

**‘L’ascension sociale’ and the return to origins:  
reconstructions of family and social origin in the writings  
of Albert Camus, Annie Ernaux, Didier Eribon and  
Édouard Louis.**

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## ABSTRACT

The ‘ascension sociale’ referred to in the title of this study is of a particular character. It concerns the phenomena of dislocation and ‘éloignement’ described in the writings of certain French writers who become, from relatively humble origins, ‘intellectuels de première génération’. For the individuals concerned, the exceptionality of such a trajectory brings with it particular social and psychological pressures which raise important questions relating to social class, culture and the key role of education in social reproduction. Variations on this theme are reflected in the chosen texts of the French writers with whom this study is concerned – Albert Camus, Pierre Bourdieu, Annie Ernaux, Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis. They are writing out of different historical and geographical contexts and in a variety of different genres, and this enriches the possibilities of a comparative cultural study. Such a study is further enhanced, I argue, through invoking a British tradition which can be discerned in the writings of, among others, Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams. To provide a theoretical perspective from which to view this work, Chapter I brings together Richard Hoggart’s social analyses in two key texts – *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) and *A Local Habitation* (1988) – and Pierre Bourdieu’s work with Jean-Claude Passeron on social reproduction and educational inequality reflected in *Les Héritiers* (1964) and *La Reproduction* (1971). Hoggart’s reflections on his educational experience as a ‘scholarship boy’ in *A Local Habitation* are set alongside Bourdieu’s depiction of his life as an *interne* in his Pau lycée in *Esquisse pour une autoanalyse* (2004). This Franco-British theoretical background is used in subsequent chapters to provide a lens through which to view key texts by the French writers who return, in a variety of ways, to their own pasts, and to their experience of cultural displacement and of living between two worlds.

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## Introduction

*It is a most miserable thing to feel ashamed of home. There may be black ingratitude in the thing, and the punishment may be retributive and well deserved; but that it is a miserable thing, I can testify.*

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1861)<sup>1</sup>

The ‘ascension sociale’ referred to in the title of this study is of a particular character. It concerns the phenomena of dislocation and ‘éloignement’ described in the writings of certain French writers who become, from relatively humble origins, ‘les intellectuels de première génération’. Thus, this is not a reference to the general trend of material and social advance that might be said to characterise the experience of many, especially during the post-war years of economic expansion. It is the identification of a more specific and exceptional trajectory and cultural transformation from relative poverty to membership of the French intellectual élite – what Pierre Bourdieu is referring to when he speaks of the ‘très fort décalage’ between his ‘basse extraction sociale’ and his ‘haute consécration scolaire’.<sup>2</sup> It is necessary also to give some precision to the term ‘intellectuel’ as it is generally understood in the French context. William Paulson’s definition is helpful here:

a person of recognised intellectual attainments who speaks out in the public arena, generally in ways that call into question established society or dominant ideologies to account in the name of principle or on behalf of the oppressed.<sup>3</sup>

Pierre Bourdieu, himself, and the French writers with whom this study is principally concerned – Albert Camus, Annie Ernaux and Didier Eribon – are all striking examples of the *engagé* intellectual in Paulson’s sense of the term; (Édouard Louis, at 22, is too young to have quite achieved this degree of recognition). For these individuals, the exceptionality of their ‘ascension sociale’ from their milieux of origin brings with it particular social and psychological pressures and raises important questions relating to social class, culture and the key role of education in social reproduction. Variations on these themes are reflected in the chosen texts of these French writers, who are writing out of different historical and geographical contexts and in a variety of different genres. This variety enriches the possibilities of a comparative cultural study, and is, I argue, further enhanced through

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, (London: Penguin English Library, 1985) p.134.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* (Paris: Raisons d’agir, 2004) p.127.

<sup>3</sup> William Paulson, ‘Intellectuals’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern French Culture*, ed. by Nicholas Hewitt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) p.145.

invoking a British tradition which can be discerned in the writings of, among others, Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams.

To provide a theoretical perspective from which to view this work I propose to bring together Richard Hoggart’s social analyses in two key texts – *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) and *A Local Habitation* (1988) – and the concepts of ‘habitus’, ‘field’ and ‘social and cultural capital’ developed by Pierre Bourdieu throughout his sociological work. It is particularly interesting to set Hoggart’s reflections on his educational experience as a ‘scholarship boy’ in *A Local Habitation* alongside Bourdieu’s depiction of his life as an *interne* in his Pau lycée in *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* (2004). I will also refer in particular to Bourdieu’s work with Jean-Claude Passeron on social reproduction and educational inequality reflected in *Les Héritiers* (1964) and *La Reproduction* (1971). In doing so I will trace the reception of Hoggart’s work in France in which Passeron plays an important role.

The geographical and historical scope of the study is indicated in the chart below:

Author	Dates	Key Texts	Origin	Secondary Education
Albert Camus	1913-1960	<i>L’Envers et l’Endroit</i> (1937) <i>Le Premier Homme</i> (1994)	Alger, Algeria	1920s-early 1930s
Richard Hoggart	1918-2014	<i>The Uses of Literacy</i> (1957) <i>A Local Habitation</i> (1988)	Hunslett, Leeds, England	1930s
Pierre Bourdieu	1930-2002	<i>Les Héritiers</i> (1964) <i>La Distinction</i> (1979) <i>Esquisse pour une auto-analyse</i> (2004)	Pau, Pyrénées-Atlantique	1940s
Annie Ernaux	b. 1940	<i>La Place</i> (1983) <i>Une femme</i> (1988)	Yvetot, Seine-Maritime	1950s
Didier Eribon	b. 1953	<i>Retour à Reims</i> (2009) <i>La Société comme verdict</i> (2013)	Reims, Champagne-Ardenne	1960s
Édouard Louis	b. 1992	<i>En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule</i> (2014)	Hallencourt, Somme	2000s

The final column indicates the approximate period of these writers’ experience of secondary education – at lycée, grammar school (Hoggart) or collège/lycée (Louis) – a crucial stage in their social histories, and one to which they all return in the key texts specified. The chart

shows that the study will range, decade by decade, over more than half a century, examining texts which reflect different geographical and social conditions, including the devastating effects of war and economic depression. Camus and Hoggart may, at first sight, seem an unlikely pairing, but, as the chart shows, they are near contemporaries, and I will seek to show what their texts have in common. The chart also records the ahistorical appearance of *Le Premier Homme*, 34 years after the death of its author, and after the publication of Ernaux's *La Place* and *Une femme*, though written, as I shall demonstrate, at a different moment in French literary history. Édouard Louis' *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* appeared early in 2014, after I had begun this study, and I am pleased to have had the opportunity to include his work, not least as a way of showing how the issues raised in the earlier texts have a continuing significance in the work of a new generation of writers. Indeed, I will show that there is an explicit filiation between Pierre Bourdieu and Annie Ernaux, Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis whom I identify as representing a Bourdieusian heritage.

My thesis argues that the sociological perspective afforded by the analyses and personal commentaries of Hoggart and Bourdieu can be used to illuminate productively the various ways in which the chosen authors write of their estrangement from their milieux of origin, and of what prompts their desire to revisit their own pasts. They write in a variety of genres and often in ways that defy generic classification. There is a crucial sense in which sociological, ethnographic and political concerns are embedded in autobiographical or literary narratives. Hoggart's writing is a notable example of this. *The Uses of Literacy* was written while he was working as an adult education tutor of English Literature for the University of Hull and, in many ways, reflects his concerns as a rigorous analyst of literary texts, while having an important personal, autobiographical dimension. Yet it is undeniably a work of considerable sociological insight, as its reception in France indicates. Camus' early *L'Envers et l'Endroit* as well as his posthumous *Le Premier Homme* are both works of 'autobiographical literature', but, as I will show, reflect telling commentaries on the social world they represent. Édouard Louis' *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* might be regarded as 'autofiction' but is also a shocking indictment of the abject social conditions of its setting. Bourdieu's *Esquisse* announces itself as 'une auto-analyse' and the author is emphatic that it is not an autobiography. Indeed this denial of a primarily autobiographical intent is something shared by Ernaux and Eribon. Ernaux's focus in *La Place* and *Une femme* is not upon herself but on her parents and the representative significance of their stories, though, as we shall see, this kind of 'récit transpersonnel' is inseparable from a reflection of the author's

own subjectivity. Eribon, on the other hand, prefers the title ‘introspection sociologique’ for the interrogation of the self and of family and social background which is the material of *Retour à Reims*.

As well as questions of genre, of audience and purpose (Bourdieu asks himself: ‘Pourquoi et...pour qui j’ai écrit?’),<sup>4</sup> my study highlights the crucial role of education in social reproduction, showing how the chosen texts reflect the tensions that exist between the culture of the home and the culture of the school, and the conflation of intellectual and social distinction. In analysing these texts I seek to find reasons to explain the exceptionality, in defiance of all the ‘déterminismes sociaux’, of the trajectories they describe, and to show the psychological pressures, caused by estrangement and dislocation, upon the identity of the ‘transfuge de classe’.

Individual chapters focus on Albert Camus and Annie Ernaux, and, in the final chapter, I discuss the work of Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis whom I bring together as representing a Bourdieusian heritage. There is thus a sense of chronology in this arrangement, though the order is complicated, as we have seen, by the posthumous appearance of *Le Premier Homme*. However, throughout the study, rather than treating each author in isolation, I have tried to register important points of comparison between all the chosen texts in ways which I hope demonstrate the relevance of the sociological theories to this undertaking. Chapter One examines the Franco-British theoretical background provided by Hoggart and Bourdieu in order to provide a lens through which to view these key texts by French writers who return in a variety of ways to their own pasts, and to their experience of cultural displacement and of living between two conflicting social worlds.

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* (Paris: Raisons d’agir, 2004) p.140.



## Chapter I: An Anglo-French sociological perspective

The post-war years of economic and social reconstruction prompted both in France and in England a concern with increased egalitarianism and social justice. This had a particular resonance in the context of the sociology of education, where notions that educational systems enshrined ideals of meritocracy and ‘égalité devant l’école’ were seriously challenged. In England in the 1950s Floud and Halsey’s *Social Class and Education Opportunity* showed unequivocally that ‘selection by the purportedly objective eleven-plus exam, measuring, it was claimed, only innate ability, was determined overwhelmingly by social class’.<sup>5</sup> At the same time in France sociological studies by Bourdieu and Passeron leading up to the publication of *Les Héritiers* in 1964 explored the relationship between social class and ‘la culture légitime’.<sup>6</sup> These exposed as a myth the prevalent ‘idéologie du don’ and demonstrated how far educational success was socially determined. On both sides of the Channel educational success and a consequent upward social trajectory by children from working class backgrounds was thus shown to be exceptional, defying the overwhelming tendencies identified in the sociological research, and bringing with it a sense of dislocation and uncertainty.

### I.1 Richard Hoggart: *The Uses of Literacy* (1957)

In 1957 Richard Hoggart, reflecting on his own experience in pre-war Britain, described, in the autobiographical element of *The Uses of Literacy*, the experience of an orphaned working class boy moving from his milieu of origin into the world of the university. Referring to this book in the introduction to the American edition of his memoirs, he puts this succinctly:

...it described the psychological, the emotional, the intellectual pressures on a boy who climbed out of the working class through the use of his brains and forever after felt between two worlds.<sup>7</sup>

Hoggart’s reflections on this experience are made most explicit in the section ‘Scholarship Boy’ of Chapter 10, ‘Unbent Springs: A Note on the Uprooted and the Anxious’ in *The Uses*

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<sup>5</sup> See Fred Inglis, *Richard Hoggart: Virtue and Reward* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014) p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Les Héritiers: les étudiants et la culture* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1964).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Hoggart, *A Measured Life: The Times and Places of an Orphaned Intellectual* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1994) p. x.

*of Literacy*.<sup>8</sup> In this section, John Corner points out that – as was the case with Raymond Williams – Hoggart connected direct personal, autobiographical issues to broader social ones in a manner which was (and is) far from conventional in British academic life.<sup>9</sup> That this was not an easy undertaking is acknowledged by Hoggart at the outset: ‘This is a difficult chapter to write, though one that should be written.’ (263) He identifies a ‘cultural uprooting’ to be the inevitable experience of the ‘scholarship boy’ obliged to live at the ‘friction point between two cultures’, that of the home and that of the school. He is careful not to generalise and acknowledges that there are various degrees of discomfort experienced by individuals. He chooses to focus on those (we assume like himself) for whom this uprooting is ‘particularly troublesome’ because ‘the difficulties of some people illuminate much in the wider discussion of cultural change’. (264) These individuals he describes as ‘self-conscious and yet not self aware in any full sense’, ‘uncertain, dissatisfied, and gnawed by self doubt’, unable ‘to resolve the complex tensions which their uprooting, the peculiar problems of their particular domestic settings, and the uncertainties common to the time create’. (265)

Hoggart describes how the early identification of talent in ‘this kind of boy’ (‘E’s got brains’) is accompanied by an increasing sense of isolation, of being ‘progressively cut off from the ordinary life of his group’, of ‘heading for a different world’ and, hence, one may assume, being exiled from his own. The requirement to ‘get on’ means that he is increasingly alone, apart from ‘the intense gregariousness of the working-class family group’, sitting at a corner of the living-room table, trying to concentrate on his homework as family life goes on around him. Hoggart expresses the tensions inherent in this experience when he suggests that, at this stage (early secondary school), the boy is ‘very much of *both* the worlds of home and school’. He is ‘enormously obedient to the dictates of the world of school, but emotionally still strongly wants to continue as part of the family circle’. (265-266) As time goes on these tensions may become increasingly difficult to reconcile. He will, probably unconsciously, have to ‘oppose the ethos of the hearth’ (265):

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy, Aspects of Working Class Life* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009) pp. 262-275. Page numbers of further references to this chapter will be placed in brackets after the quotation.

<sup>9</sup> See John Corner, ‘An Interview with Richard Hoggart: Studying Culture: Reflections and Assessments’, in *The Uses of Literacy* op.cit. p. 347. See also Melissa Gregg, ‘A neglected history: Richard Hoggart’s discourse of empathy’, *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 7:3, 285-306. For Raymond Williams, see, for example, *Culture and Society* (1958), *Border Country* (1960).

