BEING "INTEGRATED," BEING "OTHER": TEACHING ANNIE ERNAUX'S *LES ARMOIRES VIDES* IN THE UNDERGRADUATE FRENCH CURRICULUM

Lynn Penrod

Annie Ernaux's 1974 novel, *Les Armoires vides*, can be an incredibly effective text for implementing a four-skill "integration" model into the intermediate undergraduate French class –all the while serving as an extraordinarily rich text in terms of its presentation of concepts of alterity, something which is becoming more and more the focal point of a contemporary undergraduate curriculum in French studies. I am not concerned here with an analysis of some specific aspect of the text itself but rather a hands-on practical presentation of the ways in which the text can be used by instructors who are interested in blurring, if not eradicating, the traditional boundary markers between "language," "literature" and "culture."

Annie Ernaux's *Les Armoires vides* has long been one of my favorite texts in contemporary French literature, and I have used it happily in several courses in very traditional ways (in a senior undergraduate course on women writers, in an "Introduction to Twentieth-Century French Literature" course; and in both senior undergraduate and graduate courses in applied literary translation). There are a multiplicity of approaches that one can take in these discreet kinds of courses: first-person narrative techniques; genre boundaries between autobiography and fiction; theory relating to autobiographical writing; thematic concerns relating to abortion, class, education, or adolescent alienation from parents; the role of language in the formation of class consciousness, recurring metaphors and images; and language levels—including regionalisms, slang and lower-working class idiom.

Since I have always liked the text so much, I have never seemed to have much difficulty bringing my students along with me, but I have come to realize that the Ernaux text, at least as I had been using it in literature classes in the past, actually functioned as simply one building block in the edifice which we had named in the university course catalogue "French Literature of the Twentieth Century."

When I was asked in 1999-2000 to serve on a small ad hoc committee of my department's French Area with the mandate of attempting to integrate the French curriculum along the general lines of the German program at Georgetown,[1] I became intrigued at the possibilities Ernaux's work afforded as both an *integrated* text (that is, already possessing all the "content-based" material needed for use in language, literature, culture, and linguistics) and an *integrating* one (that is, a text which students and instructors alike could work with quite happily on several levels simultaneously in order to study, understand, and have a better sense of what it means, in the largest sense, to be "other"). In short, as we were trying through curricular reform to work with students in an integrated model so that in a department which calls itself "modern languages and cultural studies" students will begin to have a more integrated, content-based program which will lead to better cultural literacy overall, I began to see how Ernaux's *Les Armoires vides* might fit into such a framework.

One of the first questions to ask, however, is why *Les Armoires vides*? Other texts by Ernaux, notably *La Place* and/or *Une Femme*, are arguably "easier reads" and have had more critical work (in the pedagogical sense) done on them.[2] The answer, I suppose, is a rather personal one and a rather simple one: *Les Armoires vides* is Annie Ernaux's first book (published in 1974), and it is a text that I fell in love with on first reading. Of course, the other Ernaux texts are wonderfully teachable and carry as well the same thematic threads as *Les Armoires vides* and are always useful in terms of keeping a textual thread alive from course to course or to use for students who want and need an extra challenge. But interestingly enough, university-level students still respond quite well to *Les Armoires vides* (even though they will also readily admit that the other two texts are, in a purely

"language" sense, easier to read).

Les Armoires vides traces the childhood and adolescence of Denise Lesur, a fictional protagonist bearing enormous resemblance to Annie Ernaux herself. Set in the 1950's the novel is the story of a young girl's youth and adolescence in a small town in Normandy. Denise's working-class parents struggle to make ends meet in the tiny café-épicerie they run in one of the town's poor outlying neighborhoods. Her parents are full of hopes and aspirations for their only child and indeed some of these hopes are fulfilled (she does well in school and accordingly climbs the ladder of social class well beyond her parents' station in life). Unfortunately, one of their deepest fears (that she might get pregnant) is also realized. Indeed, Denise's first-person narration of her childhood and adolescence is framed by her account of the illegal abortion that she decides to have after being abandoned by Marc, her middle-class boyfriend.

