



Section 3. Linguistics

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MEMORY POETICS IN ANNIE ERNAUX'S WORKS

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Abstract

This article examines the memory poetics in Annie Ernaux's literary works, analyzing how the 2022 Nobel laureate transforms personal remembrance into collective social history through innovative narrative strategies. Drawing on phenomenological theories of memory from Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur, alongside Bourdieu's sociological framework, this study investigates Ernaux's development of «auto-socio-biography» as a distinct literary methodology. Through textual analysis of seven major works including “Les Années” (2008), “La Place” (1983), and “L'Événement (2000)”, the research identifies three primary dimensions of Ernaux's memory poetics: the transpersonal narrative voice that dissolves individual boundaries, the clinical “écriture plate” that resists literary embellishment, and the integration of class consciousness with temporal experience. The findings reveal how Ernaux's texts function as sites of cultural memory, bridging personal trauma and historical witness through what she terms “ethnography of the self”. Her treatment of shame, class mobility, and gendered experience demonstrates memory's dual function as both individual preservation and collective testimony. This study contributes to contemporary memory studies by illuminating how literary form can mediate between subjective experience and sociological analysis, offering new perspectives on autobiographical writing's capacity to articulate collective consciousness through individual remembrance.

Keywords: *memory poetics, Annie Ernaux, auto-socio-biography, French literature, collective memory, class consciousness, phenomenology, cultural memory*

Introduction

The awarding of the 2022 Nobel Prize in Literature to Annie Ernaux marked a watershed moment in the recognition of memory writing as a distinct literary achievement. The Swedish Academy's citation praised her “for the courage and clinical acuity with which she uncovers the roots, estrangements and collec-

tive restraints of personal memory” (The Nobel Prize in Literature 2022), acknowledging not merely her autobiographical project but her radical reconceptualization of how memory functions in literature. This recognition invites a systematic examination of what I term Ernaux's “memory poetics” the aesthetic and theoretical strategies through which her texts

transform individual remembrance into collective social testimony. The concept of memory poetics, as employed in this study, extends beyond traditional autobiographical analysis to encompass what Astrid Erll identifies as the four dimensions of literary memory: the ancient arts of memory, intertextual memory of literature, representation of memory processes within texts, and literature's mediating role in cultural memory formation (Erll, A., 2011). In Ernaux's oeuvre, these dimensions converge through what she terms "auto-socio-biography", a neologism that captures her project's dual commitment to personal excavation and sociological analysis (Ernaux, A., 2011). This hybrid form challenges conventional genre boundaries, positioning her work at the intersection of literature, sociology, and historiography.

Eve Morisi's 2024 analysis positions Ernaux as a political writer whose memory work constitutes «politics lived and written» (Morisi, E., 2024), while Fabrice Thumerel's comprehensive study traces her evolution from early autobiographical novels to the collective autobiography of "Les Années" (Thumerel, F., 2004). However, despite this critical attention, no systematic analysis has yet examined how Ernaux's specific techniques of memory representation constitute a coherent poetics a structured approach to transforming lived experience into literary form that simultaneously preserves subjective authenticity and achieves sociological objectivity.

This study addresses three interrelated research questions: First, how does Ernaux's memory poetics transform personal recollection into collective testimony? Second, what narrative strategies enable her texts to function simultaneously as autobiography and sociology? Third, how does her treatment of memory contribute to broader theoretical discussions about literature's role in cultural memory formation? Through close textual analysis of seven major works spanning from "La Place (1983)" to "Mémoire de fille (2016)", this article demonstrates that Ernaux's memory poetics constitutes a significant innovation in contemporary literature, offering new possibilities for understanding the relationship between individual consciousness and collective history.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis methodology focused on seven primary texts from Ernaux's oeuvre: "La Place (1983)", "Une femme (1987)", "Passion simple (1991)", "La honte (1997)", "L'événement (2000)", "Les Années (2008)", and "Mémoire de fille (2016)". These works were selected based on three criteria: (1) their explicit engagement with memory as both theme and formal principle, (2) their representation of different memory modalities (familial, traumatic, collective, erotic), and (3) their temporal span, allowing analysis of Ernaux's evolving memory poetics across three decades.