Almost every working-class boy who goes through the process of further education by scholarships finds himself chafing against his environment during adolescence. (264)

However, in Hoggart's account the tensions involved in growing up and away do not in any lasting way lead necessarily to a rupture in the relationship between the gifted individual on his upward social trajectory and the family he has left behind:

...the test of his real education lies in his ability, by about the age of twenty-five, to smile at his father with his whole face and to respect his flighty young sister and his slower brother. (264)

This kind of reconciliation is not presented as inevitable or the norm but as a 'test' of 'real' education, of increased self-awareness and knowledge of the world beyond the educational system. Though Hoggart seems to include himself alongside those who 'perhaps for a very long time have a sense of no longer really belonging to any group', he clearly admires those who achieve a kind of poise, who are at ease in their new group 'without any ostentatious adoption of the protective clothing of that group', and who have an easy relationship with their working-class relatives based on a 'just respect'. (263-264)

To the modern reader, Hoggart's 1950s reflections on his pre-war childhood and adolescence have a distinctly androcentric flavour. He is, after all, writing of his own experience as a 'scholarship boy', reflecting an essentially male experience of the tensions between home and school.<sup>10</sup> Part of this involves an increasing isolation from the male peer group. The boy is indoors doing his homework while his male contemporaries are fully members of the 'gang which clusters round the lampposts in the evenings'. (266) The indoor space which brings him closer to the women of the house contrasts with the outdoor space which is the preserve of the man of the house and the boy's brothers. Hoggart finds this closeness to women reflected in autobiographical accounts by working-class writers:

Perhaps this partly explains why many authors from the working classes, when they write about their childhood, give the women in it so tender and central a place. (266)

Solitariness contrasts with gregariousness, the world of the home with the requirements of the school. For Hoggart, the two worlds 'meet at few points'. There are consequent pressures on

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<sup>10</sup> At the time, there were, of course, also 'scholarship girls' but far fewer in number. See, for example, Francesca Carnevali and Julie Marie Strange, *20th Century Britain: Economic, Cultural and Social Change* (London: Routledge, 2007) p. 360 : '...the probability of accessing grammar schools varied widely by region, gender and also by social class...Birmingham boys were twice as likely to secure a grammar school place as their female contemporaries simply because the number of places available was greater for boys than girls'.

ways of talking and ways of behaving: ‘Once at the grammar school, he quickly learns to make use of a pair of different accents, perhaps even two different apparent characters and differing standards of value.’ (267) These differences are evident in the cultural status of the books encountered at school ‘never mentioned at home’ compared with the magazines, familiar at home, which are never mentioned at school. The ‘exceptional’ newcomer into this unfamiliar environment may not escape experiencing a sense of ‘social shame’ when the two worlds of the home and the school inevitably meet – ‘the stigma of cheaper clothes, of not being able to afford to go on school-holiday trips, of parents who turn up for the grammar school play looking shamefully working class’. (267)

In a way which approaches Bourdieu’s use of the term ‘capital’ in its various formulations – social, cultural, economic, symbolic – Hoggart uses the term ‘currency’ to explain the scholarship boy’s dependence on his ‘brains’ in negotiating his movement upward from his origins:

For brains are the currency by which he has bought his way, and increasingly brains seem to be the currency that tells. He tends to make his schoolmasters over-important, since they are the cashiers in the new world of brain-currency. (267)

This can have the effect of displacing the father who ‘can have little place’ in the world of the school. But Hoggart recognises also the limitations and insufficiency of the ‘brain-currency’ in itself. Intellectual cleverness may get him some way within the confines of the educational institution, but without the social and cultural experience not so far available to him, the scholarship boy has merely learned how to manipulate the new currency:

He learns how to receive a purely literate education, one using only a small part of the personality and challenging only a limited area of his being...He rarely feels the reality of knowledge, of other men’s thoughts and imaginings, on his own pulses. (268)

Hoggart proceeds to consider the psychological consequences of the exceptional individual’s estrangement from the milieu of origin. This is clearly the articulation of personal experience, rather than the conclusions of objective scientific research. It is this which makes the chapter ‘difficult to write’. Initially, the estrangement is seen as a matter of the loss of personal attributes and what might be regarded as ‘life skills’: the ‘resilience’, ‘vitality’, ‘readiness to take a chance’ which the working-class boys he has left behind are developing in their daily lives, not least in the male preserve of the streets. At the same time, these losses are not

compensated for by the acquisition of the ‘unconscious confidence’ he notes in the wealthier middle-class people he encounters in the new environment to which he has ‘earned’ uncertain access. Perhaps the most significant thing the estrangement has led to is the loss of any sense of belonging: ‘He has left his class, at least in spirit, by being in certain ways unusual; and he is still unusual in another class, too tense and over-wound.’ (272) This state of ‘not belonging’ leads to him both yearning to be part of what Hoggart characterises as ‘that well-polished, prosperous, cool, book-lined and magazine-discussing world of the successful intelligent middle class’, and, at the same time, ‘with another part of himself’, developing an asperity towards it. This division of the self leads Hoggart to conclude this section with the bleak image of the scholarship boy as a member of ‘the uncreative but self-doubting minority’, torn between his great aspirations and his inability to realize them. In a pre-echo of Bourdieu’s reference, when writing of his own schooldays, to a ‘*décalage*’ between his ‘*haute consécration scolaire*’ and his ‘*basse extraction sociale*’,<sup>11</sup> Hoggart leaves his scholarship boy harassed by ‘the discrepancy between his lofty pretensions and his lowly acts’. (275) The conflation of intellectual with social distinction – and thus the disadvantage of those who aspired to the one and were without the other – is described by Stuart Hall when, writing of Raymond Williams (the son of a railway signalman who won a scholarship to Cambridge at the end of the 1930s), he comments:

I still feel a strong sympathy for that way in which the bright young lad from the ‘periphery’, coming to Oxbridge as the idealized pinnacle of an *intellectual* path, first experiences the actual *social* shock of discovering that Oxbridge is not only the apex of official English intellectual culture, but the cultural centre of the class system.<sup>12</sup>

Even for someone with the robust self-assuredness of Williams, the encounter with the social exclusiveness of his new environment could be destabilising. Hall writes:

Williams arrived in Cambridge...as the bright ‘scholarship boy’ from the valleys. He records with feeling how that brash, radical certainty was constantly broken against the effortless assumption of superiority of the system: the sense, as he put it, that any critical statement he made could be immediately beached by a knowing reference to a comparative text he had not read; the sense of being ‘continually found out in ignorance’; and being forced to look at himself, increasingly, with radical doubt.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* (Paris: Raisons d’agir, 2004) p.127.

<sup>12</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Politics and Letters’, in *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Terry Eagleton (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989) p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 56.

Hoggart wrote *The Uses of Literacy* over a five-year period between 1952 and 1956. During that time, Lynsey Hanley points out that he was employed by Hull University ‘to teach literature to mainly working-class students at evening classes in towns as far apart as Goole, in East Yorkshire, and Grimsby, in Lincolnshire’.<sup>14</sup> In the second section of Chapter 10, ‘The Place of Culture: A Nostalgia for Ideals’, Hoggart, drawing on this experience, turns his attention to the problems inherent in the ‘acculturation’ of those who ‘wish for entry into the cultured life’. (279) Here, he is, of course, using the term ‘culture’ in its classical Arnoldian sense as ‘the best that has been thought and said in the world’, as a manifestation of the values of ‘civilisation’ revealed in ‘great’ art, literature, and ‘classical’ music, inevitably the province of the élite, and difficult of access to the many. He describes the sense of exclusion of those who long for expertise but who have a ‘poor background and inadequate training in handling ideas or response to imaginative work’. (281) As a result ‘[t]hey wander in the immensely crowded, startling, and often delusive world of ideas like children in their first Fairground House of Thrills’. (281) Yet he finds something admirable in their idealistic love for ‘things of the mind’, seeing in this ‘a wish for the assumed freedom, for the power and command over himself, of the “really cultured” man’. He recognises that this may be a delusion, but it is, for him, a worthy delusion.

## **I.2 Pierre Bourdieu and J-C Passeron: *Les Héritiers* (1964)**

The significance, in the context of the educational system, of the relationship between social class and this notion of the ‘cultured life’, is reflected in the sociological studies of Bourdieu and Passeron which culminated in the publication of *Les Héritiers* in 1964. Alain Bruno points out that the two French sociologists shared a similar exceptional social trajectory from relatively humble origins – they were both *boursiers* – to academic distinction at the École Normale Supérieure and *agrégation* in philosophy (in 1954). In doing so, as Passeron himself points out, they became familiar with the same prevailing discourse on the ‘école républicaine du mérite et du talent’ and the Durkheimian notion that schools were a source of emancipation, of social integration and mobility.<sup>15</sup> Their researches lead them to call into question this fundamental ideology of the French educational system. While Hoggart details the anxieties and uncertainties, for a British working-class boy, in attempting

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<sup>14</sup> See Introduction to *The Uses of Literacy* op.cit. p. xiii.

<sup>15</sup> Alain Bruno, *Lire Pierre Bourdieu et J-C Passeron, Les Héritiers: Les étudiants et la culture. Un renouveau de la sociologie de l'éducation* (Paris: Ellipses, 2009) p.8.

the kind of ‘cultural transformation’ which is a prerequisite to the achievement of the status of ‘intellectual’, Bourdieu and Passeron explore the relationship between academic success and social class in the case of students in Higher Education in Paris in 1961. Given that, at that date, only 6% of students in Higher Education were ‘fils d’ouvriers’, they ask whether the only possible conclusion is that ‘le milieu étudiant’ is ‘un milieu bourgeois’. If that is the case, how can notions of ‘meritocracy’ or ‘égalité devant l’école’ be justified? They criticise the notion of the ‘égalité formelle’ which recognises the equal rights and duties of all students, because it can only recognise inequality in terms of the individual gifts (‘dons individuels’) possessed by the students. This ‘idéologie du don’ accepts unquestioningly the existence of ‘inégalités naturelles’ and refuses to recognise ‘l’inégalité culturelle socialement conditionnée’.<sup>16</sup> For Bourdieu and Passeron it goes without saying that notions of ‘la culture savante’ and ‘la culture légitime’ are inscribed in the fabric of the educational institution and in its pedagogy and, therefore, provide a barrier to the educational success of students whose social origins have largely denied them access to this cultural experience. Middle-class students are therefore at a distinct advantage, enjoying what Bourdieu and Passeron define as ‘le privilège culturel’: ‘Les étudiants ont des connaissances d’autant plus riches et plus étendues que leur origine sociale est plus élevée’.<sup>17</sup> This ‘privilège’ corresponds to the accumulation of ‘habitudes culturelles de classe’, and, also, to economic factors (because it is the cost of access to cultural ‘goods’ which is one of the sources of inequality). The analyses of Bourdieu and Passeron illuminate the plight of Hoggart’s ‘scholarship boy’, anxious and uncertain, aware of his relative social and cultural disadvantage in the privileged environment of the educational institution, and underline how exceptional are the cases in which individual children of ‘basse extraction sociale’ – Hoggart, Bourdieu himself, Camus, Ernaux, Eribon, Louis – manage to succeed.

### **I.3 Richard Hoggart in France**

Bourdieu and Passeron had come across the paperback English version of *The Uses of Literacy* as they were carrying out their researches.<sup>18</sup> Indeed it was J-C Passeron who was

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<sup>16</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Les Héritiers. Les étudiants et la culture* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1964) p. 103 fn.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

<sup>18</sup> ‘C’est pendant qu’ils préparent *Les Héritiers* que Bourdieu et Passeron découvrent R.Hoggart, grâce à la lecture en édition de poche de *The Uses of Literacy*.’ See Alain Bruno op. cit. p. 29.

later to translate and introduce to a French public *The Uses of Literacy* which was published in Paris as *La Culture du Pauvre* in 1970, the same year which saw the publication of another collaboration between Bourdieu and Passeron, *La Reproduction*. Hoggart's *A Local Habitation*, the first volume of his memoirs, covering the years 1918-1940, published in England in 1988, was soon translated into French (with the participation of the sociologist Claude Grignon), where it appeared as *33 Newport Street: Autobiographie d'un intellectuel issu des classes populaires anglaises* in 1991. The considerable success of this book in France is reflected in its being the focus of one of the *Répliques* broadcasts on France Culture chaired by Alain Finkielkraut under the title '33 Newport Street' – *Conversation sur un chef d'œuvre*.<sup>19</sup> Hoggart's work has thus enjoyed an esteem in France which is not always the lot of the work of British intellectuals.<sup>20</sup> Indeed the use of the word 'intellectual' in the subtitles of both the American and French editions of the memoirs is absent in the original English version, and perhaps this reflects the different resonance which the term carries in these different cultural contexts. Certainly the term 'intellectual', and particularly the notion of the intellectual 'de première génération', is central to the considerations of social trajectory and cultural transformation which are reflected in the texts which are the objects of this study. Though Hoggart is unlikely to have been comfortable using the phrase 'intellectuel issu des classes populaires anglaises' to describe himself in a British context, this formulation sums up the situation precisely.

If Hoggart is incontestably an 'intellectual', there is a further question about whether he is properly a 'sociologist' – as he was first introduced (by Passeron) to a French audience – or a literary critic (his first published book was on W.H.Auden), or, as would now perhaps be generally agreed, a progenitor of Cultural Studies. This question is addressed in the discussion between Finkielkraut and the two French sociologists, J-C Passeron and Claude Grignon, and is important because it raises issues of distinction between literature and sociology, between autobiography and ethnography, which are central to the consideration of the texts by Camus, Bourdieu, Ernaux, Eribon and Louis featured in this study. In the *Répliques* broadcast, *33 Newport Street* is presented as a 'chef d'œuvre', but is it a masterpiece of sociology or of literature? Finkielkraut offers a distinction between a 'regard littéraire' and a 'regard sociologique' which, he suggests, traditionally oppose each other;

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<sup>19</sup> Later included in Alain Finkielkraut, ed., *Ce que peut la littérature* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006) pp. 245-272.

<sup>20</sup> A new edition of *33 Newport Street* was published in France in 2013; *A Local Habitation* is currently out of print in the UK.



sociology treating the individual as an example of social determination, while literature, in contrast, presents individuals in all their ‘singularité inéchangeable et irréductible’. However, Passeron sees Hoggart as somehow managing to operate in both registers, or at least in a single register which is ‘savamment mixé de sciences sociales et de littérature’, offering sociological insight ‘qui produit simultanément des effets littéraires’.<sup>21</sup> In an interview of 1992, Passeron responds to this question about Hoggart: ‘Peut-on parler d’une position originale de cet auteur entre littérature et sociologie?’ In his reply he stresses the uniqueness of Hoggart’s position and describes *The Uses of Literacy* in the following terms:

...ce livre dépourvu de presque tous les signes extérieurs d’appartenance aux sciences sociales et qui, pourtant, nous semblait d’une bien meilleure sociologie des classes populaires que tout ce que nous pouvions lire dans les arides sociographies des spécialistes du chiffre ou les froides divagations idéologiques d’intellectuels ‘engagés’.<sup>22</sup>

In November 1994, a conference was organised in Marseille by Passeron in honour of Richard Hoggart. Hoggart was himself in attendance and presented a paper (in English), ‘Writing about People and Places’ (*Les mots, les gens, les lieux*). The conference included presentations by Passeron on *La Culture du pauvre* and by Grignon on *33 Newport Street*. The conference concluded with a paper by Passeron entitled *Richard Hoggart, écrivain et sociologue* in which he repeats what he sees to be the contradictions implicit in the juxtaposition of ‘écrivain’ and ‘sociologue’:

Je porte depuis longtemps une admiration contradictoire à Richard Hoggart – celle du sociologue, entêté de véridicité jusqu’au prosaïsme, mais aussi celle du lecteur de récits ou romans dont le pouvoir d’envoûtement repose sur les effets d’un style de l’imagination.<sup>23</sup>

The distinction between scientific analysis on the one hand, and the representation in language of lived experience on the other, is an important one to register in a discussion of texts as diverse as those represented in this study. This is something which Hoggart himself touches on when he comments on the original reception, particularly in France, of *The Uses of Literacy*:

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<sup>21</sup> *Ce que peut la littérature* op.cit. p. 253-257.

