self-contemplation. The borderline academic self-commentary, the questioning of the mode of writing and the pursuit of generalization that were discussed in this chapter are similarly a part of the autobiographical way of life. They are but one layer of the complex self-conscious sphere, and not the ultimate cause or the final end of the autobiographical project. Not only is Ernaux's writing a mosaic of self-reflective processes, but her entire autobiographical project is.

The perfect form she admits seeking may not be achievable in one single text, not even in *Les Années*, but her recent burst of publication shows that she at least strives to write everything that there still is to write. It is, perhaps, the entirety of her texts, the compilation of the various modes, and *also* her authorial self-commentary, that is the so-called 'perfect form'. In this respect, there is a resemblance to the more conventional classics of autobiographical writing, which attempt to depict their subjects' personalities and lives thoroughly and honestly. When the whole oeuvre and the author's comments are considered, the seemingly fragmented story of the subject's life becomes more thorough and complete. Ernaux hurriedly strives to build up all its pieces and to compile her literary achievements and her own life before it is too late – duplicating the motivation behind classic autobiographies written later in life, such as Rousseau's *Les Confessions*. Ernaux's consciously constructed literary testimony in the face of death is of a broader scope than Duras's *C'est tout* which consists of quite scattered thoughts on life and writing. Towards the end of her life and career it is definitely the autobiographical that Ernaux has turned towards, as the inclusion of photographs in her works and the emphasis on the connection between her life and writing show.

6. *La Duras* – the Image, the Myth, and the Author

Donc, voyez, j'écris pour rien.
J'écris comme il faut écrire il me semble.
J'écris pour rien.
Je n'écris même pas pour les femmes.
J'écris sur les femmes pour écrire sur moi,
sur moi seule à travers les siècles. (VM, 59.)²²⁶

Of our two authors, Marguerite Duras, née Donnadieu, has obviously been the most celebrated. Annie Ernaux has perhaps been the favourite of the so-called ordinary reader. She also gained more positive critical attention as her career has progressed, but Duras is both a critically acclaimed author and a cultural figure *par excellence*. She was already a familiar name in the intellectual and literary scene in Paris before aspiring into a renowned media personality in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s, after the publication of *L'Amant*, she became a literary superstar. In addition to writing novels and directing movies, the attention-seeking author appeared in TV shows, wrote journalistic pieces and let her scandalous opinions on every part of society be heard (Crowley 2000, 234). She spoke out vigorously on both national and international affairs, and her journalistic writing touched upon such issues as the American attack on Tripoli (Williams 1997, 20–21). She maintained her status, despite her illnesses, until her death in 1996 – if anything, her later years only added to her fame and notability.

As stated, the Durasian self was increasingly recognizable in the French cultural scene from the 1970s onwards. It is no coincidence that Duras's writing under discussion in this study was published after the 1970s. In the following two decades self-emphasis was apparent both in Duras's public performances and in her writing. In addition to bringing forth the self and the problems related to that

²²⁶ 'See, here, I write for nothing.
I write like the need to write seems to me.
I write for nothing.
I do not write for women.
I write about women to write about me,
only about me throughout the centuries.' (My translation.)

self as a central theme, Duras wrote works where the presence of her self was emphatic (cf. chapters 2 and 4), and those works started to increasingly resemble autobiographical writing. What characterized the author's output was the complete belief in her own importance and uniqueness. Duras refused to surrender in the face of the admiration towards her oeuvre, and during her lifetime and career she made absolutely clear that she herself had as much significance as her literary work. Self-dramatization served both to highlight her own personality and to sustain her literary arguments. (Cf. Crowley 2000, 234.) The author went so far as to designate herself, with a definite article, *La Duras* (Adler 1998/2000, 300, 350). She represents an archetype of a media author whose oeuvre and public authorial image are intertwined.

Duras's way of emphasizing herself and forming her public image was largely dependent on the same kind of reflection she channelled into the pages of her books: one that mostly concerns herself and writing, and that is characterized with an intense, obsessive, passionate approach. In this chapter, I will suggest that Duras's literary alter ego, her autobiographical 'I' which was discussed in chapters 2 and 4, is complemented by her authorial image. The image is partly moulded via Duras's public commentary, which in my analysis is represented by a few exemplary interviews published in academic journals or article collections.²²⁷ *La Duras* will be discussed with regard to her readers (who are also the audience for her image-forming process), the myth-like quality of her image, her alleged narcissism, her aspirations towards the archetypal status of a Romantic genius, and the loneliness, madness and obsession that were both themes in and a method of writing for her.

The autobiographical nature of some of Duras's works appears as an influential factor in her authorial image as well. Narratologists and semioticians tend to deduce a textual version of the author's life ('the author's metatext') solely on the basis of his or her writing (Tammi 1985, 237; cf. Introduction, 'Texts and Lives'). According to Wallace Fowlie, the author's life metamorphoses into a sort of a personal myth when transferred into his or her texts (Fowlie 1988, 166). In the following discussion, the author's life, or at least the image of that life which is available to the readers, is considered in its own right and also in connection with her oeuvre. I will not claim that the author's work can never be separated from the author's image or that the image is necessary to the interpretation of this work. But I will bear in mind that such an image is a product of an authorial self-reflective process that is strikingly similar to and in close connection to the literary self-creation

²²⁷ Similarly to the discussion on Ernaux's authorial self-commentary, the aim here is not to cover all or even most of the paratextual material available on Duras, but to comment on some examples that are revealing and relevant to my discussion. The selection of interviews dates from the 1970s, and besides literary interpretation they deal with Duras's left-wing and feminist politics.

taking place in the author's actual works. In addition to the relationship between the author and her work, the border between Duras's public and private personas is visible especially when her works already introduce some details of her personal life. However, as was stated in the introduction, more important than the seeming boundaries between the private and public Duras is how the author forms a public image of herself through the act of self-reflection, in other words public commentary on herself and her work. The author also mediates the image to others through the very same commentary. In Duras's case, this commentary often brings up aspects of a life that is usually regarded as 'private', such as alcoholism and love affairs.

6.1 Encountering Duras

An encounter with Duras was always a forceful experience. The author's physical appearance is often remarked on. Her biographer, Laure Adler, recalls the author's sparkling eyes and her tremendous laughing energy (Adler 1998/2000, 3). Germaine Brée describes her as '[s]mall, dark, sturdy, warm, and forthrightly brusque in manner' (Brée, Duras & Doherty 1972, 401). Overall, anyone who has heard of Marguerite Duras has a certain, often very precise idea of her. Duras's immutable qualities, those that most people that are familiar with her work and persona would agree upon, entail some of the following: her extensive media participation as well as the wide range of her oeuvre, the scandalousness of her comments and actions, her deep knowledge of literature and her intellectuality, her visual image, with a knee-length skirt, a vest and a certain kind of haircut (the 'Marguerite Duras' uniform is discussed in *La Vie matérielle* by her literary alter ego), her way of emphasizing the deep connection she has with her writing, and her all-consuming passion for anything she embarked upon in life. A further building block of Duras's public image comes from her love affairs: she did have affairs and regarded them as intensely and passionately as her writing, which was and remains common knowledge, partly due to her descriptions of the affairs in her reflective writing, such as *La Vie matérielle*. Similarly, common knowledge is her long struggle with alcoholism.

Above, I implied that there exists a community of readers who have heard about Duras and who have a certain idea of her. It is not enough to be a forceful, charismatic character: in order to gain momentum, the authorial self-commentary needs an audience as well. The author's image-forming via her public actions is not merely a narcissistic enterprise, but also something mediated to others. Duras was obviously aware of the reception of her oeuvre and of the way in which the public must have regarded her personality. The intriguing qualities of the image that are

consciously chosen for display are often those that attract the audience, so the highly constructed nature of this image is worth noting.