Denise's ambitions, as contrasted with those of her parents, are somewhat different although related: "Her main aim is to leave the tawdry surroundings, constant near poverty, and attendant hypocrisy of her uneducated, tired and bickering parents, and to accede to the bourgeois world held up as a model all around her, in advertising, in magazines, and, above all, at school" (Sanders 20). When Denise first discovers that she is pregnant, she is overjoyed—first of all in managing to arrive at the social level of the bourgeoisie and secondly in succeeding at having such sweet revenge on her parents. Yet when she realizes that an abortion seems to be her only recourse, we are brought to the novel's formal opening.

Les Armoires vides thus begins with a crisis as Denise waits in her dormitory room for her illegal backstreet abortion to run its course.[3] "The description of this crisis leads to the question of how and why she finds herself in this situation, which becomes a pretext (in both senses) for the rest of the novel. This short introduction is then followed by a long 'flashback' which continues most of the text" (Thomas 5).

The heart of the narrative of *Les Armoires vides* is an almost stream-of-consciousness narrative, at times angry, at times nostalgic, at times lucid, at times totally confused, of Denise's recollections of

her double life, the life with her parents in the café-épicérie and her school life, and the growing chasm which separates her from her own background.

The ending of *Les Armoires vides*, however, finds Denise simultaneously freeing herself from the working-class background that has weighed so heavily on her and realizing that the superiority of the world to which she is acceding is merely an illusion. The circular structure—crisis, explanatory flashback, return to or resolution of, initial crisis—is a characteristic of all of Ernaux's work, as Lyn Thomas has pointed out (Thomas 5). And as Sanders reminds us, much women's writing is often about breaking free, but in this particular case, Denise's social and sexual freedoms have worn grimly thin almost before she has achieved them. This element of "breaking free" so characteristic of Ernaux's writing combined with the easily identifiable structure of the text lends itself well pedagogically within an integrated and (we hope) integrating curriculum in French studies.

Moving almost in contradiction to my own previous remarks about not speaking about language, literature, and things cultural as nonintegrated blocks in language learning, I should now like to address the more practical aspects of presenting *Les Armoires vides* to a senior undergraduate group and discuss three areas separately– language work, cultural elements, and literary aspects. In actual classroom experience, the seams between these areas should never be visible.

Language Work

1. **Vocabulary**: The lexical items in *Les Armoires vides* can initially be disorienting for students who may not be at all familiar with working with regionalisms, different vocabulary registers, and the like—see, for example, words and expressions such as *virer au bleu, moche, minable, péquenot, emmerder, s'engueuler, l'école buissonnière, un paletot, en boulichon, en carcaillot, le pinard, la bidoche, se faire baiser, la vieille carne, ma petite bisotte, le vantail, le soupirail.* Students are thus encouraged to work with a wide variety of dictionaries (both in hard copy and on-line versions available from our library system) and to use these words in their own journal writing. We also discuss English language levels and "equivalents" from multiple

perspectives since the multicultural (and multilinguistic) backgrounds of many of our students permit it. Students are encouraged to discuss sociological "class" issues and distinctions implicit in regionalisms. How do we learn language registers (in any language)? To lighten the work here a bit (since it can be daunting to some), we also use brief extracts from two humorous contemporary texts by "Geneviève," *Merde! The REAL French You Were Never Taught at School* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984) and *Merde Encore! More of the REAL French You Were Never Taught in School* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986).

2. Syntax: Sentence structures in *Les Armoires vides*, given that this text involves stream-of-consciousness narrative, require patience on the part of students at this level. Unaccustomed to dealing with such structures even in English (where, for the most part, traditional writing style is a requirement in composition courses), they are encouraged to look for meaning blocks, transitional words, word associations and signifying chains. We do free word association exercises in pairs, then as a class. This also helps to increase vocabulary retention and use.

3. **Journal Writing**: *Les Armoires vides* provides a wonderful opportunity for writing practice. Students are assigned to keep a reading journal as they experience the text. Suggested entries, beyond their personal responses and reactions to the text, include "my first memory," "my first experience of school," "I liked/hated elementary school because...," "the first time I felt ashamed of my parents/my background/my house/my clothes/, etc." Students may elect to write their journals using their own "I" or may choose to adopt a totally fictional alter ego.