<sup>22</sup> Passeron, Jean-Claude, ‘Portrait de Richard Hoggart en sociologue’, *Enquête*, 8. (1993), < <http://enquete.revues.org/175> > [accessed 13 February 2015].

<sup>23</sup> See Claude Grignon and Jean Claude Passeron, *Richard Hoggart en France : [actes du colloque, Marseille 1994]* (Bibliothèque Publique d’Information: Centre Georges Pompidou: Paris) p. 211.

In fact, most social scientists, here and abroad, were generous to the book, saying it suggested new and useful ways of looking at social change. Some French sociologists, in particular, said it implicitly rebuked their own over-preoccupation with abstractions by its hold on ‘phenomenological detail’.<sup>24</sup>

The French sociologists here are given anonymity but there can be no doubt about Bourdieu’s status as a great example of a scientific approach to sociological enquiry or of his conceptualisation of the theoretical ‘abstractions’ that underpin it. Thus, before examining how these distinctions are at play when Hoggart and Bourdieu come to write of their own early experience in *A Local Habitation* and *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* respectively, some account must be given of Bourdieu’s theory of social practice and the tools he developed for analysis which are particularly relevant in consideration of ‘l’ascension sociale’.

#### **1.4 Bourdieu’s theory of social practice**

Across the range of his sociological studies – from his early work on peasant farmers in the Béarn and his ethnographic studies in Algeria in the 1950s, through his early work on education in *Les Héritiers* and *La Reproduction* in the 1960s to the major works of his maturity such as *La Distinction* in 1979 and the widely influential *La Misère du monde* in 1993 – Pierre Bourdieu evolved a theory of social practice which involved the development of key concepts such as ‘habitus’, ‘field’ and ‘capital’ which have subsequently found wide applications across a range of domains including cultural studies and literary criticism. How might these terms clarify the issues at stake in an analysis of the trajectories of ‘ascension’ and (more problematically) ‘retour’ as reflected in the texts of Camus, Ernaux, Eribon and Louis? Such an analysis of trajectory is something that Bourdieu himself undertook in the field of literary studies in his work on Flaubert’s *L’Éducation sentimentale*. More significantly, shortly before he died in 2002, Bourdieu sketched out some elements of an auto-analysis in *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* and, in doing so, to an extent applied some of his practice as a sociologist to his own social trajectory.

In the context of an analysis of social trajectory, Bourdieu’s concepts of ‘habitus’, ‘field’ and ‘capital’ may be seen as a way of reconciling the subjectivity of individual agency

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Hoggart, *A Sort of Clowning 1940-1959* in Hoggart, *A Measured Life*, op. cit. p. 142.

with the objectivity of external social structure.<sup>25</sup> They exist in an interlocking and dynamic relationship. The ‘habitus’ may be broadly thought of as representing the ways in which the set of predispositions that individual past history – for example, family background and education – may be said to structure present ways of acting and thinking. Bourdieu defined ‘field’ as:

a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. It contains people who dominate and people who are dominated...a space in which various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies.<sup>26</sup>

The (relative) power within a field at an individual’s disposal is perhaps a way of describing the various forms of ‘capital’ – economic, social, cultural, or symbolic – that an individual possesses. ‘Cultural’ capital, for example, might indicate the tastes and lifestyles of one social group rather than another and, hence, it has an evident relationship with ‘habitus’. The relationship between all three and their influence on practice is indicated in Bourdieu’s equation:

[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice

Our current practice – the strategies we adopt – in a given ‘field’ (for example an educational institution) thus depends on the position in the field granted to us by the ‘capital’ we have accumulated which has informed, and continues to inform through its interaction with the field, the structuring of our ‘habitus’.

Bourdieu gave three lectures on Flaubert at Princeton in 1986. The first of these is entitled ‘Is the structure of *Sentimental Education* an instance of social self-analysis?’ and, hence, seems a relevant reference point for a consideration of Bourdieu’s own ‘auto-analyse’ in the *Esquisse* and to the use of his conceptual tools in an analysis of social trajectory. He suggests that the novel contains an analysis of the social space which is the author’s own and thus provides the instruments needed for an analysis of Flaubert himself: ‘Flaubert the

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<sup>25</sup> The following highly simplified ‘working definitions’ derive from the far more sophisticated discussion of these concepts and their applications in Michael Greenfell, ed., *Pierre Bourdieu: key concepts*, 2nd edn (Durham: Acumen, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television and Journalism*, trans. by P.Parkhurst (London: Pluto Press, 1998) p. 40.

sociologist gives us a sociological insight into Flaubert the man.<sup>27</sup> The geographical and historical setting of the novel – Paris in the 1840s – includes a social space which represents the structure of the ruling class which Bourdieu calls the ‘field of power’. He demonstrates how this field is organised around two poles represented by Arnoux, the art dealer and Dambreuse, the banker. According to Bourdieu these are totally opposed to each other. On the one hand, the writers and artists who cultivate ‘disinterested intelligence’ and, on the other, those who worship money and power. Bourdieu notes the distinctions in style and taste between the two worlds, including language – ‘serious, boring, conservative conversation’ on the one hand, ‘readily obscene and always paradoxical speech’ on the other – and dining habits; – classic dishes chez Dambreuse whereas, chez Arnoux, ‘the more exotic the dish, the better’. Into this social space of conflicting polarities, Flaubert introduces a group of young men intent on making their way in the world as successfully as the interactions between the social forces at work and the predispositions of their own habitus will allow:

*L'Éducation* may be read as an experimental novel in the true sense of the term. Flaubert first offers us a description of the field of power, within which he traces the movements of six young men, including Frédéric, who are propelled in it like so many particles in a magnetic field. And each one's trajectory – what we normally call the history of his life – is determined by the interaction between the forces of the field and his own inertia, that is, the habitus as the remanence of a trajectory which tends to orient future trajectory.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, within the field of power, latent, potential forces may act upon any ‘particle’ which enters. But Bourdieu also sees it as a ‘battlefield’ or as a game in which the trump cards are the habitus. He distinguishes between the characteristic aptitudes which Frédéric, Deslauriers, Martinon and Cissy possess in different combinations which might lead to social success. But he also introduces the notion of habitus as both ‘inheritance’ and ‘the determination to succeed’. Deslauriers with no inheritance has only determination, whereas the bourgeois Martinon has both inheritance and the determination to increase it. And then there is Frédéric who ‘refuses to inherit...to be inherited by his inheritance, or to do what he should do to inherit’. For Bourdieu, Flaubert becomes the divine creator of this generative model: the game having been set up, the young men's intrinsic properties (the trump cards) dealt out, the game can begin. All the interactions which follow are, according to Bourdieu,

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<sup>27</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. by Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993) p.145. A further reading by Bourdieu of *L'Éducation sentimentale* also forms the Prologue, ‘Flaubert analyste de Flaubert’ to *Les Règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992) pp.17-81.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p.148.

‘merely so many opportunities for Flaubert to display the characters’ essence as their life stories unfold in the course of time’.

Bourdieu goes on to consider Flaubert’s own position in relation to social space, the writer’s position in the structure of the field of power. He writes of his ‘aloofness from the social world’ which gives him a predisposition to produce the view of the social space we see in *L’Éducation sentimentale*. He contrasts the sociological reading of the text with a literary one, defining the difference between literary and scientific expression in terms of negation: ‘...the sociologist lays bare a truth that the literary text will reveal only in veiled terms...the specific quality of literary expression consists precisely of this negation’.<sup>29</sup>

### **1.5 Pierre Bourdieu: *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* (2004)**

To what extent might some of the methods of analysis sketched out above be applied to Bourdieu’s own auto-analysis in the *Esquisse*? Clearly, the *Esquisse* is not a literary work. Neither, Bourdieu insists from the outset, is it an autobiographical one, a genre Bourdieu appears to mistrust, regarding it as both ‘convenu’ and ‘illusoire’. Instead he offers it as ‘quelques éléments pour une auto-socioanalyse’, or a sociological analysis where the writer himself is the object. He is, however, tentative about this, viewing it as a somewhat uncertain venture. He talks of the extent of his journey in the social world (‘l’amplitude de mon parcours dans l’espace social’) and the practical incompatibility between the social worlds which his journey links without reconciling them.<sup>30</sup> He is thus apprehensive about whether his readers will know how to regard the experiences he evokes because he is far from being sure himself, even with the instruments of sociology. However, if not an ‘autobiography’, autobiographical elements are clearly going to provide the subject matter for any subsequent sociological analysis. Here, Philippe Lejeune’s criteria for autobiography as a prose narrative in which author, narrator and protagonist are the same person are all fulfilled, but it is not until the last third of the book that Bourdieu allows his readers a glimpse into the social origins which are the start of his trajectory.<sup>31</sup> This seems to be done almost with reluctance:

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p.158.

<sup>30</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* op.cit. p.11. Future references are incorporated in the text.

<sup>31</sup> See Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1996) pp.13-46.

Cette esquisse pour une auto-analyse ne peut pas ne pas faire une place à la formation des dispositions associées à la position d'origine, dont on sait que, en relation avec les espaces sociaux à l'intérieur desquels elles s'actualisent, elles contribuent à déterminer les pratiques. Je ne m'étendrai pas sur les propriétés de ma famille d'origine. (109)

Thus, the formation of the habitus and its role in determining practice is to be the focus of this section of the book, although details of family background are to receive only cursory treatment. Bourdieu does, however, explain his father's social position as that of a *métayer* originally, who became at the time of his birth a *facteur* and subsequently a *facteur-receveur*, thus making a small social ascension to that of an *employé* rather than a *petit paysan*. Such a distinction is significant for Bourdieu, regarding his status as 'transfuge fils de transfuge' as influencing his attitude to the social world. However, at the local primary school, Bourdieu has practically everything in common with his classmates 'sauf la réussite qui me distinguait un peu', although there was a sort of invisible barrier which sometimes showed itself in ritual insults against 'employés...aux mains blanches'. (110) Bourdieu writes explicitly about his growing awareness of the distinctive features of his habitus:

J'ai découvert peu à peu, surtout peut-être à travers le regard des autres, les particularités de mon habitus qui, comme certaine propension à la fierté et à l'ostentation masculines, un goût avéré de la querelle, le plus souvent un peu jouée, la propension à s'indigner 'pour peu de choses', me paraissent aujourd'hui être liées aux particularités culturelles de ma région d'origine que j'ai mieux perçues et comprises par analogie avec ce que je lisais à propos du 'tempérament' de minorités culturelles ou linguistiques comme les Irlandais. (114-115)

A propensity to quarrelsomeness and to masculine pride and ostentation are thus seen in cultural rather than psychological terms. Such an analysis, it might be argued, succeeds in bypassing the self in favour of cultural stereotype, such as the 'temperament' of the 'Irish'. The reader might also ask why these particular characteristics rather than others have been highlighted.

Between 1941 and 1947 Bourdieu was a boarder at the lycée in Pau. As a boarder he was the social inferior (coming from a remote village) to the sons of the Pau bourgeoisie who lived in the town. Bourdieu does not make explicit how he comes to be there. We know that it was the 'réussite' which distinguished him at primary school; it was nonetheless not necessarily the usual *parcours* for someone from his background to enter the lycée. We can infer that his father had a determining role here because Bourdieu mentions his father's mistrust of local notables such as doctors, curés or even primary schoolteachers 'qui n'avaient

guère favorisé ses efforts pour me pousser au lycée.’ It seems surprising that the father’s role in facilitating the surely highly significant access to the lycée is not more clearly acknowledged. Though Bourdieu does not use the term ‘field’ specifically to describe the Pau lycée, it is easy to see it as ‘a structured social space, a field of forces’ and to see the pupils who enter it as ‘particles’ subject to the operations of magnetic forces in the same way as Frédéric and his companions in the Paris of 1848 in *L’Éducation sentimentale*. As in Flaubert’s Paris, two dominant and opposed polarities appear to be operative in the social space of the lycée, although Bourdieu does not use these terms explicitly. On the one hand, there is the bourgeois vision of humane values and intellectual discovery presented during the day by the teachers, and, on the other, the crudeness and violence of the life of the internat after the school day with its innumerable ‘chahuts’, the internecine warfare between the pupils and the ‘pions’, and the daily struggle for survival. Bourdieu acknowledges that this experience had a profound impact on the evolution of his habitus:

L’expérience de l’internat a sans doute joué un rôle déterminant dans la formation de mes dispositions ; notamment en m’inclinant à une vision réaliste (flaubertienne) et combative des relations sociales qui, déjà présente, dès l’éducation de mon enfance, contraste avec la vision irénique, moralisante et neutralisée qu’encourage, il me semble, l’expérience protégée des existences bourgeoises (surtout lorsqu’elles sont maîtrisées de religiosité chrétienne et de moralisme). Cela notamment à travers la découverte d’une différence sociale, cette fois inversée, avec les citadins ‘bourgeois’, et aussi de la coupure entre le monde violent et rude de l’internat, école terrible de réalisme social, où tout est déjà présent, à travers les nécessités de la lutte pour la vie : l’opportunisme, la servilité, la délation, la trahison, etc., et le monde de la classe, où règnent des valeurs en tout point opposées, et ces professeurs qui, notamment les femmes, proposent un univers de découvertes intellectuelles et de relations humaines que l’on peut dire enchantées. (117)