Duras had her readers' acceptance, but in order for her image to work, she needed their assistance (though one wonders how much credit the author would have given to her readers for her image²²⁸). The audience can be quite an active participant in the image-forming process. Ruth Amossy discusses Aristotle's *ethos*, i.e. 'the image of the self built by the orator in his speech in order to exert an influence on his audience' (Amossy 2001, 1). She quotes sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who claims that a discourse needs to be pronounced before legitimated readers in a legitimated situation in order to be authoritative (ibid., 3). In Duras's case, legitimated receivers would be educated, if not necessarily academic, readers of literature, who are interested in her public persona in addition to her writing. In order for her to be convincing, and in order for her claims of self-importance and the symbiosis between herself and her writing to be heard, the receivers must have formed a pre-existing opinion that she has something valid to state and that she is noteworthy, talented, and famous for a reason. This pre-existing opinion is called 'prediscursive ethos' or 'prior ethos' (Amossy 2001, 7). By the 1980s Duras was widely recognized as an acclaimed author and a cultural figure of tremendous importance. This recognition and the acceptance of her audience allowed Duras to form an image of herself quite freely and eased the birth of the powerful figure known as *La Duras*.²²⁹

The problems of encountering the forceful figure in Duras's oeuvre were already hinted in chapter 2. The problem intensifies when one is discussing the authorial persona. Research on Duras's public personality is perhaps even more riddled with insufficient criticism and lack of objectivity than the interpretation of her literary work. Critics themselves have recognized this: James S. Williams notes that researchers had been mesmerized by Duras's fast production rate and the immense media attention her each publication received. According to him, Duras has been connected to her work in a simplistic way (the relationship between the two has been regarded as symbiotic), and duplicating her comments has taken the place of criticism in the research on her oeuvre (Williams 1997, 1–2.) In her introduction to an interview with Duras, Germaine Brée appears both implicitly and explicitly to be praising the author. 'With thirty years of fiction writing behind her, constantly remoulding the forms she works with, Duras cannot now be classified under any label', she suggests, implying that the magnitude of Duras's work elevates the au-

²²⁸ Though, according to Jellenik, Duras welcomed the readerly participation already in the creation of texts (Jellenik 2007, 192).

²²⁹ For some theoretical sources that discuss the author's image and identity forming, see Introduction, 'Texts and Lives'.

thor above literary labels. She continues, '[g]enerous, she is always to be found among France's leftist intellectuals; but she does not intellectualize a position which she feels, lives, and expresses through the situations, characters, and dialogues in her writing. Whether fiction, drama, or film her work is impressive in its uniqueness and scope.' (Brée, Duras & Doherty 1972, 401.) The image of Duras that comes across from this example is almost mythical.²³⁰

Martin Crowley's study on the ethics of Duras's writing is a perfect example of the subtle ways in which the problems of encountering the author may present themselves. In spite of being learned and thought-provoking, the study resorts to idealization, in particular with regard to Duras's personality. The study struggles to keep in focus on analyzing the author's intensive personality, but the choice of words and rhetoric shows implicit non-objectivity. Consider this description of Duras's public image: 'she develops her already considerable public figure into a powerful media presence, providing dazzling television performances, scandalous *ex cathedra* judgments, and even interviews with the President' (Crowley 2000, 234). 'Already considerable figure', 'powerful presence', 'dazzling performances', 'scandalous judgments', 'and even' – all these denotations are presented as unquestionable truths even though the words are Crowley's, the addition of 'and even' further highlighting the lengths to which Duras's presence was able to go.

As a solitary example, the quote would not have that much testimonial value, but as one of many it implies a knee-jerk attitude on Crowley's part. He is making an argument relating to ethics with regard to Duras and her writing, but at instances the argument gets lost in the adulation. This tendency is surprisingly common in the criticism on Duras, and perhaps it stems from the unconscious wish to give credit to the personality (as do Vircondelet 1991/1994 and Alonzo 1998) or to present the object of study in the style of the subject's own writing (as do Enright & Shoukri 1985 and Genova 2003). Williams's note on the quoting of the author's words in criticism is recognizable in Crowley: the quotes cover approximately one-third of the last section of the study. The quotes are mostly drawn from Duras's

²³⁰ Roland Barthes defines a *myth* as a 'type of speech', a message, which is chosen by history and does not stem from natural conditions (Barthes 1957/2000, 109–110; for myth precisely as a semiological system, see *ibid.*, 111–145). In Duras's case, her myth is definitely constructed by her throughout her career via both literary and authorial reflective gestures, and with the help of her audience. I will discuss this shortly. For discussion on 'myth' in general, see Laurence Coupe's *Myth* (1997), though he analyzes the term from various perspectives that are irrelevant here (for example, the original myth models such as the fertility myth and the larger context of language and history). Some features he attaches to 'myth' resonate with what I am about to claim about Duras: a myth is a complementary action in which reading myths and mythic reading become intertwined; a myth may include a strive for perfection; and myths are not necessarily false narratives.

reflective writing in *Écrire* and *C'est tout* – nonetheless, whether as a literary alter ego or as an author, Duras has more than her say in Crowley's study.

The excessively intense approach and giving too much room to the author are problematic in numerous ways. For example, how to describe the author as an object of study thoroughly while at the same time remaining in control, that is, not giving too much say to the author?²³¹ The problem intensifies when it comes to Duras herself: she was adamant in being the one controlling her own image²³² and strove to influence it. Williams notes that after she suffered an alcohol-related illness and was in a coma in 1988–1989, she intentionally changed the way she dressed to a more feminine style. She also drew attention to her name, Marguerite, which is French for 'daisy'. (Williams 1997, 20–21.) More importantly, the wish for control governed the things she allowed to be known about her. Especially towards the end of her career, and her life, Duras became more and more introverted although she continued publishing and being in the spotlight until the very end. Leah D. Hewitt suggested in 1990 that it is Duras herself who refuses to be interpreted and defined (Hewitt 1990, 96). Of course, becoming introverted was also a symptom of a life-threatening illness (throat cancer).

Laure Adler encountered this problem when she embarked on a mission to write the author's biography. Conventional biographies can, when reaching their full potential, participate in the construction of the author's image as well as in the interpretation of her oeuvre. In her work Adler does not merely list the events of Duras's life but also analyzes her oeuvre in a very in-depth manner, often in connection with the author's life. Biographies can continue the reflective process of the author herself, depending on how much influence the author has on the actual process of writing the biography. In Adler's and Duras's case, interviewing the author for the biography proved to be quite challenging. Adler describes how Duras was adamant that she did not want a biography written of her. The author strove to hide herself from the rest of the world and continued her refusal to reveal certain details of her life during the discussions with Adler. Only Duras had per-

²³¹ Extremely suspicious is the publication of Xavière Gauthier's interview (1975) which appeared in *Marguerite Duras par Marguerite Duras, Jacques Lacan, Maurice Blanchot, Dionys Mascolo, Xavière Gauthier, Pierre Fedida...* Duras knew most of the people who wrote the articles, the interviews and the borderline poetic pieces in this publication, and not only that, at least Dionys Mascolo was her lover in the 1940s and remained a very close personal friend.

²³² There have been other notorious control freaks in contemporary literature, Nabokov being one of them (cf. Tammi 1985, 238–239). Another instance of Durasian control is the taking over the life of her young admirer and a later life partner, Yann Andréa (she renamed him; his original name was Yann Lemée). People generally noted that he seemed to have lost his own personality after meeting Duras. Yann, however, may have regained some control when he served as a transcriber for the dying author's last book, *C'est tout*. Similarly to Annie Ernaux's and Marie's *L'Usage de la photo*, *C'est tout* is a co-operation although the motivation behind it is to allow for *La Duras* to speak one last time.

mission to write about a character named Duras, or to speak about the author Duras, not to mention the private person.²³³ Whenever Adler tried to bring out the subject of writing a biography, the author shrugged her shoulders and advised her to stick to discussing only her books. Adler admits that although in the end the biography was published (conveniently after Duras's death), a lot of secrets were left undiscovered and that this applies to all life writing: the object of writing cannot be grasped completely. (Adler 1998/2000, 6–7.)

Being mysterious was Duras's way of staying in control of her authorial image. Duras's own desire to remain mysterious and unpredictable led to the indefinability of her character as well. She questioned her own identity: she retrospectively wrote in the margin of her old notebook (which was posthumously transformed into *Les Cahiers de la guerre et autres textes*): 'Is this Duras? It doesn't look like Duras.' (Adler 1998/2000, 4–5.) The older Duras does not recognize her younger self, the self who wrote the notebook.²³⁴ Another example of the Durasian self-cancelling definition is presented by Laure Adler in connection with the author's film *Le Camion* (1977). Duras appears in the film herself. According to Adler, Duras did not attempt to artificially improve her looks but revealed her face to the camera as it was: 63 years old, ravaged by time and by excessive consumption of alcohol. In spite of this, there is no way of knowing who the Duras we see in the film really is. Is she the author Duras or a character the author created, in other words a woman asking for a lift from a truck driver? It is the task of the viewer to guess if it is simply a question of the actor Duras repeating her lines or whether the screenwriter/director Duras has put autobiographical elements into the mouth of the woman described – who is herself. (Adler 1998/2000, 306.) Consequently, if neither Duras herself nor her writings are able to tell certain truths about her, her 'self' remains an illogical figure that constantly moves around discourses, never turning into a solid entity.