4. **Debate**: *Les Armoires vides* also provides extraordinarily rich possibilities for student discussion and debate about a wide variety of contemporary issues which are usually of importance and/or interest to university students: abortion, parental control, the value of education, or premarital sex. In class we work in pairs, then in groups of three or four, and finally present the "pour" and the "contre" of specific issues taken from the novel. Multifaceted cultural experiences and recollections are always used as jumping-off points for discussion. *Note*: depending on the linguistic competencies here, students work in groups with *all* members participating in research and fact-gathering activities

(from library to internet) but with some taking larger lead roles in solo oral work.

5. **Verb Tenses**: We make every effort here to work on those tenses that appear most frequently within the novel itself. The present tense is used often and we emphasize the present tense in journal writing. Given the number of memory sequences in this text, the interplay of *imparfait, passé composé* and *plus-que-parfait* is also critical.

Cultural Elements

1. Abortion (France 1950's/Canada 1950's: contemporary Canada/ contemporary France): Why is abortion such a powerful theme and motivator in *Les Armoires vides*? Ernaux herself has said, "It's important to remember that it's through the body—via the pregnancy and the abortion—that the encounter with the middle class and its rejection take place. The symbolic value of the abortion is enormous, even though I was not aware of it at the time of writing" (Ernaux 69). Abortion is, of course, a highly charged subject, but students do very well in terms of researching the area and reporting to the class (in groups) the results of their work. Along with their outside research on education systems (see #2 below), the abortion research allows them (a) basic research technique practice; (b) opportunity to make use of library resources they may not have accessed previously; and (c) further ability to "integrate" the "real world" with the world of fiction created by the novelist. Note: Abortion in France was illegal at the time of the text.

2. **Educational systems (France/Canada)**: For this cultural aspect of *Les Armoires vides* I assign a short reading from *La Civilisation française en évolution II* by Ross Steele, Susan St. Onge, and Ronald St. Onge (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1997) on the French educational system. Students then have the possibility of comparing and contrasting their own educational experiences (primary school, middle school, senior high school) with Denise's. Public and private schools, and schools with religious affiliations are treated differently in Canada; and students who come from other backgrounds can also add helpfully to the discussion in this area.

3. **Social class (France/Canada)**: Here, too, we see that *Les Armoires*

vides provides a rich source for students at this level to learn something about alterity. Several readings can be assigned, either in advance, or for work outside class, followed by presentations by a pair or group and in-class discussion. Sample readings include Michel Ragon's "La Mémoire des petites gens" in *Le Magazine Littéraire* 150 (juillet-août 1979), 17 and a selection from La *Civilisation française en évolution II*. Ernaux herself has underlined her debt to the work of Pierre Bourdieu on the relationship between language, culture and class, and her novel is perhaps first and foremost a recovery of the cultural inheritance which was hers before she entered the university world. Bourdieu's "Qu'est-ce que parler veut dire?" (or extracts from the essay) are used to stimulate discussion here.

4. **Rites of passage (childhood/adolescence) in France/Canada**: Although in *Les Armoires vides* Denise's first communion, her first days at school, the discovery of her female body, her initiation into sex and the world of male-female relationships are the principal "rites of passage" discussed, we usually discover through student journal entries and class discussion that there are other significant "rites of passage" which are important if we wish to understand and appreciate the other. We work with dictionary and encyclopedia definitions of "rites of passage" in the anthropological sense and seek to create links between literary narrative and anthropological narrative.

Literary Aspects

1. First-person narration: The concepts of the transpersonal I, auto/biography, and "auto-fiction" provide a good point of departure for a literary discussion of *Les Armoires vides*. (Students are asked to read a brief article taken from the Internet on auto-fiction, Mounir Laouyen's "L'Autofiction: Une Réception Problématique.") We are able to make good use of basic and simplified extracts from several *Que Sais-Je?* volumes: *Théorie de la littérature* (Stéphanie Santerres-Sarkany, Paris: PUF, 1990) and *La Critique littéraire française au XXe siècle* (Michel Jarrety, Paris: PUF, 1998) as well as selections from M.P. Schmitt and A. Viala's *Savoir-Lire. Précis de lecture critique* (Paris: Didier, 1982).

2. **Bildungsroman or Anti-Bildungsroman?** Lyn Thomas has pointed out quite correctly that "*Les Armoires vides* can be seen as a kind of *Bildungsroman* in reverse, or anti-*Bildungsroman*, in that it describes the negative aspects of an education; instead of gradually assimilating the culture to which she is exposed, Denise is violently expelling it, the upward trajectory of *Bildung* replaced here by the downward spiral which culminates in abortion" (Thomas 6).