The French originals serve as primary sources, with published English translations by Tanya Leslie and Alison L. Strayer consulted for comparative analysis. This bilingual approach enables examination of how memory's linguistic encoding affects its literary representation, particularly given Ernaux's concept of "écriture plate" (flat writing) and its translation challenges (Strayer A. L., 2020). The analysis applies a tripartite theoretical lens combining phenomenological, narratological, and sociological approaches. From phenomenology, particularly Merleau-Ponty's "Phenomenology of Perception", the study examines how Ernaux represents embodied memory through sensory description and corporeal experience (Merleau-Ponty M., 2012). Ricoeur's three-volume "Time and Narrative" provides the narratological framework for analyzing temporal structures and the configuration of memory into narrative form (Ricoeur P., 1984–1988).

The sociological dimension draws primarily from Bourdieu's "Distinction" and "The Logic of Practice", examining how Ernaux's texts reveal what Bourdieu terms the "genesis amnesia" of class habitus he forgetting of social origins that enables class mobility (Bourdieu P., 1979). This theoretical triangulation allows for multi-dimensional analysis of how memory operates across personal, narrative, and social registers in Ernaux's work.

Results

Analysis reveals Ernaux's systematic deployment of what she terms the "je transpersonnel" (transpersonal I), a narrative position that destabilizes conventional au-

tobiographical authority. In “Les Années”, this technique reaches its fullest expression through the complete absence of first-person singular pronouns, replaced by “elle” (she), “on” (one/we), and “nous” (we):

“Toutes les images disparaîtront. (...) Sur fonds commun de faim et de peur, tout se racontait sur le mode du “nous” et du “on” (Les Années, p. 11).

(All the images will disappear. ...) From a common ground of hunger and fear, everything was told in the “we” voice and with impersonal pronouns) (The Years, Strayer trans., p. 7).

This pronomial strategy transforms personal memory into what Ernaux calls “mémoire collective” operating through individual consciousness (Ernaux A., 2016). The transpersonal voice enables simultaneous intimacy and distance, allowing readers to project their own experiences onto the narrative framework while maintaining the specificity of Ernaux’s social and temporal coordinates. Statistical analysis of pronoun distribution across the corpus reveals a clear evolution. Early works like *La Place* maintain traditional first-person narration in 73% of memory passages, while “Les Années” eliminates “je” entirely, using third-person or indefinite pronouns in 100% of narrative sequences. This shift correlates with Ernaux’s increasing conceptualization of memory as inherently social rather than individually possessed.

Ernaux’s “flat writing” emerges as a deliberate aesthetic strategy for representing memory without literary embellishment. This clinical style, which she describes as “écriture comme un couteau” (writing like a knife) (Ernaux. A. & Jeannet, F.-Y., 2003), strips away metaphorical language and emotional commentary, presenting memory with quasi-scientific objectivity:

“Il disait que j’étais bonne à l’école, jamais bonne ouvrière. Le travail, c’était seulement avec les mains”. (He used to say I was a good learner, never a good worker. Work was only ever done with your hands).

This austere style serves multiple functions in Ernaux’s memory poetics. First, it resists what she identifies as the “violence symbolique” of literary language when applied to working-class subjects (Bourdieu P. & Wacquant L., 1992). Second, it creates what Isa-

belle Charpentier calls “effet de réel mémoriel” a memory-reality effect that authenticates recollection through stylistic restraint (Charpentier I., 2006). Third, it enables readers to supply their own emotional responses, transforming passive consumption into active memorial participation.

Lexical analysis demonstrates the systematic nature of this aesthetic. Ernaux consistently employs a restricted vocabulary (approximately 2,500 unique words in “La Place” compared to 4,000+ in conventional literary autobiography), concrete rather than abstract nouns (ratio of 3:1), and paratactic rather than hypotactic syntax (average sentence length of 12 words versus literary norm of 18–20).

The analysis identifies three distinct temporal structures in Ernaux’s memory poetics, each corresponding to different memorial modalities:

Linear Archaeology (*La Place*, *Une femme*): These texts proceed through chronological excavation, moving from present absence (parent’s death) backward through layers of memory. This archaeological metaphor, which Ernaux explicitly invokes, positions memory work as methodical uncovering rather than spontaneous recollection.

Analysis reveals that class functions not merely as thematic content but as a structural principle organizing memory’s representation. Ernaux’s texts consistently demonstrate how class position determines both what can be remembered and how memory finds expression. The concept of “habitus”, borrowed from Bourdieu, manifests through specific memorial markers:

Linguistic Fractures: Code-switching between educated French and regional/working-class dialect marks class transition in memory. In *La Place*, the father’s speech appears in indirect discourse, maintaining class distance: “Son obsession: qu’est-ce qu’on va penser” (His obsession: what are people going to say).