A further essential aspect when encountering the autobiographical author and allowing her voice to be heard amidst critical analysis is that the author can be, and undoubtedly is, highly unreliable. This unreliability can be an essential method for the author to control the construction of her public image. The author may intentionally lead people astray. This is especially true of autofictional authors such as Camille Laurens. Laurens would do anything to blur the boundaries between her private and public lives, since it is the most essential part of their autobiographical

²³³ Though Duras had no problem with being frank about her alcoholism, for example, as long as it was she who made the revelations.

²³⁴ See chapters 2 and 4 on literary versions of the divide between older and younger 'Duras'. The note in the margin can also be seen as a reference to the author's style. But, since Duras somewhat equated herself with her writing, the reference to style can be interpreted as a reference to herself as well.

projects. And, the author might not lead people astray per se, but still choose very carefully what to say and how to act in order to construct a certain conception of herself. As a human being, like anyone else, the author may be unconsciously ambiguous and misleading in her delivery.

It might be that no one can truly know Marguerite Duras nor produce theoretical frames to comprehend the Durasian self (Williams 1997, 21). However, as proposed, there are many who would claim that they have a very precise idea of the author. The aspects of Duras's public personality (especially in connection with her fluid autobiographical alter egos) come together to form an image that is both constant and definable, and at the same time mutable and indefinable. The author's wide-ranging participation in the media, combined with the fluidity of her image and her deliberate unreliability, makes it impossible to define her in any straightforward fashion. But, at the same time one can have a certain emphatic idea of the almost mythical figure *La Duras*.

6.2 Interviewing Duras

Duras's desire to control the material dealing with her image spills over into her interviews, such as those conducted by Germaine Brée, Susan Husserl-Kapit, and Jean Schuster.²³⁵ The interviews were conducted in 1972 and 1975, at a time when Duras was already a household name in France but not yet an international literary superstar. She began a more self-conscious moulding of her public image around this time (Adler 1998/2000, 300). In later interviews, Duras's attitude would be different: as was stated above, she withdrew from the public eye in her later years.

Conceptually, the interviews are here regarded as paratexts since Duras's comments in them obviously relate to her literary oeuvre, but as textual artefacts the interviews are independent from it. Another defining feature of such paratexts is the existence of another agent, who is in this case the interviewer.²³⁶ This type of authorial self-commentary is significantly different from such works by Duras and Annie Ernaux which, depending on interpretation, have an ambiguous position between the literary and the authorial: these works include their contemplative writing and Ernaux's *Retour à Yvetot* and even *L'Écriture comme un couteau*.

²³⁵ These examples are only a small fraction of all the possible ones. Another selection would obviously present results that somewhat vary from the ones presented here. A thorough selection is beyond the scope of this work.

²³⁶ Also Ernaux's *L'Usage de la photo* and Duras's *C'est tout* embody another agent: Marc Marie and Yann Andréa.

A notable feature in the interviews mentioned above is that Duras gives inconsistent answers. There are a number of instances in Brée's 1972 interview on the publication of Duras's *L'Amour* that baffle the reader as well as the interviewer herself. Brée asks the following: 'It's paradoxical to put the problem in these terms, since you yourself are a writer. The world must pass through you and yet it must be shattered?' Duras answers: 'Absolutely, I can't read a book; in fact, I can't read at all.' (Brée, Duras & Doherty 1972, 415.) In addition to the paradox Brée is noting, Duras's answer is ambiguous and requires a lot of deduction from the reader in order to be understood. Husserl-Kapit notes the inconsistencies in Duras's answers to her questions in the foreword to her interview from 1975. 'There are several disconcerting elements in her comments' (Husserl-Kapit & Duras 1975, 424), she states, and repeats the same to Duras herself: 'It seems strange that everything is instinctive, everything organic. You're so radical and then so traditional. You... seem to stay behind.' (Ibid., 428.) On the other hand, she adds that 'contradictions are an integral part of the art of Marguerite Duras' (ibid., 425). Perhaps contradictions are an integral part of the image of Marguerite Duras, per se. It is, however, risky to emphasize the paradoxical nature of Duras's commentary on her work. In addition to not being able to reconstruct what she is actually saying and why, the interviewer or the critic such as myself reading the interview unwillingly risks enhancing the myth of Duras as an ambiguous, unattainable, and thus intriguing artist.

In Brée's interview, Duras is at times quite explicitly the one controlling the discussion. This is apparent already at the beginning: Duras is credited as one of the authors of the interview.²³⁷ In the actual interview, her answers bring to mind an attentive but superior teacher, who acknowledges the ideas of her student and leads her on in her struggle to find the meaning and significance in the work at hand – which almost if by chance happens to be her own. Statements such as 'I hadn't noticed it myself. But that's fine'; 'You have?'; 'Do you find this to be the case?'; and 'That's well observed' endorse the sense of a teacher-student relationship. Simultaneously she happens to define her work almost if by accident: 'Q. Nevertheless, they are stories? A. It's just something I happen to do easily. They are closer to *récits* than to novels, it seems to me.' (Brée, Duras & Doherty 1972, 402.) Regarding her work as *récits* has been an influential aspect of the criticism of her books. As I have previously noted (cf. Introduction, 'Ernaux, Duras, and Autobiographical Writing'), Duras herself shuddered at the thought of people categorizing her work as an example of, for instance, *nouveau roman*. Defining her work

²³⁷ Although this is common in author interviews.

almost nonchalantly in the midst of an interview implies that she has the authority to revoke the critics' opinion and provide her own as the right one.

It is enlightening to compare the two interviews, which are quite dialogical in nature, to Jean Schuster's interview from 1972. Schuster poses short questions on writing and authorship in general, and Duras's responses continue for pages. The 'interview' is more like an essay on writing, written by Duras herself (cf. Ernaux's *L'Écriture comme un couteau* where the answers can also cover several pages). Here, as well, the most startling effect is not that Duras would be willing to hand over the keys to unlock the meanings of her work, but more, her dominant role in the discussion. In this case, as in Crowley's, she is given quite a prominent voice. The interview is included in a collection of articles and essays entitled *Marguerite Duras par Alain Vircondelet*, so perhaps the overall aim is to balance out the critical discussion of the author with her own ideas on writing. The short questions are merely a springboard for her to discuss her relationship with her own writing and being an author.

However, even if Duras has control over the progression of Brée's interview or is allowed plenty of room in Schuster's, she does not have particular control over the interpretation of her work in either of the interviews. There is a lot of discussion, analysis and interpretation on her most recent books, which is quite common for an interview with an author. At first glance, Duras is not much more domineering than authors usually are in a situation like this, and the interviewers take part in the analysis, each participant complementing the other in the discussion. In Schuster's interview it is more a question of Duras presenting her views on writing in general, which does reinforce Duras's image as someone who is self-conscious and self-reliant as an artist, but does not compel the readers to make particular deductions about her work per se.

The crux of all this is that Duras acquires a position in the interviews which enforces her image as a talented, emphatic, charismatic artist. She may not necessarily have wished to control the interpretation of her work, or at least this intention is irrelevant. She did have control over the formation of her public image both unconsciously and consciously, by being the superior participant in Brée's interview, and a slightly preachy one in Schuster's interview.²³⁸ Part of this image is the unreliability which manifests itself, for example, in ambiguous answers. Unreliability is, somewhat paradoxically, one aspect of this personality with her influential voice. The ambiguity and the superior attitude were a part of Duras's way of conducting herself in interviews and, more, a way of constructing her own authorial myth. Duras follows the lines of her literary work in her authorial self-reflection:

²³⁸ Authors are usually given a proper amount of respect in interviews. In the context of Duras's already mythologized image, it is unavoidable that the respect has further implications.

the answers that are laconic (and superior in tone) are formally quite similar to her way of writing, which often consists of short sentences, pauses, silences, and ambiguity. The answers that are long and preachy, for their part, seem to endorse the vision Duras has of her writing in an explanatory manner.

6.3 From Personal Politics to Self-Emphasis

Unlike Ernaux, who has been more prone to comment on her working-class background and her parents, Duras does not much discuss the details of her personal life in these interviews. She concentrates on her views on writing, but on more political matters as well.²³⁹ Brée asks her about the responsibilities of an author, and she answers:

A. I have held two very different opinions on that score. For a long time, I held for the absolute noncommitment of the writer; now I hold that it is madness and a lie to say that the writer is not committed. A writer commits himself from the very moment he picks up the pen. Revolutionary demands and literary demands are one and the same.

(. . .)

(. . .) For me, the true intellectual isn't the man of culture; it's the worker. I think that intellectuality in all its rigorous demands has gone down into the proletariat. (Brée, Duras & Doherty 1972, 421.)

As Duras admits, her literary and political aspirations unavoidably overlap. She states that while she used to promote the non-commitment of an author she has later come to realize that picking up the pen transforms the author into a revolutionary.