3. **The concept of "mixed register" in language**: Again we turn to Lyn Thomas: "The mixed register of *Les Armoires vides* is also particular, in that whilst literarity in the form of the metaphor is not rejected as it will be later, it is combined with slang expression, the familiar language both of Denise's culture of origin and of the student world she is now part of. Indeed, as Denise herself points out, there is no clear dividing line between the two" (Thomas 7).

4. **Images and Metaphors, Recurring Themes and Motifs**: Here we use the work of Carol Sanders, who classifies Ernaux's metaphors into three main types: the elemental (fire, water, movement, light, depth), animal imagery, and "basic sensory imagery"—references to the senses of smell and taste (Sanders 21). Christine Fau would also add "color" to this list, with "red" as the predominant one in *Les Armoires vides*.

5. **"Return to realism" descriptive techniques**: Here we have recourse to Schmitt and Viala and make extensive use of extracts and group work. Students are encouraged (see journal writing) to include descriptive passages about "ordinary" objects in their surroundings, physical descriptions of someone seen on the bus, for example, or a close friend or relative.

6. **Narratological aspects of *Les Armoires vides***: Concepts introduced here include focalization, point of view, analepsis and prolepsis, etc. Again *Les Armoires vides* lends itself well to a narratological approach, giving students a more formalized "structure" by which they can then approach the analysis of other texts read in the course.

7. **The "isms" of Annie Ernaux: feminism, Marxism, existentialism**. Here we make use of brief extracts from contemporary dictionaries of French philosophical and critical terms and ask students to do some

very basic research in order to come up with elementary definitions for the kinds of philosophical issues and questions that recur in the text.[4] Depending on the level of student enrolled in the course we also read further extracts from the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

My more traditional colleagues may question the wisdom of choosing to use Ernaux's work here rather than, say, a text by Simone de Beauvoir or Marguerite Duras, or in short a text which might more convincingly at least claim current canonical status. At times, too, I wonder if asking students who may never read more than one or two novels in French in an entire lifetime if my choice for them of Annie Ernaux is justified. Yet given that the undergraduate curriculum in French studies of the twenty-first century must definitely and definitively engage students in new ways if indeed it is to survive in good health, presenting French literature as a collection of artifacts is no longer tenable. We can only hope that a more integrated approach, both in text choice and in the use of the text within the classroom, will help students as they seek to understand concepts of alterity and to become functionally literate in the cultural sense when they leave our programs and venture out into the world.

University of Alberta

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Heidi Byrnes, "Reflections from a College Foreign Language Perspective" in James Lee and Albert Valdman, eds., *Form and Meaning: Multiple Perspectives* (Heinle & Heinle, 1999).

[2] See, for example, Marie-France Savéan's presentation of *La Place* and *Une Femme* in Gallimard's "Foliothèque" series (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1994) or P.M. Wetherill, *La Place*, in Methuen's Twentieth-Century French Texts series (1987).

[3] It is interesting to note that another of Ernaux's most recent works, *L'Événement* (Gallimard, 2000), is a return to the same event (the illegal abortion) nearly forty years later.

WORKS CITED

Atack, M. and Powrie, P., eds. *Contemporary French Fiction by Women: Feminist Perspectives*. Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1990.

Day, Loraine. "Class, Sexuality and Subjectivity in Annie Ernaux's *Les Armoires vides*." *Contemporary French Fiction by Women: Feminist Perspectives*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press,1990. 41-50.

Day, Loraine and Tony Jones. *La Place/Une Femme*. Glasgow: UGlasgow French and German Publications, 1990.

Ernaux, Annie. *Les Armoires vides*. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1974.

Fau, Christine. "Le Problème du langage chez Annie Ernaux." *The French Review* 68.3 (1995): 501-512.

Laouyen, Mounir. "L'Autofiction: Une Réception Problématique." http://www.fabula.org/forum/colloque99/208.php.

Sanders, Carol. "Stylistic Aspects of Women's Writing: The Case of Annie Ernaux." *French Cultural Studies* 4 (1993): 15-29.

Savéan, Marie-France, ed. *'La place' et 'Une femme' d'Annie Ernaux*. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1994.

Thomas, Lyn. *Annie Ernaux. An Introduction to the Writer and Her Audience*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 1999.