The aptitudes, the intrinsic properties, the ‘capital’ including ‘the determination to succeed’ which Bourdieu brings with him into this field of forces, by his own admission, enable him to be successful. The problem is that he is caught between two worlds which are irreconcilable. Though rather disgusted by the ‘anti-intellectualisme doublé de machisme paillard et gueulard qui faisait les délices de mes compagnons d’internat’, he is able to perform on the rugby field and can hold his own in the rough and tumble of school life, so that his academic prowess ‘et la docilité suspecte qu’elle est censée supposer’ is not in a position to exclude him from the solidarity and sense of community ‘dite virile’ which accompanies sporting triumph, fighting together and bathing in the ‘admiration accordée sans réserve aux exploits, beaucoup plus solide et directe que celle de l’univers scolaire’. (127) On the academic side, a reconciliation

of sorts between the two worlds is achieved, as it is as a result of the 300 *colles* he receives for bad behaviour that he spends so much time reading. Paradoxically, he ends up so well adapted to the detested world of the internat that he prefers to spend his Sundays ‘en toute tranquillité’ in detention in a deserted lycée rather than returning home. (120)

If this serves as some explanation of his successful navigation of the Pau lycée, there is very little in Bourdieu’s analysis to explain his subsequent, very exceptional, if not extraordinary, transfer to the lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris which led in due course to his entering the École Normale Supérieure and hence to the extremely distinguished academic career which followed. Surely it is to be expected that an auto-socioanalyse would provide an explanation of this remarkable trajectory. The only clue the reader is given appears during a passage in which Bourdieu is describing some trouble he was in with the *censeur des études* which was going to lead to him being excluded a few months before his *baccalauréat*. At this point, the proviseur, Bernard Lamicq, intervenes in a ‘complicité affectueuse’ and he is saved. Bourdieu tells us that Lamicq was ‘un des rares sinon le seul normalien béarnais’ who furthermore had ‘décisivement orienté ma “carrière”’. In what way or for what reason Bourdieu does not tell us. But he does recount Lamicq’s remark ‘Mon garçon tu as du cran!’ thus reflecting once more the image of gutsy masculinity that Bourdieu has already presented us with. Bourdieu surmises that Lamicq wished to acknowledge ‘la vertu de rétivité’ glorified in local tradition in the saying (in Gascon) ‘Arissou arissat, castagne lusente’ (‘Bogue hérissée, châtaigne luisante’). (116)

Bourdieu uses the term ‘habitus clivé’ to refer to the discrepancy between his ‘haute consécration scolaire’ and his ‘basse extraction sociale’, a discrepancy mirrored in the ‘décalage’ between the academic life of the lycée and the world of the internat. This he calls a ‘coïncidence des contraires’ and identifies it as having had a lasting impact on his subsequent ambivalent attitude to the world of Higher Education. On the one hand, there are his thirst for knowledge and his submission to the idea of the ‘bon élève’ and the ‘règles du jeu’ of the academic life; on the other, ‘une disposition rétive’ towards the system itself, especially on formal occasions such as award ceremonies and *concours*. (127)

Bourdieu begins his closing paragraphs by posing the question: ‘Pourquoi et surtout pour qui ai-je écrit?’. His answer is a complex one, but he begins by suggesting that it is perhaps to discourage biographies and biographers, while, as a point of professional honour,



providing the information that he would have liked to find when he was trying to understand the writers and artists of the past, and extending his reflexive analysis beyond the generic discoveries procured by scientific analysis itself. (140) To what extent, however, can the *Esquisse* be regarded as an exercise in the distinctive genre of ‘auto-socioanalyse’? It seems legitimate to question the extent to which the *Esquisse* is objective social self-analysis and not, rather, a socially aware autobiographical sketch in which it is difficult not to see the writer’s selection of material being made with a self-conscious regard for the image of the self that is being created.

### **1.6 Richard Hoggart: *A Local Habitation* (1988)**

When Hoggart comes to revisit his childhood in *A Local Habitation* (1988), he does so without denying its autobiographical nature. Indeed, in the English edition, it is presented as the first volume in his ‘Life and Times’ and, in the American edition, as ‘The Times and Places of an Orphaned Intellectual’. He does, however, acknowledge the difficulties inherent in the genre: ‘The fact that memory clings to this incident and refuses against all evidence to agree to the recovery of that, may tell you little about the representational value of any incident, a lot about your own inhibitions.’<sup>32</sup> While he recognises an obligation to eschew the devices of fiction, he is attempting, he claims, ‘to make, out of a personal story, a sense rather more than the personal’. While Bourdieu may be said to start with objective, scientifically verified social observation which he then seeks to further evidence in his own experience, Hoggart begins with his personal experience and seeks to demonstrate its representative significance. We have seen how the generalised observations on the plight of his ‘scholarship boy’ in the ‘difficult’ chapter of *The Uses of Literacy* were undoubtedly based on his own personal experience. Nonetheless, the anonymity of the ‘scholarship boy’ was preserved in the text. In *A Local Habitation*, Hoggart records unequivocally his own experience, looking back aged around 70, on his childhood, spent in the home of his grandmother and shared with his aunts, uncle and a woman cousin in a small, terraced house in a working-class area of Leeds. Hoggart had never known his father who died when he was eighteen months old, and his mother died of what was called ‘consumption’ before he was seven. He was thus brought up by the women of the extended family, his grandmother being given seven and sixpence each week by the Board of Guardians who had responsibility for his welfare as an orphan.

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Hoggart, *A Local Habitation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) p. xi.

The book's opening sentence – 'My Aunt Annie is dying in St. James's Hospital' – is used by Hoggart to register the significance for him of one of the major personalities of his childhood, as well as issues of class (the use of the possessive 'my' in 'My Aunt' evoking, for Hoggart, the fabric of working-class life) and of precise location (St James's hospital being 'where many of the poor of Leeds have gone to die for generations'). If he denies himself the 'devices of fiction' he nonetheless creates vivid portraits of the formidable women of the household, especially his two aunts – Annie and Ethel – who 'executed a constant arabesque' in his mind. This is a discourse far removed from the 'scientific' auto-analyse of Bourdieu. He evokes the warmth, affection and solidarity of the extended family and the local community of poor, back-to-back households, whilst acknowledging the harshness of the prevalent penury. He asks himself what part this experience might have played in the development of his habits and attitudes – what Bourdieu would call his 'habitus':

This account is little to dredge from the hinterland of memory where it has been lying so long. Even more difficult to assess is what habits, what attitudes, what typical forms of behaviour those years encouraged. (54)

He cites five qualities which he feels derive from those early experiences. First of all, a 'sort of stubborn pride', a mixture of 'cockiness, drivenness, obstinacy, doggedness', a 'bloody-minded digging-in if brusquely or improperly pushed'. All of this is reminiscent of the 'rétivité' we noted that Bourdieu ascribed to himself as a primary ingredient of his habitus. Allied to this, Hoggart mentions a suspicion of groups and a consequent emphasis on individuality. His early experience of poverty gave him also an acute sense of the precariousness of economic status and, thus, the fear of being out of a job. Linked with this is the fourth characteristic: the need to gain respect and by his own efforts. For Hoggart, this is about writing, which he sees as a means of 'how you may begin to get hold of your life, make more sense of it, in some way command or at least understand it better'. The final characteristic he identifies is his conviction of the need for love. (54-55)

Hoggart remembers with gratitude the various interventions and encouragements both from within and outside the family which had a decisive bearing on the course of his career. He records visits to his home by his elementary school headmaster when he was recovering from pneumonia; the role of Miss Jubb as representative of the Board of Guardians (as an orphan, Hoggart was under its care but 'living out') in mediating with his grandmother to ensure his entry into the Sixth Form, and the sympathetic English teacher who organised a

whip-round so that Hoggart could go on a school trip to Stratford. Most decisive perhaps was his headmaster's intervention to secure his place at grammar school, for Hoggart, despite his cleverness, had failed the decisive eleven plus examination. He comments: 'It was not difficult for clever children from working-class streets to fail to show their potential in a once-for-all test'. Hoggart thus considers himself to have been fortunate to have found access to the means 'to break the ties of home and Leeds', and doubts whether he would have had the tenacity to do so in other circumstances. (155)

Hoggart's accounts of his schooldays at Jack Lane Elementary School and Cockburn Grammar School in Leeds have points in common with Bourdieu's depiction of his Pau lycée. Both Bourdieu and Hoggart shone in the classroom, so it was necessary to compensate by showing their mettle in the playground. Just as Bourdieu collected his *colles* for his unruly behaviour, Hoggart, at Jack Lane, knew that he had to establish himself in some way and gained 'credit in the anti-authority bank' after being punished for climbing on the school roof to retrieve lost balls. Both showed themselves capable of using their cleverness, their verbal dexterity, as a weapon. However, whereas Bourdieu, as we have noted, found in the classroom 'un univers de découvertes intellectuelles et de relations humaines que l'on peut dire enchantées', Hoggart records, at his elementary school, the 'absence of the sense of intellectual enquiry', everything being presented 'on a plate', 'never as a matter of speculation'. (147) Even at the grammar school, though he remembers 'many kindnesses, much professional care' from his teachers, he also notes 'not a single subversive or radical thought from any of them'. (169) Some had themselves 'climbed up with more or less difficulty' and were 'on the look out for those children who might need and make good use of a special push', but such a push operated only within the relatively limited confines of the school curriculum. What Bourdieu and Passeron define as 'le privilège culturel' – access, for example, to culturally enriching activities involving music, the visual arts, drama in performance – lay outside the scope of the school's more utilitarian purposes. Hence, for Hoggart, the apparent 'insouciance' with which more middle class students might operate a wide range of cultural reference is something he saw to be beyond him. He comments on this aspect of his habitus:

That capacity for playfulness still eludes me. It would be unjust to blame the lack on Cockburn: much more likely, it comes from natural disposition and the intertwining of that with the stresses of the route; not much time for pirouettes just for the hell of it, on the way. (172-173)

Nonetheless, access to the grammar school was, for Hoggart, the first step on a journey by which he would 'get out of Hunslet and the life of Hunslet', joining the small trickle of children 'in their new silly blazers and even sillier caps, starting the journey away, getting on the first of the little launching pads'. (156) After Cockburn lay the University of Leeds:

So the gateways opened further, the ways out progressively unrolled. One more individual, like a more than usually tenacious tadpole heading for the surface, tail working like mad, driven by a mixture of social pressures, had worked his way up the system to this next point of entry. (181)

For Bourdieu, after the lycée in Pau, the way ahead pointed to Louis-le-Grand in Paris and the École Normale Supérieure. For both, a significant 'ascension sociale' had been facilitated via an educational system to which their exceptional talents allowed them access, despite the overwhelming social pressures on them to stay within their milieu of origin.

## Chapter II: Albert Camus, first and last

*J'ai beaucoup de choses en commun avec vous, mais d'abord une fidélité aux mêmes origines. Voilà pourquoi avec vous, Guilloux, ou d'autres, il me semble que je peux laisser parler un peu ce que j'ai de plus profond.*

Albert Camus, lettre à Jean Guéhenno, octobre 1945<sup>33</sup>

This chapter will look in detail at Camus' depiction of home and family in his earliest writings as well as in his final, uncompleted work, *Le Premier Homme*, published 34 years after his death, in 1994. I will show how significant parallels can be found between Camus' texts and the accounts given by Hoggart and Bourdieu of their own social trajectories, discussed in Chapter One. Consideration will be given to the challenges Camus faced in his early twenties in trying to reconcile his desire to write about what he knew best – the detail of his own life in the 'quartier pauvre' of Belcourt – with the quest for a more impersonal style, a struggle between 'témoignage', on the one hand, and the aesthetic concerns he associated with the 'œuvre d'art' on the other. I will argue that Camus denies this autobiographical impulse for most of his career as he produces his cycles of novels, philosophical works and plays, until, in the last years before his untimely death, he seeks once again to write in his own voice, to register the complexity of his feelings for his mother, and to bear witness to the life of his own people, his family and his origins. As a starting point for this discussion I choose a particular historical moment – the year 1958 – to register a coincidence of location and a contemporaneity in the trajectories of Pierre Bourdieu and Albert Camus.

### II.1 1958: looking back

In the same year which saw the publication of Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* in England, Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. In March and April of the following year – 1958 – Camus visited Alger where his mother still lived in the same apartment in which he had spent his childhood. Coincidentally, Pierre Bourdieu was also in Alger at that time. Having taken his *agrégation* in philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure in 1954, he had gone to Algeria to undertake his military service. In 1958 he was 'assistant à la Faculté des Lettres d'Alger' (where Camus had been a student before the war)

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<sup>33</sup> quoted in Agnès Spiquel-Courdille, ed., *Albert Camus, Louis Guilloux 'Correspondance' 1945-1959* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013) p.14.

and was beginning his ethnographic researches of the Kabylie and other indigenous populations which were to culminate in the publication of his first book, *Sociologie de l'Algérie* (1958).<sup>34</sup> The same year saw the publication of Camus' *Chroniques Algériennes* which included his reporting of the 'Misère de la Kabylie' which had appeared in the journal *Alger républicain* in June 1939. Thus both the unknown young sociologist and the world-famous Nobel Prizewinner, however different their pathways to this point, may be said to have had in common the ultimately humanitarian concerns reflected in these publications.

In 1958, Camus also agreed to the re-publication of another text originally appearing in Algeria before the war. This was his first published book, *L'Envers et L'Endroit*, which had appeared in a series entitled *Méditerranéennes* produced by his friend, Edmond Chablot, in Alger in 1937. The book consists of five essays which mix the autobiographical, the lyrical and the philosophical. For the re-publication, Camus wrote a new *Préface* which is of considerable interest in a discussion of Camus' desire to return, in his writing, to his own origins and to a more personal style. As we have seen, both Bourdieu and Hoggart choose, at different times in their lives, to return in their writing to their origins and, as we have noted, Bourdieu insists that he is not being autobiographical but 'socio-analytical', while Hoggart is seeking to demonstrate the wider social significance of his own personal experience. What is interesting in considering the earliest writings of Camus is his clear impulse, even at the age of 22, to return to a past which he already senses as 'une pauvreté perdue', something precious which he has lost. In the *Préface* he explains his previous reluctance to agree to the re-appearance of this early work: 'Je ne renie rien de ce qui est exprimé dans ces écrits, mais leur forme m'a toujours paru maladroite.'<sup>35</sup> This formal maladroitness is understandable, he claims, in the work of such a youthful writer because 'à vingt-deux ans, sauf génie, on sait à peine écrire' (31). And yet, the mature Camus reflects on the profound significance of the content of these early writings in his work as a whole: 'il y a plus de véritable amour dans ces pages maladroites que dans toutes celles qui ont suivi'. (32) He explains that he is more aware of the 'maladresses' of *L'Envers et l'Endroit* than of those of his other works because they allow some of his deepest feelings to emerge: '(elles)...trahissent un peu le sujet qui me tient le plus à cœur'. (31) Later in the *Préface* he remarks: 'Les secrets qui nous sont les plus

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<sup>34</sup> Alain Bruno, *Lire Pierre Bourdieu et Jean-Claude Passeron, Les Héritiers* (Paris: Ellipses, 2009) p.5

<sup>35</sup> 'Préface' *OCI* p.31. All references to the texts of Albert Camus will be given in this way to the four volume *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 4 volumes: Volumes I and II, 2006; Volumes III and IV, 2008). Normally the title of the individual item will be given. Where protracted treatment of a particular text is being given page numbers will be incorporated in the text.

chers, nous les livrons trop dans la maladresse et le désordre...'. (38) Thus, that which is of most emotional importance to Camus – what is closest to his heart – is something which the ineptness of his first attempts at writing lets slip. Yet, at the same time, he now recognises, it is the 'amour' to be found there that he wishes to cherish and, as we shall see, that he wishes to explore more openly in the work he is currently – in 1958 – struggling with: *Le Premier Homme*. This tension between emotional truth and austerity of expression is a more aesthetic consideration than is, for example, Bourdieu's insistence on the scientific nature and purpose of any incidental representation of the self to be found in the *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*, where he wittily plays on the Magritte formula in his choice of epigraph: 'Ceci n'est pas une autobiographie'.