In the quote, Duras also reveals her left-wing aspirations, like any proper intellectual in the aftermath of May 1968. The interviews conducted by Brée and by Husserl-Kapit comb thoroughly through Duras's left-wing and feminist political aspirations, appropriate to the time. Husserl-Kapit notes in the foreword to her interview that one of Duras's aims is to destroy the male ethic and rhetoric (Husserl-Kapit & Duras 1975, 423–424). By extension, Duras herself states that intellectuality, which she considers to be a manly trait, is not an essential aspect of writing:

²³⁹ Concentrating on the political was often a characteristic of author interviews in the 1970s, especially in the case of experimental female authors.

MD: I know that when I write there is something inside me that stops functioning, something that becomes silent. I let something take over inside me that probably flows from femininity. But everything shuts off – the analytic way of thinking, thinking inculcated by college, studies, reading, experience. I'm absolutely sure of what I'm telling you now. It's as if I were returning to a wild country. Nothing is concerted. Perhaps, before everything else, before being Duras, I am – simply a woman. (Husserl-Kapit & Duras 1975, 428.)

Duras compares the state of being a woman with writing. In her opinion, writing is something more profound than the academic intellectuality of men, which is theoretical. Female intellect, on the other hand, is organic: 'We must move on to the rhetoric of women, one that is anchored in organism, in the body.' (Husserl-Kapit & Duras 1975, 434.) Her views can be compared to those of other illustrious French writers and theorists like Hélène Cixous, Monique Wittig and Luce Irigaray,²⁴⁰ who have promoted the existence of *écriture féminine* – despite her not wishing to be categorized as a feminine/feminist writer.

The feminist politics of the 1970s seem to have turned into raw, organic sexuality and real passion between men and women in Duras's world. In Husserl-Kapit's interview she implicitly renounces the feminist aspirations of forgetting the inherent connection between the two sexes:

MD: (. . .) I have only loved men. And erotically I only have a valid – violent, passionate – experience with men. I have had many lovers. I have known passion with men. Real passion. There are many women in France in my situation who are forcing themselves to forget men. So we're witnessing a kind of decrease in libido. Not really a decrease, because the libido is still there. It is a decrease in eroticism, in sexuality. I think it's a mistake. Why go against nature? Why change it? (Husserl-Kapit & Duras 1975, 432.)

It is relevant that Duras's cause for promoting 'real' passion and organic sexual relations arises from a very personal background, from her loving and having had passionate experiences with men, and not just from political aspirations – despite her recognition that all writing is more or less 'committed'. As Husserl-Kapit states: '[Duras] writes from what she believes to be the essence of women, *that part of her* directly connected to *her* pain, *her* yearnings, and *her* joy.' (Husserl-Kapit & Duras 1975, 424; emphasis original). Annie Ernaux takes her private experiences and turns them into something general, as does Duras; she draws from her personal emotions and beliefs. However, Duras does not strive to generalize her experiences of writing, men, and passion, but regards herself, her pain, yearnings and joy as

²⁴⁰ See for example Cixous 1975/1976, and Irigaray 1974/1985 and 1977/1985.

perfect examples of the essence of women – or at least as examples of what this essence should be. Her opinions in the quotes above stem from deep within herself: she has had passionate affairs with men, she is the one who experiences the flow of writing, and this is valid even despite her identifying herself as ‘simply a woman’. The quote now re-emerges as a prime example of Duras’s paradoxical answers.

The interviews quoted here all date from the 1970s. This is no coincidence: as Adler states, it was around this time that Duras began to truly create her own myth, the cult of Duras. According to Adler, Duras has been accused of egoism, all-consuming self-love, and narcissism. (Adler 1998/2000, 300.) Narcissism has wide-ranging meanings, from a characteristic of texts to cultural narcissism. Narcissism’s connection with autobiographical writing is self-evident: since all perception is filtered through the autobiographical ‘I’, the text often appears as fundamentally self-absorbed (Robinson 1980, 53). ‘Ernaux’ concentration on her intense passion and Duras’s way of reverting every topic she discusses in her contemplative writing back to herself highlights this seeming self-centeredness. Duras’s authorial comments refer to and stem from herself and her writing. Adler states that the author had locked herself in a narcissistic cage and created the myth about her in order to survive her own success. We know that Duras used the third person pronoun when talking about herself. Moreover, she referred to herself as *La Duras*. (Adler 1998/2000, 300, 350.) Since ‘la’ is the definite article in the French language, it follows that Duras turned herself into a pre-determined, unquestionable figure and assumed that everyone knew her in advance.²⁴¹ Adler adds that Duras recognized her ‘fashionability’ and said so publicly. According to the author, what people saw in her was political marginality, revolutionary power and the ability to say it all. If people mocked her self-centeredness, her attitude grew even worse. (Ibid., 333.)

Duras seemed to regard her gift for writing as unique and undeniable. From the moment her first book was published, she believed in her talent and regarded herself as a genius. (Adler 1998/2000, 4.) In Brée’s interview, Duras contemplates how literature had up to that point masked things (Brée, Duras & Doherty 1972, 409) and been asleep from the nineteenth century onwards (ibid., 410–411), giving the impression that she is, now, awakening it with her unique writing. In Husserl-Kapit’s interview, she quite arrogantly states that ‘Colette wrote like a little girl, a turbulent and terrible little girl’ (Husserl-Kapit & Duras 1975, 425). Adler refers to the mode *nouveau roman* and the way in which Duras wanted to distance herself from this mode, often used to categorize her writing by research-

²⁴¹ It should be noted that the author’s reference to herself shows irony towards the media as well (in context of the awarding of *India Song* in 1975), and even growing tiredness towards herself (in context of the winning of the Goncourt prize and the ensuing praise in 1984).

ers: ‘Thirty years later, Duras publicly denounced the *nouveau roman* and fiercely denied ever having been one of its authors. She went so far as to insist proudly that she’d never understood any of it. Marguerite belonged to no one and compared herself to no one.’ (Adler 1998/2000, 210.) Duras wanted to separate herself from others and define herself and only through herself, and as being unique.

C’est tout, for its part, includes the following piece of dialogue, already quoted earlier in this study:

Y.A. : Vous êtes qui?

M.D. : Duras, c’est tout.

Y.A. : Elle fait quoi, Duras?

M.D. : Elle fait la littérature. (CT, 24–25.)²⁴²

Crowley remarks in connection with this work that “Duras” (who is everything) *makes literature*. Which also gives her the right to tear this institution down, to write it off in favour of a biblical thundering, to elevate herself (. . .) beyond mere literature, by writing her own work into a biblical weave.’ (Crowley 2000, 279; emphasis original.) Again, Crowley embarks on rhetoric of admiration which, one begins to suspect, must entail an ironic twist, even if it is supposed reflect Duras. *C’est tout* does include ‘M.D.’s thoughts about her own talent, as I remarked in chapter 2, such as her being exceptionally talented, her writing being indelible, her handling of language being superb, and her happening to be a genius. The amount of self-praise is overwhelming. With this particular book, it is more a question of literary self-reflection. It is intriguing how much literary and authorial reflection resemble each another: ‘Duras’ and Duras seem to convey a very similar message about the essence of *La Duras*.

In addition to media participation and general self-praise in her writing, Duras highlighted herself by elevating her person as the main topic of those books of hers that either leaned more towards the autobiographical (*L’Amant* being the most obvious one) or introduced her alter ego’s emphatic reflecting voice (*La Vie matérielle*, *Écrire* and *C’est tout*). According to Irving Louis Horowitz, autobiographies function as a venue for elevating one’s personal value in the reader’s eyes and so researchers have viewed autobiographical writing as something akin to self-celebration. One of the motifs for writers of autobiographies might be to rise above themselves, to be remembered, and to accomplish something larger than life itself. While autobiography is constructed as a meaningful mosaic for others to see,

²⁴² Y.A.: Who are you?

M.D.: Duras, no more.

Y.A.: What does Duras do?

M.D. She creates literature.’(NM, 35.)

one is also guaranteed a place in the cosmos. (Horowitz 1977, 174, 176–177.) Georges Gusdorf states that each individual tends to think that he or she is the center of the universe and that since his or her existence is paramount in the world, his or her death consequently leaves the world imperfect. And when such an individual writes an autobiography, he or she calls for others to serve as witnesses for him- or herself. (Gusdorf 1956/1980, 29.) As Duras states in *La Vie matérielle*: ‘Donc, voyez, j’écris pour rien. J’écris comme il faut écrire il me semble. J’écris pour rien. Je n’écris même pas pour les femmes. J’écris sur les femmes pour écrire sur moi, sur moi seule à travers les siècles.’ (VM, 59.)²⁴³ (Cf. King 1989, 163.) She writes about women to write about herself, throughout the centuries. These kinds of comments from her autobiographical alter ego are inextricably linked to her authorial comments on her self-importance. Considering all this, narcissism on at least some level is hardly an unsubstantiated claim.