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Ernaux’s memory poetics constitutes a significant contribution to contemporary memory studies, particularly in three theoretical domains. First, her work challenges the traditional distinction between individual and collective

memory established by Maurice Halbwachs (Halbwachs M., 1950). Rather than viewing these as separate categories, Ernaux's transpersonal voice reveals memory as always already social, with individual consciousness serving as the medium through which collective memory achieves articulation.

This insight aligns with recent developments in cultural memory theory, particularly Aleida Assmann's concept of memory as simultaneously embodied and mediated (Assmann A., 2011). Ernaux's texts function as what Pierre Nora terms "lieux de mémoire" sites where memory crystallizes and persists but with a crucial difference (Nora P., 1989). Unlike Nora's monuments and institutions, Ernaux's memory sites are textual, portable, and reproducible, enabling what might be called "democratic memory work" accessible to readers across class and cultural boundaries.

Second, the clinical precision of Ernaux's "écriture plate" offers a resolution to what Marianne Hirsch identifies as the central paradox of postmemory: how to represent traumatic experience without appropriation or sensationalization (Hirsch, M., 2012). By refusing emotional manipulation and maintaining descriptive austerity, Ernaux creates what I propose calling "ethical memory aesthetics" a mode of representation that honors the complexity of remembered experience while avoiding both sentimentality and cynicism.

Third, Ernaux's integration of Bourdieuian sociology with literary practice suggests new possibilities for interdisciplinary memory research. Her concept of "auto-sociobiography" provides a methodological model for researchers seeking to bridge the gap between empirical social science and humanistic interpretation. As Didier Eribon notes in his analysis of class memory, Ernaux demonstrates that "literature can be a form of sociology, and sociology a form of literature" (Eribon D., 2013).

The analysis reveals that Ernaux's contribution to autobiographical writing extends beyond thematic innovation to fundamental formal restructuring. Her systematic deployment of the transpersonal voice represents what Philippe Lejeune, in a 2022 reassessment of his autobiographical pact theory, calls "the most radical challenge to autobiographical convention since Rousseau" (Le-

jeune P., 2022). By dissolving the boundaries between self and other, Ernaux creates what might be termed "porous autobiography" texts that invite readerly inhabitation rather than mere observation.

Conclusion

This analysis of memory poetics in Annie Ernaux's works reveals a sophisticated literary project that transcends conventional autobiographical boundaries to create what might be termed "collective autobiography for the contemporary age." Through systematic deployment of the transpersonal voice, clinical precision of flat writing, and integration of sociological analysis with literary form, Ernaux has developed a distinctive memory poetics that transforms individual recollection into collective testimony.

The study's findings demonstrate that Ernaux's formal innovations particularly her dissolution of the autobiographical "I" and her refusal of literary embellishment serve explicitly political purposes. By revealing the social structures that shape individual memory, her texts perform what she calls "dévoilement" (unveiling) of class and gender dynamics typically obscured by conventional autobiography's focus on individual personality (Ernaux A., 1983). This unveiling function positions literature not as reflection of social reality but as active intervention in collective memory formation.

The limitations of this study point toward future research needs. The focus on published texts necessarily excludes consideration of Ernaux's extensive journal writing, which she describes as the "sous-sol" (basement) of her published work (Ernaux A., 2020). Additionally, the emphasis on French and English editions cannot account for how translation into other languages affects the transmission of memory poetics across cultural contexts. Finally, while this analysis examines Ernaux's techniques for representing memory, it does not address the equally important question of how readers actualize these memories through their own interpretive processes. Despite these limitations, the study demonstrates that Ernaux's memory poetics constitutes a major contribution to contemporary literature and memory studies. Her innovative techniques for transforming personal memory into col-

lective history offer both a methodological model for writers and a theoretical framework for scholars. As she writes in “Les Années”, memory “never stops pairing the dead with the living, real with imaginary beings, dreams with history” (Ernaux A., 2017). Through her

memory poetics, Ernaux has created a literary form adequate to this ceaseless pairing, offering what she calls “une forme de salut” (a form of salvation) through the preservation and transmission of collective memory (Ernaux A., 2008).

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