For Camus, the distinction is being made between considerations of form and the emotional source which demands to find expression. He goes to some length to describe the importance of this 'source' in the life and work of the artist:

Chaque artiste garde ainsi, au fond de lui, une source unique qui alimente pendant sa vie ce qu'il est et ce qu'il dit...Pour moi, je sais que ma source est dans *L'Envers et l'Endroit*, dans ce monde de pauvreté et de lumière où j'ai longtemps vécu... (32)

It is to this world of poverty and light that Camus is proud to have borne faithful witness in his first, published work:

...je puis avouer...que la valeur de témoignage de ce petit livre est, pour moi, considérable. Je dis bien pour moi, car c'est devant moi qu'il témoigne, c'est de moi qu'il exige une fidélité dont je suis seul à connaître la profondeur et les difficultés. (31)

It was not immediately obvious to the young Camus that 'ce monde de pauvreté et de lumière' was suitable material for his own writing. However, while he was still at school, he encountered a book which seemed to speak to him directly because it mirrored some of the particularities of his own experience. Jean Grenier, Camus' philosophy teacher at the Grand lycée de garçons d'Alger, recognising the talent of his seventeen year-old student, and knowing something of his family circumstances, loaned him the recently published first novel of his friend, André de Richaud. This was *La Douleur*, a story set in a small provincial village during the First World War, which evoked the desolation of a widow, Thérèse Delombre and her young son, Georges, isolated by the death in action of the husband and

father. Although its merits were recognised by a *jury littéraire* which included Mauriac, Bernanos and Julien Green, the novel provoked something of a scandal because it recounted the woman's sexual relationship with a German prisoner of war.<sup>36</sup> What is likely to have interested Camus most, however, is the depiction of the relationship between the widowed mother and the son, particularly the intensity and complexity of the son's feelings towards his mother. Like Camus, de Richaud was an *orphelin de guerre*, his father, like Camus' having been killed during the early years of the war, and it is not surprising that the world depicted in the novel should have struck a chord of recognition in the young Camus. Certainly, he acknowledged that the novel had a profound effect upon him:

...je n'ai jamais oublié son beau livre, qui fut le premier à me parler de ce que je connaissais : une mère, la pauvreté, de beaux soirs dans le ciel...Je le lus en une nuit, selon la règle, et, au réveil, nanti d'une étrange et neuve liberté, j'avancais, hésitant, sur une terre inconnue. Je venais d'apprendre que les livres ne versaient pas seulement l'oubli et la distraction. Mes silences têtus, ces souffrances vagues et souveraines, le monde singulier, la noblesse des miens, leurs misères, mes secrets enfin, tout cela pouvait donc se dire...<sup>37</sup>

*La Douleur* seemed to Camus to legitimise his own autobiographical instincts. It spoke to him of a world he recognised and, further, opened up the possibility that this world could be written about, that his own experience of it could legitimately form the material for his own first attempts at writing. His own silences, the inchoate nature of his own sufferings, his most secret feelings, the paradoxes of his family life could be the source of what he was going to find it possible to say. Camus' inclusion of 'pauvreté' among those things about which the book spoke to him may appear to be intriguing as the social milieu of *La Douleur* is middle-class. However, Camus at this time is rarely using the word to indicate solely economic want and oppression but as a term which encapsulates additionally the 'lumière', the 'beaux ciels', the 'amour' of his childhood.

But how might all this be said? How could these 'raw' experiences be fashioned into writing? What might be the appropriate literary forms? Clearly, the mature Camus of the *Préface* believes the 'gaucheries' of *L'Envers et l'Endroit* to be largely a matter of form. He acknowledges that the work of art must first of all make use of urgent emotion – what he recognises as 'mon désordre, la violence de certains instincts, l'abandon sans grâce où je peux

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<sup>36</sup> See Introduction to André de Richaud, *La Douleur* (Paris: Grasset, 1931).

<sup>37</sup> 'Rencontres avec André Gide', *OC III* p.881.



me jeter'. (37) But, like Baudelaire who extolled the formal constraints of the sonnet form in rendering the emotion more intense,<sup>38</sup> Camus believes that these 'forces obscures de l'âme' must be channelled; they must be made use of, 'mais non sans les canaliser, les entourer de digues, pour que leur flot monte...'. He suggests that in his mature work the 'digues' have perhaps been raised too high, and that this has led to a certain 'raideur' for which he criticises himself. However, the opposite is true of his youthful writing. He is, on the one hand, 'fils d'une libre nature', and, on the other, 'esclave, et esclave admiratif, d'une tradition artistique sévère'. He seems to be debating with himself the extent to which, in the creation of a work of art, the rawness of experience must necessarily undergo a transformation. He yearns to discover an equivalence between who he is and what he says, and declares that, if this should ever come to be, the work he would create would resemble, in one way or another *L'Envers et l'Endroit*:

Simplement, le jour où l'équilibre s'établira entre ce que je suis et ce que je dis, ce jour-là peut-être, et j'ose à peine l'écrire, je pourrai bâtir l'œuvre dont je rêve. Ce que j'ai voulu dire ici, c'est qu'elle ressemblera à *L'Envers et l'Endroit*, d'une façon ou de l'autre, et qu'elle parlera d'une certaine forme d'amour. (37)

Of course, in 1958, the 'œuvre' of which Camus dreamed, and the desire to find an equivalence between his own identity and what he creates as an artist, are already represented in his project for *Le Premier Homme* with which he is wrestling at this time. It is in the following year, 1959, that Camus finds himself able to pursue this project intensively.<sup>39</sup> But, in his notebook entries for 1957 after the award of the Nobel Prize, and in 1958, it is possible to trace Camus' anguish and despair as he withdraws into himself, into silence on the tragedy which is unrolling in Algeria, turning his back on the sterile and wounding exchanges with Sartre and the Parisian left. When he talks, as he does repeatedly, of 'amour' and 'pauvreté', he elides them, and one senses that he is above all talking about the emotional and moral centre he associates with his origins:

*17 octobre*

Nobel. Étrange sentiment d'accablement et de mélancolie. À 20 ans, pauvre, et nu, j'ai connu la vraie gloire. Ma mère.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> 'Parce que la forme est contraignante, l'idée jaillit plus intense.' Baudelaire, *Lettre à Armand Fraise* 19 février 1860, quoted in Evelyne Amon and Yves Bomati, *Vocabulaire pour la dissertation* (Paris: Larousse, 1992) p.274.

<sup>39</sup> 'Repères chronologiques' *OC IV* p.ix.

<sup>40</sup> 'Cahier VII' *OC IV* p.1266.

It is to this world of his origins, to his homeland, to his own people, that he now wishes to commit himself:

*29 mai 1958*

Mon métier est de faire mes livres et de combattre quand la liberté des miens et de mon peuple est menacée. C'est tout.<sup>41</sup>

## **II.2 Camus at 22: Premiers écrits**

If Camus in 1958 is thinking back to his former self, to his first steps as a writer, it is instructive, before considering *Le Premier Homme*, to examine his earliest attempts at prose-writing and the ways in which he was struggling to balance the urge to write about the detail of what he knew with a contrary impulse towards the impersonal construction of the work of art. The earliest experiments which reflect this attempt to balance 'témoignage' and what Camus sees as the necessary detachment of the writer in the search for appropriate forms, were worked on during a tumultuous period. Camus' biographers (for example, Olivier Todd<sup>42</sup>, Roger Grenier<sup>43</sup>, Herbert Lottman<sup>44</sup>) chronicle the vicissitudes of the young Camus' life in the seven years leading up to the publication of *L'Envers et l'Endroit* on May 10<sup>th</sup> 1937. What is of interest in terms of his development as a writer is the character of his educational experience and of his more general reading during these years.<sup>45</sup> In 1930, Camus passed the first part of his *baccalauréat* and began studying in the *classe de philosophie* under Jean Grenier, but at the same time the first attack of the tuberculosis which was going to mark these years meant a prolonged absence. He recommenced the following year and, in 1932, passed the *baccalauréat* and entered the *classe préparatoire* for the *École normale supérieure*. However, a recurrence of tuberculosis prevented him from pursuing his ambitions towards *agrégation* and he transferred his studies to the *Faculté de Lettres* in *Alger*. In 1935 he was duly awarded his *license* in philosophy, and in May 1936, his *Diplôme d'études supérieures* for a dissertation entitled *Métaphysique chrétienne et néoplatonisme*. During this period he also joined and left the communist party, founded the *Théâtre du Travail*, worked as a clerk for

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p.1273.

<sup>42</sup> Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus, une vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996).

<sup>43</sup> Roger Grenier, *Albert Camus: Soleil et ombre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987).

<sup>44</sup> Herbert R. Lottman, *Albert Camus, a biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979).

<sup>45</sup> See Jan Rigaud, 'Les maîtres à "l'école" d'Albert Camus', in *Albert Camus aujourd'hui*, ed. by Alek Baylee Toumi (New York: Peter Lang, 2012) pp.17-29.

a shipbroker and at the Préfecture, travelled in the Balearic Islands and in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Italy, left the family home to live, first, with his uncle and then with his brother, married and separated from Simone Hié and, before his illness, played football for Racing universitaire d'Alger. In the 1958 *Préface* Camus tells us that *L'Envers et l'Endroit* was written in the middle of this tumultuous period:

Les essais qui sont réunis dans ce volume ont été écrits en 1935 et 1936 (j'avais alors vingt-deux ans) et publiés un an après en Algérie, à un très petit nombre d'exemplaires. (31)

At the same time, then, that he was registering profound changes in his personal life – menacing illness, death (his grandmother's and the real prospect of his own), love, marriage, separation, political engagement, travel – he was undergoing a rigorous academic training in the domain of philosophy, and had discovered, within himself, the conviction that he wished to be a writer.

The *Notes de Lecture* which Camus wrote in April 1933 give an insight into his preoccupations as he made his first tentative steps in his chosen profession. Almost immediately he castigates himself for allowing his emotional intensity to spill over into his writing. In a way which prefigures some of what we have noted in the *Préface* to *L'Envers et l'Endroit* written twenty-one years later in 1958, he argues with himself that he must subjugate his feelings, mask them under a cooler, more ironic detachment in order to let his writing do the work in engaging the reader's sympathetic attention:

Il me faudrait apprendre à dompter ma sensibilité, trop prompte à déborder. Pour la cacher sous l'ironie et la froideur, je croyais être le maître. Il me faut déchanter...Il faudrait qu'elle parle, non qu'elle crie. Il faudrait, puisque je veux écrire, qu'on puisse la sentir, dans mon œuvre, non dans la vie.<sup>46</sup>

One way of attempting a greater objectivity can be seen in the writing he was doing at this time. Having just finished *La Maison mauresque*, he notes 'Je me suis efforcé de n'y laisser paraître mes souffrances présentes'<sup>47</sup>. In an effort to avoid the directly autobiographical, he has sought a 'formula' in the external world which recalls T.S.Eliot's notion of the 'objective correlative'. In his 1919 essay on *Hamlet* Eliot wrote:

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<sup>46</sup> 'Notes de Lecture', *OCI* p.955.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.<sup>48</sup>

In these short, meditative prose poems, Camus seems to be searching for just this – ‘je veux écrire qu’on puisse la sentir dans mon œuvre...’. These early prose poems are ‘exercices’ in ways of writing which avoid the directly autobiographical, which avoid representing the actuality of the life going on around him. The narrator is the sole human presence, the observer of a depopulated natural world. Even here Camus seems anxious to shift the focus away from the narrator’s sensibility onto the external world itself. In *La Maison mauresque*, he seeks to construct a symbolic representation of contradictory emotions through the ‘correspondances’ he discerns, in a Baudelairean sense, between the different parts of the house and different emotional registers:

...ces fines et courtes émotions que donne la première visite d’une maison mauresque, j’ai voulu élargir dans les correspondances...J’ai voulu bâtir une maison d’émotions. La voici. – En elle se succèdent des pénombres bleues et des cours ensoleillées. Une même question se pose dans l’ombre et lumière.<sup>49</sup>

The binary oppositions characteristic of Camus’ way of thinking about the world at this time – evidenced by his choice of *L’Envers et l’Endroit* as the title of his first published book – are clearly reflected in the evocative prose of these short pieces. Here the ‘pénombres bleues’ are contrasted with the ‘cours ensoleillées’, ‘l’ombre’ with ‘lumière’. In the second piece, ‘L’Entrée’, the narrator moves onto the terrace which overlooks the arab town and the sea. As evening approaches, the violent colours of the day gradually darken, but the accompanying tone of sadness is contradicted by the brutal movement of the houses as they jostle steeply down towards the sea:

Mais rebelle, et contredisant l’heure, le mouvement brutal de la descente vers la mer reste, si les couleurs se diluent lentement. La paix qui descend du ciel est inquiétée par les maisons qui se bousculent jusque vers l’eau qu’elles heurtent sans transition...Sensible et belle d’impunité, c’est une foule bien vivante qui descend vers l’eau. Son agitation est si vraie, si humaine qu’on lui en veut presque de ne point créer. Des cris briseraient la cruelle opposition qui s’étouffe et se nourrit dans le silence.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> T.S.Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932) p. 145.

<sup>49</sup> ‘La Maison mauresque’, *OCI* p. 967.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* p.968.

However a fleeting harmony is achieved by the calm serenity of the sea and the sky which momentarily defeats the efforts of the town to disturb this tranquility.