6.4 An Heir of the Romantic Author?

Duras herself had much to do with the public perceiving her as an embodiment of the ambiguous creative genius. She cultivated the myth by regularly secluding herself from the public, by wrapping herself in the halo of her talent, and by emphasizing the image of herself as a true bohemian. As I stated in the introduction, this is nothing uncommon in literary tradition, as modernist authors, authors of the Beat generation and postmodernist authors as well (among many, many others) prove (cf. Introduction, ‘Texts and Lives’). Here I will compare *La Duras* with the poets of the Romantic period. They consciously constructed their public images, and the readers were also particularly interested in the ‘ideal biographical legend’, as Tomaševski puts it (1923/1978, 49, 52, 55). Duras was very much creating her own ideal biographical legend in a way that resembles the writers and the poets of the pre-Romantic and the Romantic period that Nabokov and Tomaševski mention, such as Pushkin, Voltaire, and especially Byron, who in his scandalous public performances perhaps resembles Duras the most. Andrew Bennett states that the Romantic poet ‘writes so that his identity (. . .) will survive’ (Bennett 1999, 2).²⁴⁴ Duras definitely had aspirations of creating her own myth almost according to the Romantic ideal of wanting to leave something behind after she had gone. As Ben-

²⁴³ ‘See, here, I write for nothing. I write like the need to write seems to me. I write for nothing. I do not write for women. I write about women to write about me, only about me throughout the centuries.’ (My translation.)

²⁴⁴ It should be noted that the Enlightenment had also been organized around the individual authors’ biographies (‘the man and his work’ approach).

nett attaches importance to the act of reading, so I wish to argue, as was already suggested, that the myth of the poet and the myth of Duras have been constructed in co-operation with readers and critics, and it is very much alive today, some eighteen years after her death.

It would naturally be reductive and even impossible to fit Marguerite Duras or her work into the definitions of the Romantic author or Romantic literature as such, no matter the extent and flexibility of the definition.²⁴⁵ In addition to the creation of her own myth, however, there are other characteristics of Duras's authorial self-reflection that resonate with the image one has of Romantic authors. For example, in its emphasis on nature and authenticity, Romanticism was somewhat opposed to the reliance on 'grown-up' technological developments. In her most political days Duras did demand organic, female intelligence as opposed to theoretical, male intelligence, which is quite comparable with the polarization of experience and authenticity and technology. Her political activity follows the lines of the re-evaluation of values, which was essential in Romanticism. She shared a lot with feminist and left-wing ideologies but was a revolutionary among feminists since she called for natural, physical femininity and sexuality for all women and not equality among men and women per se. Susan S. Williams discusses female Romantic writers as opposed to the conventional idea of the male Romantic genius in the 19th century (Williams 2006, for example 37–38, 167–168), and notes that some, like Constance Fennimore Woolson, were attracted to the ideas of Romantic authorship but regarded it as self-absorbed (*ibid.*, 14; *ibid.*, chapter 7). If female authors regarded the idea as somewhat narcissistic, Duras would in this respect seem to lean towards a more male-oriented perspective of Romanticism – which again supports my suggestion that Duras should not be read simply as a female/feminine author.

The politics of the author are often juxtaposed with her ideal biographical legend. Tomaševski suggests that already certain pre-Romantic authors, Voltaire among them, turned their lives into propaganda tools, and their works were identified with their personalities and revolutionary opinions (Tomaševski 1923/1978, 48). Duras was conveying exactly that in several interviews conducted in the 1970s. It is interesting that she weaved together her passion for feminist and political ideologies and turned them into an equally intense reflection of her oeuvre and her profession as an author. In 'Duras as a Romantic', the myth of her divine talent and herself as a creative great genius is the most accurate feature. It is common knowledge that Romantic poets celebrated the sublime origin of their creation, as if their writing just 'came to be'. In Brée's interview, Duras discusses the mystic talent

²⁴⁵ For an elaborate insight on features of Romanticism, see for example the general overviews of Abrams (1953), Clark (1997), and Ferber (2010).

of the writer that has been in her since the age of twelve. 'I always wrote', she states (Brée, Duras & Doherty 1972, 404). Writing as something innate and natural is admittedly a common characteristic that authors like to attach to themselves. Duras continues:

(. . .) It is as if I had been afflicted with a disease of the eyes, with a deformation of sight which is almost total, so that I recognize reality only in its simplest terms, almost to the point of naiveté.

(. . .)

It's as though it were there, beforehand. I know only that it has always been there and that it is there for everyone to see. One has only to make an effort to discern it and I make the effort. (Ibid., 405.)

With this answer, Duras adheres to another common idea attached to Romantic poets: the poet's ability to uncover hidden realms with her unusual talent (the underlying implication is that she is the only one who is able to make the effort). She talks about the closeness of certain of her books to her (ibid., 404). She states that writing is not merely an act itself, it is a certain way of seeing things, a certain silence, and that one does not even need blank pages in order to write:

You have to use words in order to break [emotion and perception]; you have to take that step. I feel that I am writing all the time. Obviously, you will say that I feel some lack. I try not to write; formerly, I wrote a good deal and now I try to write less. When I don't write for awhile, I feel a lack, the lack quite simply of the table, of the position that I'm in at this moment. I have the feeling that I never stop, but I know lots of people who don't stop either. (Ibid., 408.)

Here, writing is regarded as a natural gift inherent in the author, and definitely signifies something more profound than the simple act of 'writing stories'. The same mystery surrounds the names of Durasian literary characters: after a long, analytic question on the subject, Duras simply replies 'I can't tell you how they come about.' (Ibid., 418–419.) Her reply suggests that the names of characters just come to her as if by divine inspiration.

Geoffrey Galt Harpham states that autobiographical writers often live in an eternal anticipation of writing, and that they are conscious of the narrativity of their own lives from very early on (Harpham 1988, 42). In Brée's interview, Duras recalls having 'always' written, or at least since she was about twelve years old (Brée, Duras & Doherty 1972, 404). It is not uncommon for an author to state that he or she wrote constantly long before publishing anything or before having had any kind of professional attitude towards writing. In Duras's case, autobiographical

writing was definitely not merely a late phase in a lifelong process of identity formation as Paul John Eakin suggests (though it was that, too: she published her first truly autobiographical work *L'Amant* at the age of 70). It was present at almost every stage of the author's life. As a girl, she planned her future writing, and her oeuvre, from her very first books up until her very last ones, was intertwined with her own life. Her autobiographical enterprise may not have been as calculated and pre-meditated as Ernaux's, but both authors live up to Gusdorf's statement: a great artist truly lives for his or her autobiography (Gusdorf 1956/1980, 47).²⁴⁶

After the alcohol-induced coma she suffered in 1988–1989, Duras continued to write. The most essential pieces of writing she produced during this time are accounts on life, writing, love, and solitude. Even though she was fully mobile, if not completely healthy, after the coma, she turned more inwards and began to repeat themes that were close to her many decades ago. She emphasized the essentiality of writing to her character. As her alter ego states in *C'est tout*:

Toute une vie j'ai écrit.
Comme une andouille, j'ai fait ça.
C'est pas mal non plus d'être comme ça.
Je n'ai jamais été prétentieuse.
Ecrire tout sa vie, ça apprend à
écrire. Ça ne sauve de rien. (CT, 38.)²⁴⁷

It appears to be important for her to pronounce that writing is an authentic part of her life, and always has been. In Brée's interview, Duras states that all her stories already exist before her writing them down and that the process of writing does not change them fundamentally. The pre-existing story only needs to be opened up. (Brée, Duras & Doherty 1972, 405.) In this particular context, the autobiographical story is there since it is already a part of the author's life, and it only needs to be transferred into a textual form. However, Duras's comments imply that any story is, simply, there, since writing is such a fundamental part of herself.

²⁴⁶ Eakin uses the phrase the 'driven autobiographer', and provides Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975) as an example: 'In Kingston's world, sanity and insanity are linked to language, and the child-Maxine burns to break out of her conlified silences in order to utter her experience, her self' (Eakin 2008, 152), he states, meaning that the autobiographer is consumed by the inherent, constant need to express herself.

²⁴⁷ 'All my life I've written.
Like a sausage out of a grinder, that's what I've done.
And there's nothing wrong being like that.
I've never been pretentious.
Writing your whole life, you learn
to write. It doesn't help at all.' (NM, 49–50.)