Alors, le calme des eaux rejoint celui des cieux, tandis qu'en deçà du regard, la ville en vain s'évertue à troubler cette fugitive harmonie. (968)

But, as night covers the sky, the narrator is again disturbed when he registers the conflict between the bright lights of a steamship and the darkness of the waters. The conflict of these two elements, light and water, gives rise to an emotion of 'inquiétude', here best considered as a state of agitation, of instability:

Mon inquiétude est alors revenue comme je regardais ce primordial mélange d'eau et de lumière dont on n'aurait dit si l'eau brassait la lumière ou si la lumière noyait l'eau. L'inquiétude devant, encore, le conflit de deux éléments. (968)

The impersonality which Camus is seeking is achieved here through the displacement of the source of the emotion from the personal circumstances of the 'je' to the detail of the seascape which constitutes the external reality being described. In this procedure the 'je' becomes the anonymous conduit for registering the emotion provoked by the objective natural phenomena. The binary character of the successive oppositions is made explicit in a remarkable sentence which emphasises the brutality of the elemental discordance and explains the resultant feeling of disquiet:

Rythme binaire, atroce, jazz despotique et cruel, sans nostalgie, devant l'eau et la lumière, la ville et le ciel, toujours...(968)

In contrast, the instability of this conflict gives way, in the third of these pieces, 'La Tombée de lumière', to an evocation of stillness and silence as the narrator recalls the movement from shadow into the sudden brilliance of sunlight. The elemental warmth of the sun strips away 'fausse sentimentalité' so that all else is forgotten in the 'unique sensation de chaleur envahissante'. Later in the same piece, the narrator finds himself, close to mid day, in a small muslim cemetery surrounded by fig trees. Here, all is silence and peace, and, again, human sentimentality, 'l'amour du pathétique' which has too often guided the narrator, is set against the 'plénitude d'indifférence' to be found in 'cette muette demeure'. (970-971) This association of silence with an unmoveable indifference which is beyond the falseness of human sentiment anticipates what Camus is going to be writing later in *L'Envers et l'Endroit* about the 'indifférence' and the 'admirable silence' of 'cette mère étrange'.

At the time of this early experiment in the prose-poem genre, it is André Gide who most seems to influence Camus. He is the writer who is referred to most often in the *Notes de Lecture*. The young Gide, recovering, himself, from tuberculosis, had visited North Africa in 1893 and 1895 and had published *Les Nourritures terrestres* in 1897. In his preface to the 1927 edition of this ‘manifesto of Dionysian individualism’<sup>51</sup> Gide explains the context of its first appearance:

*Les Nourritures terrestres* sont le livre, sinon d’un malade, du moins d’un convalescent, d’un guéri – de quelqu’un qui a été malade. Il y a dans son lyrisme même, l’excès de celui qui embrasse la vie comme quelque chose qu’il a failli perdre.<sup>52</sup>

The parallels with Camus’ own situation in 1933 are obvious. The narrator in *Les Nourritures terrestres* exhorts Nathanaël to give himself up to a life of individualistic pleasure and sensuous enjoyment: ‘Ne distingue pas Dieu du bonheur et place tout ton bonheur dans l’instant’<sup>53</sup>. But, at 16, when Camus first encountered the book, before he was ill, it made little impact. He recalls that ‘ces invocations me parurent obscures. Je bronchai devant l’hymne aux biens naturels. À Alger, à seize ans, j’étais saturé de ces richesses.’<sup>54</sup> He was no Northern protestant discovering the world of the Mediterranean for the first time; he was already there. At that age he needed no urging towards physical enjoyment. However, his first debilitating attack of tuberculosis led to his isolation from the physical world. He recounts how ‘une heureuse maladie m’avait détaché de mes plages et de mes plaisirs’. He subsequently reads ‘tout l’œuvre de Gide’ and comes once more upon *Les Nourritures terrestres*. This time he experiences ‘l’ébranlement si souvent décrit’, but for him this was not to do with the sensuous enjoyment of life but with Gide’s advocacy of ‘dénouement’: ‘Bien avant que Gide lui-même eût confirmé cette interprétation, j’appris à lire dans *Les Nourritures terrestres* l’évangile de dénuement dont j’avais besoin’. For Camus, at this time, ‘dénouement’ was not a desirable optional alternative to bourgeois materialism, but the living reality of the ‘pauvreté’ which surrounded him. But to have this ‘deprivation’ extolled as a necessary prerequisite to ‘le bonheur’ would have confirmed the attitude to poverty he was

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<sup>51</sup> Pascal Bruckner, ‘Happiness’, in *The Columbia History of Twentieth Century French Thought*, ed. by Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) p.243.

<sup>52</sup> André Gide, *Les Nourritures Terrestres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969) p. 11.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid p. 31.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Rencontres avec André Gide’ *OC III* p.881.

later to describe in the 1958 *Préface to L'Envers et l'Endroit* : 'La pauvreté...n'a jamais été un malheur pour moi: la lumière y répandait ses richesses'.<sup>55</sup>

There is no doubt that Gide was a considerable influence in Camus' early development as a writer. In the *Notes de lecture* he made in April 1933 he castigates himself for the banality of his thoughts on Gide:

Ai relu mes notes sur Gide. Affreusement banales. Lieux communs puérils. J'enrageais de la médiocrité de ma pensée en songeant à la profondeur du sentiment que j'ai pour Gide.<sup>56</sup>

Here he articulates a familiar discrepancy between the profundity of his feeling and the adequacy of its form of expression, and shows himself, even at this early stage, to be an inheritor of that 'tradition artistique sévère' that he mentions in the 1958 *Préface*. Elsewhere in the *Notes de Lecture* he refers to the characteristic tensions in Gide between the ascetic and the sensuous – what Michel Winock calls 'les deux pôles de sa personnalité, son être moral et son hédonisme'<sup>57</sup>. Camus talks of Gide's need to 'concilier son être lucide et son être passionné'<sup>58</sup>. This kind of opposition is reflected in the distinctions Camus is exploring at this time in *Cahier I* between the intellectual and the physical, between 'culture' and 'volonté', and between philosophy and literature. In May 1936, he notes:

Contre rechute et faiblesse : effort – Attention démon :  
Culture – le corps  
Volonté – le travail (Phil.) ...  
Œuvre philosophique : l'absurdité  
Œuvre littéraire : force, amour et mort sous le signe de la conquête.  
Dans les deux, mêler les deux genres en respectant le ton particulier. Ecrire un jour un livre qui donnera le sens...<sup>59</sup>

These tensions and contradictions are at the centre of his thinking at the time of his writing of *L'Envers et l'Endroit*. Here, he is expressing a wish to bring together the 'literary' and the 'philosophical', to mix the two genres while respecting a certain particularity of tone.

Whatever the questions about form, he makes explicit what it is that he wants to say. His first entry in *Cahier I* begins:

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<sup>55</sup> *OC I* p.32.

<sup>56</sup> 'Notes de Lecture' *OC I* p.956.

<sup>57</sup> Michel Winock, *Le Siècle des intellectuels*, 2nd edn (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999) p.198.

<sup>58</sup> 'Notes de Lecture' *OC I* p.958.

<sup>59</sup> 'Cahier 1' *OC II* p.809.

Ce que je veux dire:

Qu'on peut avoir – sans romantisme – la nostalgie d'une pauvreté perdue. Une certaine somme d'années vécues misérablement suffisent à construire une sensibilité. Dans ce cas particulier, le sentiment bizarre que le fils porte à sa mère constitue *toute sa sensibilité*. Les manifestations de cette sensibilité dans les domaines les plus divers s'expliquent suffisamment par le souvenir latent, matériel de son enfance (une glu qui s'accroche à l'âme).<sup>60</sup>

These are the things he feels it imperative to say. In an argument he seems to be having with himself, he is concerned about restraining the pressure of his own sensibility, and yet, paradoxically, he is insistent that he wishes to express the truth of his own experience: 'l'œuvre est un aveu, il me faut témoigner'. Despite what he has said earlier about irony and detachment, he is insisting that the writing he wishes to produce will be confessional, a bearing of faithful witness to the 'amour' he finds in the reality of his own family life, and in the complexity of a son's 'bizarre' attachment to his mother amidst the poverty of Belcourt. He insists that 'c'est dans cette vie de pauvreté, parmi ces gens humbles ou vaniteux, que j'ai plus sûrement touché ce qui me paraît le sens vrai de la vie'.

Although Camus did not, of course, use Bourdieu's term 'habitus', in the very first of the notebooks he began writing in May 1935, he writes about the enduring effects of early experience on the formation of the 'sensibilité'. Camus is 22 and has already experienced a change of social milieu, a movement away from the abject poverty of his childhood, as a result of his education and of his convalescence, after tuberculosis, at the home of his more well-off uncle.<sup>61</sup> He argues that one can have, without sentimentality, a nostalgia for 'une pauvreté perdue', and that a certain number of years living in poverty 'suffisent à construire une sensibilité'. Within the context of this poverty, the 'sentiment bizarre' which links a son to his mother is constitutive of 'toute sa sensibilité'. And this 'sensibilité' manifests itself 'dans les domaines les plus divers' as a 'souvenir latent, matériel de son enfance' which Camus expresses in the form of a metaphor – 'une glu qui s'accroche à l'âme'. Clearly, here, we are in the realm of the affective, in a way which reflects the particularities of Camus' personal situation. It may be thought that this takes us a long way from the science of Bourdieu's sociology. Yet Camus seeks to generalise, to locate these reflections in the context of a wider awareness of society, of class and of social trajectory. He registers the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p.795.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, Olivier Todd, *op.cit.* p.63.



‘mauvaise conscience’ of, in Bourdieu’s phrase, the ‘transfuge de classe’, and reflects some of the tensions and contradictions inherent in the ‘habitus clivé’:

De là, pour qui s’en aperçoit, une reconnaissance et donc une mauvaise conscience. De là encore et par comparaison, si l’on a changé de milieu, le sentiment des richesses perdues...Ce qui compte aussi, ce sont les mauvaises hontes, les petites lâchetés, la considération inconsciente qu’on accorde à l’autre monde (celui de l’argent). Je crois que le monde des pauvres est un des rares, sinon le seul qui soit replié sur lui-même, qui soit une île dans la société.<sup>62</sup>

In this first entry in *Cahier I*, in what might be thought of, generically, as a journal entry, Camus is registering the sense of social shame and the shame of that shame – ‘les mauvaises hontes’ – and the ingrained sense of deference – ‘la considération inconsciente’ – towards the ‘other’ social class – ‘l’autre monde (celui de l’argent)’ – that we encounter in the ‘sociological’ self-analyses of Bourdieu and Hoggart.

If ‘habitus’ is about the way past experience structures present ways of acting and thinking, Camus’ use of the word ‘sensibilité’ carries more of an emotional freight, more to do with ways of feeling than ways of thinking.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, considering his early family circumstances – the death of his father when he was two years old and the infirmity of his illiterate mother – the sense of attachment to early experience of the ‘pauvreté perdue’ is inextricably linked to the image of the mother in Camus’ early attempts at fictional writing. In *Louis Raigneard*, an early fragment ‘de l’inspiration autobiographique’ reconstituted by Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi, the ‘habitus clivé’ resulting from the hero’s literary education is given poignant expression in his perception of his growing ‘éloignement’ from his mother:

Certes il avait fait sa vie hors de sa mère. Mais s’il savait une chose, c’était bien la vanité de ce confort et de ces livres. Son intelligence, il était trop orgueilleux pour ne pas la reconnaître, mais il tenait cela pour rien au prix de ce qu’il sentait si profondément. Quelque chose dormait au fond de son âme, qui était fait du parfum de cette pauvreté infinie, qui recélait des phrases entendues il y a très longtemps...C’était cela qui valait à ses yeux. Et de tout cela sa mère était le vivant symbole. C’était là toute sa sensibilité...Et lui savait bien tout ce qui faisait sa sensibilité, c’était tel jour où il avait compris qu’il était né de sa mère, et que celle-ci ne pensait presque jamais. Il était intelligent, comme ils disaient. Et ce qui le séparait

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<sup>62</sup> ‘Cahier 1’ op.cit. p.795.

<sup>63</sup> *Littre* defines ‘sensibilité’ as ‘qualité de sentir’ ; ‘susceptibilité à l’impression des choses morales’ ; ‘sentiments d’humanité, de pitié, de tendresse’.

d'elle, c'était précisément son intelligence. Chaque livre découvert, chaque émotion de plus en plus raffiné, chaque découverte et chaque fleur les éloignait à degrés.<sup>64</sup>

Just as we have seen in Richard Hoggart's account of the life of the scholarship boy in *The Uses of Literacy*, education and new perspectives afforded by literature have led to the narrator's estrangement from the context which had nurtured him. In this case, the sense of loss is real and profound as is the recognition that it is inevitable. What is striking is that Camus, in the immediacy of his adolescence, is registering in an early attempt at fiction a similar range of feelings to the mature Hoggart looking back on his childhood. For Camus, it is the desire to re-connect with what has been lost, or to acknowledge the profound significance of his exile from it, which lies behind what he says in the 1958 *Preface to L'Envers et l'Endroit* about 'l'admirable silence d'une mère et l'effort d'un homme pour retrouver une justice ou un amour qui équilibre ce silence'.<sup>65</sup>

Another of Camus' early writing projects reflects his struggle in reconciling the urge for autobiographical self-expression and the search for an appropriate form. It is in *Les Voix du quartier pauvre*, which Camus completed in 1934 after a second attack of tuberculosis, that the poor, working-class area of Belcourt and the detail of the family circumstances of his childhood, especially the mother-son relationship, are most visibly present in this early work. Indeed, if the posthumously-published and unfinished *Le Premier Homme* is excluded from consideration, it can be argued that this is the most directly autobiographical of all his writing. The first of the 'Voices', 'la voix de la femme qui ne pensait pas' re-appears almost unchanged in *Entre Oui et Non* in *L'Envers et l'Endroit*. Similarly the second and fourth voices, 'la voix de l'homme qui était né pour mourir' and 'la voix de la vieille femme malade qu'on abandonnait pour aller au cinéma' are reproduced as two of the sections in 'L'Ironie'. However, the third voice, 'la voix qui était soulevée par la musique', does not appear in the later publication. As Roger Grenier points out 'en réécrivant, Camus n'a plus osé tout dire'.<sup>66</sup> Whatever the reason, the third voice includes the portrait of the mother's brother 'sourd, muet, méchant et bête' with whom she lives partly out of pity, partly out of fear and who prevents her from pursuing her relationship with the man she loves:

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<sup>64</sup> 'Louis Raingeard' *OCI* p.90.

<sup>65</sup> 'Préface' *OCI* p. 38.

<sup>66</sup> Roger Grenier, *Albert Camus: Soleil et ombre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987) p. 27.