She regards herself as the great genius whose inspiration and writing are an inherent, almost mystical part of her. Quoting her reflective writing to validate arguments concerning her authorial moves is relevant since such writing stands almost on the border between literary and authorial contemplation (one can ask whose voice speaks in those books – ‘Duras’'s or Duras’s?) and also because it has become clear throughout the analysis that the literary and the authorial are in an intimate relationship with one another.

6.5 Loneliness, Madness, Obsession

In the end, writing was such a comprehensive part of Duras’s selfhood that she herself felt she had missed out on a normal, private life. This is not because publicity restrained her, but because of what happened within her own mind. According to Adler, Duras thought that writing took her to the ‘shadows’ and to the ‘secret archives of herself’. The journey was consuming and arduous: Duras felt that she had thrown her life away in an effort to free and empty herself of the chaos inside her. In the process, she had missed out on regular life, simple happiness, the lightness of being. (Adler 1998/2000, 193.) The longing for the ‘normal life’ Adler describes is quite common for authors who maintain the image of a passionate, consuming attitude towards their profession. Gustave Flaubert, prone to melancholy and a perfectionist when it came to his writing, is perhaps the archetype of an author who was in a state of constant anxiety because of his profession. His was a slightly different bane than Duras’s in that he was constantly after *le mot juste* (Chandler 1958, 17). This places him in the camp of Annie Ernaux, with her tireless efforts to find the right words to describe her parents. The search for the perfect rhetoric was a strenuous affair for Flaubert, a famous ‘martyr of style’. One wonders, whether without his melancholic nature Flaubert might have been more at ease with writing.

Romanticism, though a time of creating the poets’ personal myths, was also a ‘time of increasing alienation of the poet from his audience’ (Bennett 1999, 202). Like Duras, the Romantic poet lived in his own world, cut off from society and people who lead conventional lives. This was considered a sacrifice one had to pay for the unworldly gift of writing and the pursuit of fame. Conversely, in her interview Brée suggests that it might have been loneliness which triggered Duras’s writing. Duras concurs laconically, binding her loneliness to her childhood experiences, which she stated (in another instance) her writing stems from: ‘I was living at an outpost way out in the country in Indochina.’ (Brée, Duras & Doherty 1972, 405.) Another tragedy of the lonely Romantic genius was that he was misunderstood and unrecognized in his lifetime, though he was not supposed to care about

this (Tomaševski 1923/1978, 49; Bennett 1999, 4). This does not apply to Duras; despite being somewhat unattainable she was very much recognized and admired during almost all of her literary career and especially after the publication of the critically acclaimed *L'Amant*. Her reputation continued to flourish after her death as well.²⁴⁸

Writing was such a tremendous force that, to put it melodramatically, it destroyed the author's existence, as Adler quotes Duras saying:

I write to move myself from me to the book. To alleviate myself of my importance. For the book to take some of it in my place. To massacre, ruin; damage myself in the publication of the book. To popularize myself. To lie in the street. It works. The more I write, the less I exist. (Adler 1998/2000, 239.)

Duras recognized and also embraced the process of making herself vanish into and through writing. Genova goes so far as to suggest in connection with *L'Amant* that there seems to be nothing left from Duras's past except the events and people she kept alive by writing them into her books (Genova 2003, 51). Horowitz for his part states that an individual is a vacuum before the birth of his or her autobiography (Horowitz 1977, 175), a *tabula rasa* of sorts. This view suggests that Duras's self lacks substance despite the immense charisma and authority of the character who named herself *La Duras*.

Adele King associates the loss of one's identity and the so-called holes in one's ego with the theme of madness (King 1989, 162). Walking on the borderline between sanity and insanity is also a common aspect of Romantic poetry and was manifested in the interest towards the illnesses of the mind, distorted relationships, perversions, and even sadism. Duras wrote about madness quite a lot: *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* and *Le Maladie de la mort* inspect the borders of rational behaviour and cognition. The alleged connection of Romantic authors to pure nature and to the divine and the sublime constructed a myth that was incomprehensible to the rational mind. This was incisive in alienating the poets from their audiences. Catherine Cusset goes even further and suggests that madness, femininity, loneliness and writing are all connected to one another: '(. . .) a woman leaves the social, masculine world where she is condemned to silence and enters into 'la folie', madness,

²⁴⁸ Another side of the story belongs to Marguerite's namesake Claire-Louise de Duras, or the Duchess of Duras (1777–1828) (the village Marguerite Donnadiou acquired her name from), who was a pre-Romantic female author. Claire de Duras was largely ignored during her lifetime although she touched upon important issues, such as the equality between the two sexes, the basic principles of the French Revolution, and the intellectual debates that took place in the Age of Enlightenment, in her so-called unimportant sentimental novels. She fits the idea of the Romantic author for her revolutionary ideas and for her not being recognized until long after her death. (Cf. Kadish & Massardier-Kenny 1994.)

the fascination with the spectacle of the Other' (Cusset 1989, 63). Not unlike her literary alter ego, discussed in chapter 2, Duras definitely embraced solitude so that she could abandon herself into writing. She also regarded the feminine world as something separate from male pragmatism, as I showed in the context of her interviews.

What further contributed to Duras's missing out on a normal life – in addition to writing – were her apparent egoism and especially her alcoholism, the latter of which contributed to her being intoxicated during most of her writing. This sickness would at its worst lead her to drink several bottles of wine and a bottle of whisky each day. Excessive alcohol consumption was a recurrent characteristic of her love affairs as well: with Yann Andréa, drinking was a daily habit. She used to take her lovers on drunken car rides in the middle of the night. The affairs were highly intense almost to the point of obsession, resembling alcohol addiction. Of course, this is all biographical gossip. This side of her, as a solitary character prone to alcoholism, whose life borders on insanity, is far more elaborately depicted in her literary self-reflections, such as *Écrire*. In that work 'Duras' describes how she secluded herself in her house in Neauphle and drank compulsively even while writing. She ominously associates loneliness both with writing and death, and with alcohol: 'La solitude, ça veut dire aussi : Ou la mort, ou le livre. Mai savant tout ça veut dire l'alcool. Whisky, ça veut dire.' (E, 19)²⁴⁹ She confesses to drinking liqueur every night before going to bed (ibid., 23) and that without writing she would have become an incurable alcoholic (ibid., 22). In the end, writing is the only thing that can save her from the bottomless hole of loneliness and alcoholism (ibid., 20).

This again emphasizes the close relationship literary self-reflection and authorial self-reflection share with one another, since the literary work focuses on the very subject matter that characterizes the author's well-known features. This is similar to how the visual image of Duras, which I depicted earlier, resembles the one that 'Duras' offers herself in the section in *La Vie matérielle* that discusses the 'Marguerite Duras uniform'. This closeness of the literary and the authorial yet again underlines my proposition that all the reflective gestures both take place in and form one unified sphere. It is in this self-reflective space in which the comprehensive story of a figure named Duras, or 'Duras', is constructed.

Duras's obsession with her image-forming, which she began at the latest in the 1970s by re-naming herself *La Duras*, only gained in strength after her coma, and grew to dimensions which bordered on the ridiculous. Throughout this process, Duras treated her ideological aspirations, her writing, her drinking, and love affairs with an intensity that appears almost irrational to the common mind. This

²⁴⁹ 'Solitude also means, either death or a book. But first and foremost it means alcohol. It means whiskey.' (W, 7.)

same intensity is apparent in her writing as well, as I suggested in chapter 2 and 4 of this dissertation. Duras's 'mystic talent' with which she was supposedly able to produce her acclaimed writing comes together with her public image and introduces a creative individual who at the same time remains unattainable and ambiguous. In chapter 2, I quoted Enright and Shoukri who introduce the concept of the mystic writer in their article 'In Principio Erat Verbum... The Mysticism of Marguerite Duras' (1985). According to them, the mystic writer is a self-evident agent whose character is relevant, and not so much the content of her production. Her own act of writing is significant in itself and full of life regardless of what she writes about. They claim that *L'Amant* does not autobiographically describe reality per se – what is essential is the process of writing, the passion and love of which is available to readers, and this triggers the unification of writing and life. (Enright & Shoukri 1985, 54, 57–58.) Enright and Shoukri's logic is not very conclusive and only remotely academically plausible; however, they have a valid point in that in the case of the 'mystic writer' there is something self-evident, intense, and passionate about the way in which her personality and her writing are connected to one another. Intensity, passion, and an obsessive attitude towards writing were an integral part of Duras's public performances as an author, and not simply topics or formal characteristics of her literary work. This is manifested in Duras's intense act of commenting on her writing as well as on herself. Even though Duras passed away in 1996, this intense act has been carried on to this day by critics, biographers, and posthumous publications.

Conclusion

Annie Ernaux's oeuvre is far from the French aesthetic ideals of *l'art pour l'art* or *l'art pur*. Her individual works are not isolated, closed objects. True, her writing is self-referential and carefully constructed, but in addition to artistic aspirations and the contemplation of the nature of autobiographical writing, she strives to depict social reality and to present her own life story – as well as that of her parents. Often, the carefully moulded style of writing exists precisely to highlight these issues. Marguerite Duras is considered even an avant-gardist, and her work is often associated with the experimental *nouveau roman* movement despite her own protestation that she is unique and cannot be categorized. This is the case with her autobiographical writing as well, *L'Amant* being the obvious case. Both authors' autobiographical works hover between factual and fictional presentation, yet, they adamantly wind around the self presented and end up depicting a life story, albeit a fragmented one. As authors, both have been keen to comment on their work and their symbiotic relationship with *écriture*, though Ernaux's delivery has perhaps been more to the point than Duras's often controversial and ambiguous, even self-centered approach to her own image.

In the introduction, I posed the question of how self-reflection manifests itself in Ernaux's and Duras's autobiographical writing, and have come up with at least the following ways: metatextual commentary (both explicit and implicit) covering a wide range of topics, from contemplating the text itself to pondering writing as a general trait; the concentration and the emphasis on the 'I'; formal transgressions; multilayered references within the oeuvre; and systematic rewriting. The authors' authorial self-commentary is based on commenting on their oeuvres, on their methods of working, on motivations behind their writing, and sometimes even on themselves as individuals. Ernaux's speciality is a constant, pre-meditated reflection on autobiographical writing as a mode, on the possibility of depicting reality authentically, and on the obstacles this endeavor faces. Her sometimes borderline academic self-analysis manifests itself in interviews, in prefaces of academic publications, and in works that hover between literary and authorial discourses, and in her autobiographical stories as well. Her autobiographical alter ego offers a ready-made definition of her writing as a hybrid of literature, sociology and history in *Une Femme*. In *L'Usage de la photo*, *Écrire la vie* and *Retour à Yvetot*, Ernaux consciously uses photographic evidence to discuss the fugitive qualities of reality. Du-

ras's self-consciousness might be more implicit, or at least the explicit manifestations of it are somewhat scarcer than in Ernaux's works. In spite of this, the footnotes in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* and the elevating of *écriture* as the main topic of *Écrire* definitely underline the metatextual endeavor.

The autobiographical 'I's in both authors' works reflect on themselves in addition to *écriture*. At times, this reflection appears as a narcissistic enterprise, and the seeming lack of irony appears strange since both authors are obviously intellectual writers. The lack – or the highly implicit nature – of irony is not, however, a lack of perspective in self-emphasis. In Ernaux's case, self-emphasis is complemented with her desire to transform personal experiences to general perceptions – she has even explicitly stated that she does not regard autobiographical writing as exhibitionism. Duras, on the other hand, is less timid in emphasizing herself, but some of her works (most not discussed in this study) are simultaneously perceptive examinations of general human conditions and experiences. They comment on the disadvantaged, the traumatic events of the 20th century, and the nuances of emotions and cognitive states.

The literary and the authorial forms of self-reflection overlap and parallel one another both thematically and formally. Often the autobiographical 'I' and the author address similar issues, such as the essence of autobiographical writing and its meaning to the author. The overlap is manifested particularly well in texts that formally resemble both literary and authorial reflection and commentary: in Ernaux's *L'Usage de la photo*, and especially *Écrire la vie*, *L'Atelier noir*, and *Retour à Yvetot*, and in Duras's *Écrire* and *C'est tout*. These were discussed as literary works, yet they often mention and regularly comment on other works by the authors, and thus seem more like paratexts than individual works of art. Both Duras's and Ernaux's works, whether literary or authorial, textual or paratextual in nature, participate in, comment on, and contribute to their autobiographical projects equally. The boundary between the literary and the authorial becomes insignificant.

What is essential is that a certain relentless intensity characterizes the authors' reflective acts. This is evident when 'Ernaux' obsessively ponders on her feelings after the ending of a love affair in *L'Occupation* and turns those feelings into writing, or when 'Duras' refers to herself again and again in her contemplative writing, as in *Écrire*, drawing attention to her symbiotic relationship with writing. The love affairs and writing about them, as well as *écriture* as both a topic and an act, are comparable in their intensity and entangled with one another. This is emphasized by Ernaux's and Duras's insistence that their lives and their writing are fundamentally and inextricably intertwined. The authors' certain autobiographical stories are not only about passion – these stories, and the whole autobiographical projects, are themselves passionate.

Furthermore, passionate relationships and the feelings one has about them, the act of writing about writing, and the way in which Ernaux and Duras mediate them to readers in their autobiographical works, are repetitious to the point of banality. Repetition also results in a complex web of references and thematic continua spanning through Ernaux's oeuvre and covering her whole production. In Duras's case, it is the act of rewriting, as well as the self-portrait that is formed across several works, that allows for her autobiographical works to function as an entity.²⁵⁰ The repetition of similar subject matter from book to book and the conscious act of rewriting emphasize the air of intensity in the authors' work.

Ernaux confesses to being in search for the literary form that would sum up her whole life, and in the analysis I proposed that it is the completeness of her works and her authorial self-commentary combined that constitute the ultimate literary form and summary of her life. Similarly, the myth of *La Duras* is not merely a product of a self-indulgent authorial image construction but also the end result of an extensive, complicated process of telling a story of the Durasian self both in the literary and the authorial realms. Telling life stories does not require a comprehensive, chronological narrative: Duras's autobiographical works constitute only a part of her whole oeuvre, and instead of presenting a life story from the beginning to the end, it is more a question of depicting emotional states and fleeting moments of one's existence, such as the scene in the Chinese man's bedroom and the crossing of the Mekong River on a ferry. Ernaux's autobiographical project is a more concise one, yet her stories are fragmented and experimental in form as well.

Neither autobiographical project is ever complete. Ernaux's creative burst in 2011 indicates that there is always something more to reveal. Ever since she was first diagnosed with breast cancer, she has been constructing her literary testament. Death plays an essential role in the thematics of both authors' works as well: 'Ernaux' often addresses the symbiosis between life and writing, and also compares writing and death. She even suggests that true writing might be achievable by the way of death. In the foreword to *Se perdre* she states that the work is about desire, death, and writing ('de désir, de mort, et d'écriture'; SP, foreword), and thus makes another comparison, that between passion and death. In the intense, lifelong autobiographical project everything is weaved together: life, death, writing, and passion. Death is also a famous Durasian motif, and in *C'est tout*, it is more conspicuously present than ever before. However, not even death in the 'real' world is the end of the eternal process of writing, as Duras's *Les Cahiers de la guerre et autres textes* and *La*

²⁵⁰ The works of, for example, Hervé Guibert, a French intellectual who died of AIDS at quite an early age, have been regarded as being inherently connected: his first work *La Mort propagande* (1977) can be seen a synopsis of his career, a synopsis which does not directly result in his later works and events of his life, but which acquires further literary value if interpreted through these other works.

Beauté des nuits du monde show. It remains to be seen what will happen after Ernaux passes away.

Autobiographical writing is an inherently self-conscious mode (genre, if you will) of writing, and writing autobiographically means being aware of both oneself and of the fact that one is writing a story of oneself. When applied to Paul John Eakin's conception of the narrativity of human existence, reflecting upon oneself fundamentally means being conscious of the narrative nature of lives, while manifesting this consciousness in life writing. The story and the continuity of the self presented in the autobiographical stories and through the authorial self-commentary are formed by reflective gestures at both the literary and the authorial levels. The insignificance of the boundary between the literary and the authorial speaks for a broader conception of autobiographical writing, exceeding the boundaries of single autobiographical stories or even a conglomerate of them. The analysis of autobiographical writing, therefore, involves and benefits from readings that reach further than any single story.

I have suggested that Ernaux's and Duras's autobiographical writing, self-reflective gestures, and the act of telling a life story all take place in various kinds of spaces which are both the prerequisite and the result of the autobiographical process. The concept of space is an ambiguous one. In the introduction, I discussed both the abstract and the pragmatic manifestations of space relevant to my study. In the analysis, 'space' was considered: 1) the overall *self-reflective space* in which the author writes her books and comments on them, and everything that takes place in those books; 2) the web of references forming in an individual work as well as within the scope of the author's oeuvre, the latter of which is often grasped with the help of the concept of the autobiographical space; and 3) in more specific terms, a condition for writing, an example being both Duras's physical house in Neauphle and in a more abstract sense her solitude in that house and the state of drunkenness in which she often wrote. Space also includes the broader context of writing for both Ernaux and Duras, such as the social space in France throughout the 20th century from the working-class to academia, the French cultural scene, and the general atmosphere promoting individualism. In the introduction, I hoped that the variety of theoretical perspectives used in this study could serve as a functional platform for an even more precise theoretical classification, especially in relation to these spaces – here, I have offered some preliminary perspectives concerning them.