C'était bien sûr par pitié qu'elle vivait près de lui. C'était aussi par crainte. Si encore il l'avait laissée vivre à sa guise ? Mais il l'empêchait de voir l'homme qu'elle aimait.<sup>67</sup>

The poignancy of the woman's situation is evoked when, after 'une affreuse rixe', she goes to see her son 'pour pleurer' :

Que faire, vraiment? Son malheur était certain. Elle avait trop peur de son frère pour le quitter. Elle le haïssait trop pour l'oublier. Il la tuerait un jour, c'était bien sûr.

Elle avait dit tout cela d'une voix morne.<sup>68</sup>

It seems that it is in the rawness of the expression of emotion, here, that Camus is touching 'le sens vrai de la vie' and the reality of his own experience. The 'intellectual' or 'philosophical' element which he is also seeking to include in his notion of what constitutes an 'œuvre d'art' is something subsequent to the directness of this expression. How this element might be incorporated, how to 'mêler les deux genres', is something with which he will continue to experiment in these early writings.

### **II.3 Evocations of home and family in *L'Envers et l'Endroit* (1937)**

Two of the five essays in *L'Envers et l'Endroit* make use of some of the material in *Les Voix du quartier pauvre* and are among the most autobiographical of all Camus' writing. These are *L'Ironie* and *Entre Oui et Non*. The third section of *L'Ironie* depicts a family of five dominated by the figure of the grandmother. The almost mute son and the infirm mother who 'pensait difficilement' are background figures, and what is recounted is focalised through the character of the younger of the two grandchildren. The autobiographical reflections are obvious. As in the two previous sections, an old person is going to die. This time, however, fear and solitude are replaced, in the case of the grandmother, by an insistence on including her family in every detail of her physical decline, even to the extent of requiring her grandchildren to assist her in carrying out her bodily functions. The emotional focus is not on the grandmother, but on the younger grandson's reactions. When his grandmother, in front of visitors and in the presence of his mother, obliges him to say that he loves his grandmother more than his mother, he experiences 'dans son coeur, un grand élan d'amour pour cette mère

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<sup>67</sup> 'Les Voix du quartier pauvre' *OC I* p.81.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* p.81.

qui se taisait toujours.’<sup>69</sup> From the perspective of the two grandchildren ‘qui étaient à l’âge...des jugements absolus, elle n’était qu’une comédienne’ (45), evidenced by her pretence at busyness at the arrival of visitors. At her death the younger grandson can feel no sadness, cannot weep because he cannot escape from the idea that he has just witnessed ‘la dernière et la plus monstrueuse des simulations de cette femme!’ (45)

In the second essay, *Entre Oui et Non*, three recollected episodes of encounters between son and mother – ‘images’ in the mind of the narrator – are recounted in the third person, linked by meditative passages in the first person. There are temporal shifts between the now of the narrator’s situation, sitting alone in an Arab café at evening, and the recollected past. A more tender nostalgia is evoked by the essay’s Proustian opening: ‘S’il est vrai que les seuls paradis sont ceux qu’on a perdus...’<sup>70</sup> (47) For Anne-Marie Amiot, this quest for the ‘paradis perdu de l’enfance’ is essentially a Romantic one and she invokes the ‘expériences romantiques de mémoire sensuelle relatées par Chateaubriand, Nerval, Baudelaire and Proust’.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the narrator begins by describing how, like Proust’s madeleine, a single detail – ‘une odeur de chambre trop longtemps fermée, le ton singulier d’un pas sur la route’ – can trigger the recollection of what has been loved. It is only love that can return us to our true selves: ‘il n’y a que l’amour qui nous rende à nous-mêmes.’ (47) In this essay, the recollection is of primal significance to the narrator, ‘car de ces heures, du fond de l’oubli, je ramène vers moi, s’est conservé surtout le souvenir intact d’une pure émotion, d’un instant suspendu dans l’éternité.’ Alone in the Arab café as night descends, the narrator hears in the distant sound of the sea ‘l’indifférence et la tranquillité de ce qui ne meurt pas’ which recalls not ‘un bonheur passé’ but ‘un étrange sentiment’. (48) Out of this indifference is born a sort of ‘chant secret’ which transports him back in time: ‘Et me voici rapatrié. Je pense à un enfant qui vécut dans un quartier pauvre.’ (48) At this point the narration switches to the third person; what is recounted is once again, as in ‘L’Ironie’, focalised through the child. Precisely the same words are used to describe the mother: ‘elle était infirme, pensait difficilement.’ (49) When she is alone, her silence is of an ‘irréparable désolation’. If the child should enter and find her thus, he is frightened. He is beginning to ‘sentir beaucoup de choses’, though he is hardly aware of his own existence. He feels pity for his mother and

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<sup>69</sup> ‘L’Envers et l’Endroit’ *OC I* p.44.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. ‘...les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu’on a perdus’, Marcel Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1927) p.12.

<sup>71</sup> A.Amiot, ‘Un romantisme corrigé, *Entre oui et non*’, *Europe.Revue de littérature mensuelle* 77: 846 (October 1999) p.86.

does not know whether this is love. She has never caressed him ‘*puisqu’elle ne saurait pas*’. He stays looking at her and feels himself estranged though conscious of her pain. She is unaware of his presence because she is deaf. This is the pivotal moment of pure emotion, suspended in time: ‘*Mais maintenant, ce silence marque un temps d’arrêt, un instant démesuré. Pour sentir cela confusément, l’enfant croit sentir dans l’élan qui l’habite, de l’amour pour sa mère.*’ (50) As night thickens and ‘*le monde s’achève...comme chaque jour*’ in the Arab café, the narrator reverts to the first person as he reflects on ‘*l’indifférence de cette mère étrange! Il n’y a que cette immense solitude du monde qui m’en donne la mesure.*’ (50) The ‘*élan qui l’habite*’ is a surge of awareness transcendent of time, which the child recognises as love for his mother. In this equation, ‘*sa mère*’ is identified with ‘*le monde*’, and ‘*indifférence*’ is seen as something which these two profoundly important presences share, in the sense that the life that they are giving the child is beyond gratitude or human gesture; it is something primal, something which simply *is*. It is surely going too far to suggest, as does Edward J. Hughes, that ‘*the twenty-two-year-old Camus who authors this intimate portrait can draw only negative conclusions from the failing relationship*’, and that ‘*emotional negativity*’ clouds the portrait of the mother.<sup>72</sup>

Hughes’ emphasis on negativity seems also to be contradicted in the depiction of a second incident from later in the son’s life, when the mother sends for him after she has been brutally attacked by a stranger. Here it is tenderness and pity which are being evoked. The mother is lying in her bed when the narrator arrives and the doctor advises him not to leave her. He lies beside her in her suffering, registering her pain and agitation. Eventually, he falls asleep ‘*non cependant sans emporter l’image désespérante et tendre d’une solitude à deux.*’ (51) Later, much later he says, he appreciates the significance of this moment: ‘*ce moment où il avait senti les liens qui l’attachaient à sa mère. Comme si elle était l’immense pitié de son cœur, répandue autour de lui, devenue corporelle...*’ The links which bind him to his mother are elemental, beyond the superficialities of gesture or utterance. This can only be expressed in an image. And it is the image, ‘*l’image désespérante et tendre*’ which he carries away with him. As David H. Walker says in his discussion of *Le Premier Homme*: ‘*the image*

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<sup>72</sup> Edward J. Hughes, ‘Autobiographical soundings in *L’Envers et l’Endroit*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, ed. by Edward J. Hughes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) pp.42-43.

is the vocabulary of that language of silence connecting the narrator to the crucial enigma of the mother.<sup>73</sup>

In another shift of narrative stance, the first person resumes in a meditative passage in which the narrator reflects that ‘il y a une vertue dangereuse dans le mot simplicité’ (51), dangerous because, from the point of view of ‘une certaine transparence de la vie’, one might wish to die because there is nothing more significant in life than the fact of death. In his most profound experience of the world it is the simplicity of this which is overwhelming: ‘Aussi, chaque fois qu’il m’a semblé éprouver le sens profond du monde, c’est sa simplicité qui m’a toujours bouleversé.’ (52) The identification of the narrator with the son is acknowledged in the shift to the personal pronoun ‘ma’ in the phrase which exemplifies this primordial simplicity: ‘Ma mère, ce soir, et son étrange indifférence.’ A starker image is recalled as he remembers the ‘flamme démente’ in the eyes of a cat who has half consumed the last dead kitten of her litter, and he reflects that ‘à un certain degré de dénuement, plus rien ne conduit à plus rien, ni l’espoir ni le désespoir ne paraissent fondés, et la vie toute entière se résume dans une image.’ (52) On this evening, it is the image of his childhood – ‘une certaine enfance’- which comes back to him, from which he can draw a ‘leçon d’amour et de pauvreté.’ It is a moment suspended in time ‘comme une intervalle entre oui et non’; ‘l’espoir’ or ‘le dégoût de vivre’ are for another time. (52)

A third encounter between the now grown-up son and the mother is recounted, once more in the third person. The son asks his mother whether he resembles his father, killed at the Battle of the Marne. But he speaks without conviction: ‘Aucun souvenir, aucune émotion. Sans doute, un homme comme tant d’autres.’ (53) It is a matter of fact and therein lies the simplicity. To the narrator it seems that ‘toute l’absurde simplicité du monde’ takes refuge in that room. But how can he separate that room from the deserted café in which he now sits? As he leaves and looks for a last time at the lights of the bay, it is not the hope of better days which comes to him but ‘une indifférence sereine et primitive à tout et à moi-même.’ He concludes: ‘Oui, tout est simple. Ce sont les hommes qui compliquent les choses.’ In stressing the need for ‘lucidité’, he aligns himself with those ‘qui préfèrent regarder leur destin dans les yeux.’ (54)

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<sup>73</sup> David H. Walker, ‘Knowing the place for the first time?’, in *Constructing Memories: Camus, Algeria and ‘Le Premier Homme’*, ed. by Peter Dunwoodie and Edward J. Hughes (Stirling, Scotland: Stirling French Publications, 1998) p. 13.

The 'je' that introduces *Entre Oui et Non* seeks to establish a direct contact with the reader. The tone is intimate, almost confessional: 'Je sais comment nommer ce quelque chose de tendre et inhumain qui m'habite aujourd'hui', 'je me souviens', 'me voici rapatrié', 'ces heures que... je ramène vers moi', 'Cela seul est vrai en moi et je le sais toujours trop tard'. (47) The repeated use of first person pronouns – 'je', 'me', 'moi', 'moi-même' – insist that this is an intense and personal communication which is being made as though for a single reader only. When the first person plural is used it is to make a generalising statement about the human condition that we as individuals might share in solidarity: 'Nous aimons le fléchissement d'un geste...' (47) It is the hour and place for such intimacies – 'Dans un café maure...c'est déjà la nuit'. (48) The scene is set for the narrator's memories to return and for a significant, personal experience to be communicated – 'le souvenir intact d'une pure émotion, d'un instant suspendu dans l'éternité.' (47)

However, at this point in the narration, in what seems to be a dissociative strategy, the character of 'un enfant qui vécut dans un quartier pauvre' (48) is introduced whose point of view, to use Genette's terminology, 'orients the narrative perspective', thereby, ostensibly, moving it away from the narrator.<sup>74</sup> Hence we may say that it is the child 'who sees' and the narrator 'who speaks'. However, a complication arises in this, the most profoundly personal part of *L'Envers et l'Endroit*, because the child is a projection of the narrator's younger self, an identification which is rendered explicit, as we saw earlier, when the narrator switches back to the first person to acknowledge 'Ma mère, ce soir, et son étrange indifférence'. (52) This is a sudden, deliberate fracture of the prevailing narrative mode. At this significant moment, Camus seems driven to break the 'pacte de lecture' in order to bear personal testimony and yet, at the same time, before and after this moment, he feels the need to exercise his craft as a writer in order to establish a narrative distance. The instinct to mask his feelings seems to be present in this, his earliest published work, for, despite all he says about the lack of objectivity in his writing, it is clear that he is here seeking to set the narrator at some distance from the experience. After the moment of personal identification, the next scene between mother and son is recounted with, it seems, deliberate artificiality, in conventional, third-person story-telling mode: 'Et c'est ainsi qu'il n'y a pas longtemps, dans une maison d'un vieux quartier, un fils est allé voir sa mère'. (52) Here, there are no

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<sup>74</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse, a study in method*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980) p.186.

particularities of place ('une maison', 'un vieux quartier'), or time ('il n'y a pas longtemps') or person ('un fils', 'sa mère'). It is as though a too close intimacy has been checked, and, although the narrative goes on to present another intimate scene between mother and son, the hesitation between proximity and distance on the part of the narrator remains a stylistic feature of this essay. Camus' remark in his letter to Jean de Maisonseul that he felt he could allow himself to 'tout dire avec toute ma passion' seems, in this respect, wide of the mark.<sup>75</sup> Edward J. Hughes sums this up admirably when he says that 'the raw exposure given to kith and kin in *L'Envers et l'Endroit* signals a complex and often reluctant autobiographer.'<sup>76</sup>

#### **II.4 *Le Premier Homme* (1994)**

Reticence can be shown to be characteristically Camusian. Having essayed these various sketches of autobiographical writing in his earliest work in pre-war Alger, this is something he studiously avoided for the next twenty years, choosing, for example, in his three major novels, *L'Étranger*, *La Peste* and *La Chute* to place the narration in the mouths of the personae of Meursault, Rieux and Clamence. He was reluctant to speak in his own name. However, a note he makes in February 1949 reveals his recognition of this and his desire to adopt a more personal style of writing:

Depuis mes premiers livres...tout mon effort a été en réalité de me dépersonnaliser (chaque fois sur un ton différent). Ensuite je pourrai parler en mon nom.<sup>77</sup>

As we have seen, his early work is characterised by an experimentation with first and third person narrative voices and we have noted occasions when the pressure of personal testimony has led to a first person intrusion into the prevailing third person narrative mode. It is perhaps ironic therefore, that in choosing to write in his own voice in *Le Premier Homme*, he chooses to be the third person narrator of the world seen through the eyes of his younger self, his central character, Jacques Cormery, whereas in the three undoubted fictions that are his three novels, he chooses narration through the very different voices of his constructed first person narrators. The extent to which this direct identification between author, narrator and principal character would have remained had Camus lived to complete the work is open to question. Any discussion of *Le Premier Homme* must first acknowledge its 'inachevé' status. Agnès Siquel, the book's Pléiade editor is surely right to insist on referring to it as *Le Premier*

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<sup>75</sup> 'Lettre à Jean de Maisonseul' *OC I* p.97.

<sup>76</sup> Edward J. Hughes, op. cit. p.49.

<sup>77</sup> 'Cahier VI' *OC IV* p.1002.