As I stated in the introduction, self-consciousness and the concentration on the self are not new, but rather, they are recurring phenomena in Western literary culture. The emphasis on the (autobiographical) author as an individual has been a growing concern for some decades now – following, perhaps, the questioning of formalism in literary research and the emphasis on the individual in culture

in general. Obvious examples of such authors would be Vladimir Nabokov and Philip Roth, among many others, but of more contemporary authors, the extrovert author-publisher Dave Eggers also falls into the category of the self-conscious and self-emphasizing author. A certain obsessive attitude towards writing, especially writing that is about itself, is an essential feature of many contemporary French autobiographical or autofictional authors such as Michel Houellebecq. Ernaux and Duras are not the first and definitely not the last autobiographical authors who are pointedly self-aware.

Both authors thrive on literary influences – both on and of their work. In *L'Écriture comme un couteau*, Ernaux brings up Anaïs Nin, the French-Cuban author who was famous for her diaries exploring her personality and intimate relationships. Perhaps not surprisingly, Nin is discussed in connection with the two forms of writing that are of so much importance to Ernaux. Ernaux implicitly compares herself to Nin (ÉCC, 24), emphasizing how, even while generalizing, the other author, too, is immersing herself in writing on a very intimate, personal level. In *La Vie extérieure*, 'Ernaux' wanders around the Montparnasse Cemetery and stumbles upon a familiar tomb (VE, 72). She mentions Duras's grave and the photograph placed on it which happens to portray the author in an age that coincides with the events described in the famous *L'Amant*. Also, as noted in the analysis, 'Ernaux' refers to authors, novels, films, magazines, and other products of popular culture in her autobiographical works. Ernaux definitely does not reside in the vacuum of her own writing, void of any contact with the surrounding literary culture (if any author does). She also willingly and actively engages in a dialogue with her peers and even academics, thus revealing herself to be conscious of the place her writing holds in the world of literature.

I have noted how Duras was considered narcissistic and introverted, especially towards the end of her career. There is another side to that story, too. The author was immensely interested in world events, society and politics, and this investment is present in her writing, especially in *La Vie matérielle*. In the interviews analyzed, she discusses at length the immense relevance of politics to her writing and her views on 'female' writing. It might be that the pursuit of and the emphasis on individuality is an illusion. The self-centeredness might be more about the comparison to the Other, both on an individual and a cultural level – as Ernaux's transsubjection and Duras's treatment of the traumatic events of the Second World War²⁵¹ show. The seeming narcissism of the French, or of contemporary culture for that matter, is an overgeneralization.

²⁵¹ When it comes to Duras's works discussed in this study, this is evident in the story of the young English pilot in *Écire*.

Nevertheless, what I have tried to achieve in this dissertation is a view of autobiographical writing as an enterprise that is truly about the self presented through a complicated system of self-reflective gestures – without forgetting the ability of this kind of project to convey other messages as well. I have presented the act of self-reflection as an inherent part of the construction of selfhood and identity in autobiographical writing. Christian Moraru's post-modernist world which 'is not necessarily gloomy, catastrophic, devoid of substance, hope, and agency' (Moraru 2001, 173) is similar to the view I have attempted to offer of Ernaux's and Duras's writing. Attesting to hope and agency does not mean reverting to the representation of essentialist subjectivities. In my analysis, it was proposed that the subjects depicted in Ernaux's and Duras's writing are both fragmented, and, as compilations of selves resulting partly from fragmented narration, unified entities. Similarly, the life stories presented are both fragmented and quite comprehensive.

The aim was to provide new perspectives on the act of reflecting upon and narrativizing one's life, which is strongly characteristic of our time and culture, and of human experience in general. I regard the act of self-reflection and the concentration on the self as a wide cultural, social, and historical phenomenon, which is manifested in the endless mirroring process that takes place in contemporary media. Perhaps this never-ending self-reflective social and cultural enterprise, as well as the effort to find meaning in one's life by constructing stories about oneself, is and has been a way of escaping and also grasping the insecure pluralism of contemporary life. So, not only is there a self-reflective space that covers one particular author's autobiographical enterprise. There is also a wider space which includes gestures that are not merely Ernaux's and Duras's. Every self-conscious autobiographical author throughout history takes part in the dialogue, and each reader, interviewer, and academic critic participates in this reflective web. In writing this dissertation, I, too, have become a participant.

References

Abbreviations and Editions Cited

Works by Marguerite Duras

- [A] *L'Amant*. Paris: Minuit 1984.
- [ACN] *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. Paris: Gallimard 1991.
- [CT] *C'est tout*. New York, Toronto and London: Seven Stories Press 1995/1998.
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Appendix

Works by Marguerite Duras, Chronological Order

1943. *Les Impudents*. Paris: Plon.
1944. *La Vie tranquille*. Paris: Gallimard.
1950. *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*. Paris: Gallimard.
1952. *Le Marin de Gibraltar*. Paris: Gallimard.
1953. *Les Petits Chevaux de Tarquinia*. Paris: Gallimard.
1954. *Des journées entières dans les arbres*. Paris: Gallimard.
1955. *Le Square*. Paris: Gallimard.
1958. *Moderato Cantabile*. Paris: Minuit.
1960. *Dix heures et demie du soir en été*. Paris: Gallimard.
1964. *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*. Paris: Gallimard.
1967. *L'Amante Anglaise*. Paris: Gallimard.
1967. *Le Vice-consul*. Paris: Gallimard.
1969. *Détruire, dit-elle*. Paris: Minuit.
1970. *Abahn Sabana David*. Paris: Gallimard.
- . *Ab! Ernesto*. Paris: Harlin Quist/Ruy-Vidal.
1971. *L'Amour*. Paris: Gallimard.
1980. *L'Été 80*. Paris: Minuit.
- . *Vera Baxter ou les Plages de l'Atlantique*. Paris: Albatros.
- 1980/1987. *Les Yeux verts*. *Cahiers du cinéma* 312–313.
1982. *L'Homme atlantique*. Paris: Minuit.
- . *La Maladie de la mort*. Paris: Minuit.
1984. *L'Amant*. Paris: Minuit.
1985. *La Douleur*. Paris: Gallimard.
1986. *La Pute de la côte normande*. Paris: Minuit.
- . *Les Yeux bleus, cheveux noirs*. Paris: Minuit.
1987. *Emily L*. Paris: Minuit.
- . *Les Yeux verts*. Paris: Les Cahiers du Cinéma.
- . *La Vie matérielle*. Paris: Gallimard.
1990. *La Pluie d'été*. Paris: P.O.L.

1991. *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. Paris: Gallimard
1992. *Yann Andréa Steiner*. Paris: Gallimard.
1993. *Écrire*. Paris: Gallimard.
- . *Le Monde extérieur*. Paris: P.O.L.
- 1995 *C'est tout*. Paris: P.O.L.
2006. *Les Cahiers de la guerre et autres textes*. Edited by Olivier Corpet & Sophie Bogaert. Paris: POL/Imec.
2010. *La Beauté des nuits du monde*. Edited by Laure Adler. Paris: La Quinzaine littéraire.

Works by Annie Ernaux, Chronological Order

1974. *Les Armoires vides*. Paris: Gallimard.
1977. *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*. Paris: Gallimard.
1981. *La Femme gelée*. Paris: Gallimard.
1983. *La Place*. Paris: Gallimard.
1987. *Une Femme*. Paris: Gallimard.
1991. *Passion simple*. Paris: Gallimard.
1993. *Journal du dehors*. Paris: Gallimard.
1996. 'Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit.' Paris: Gallimard.
1997. *La Honte*. Paris: Gallimard.
2000. *L'Événement*. Paris: Gallimard.
- . *La Vie extérieure*. Paris: Gallimard.
2001. *Se perdre*. Paris: Seuil.
2002. *L'Occupation*. Paris: Seuil.
2003. (with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet) *L'Écriture comme un couteau. Entretien avec Frédéric-Yves Jeannet*. Paris: Stock
2005. (with Marc Marie) *L'Usage de la photo*. Paris: Gallimard.
2008. *Les Années*. Paris: Gallimard.
2011. *L'Atelier noir*. Paris: Busclats.
- . *L'Autre fille*. Paris: Nil.
- . *Écrire la vie*. Paris: QuartoGallimard.
2013. *Retour à Yvetot*. Paris: Mauconduit.