*Homme* ‘tel que nous l’avons’.<sup>78</sup> Catherine Camus believes that her father would have been less self-revelatory had he finished it:

Finally, it is obvious that my father would never have published this manuscript as it is, first for the simple reason that he had not completed it, but also because he was a very reserved man and would no doubt have masked his own feelings far more in its final version.<sup>79</sup>

Unlike Bourdieu, Camus did not have the opportunity to deny that he was in one way or another writing ‘autobiography’ though there is no doubting the book’s autobiographical character. In their authoritative book on autobiography, the Lecarmes assert that the book ‘n’est pas une autobiographie, mais c’est à coup sûr un chef d’œuvre de la littérature autobiographique’.<sup>80</sup> Equally, Agnès Spiquel considers that ‘le livre n’est pas une autobiographie’ but a novel which recounts ‘l’histoire d’une quête’, seeing in its sequencing of the undoubtedly autobiographical elements interspersed with references to ‘Le Père’, not the ‘narration d’une vie’ but a ‘remontée vers le passé’.<sup>81</sup> For the purposes of this study the book’s autobiographical character will be taken as a given and the focus will be on those sections of the book where Camus engages with the questions of social class, ‘éloignement’ and the dislocating effects of education with which we are concerned. In fact, the Lecarmes, in posing what they consider to be the ‘question centrale’ of the book, echo precisely this concern:

Comment rester fidèle au monde de la pauvreté, lequel est tout à la fois un Eden et un Enfer, quand on est sorti par les vertus de l’école laïque et par la réussite universitaire ou littéraire?<sup>82</sup>

In a very different historical and generic context from that of Bourdieu, it is nonetheless possible, in *Le Premier Homme*, to identify elements of the themes of ‘l’ascension sociale’, of ‘habitus clivé’ and of class distinction that have been noted in his sociological self-analysis. There is, for example, the question of the encouragement of a mentor. Bourdieu makes a somewhat oblique reference to the role of the proviseur of his lycée, Bernard Lamicq, in encouraging his academic success and his subsequent upward social trajectory. Camus, on the other hand, makes much more of the interventions of

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<sup>78</sup> *OC IV* p.1523.

<sup>79</sup> See Catherine Camus’ introduction to Albert Camus, *The First Man*, trans. By David Hopgood (London: Penguin Classics, 2001) pp.vi-vii.

<sup>80</sup> Jacques Lecarme and Éliane Lecarme-Tabone, *L’autobiographie* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1997) p.233.

<sup>81</sup> *OC IV* p.1523.

<sup>82</sup> Jacques Lecarme and Éliane Lecarme-Tabone op.cit p.234.

influential individuals at key moments of childhood and adolescence. In an early chapter, he describes a scene in which the mature Cormery has gone to visit his old mentor, Malan, at Saint-Brieuc. Cormery has said that with Malan he is ‘incapable d’orgueil’ and tells him why:

Parce que...lorsque j’étais très jeune, très sot et très seul (vous vous souvenez, à Alger), vous vous êtes tourné vers moi, et vous m’avez ouvert sans y paraître les portes de tout ce que j’aime en ce monde.

- Oh ! Vous êtes doué.
- Certainement. Mais aux plus doués il faut un initiateur. Celui que la vie un jour met sur votre chemin.<sup>83</sup>

This is an interesting passage to consider alongside the texts of the sociologists. In the first place it is a piece of dialogue. The drama of an encounter between two characters and the language of their exchange offers the reader a sense of actual experience, rather than a scientific analysis of something factually reported as having happened. The warmth of the human interaction is a matter of tone and is conveyed through metaphor – ‘vous m’avez ouvert sans y paraître les portes de tout ce que j’aime en ce monde’. Secondly, the passage touches on the issue of ‘giftedness’ in ‘l’ascension sociale’. In the case of Bourdieu his giftedness is taken for granted, a natural accomplishment which allows him to escape the destiny which his social origins have pre-ordained. He is an exception, a ‘miraculé’; Camus, on the other hand, in the character of Jacques Cormery, insists on the determining role of the ‘initiateur’ that chance has placed in his path. Just as Louis Germain, Camus’ primary school teacher, was instrumental in negotiating his entry into the lycée<sup>84</sup>, so the character of M. Bernard in *Le Premier Homme* is given a key role in Jacques’ academic trajectory. Having been ‘reçu’ at the lycée, from now on to be in the hands of ‘des maîtres plus savants’, Jacques bids his teacher an affectionate farewell and Camus deploys the narrator to express Jacques’ sense of the pain of separation from the world of his childhood:

...au lieu de la joie du succès, une immense peine d’enfant lui tordait le cœur, comme s’il savait d’avance qu’il venait par ce succès d’être arraché au monde innocent et chaleureux des pauvres, monde refermé sur lui-même comme une île dans la société mais où la misère tient lieu de famille et de solidarité, pour être jeté dans un monde inconnu, qui n’était pas le sien... (848-849)

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<sup>83</sup> *Le Premier Homme OC IV* p.758.

<sup>84</sup> See Olivier Todd, op.cit. p. 43. Camus famously wrote an affectionate letter of gratitude to Germain on receipt of the Nobel Prize. An exchange of letters between the two men is appended to the 1994 edition of *Le Premier Homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994) pp.371-377.

This is a passage charged with emotion ('joie', 'peine', 'tordait le cœur', 'arraché au monde innocent et chaleureux') which nonetheless evokes the tensions and contradictions noted in Bourdieu's and Hoggart's more 'scientific' analyses of the 'habitus clivé' and that move into a 'monde inconnu' in which they did not 'belong' – in Camus' terms 'qui n'était pas le sien'. From a sociological standpoint too, it is striking that Camus should, over twenty years later, re-use the figure of the 'monde des pauvres' as 'refermé sur lui-même comme une île dans la société', that we have noted in his journal entry of May 1935.

Depictions of this 'monde inconnu', this 'other' world have been noted in the discussion of the texts of Bourdieu and Hoggart given in Chapter One. Hoggart gives us an image of the 'well-polished, prosperous, cool, book-lined...world of the successful intelligent middle class'. Bourdieu refers to the 'externes', the sons of the Pau bourgeoisie:

...sortes d'étrangers un peu irréels, dans leurs vêtements apprêtés, culottes courtes un peu attardées, ou pantalons de golfe bien coupés, qui tranchaient avec nos blouses grises, et aussi dans leurs manières et leurs préoccupations, qui évoquaient toute l'évidence d'un monde inaccessible.<sup>85</sup>

It is not social envy of this 'monde inaccessible' that Camus evokes in his description of Jacques' encounter with the 'bourgeois other' at the lycée. But it is a kind of disorientation. Georges Didier is from metropolitan France, the son of an army officer from a traditional bourgeois Catholic family – 'C'était avec Didier que Jacques comprit ce qu'était une famille française moyenne'. (866) A shared taste for reading brings the two boys together in 'une sorte d'amitié très tendre'. Didier is destined for the priesthood and is intransigent in matters of faith and morality, insisting that Jacques renounce the use of bad language, something which Jacques finds easy to do when he is with him. However, 'avec les autres, il retrouvait facilement les grossièretés de la conversation', thus swapping linguistic registers between two contrasting social contexts in the way we noted Hoggart operating between home and school. The element of performativity in this construction of identity is commented on in the narration:

(Déjà se dessinait sa nature multiforme qui devait lui faciliter tant de choses et le rendre apte à parler tous les langages, à s'adapter dans tous les milieux, et à jouer tous les rôles, sauf...) (866)

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<sup>85</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*, op.cit. p.125.

His ‘nature multiforme’ – his evolving ‘habitus’ – will enable him to operate as an adept agent, playing different roles, speaking the appropriate language in a variety of different social contexts. But, at this stage in his social trajectory, Didier’s store of cultural and social capital is in marked contrast to his own. In particular, Didier brings with him a past, a personal and familial history represented by the family home in metropolitan France with its attic stuffed with family mementoes. In the face of this sense of ancestry with its attendant moral certainty and its values of duty, loyalty, *patrie*, Jacques ‘se sentait d’une autre espèce’. But rather than any feeling of social shame, Jacques is attracted to Didier precisely because of his difference. His ‘otherness’ has for Jacques the allure of the exotic, this ‘enfant de famille, de la tradition et de la religion’ being like someone returned from the tropics with a strange and incomprehensible secret. (867)

The issue of ‘social shame’ does, however, arise in Camus’ depiction of Jacques’ first few days at the lycée, and it is a question to which Camus, through the commentary of the narrator, gives particular attention. As part of a routine piece of the admission process, Jacques has to fill in a form which includes ‘profession des parents’. As his father had been killed in the war, this meant the work his mother did. He thinks ‘ménagère’ is the appropriate term, but his friend Pierre tells him that that applied to a woman who did her own housework, whereas Jacques’ mother did the cleaning for others, and the right word was ‘domestique’. Camus makes of this incident, this choice of a single word, a powerful evocation of the sudden, shameful sense of shame that engulfs Jacques: ‘Jacques se mit à écrire le mot, s’arrêta et d’un seul coup connut d’un seul coup la honte et la honte d’avoir eu honte’.<sup>86</sup> The narration goes on to comment on the significance of family background on the world’s initial judgement of a person: ‘Un enfant n’est rien par lui-même, ce sont ses parents qui le représentent’. (864) It is this judgement of the ‘world’ that Jacques has just discovered along with his own judgement of his own ‘mauvais cœur’, a judgement which brings with it an awareness of his own nature which he acknowledges with ‘rage et honte’. His reaction is, out of a ‘dur et mauvais orgueil’, ‘d’écrire d’une plume ferme le mot “domestique” sur l’imprimé’. This assertion of an obdurate pride in his own family circumstances – ‘Jacques ne désirait nullement changer d’état ni de famille’ – contrasts with the conspicuous absence of

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<sup>86</sup> The repetition of ‘d’un seul coup’ is in the text.

such a ‘fierté de classe’ in later writers’ accounts of their experience.<sup>87</sup> However, evoking an earlier period, one of the British writers already referred to – the Marxist cultural historian, Raymond Williams, writing in 1989 – makes just such a robust defence of his pre-war, working-class background in a memoir of his first experience of the élite environment of the University of Cambridge:

If I then say that what I found was an extraordinarily coarse, pushing, name-ridden group, I shall be told that I am showing class-feeling, class-envy, class resentment. That I showed class-feeling is not in any doubt. All I would insist on is that nobody fortunate to grow up in a good home, in a genuinely well-mannered and sensitive community, could for a moment envy these loud, competitive and deprived people.<sup>88</sup>

Though, unlike Camus, Williams makes no acknowledgement of any sense of social shame, the question of ‘envy’ of the more well-off is something which both writers absolutely repudiate. For Camus social shame does not lead to social envy. He concludes the account of Jacques’ moment of recognition by setting the two concepts side by side: ‘Comment faire comprendre d’ailleurs qu’un enfant pauvre puisse avoir parfois honte sans jamais rien envier?’

Nevertheless, the cultural difference between home and school is shown to become increasingly problematic for Jacques. Something akin to Bourdieu’s ‘décalage’ is expressed metaphorically in this literary (rather than sociological) text when the narrator remarks of Jacques’ home: ‘dans cette maison...ce que Jacques ramenait du lycée était inassimilable, et le silence grandissait entre sa famille et lui’. (863) Jacques’ home and family are characterised in the narration by a succession of cultural negatives: ‘Ni l’image, ni la chose écrite, ni l’information parlée, ni la culture superficielle qui naît de la banale conversation ne les avaient atteints’. It is a home without newspapers, books or radio, stocked only with objects of immediate utility. Without in any way condemning his family background, Jacques is nonetheless shown to be aware of its ‘singularité’ in the context of the lycée, and it is something he will not speak about there. There is an ‘invincible pudeur qui lui fermait la bouche sur ce sujet’.

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<sup>87</sup> The disappearance of the ‘traditional’ French working class and its sense of identity – e.g. its adherence to the Parti Communiste – is a theme which features strongly, as we shall see, in both Eribon’s *Retour à Reims* and in his more recent work, *La Société comme verdict* (Paris: Fayard, 2013).

<sup>88</sup> Raymond Williams, *What I came to say* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989) p.6.

The separation of the two worlds which Jacques uneasily inhabits is given physical representation in Camus' depiction of the significance of the newly-opened library in the lives of Jacques and his friend, Pierre. This occurs in the penultimate section of the book entitled 'Jeudis et vacances'. Significantly, the new library is situated 'à mi-chemin' between the 'quartier pauvre' where Jacques lives and the 'quartiers plus distingués' at the 'frontière entre les deux univers (l'un poussiéreux et sans arbres...l'autre où les fleurs et les arbres apportaient le vrai luxe de ce monde.' (890) It is here that Jacques and Pierre 'connurent leurs émotions les plus profondes', but Camus has not the time to elaborate at this point in his writing, noting in parentheses ('dont il n'est pas temps encore de parler, dont il sera parlé etc.'). But there can be no doubt that these profound emotions would include an awareness of being on the cusp of a new world opening out away from the confines of their own poor social milieu. Indeed, the library is described as 'un espace et des horizons multiples qui...les enlevaient à la vie étroite du quartier'. (891) The tensions involved are commented on by the narrator: 'Ainsi, pendant des années, la vie de Jacques se partagea inégalement entre deux vies qu'il ne pouvait relier l'une à l'autre.' (893) However, Camus gives lyrical reign to the boys' excitement in finding in the freshly-opened book 'quelque phrase...qui les renforcerait dans leur joyeux et avide espoir' and to the sensual pleasure of handling the books themselves. (892)

The emotional strain in the mother-son relationship that we noted earlier in discussing *Louis Raigneard* – the growing 'éloignement' which is the consequence of the son's increasing enchantment with the world of books – is rendered poignantly by Camus in the description of a moment where the illiterate, uncommunicative mother looks down on her son reading:

Catherine Cormery se penchait par-dessus son épaule. Elle regardait le double rectangle sous la lumière, la rangée régulière des lignes; elle aussi respirait l'odeur, et parfois elle passait sur la page ses doigts gourds et ridés par l'eau des lessives comme si elle essayait de mieux connaître ce qu'était un livre, d'approcher d'un peu plus près ces signes mystérieux, incompréhensibles pour elle, mais où son fils trouvait si souvent et durant des heures une vie qui lui était inconnue et d'où il revenait avec ce regard qu'il posait sur elle comme sur une étrangère. (893)

The mother is shown, here, passing her uncomprehending hands over the object which is separating her son from her, the estrangement encapsulated in the word 'étrangère' which concludes the passage. This estrangement is manifested physically and emotionally in Camus' description of the tender gesture which closes this scene: 'La main déformée

caressait doucement la tête du garçon qui ne réagissait pas, elle soupirait, et puis allait s'asseoir, loin de lui.' (893) Such lyrical passages are a characteristic feature of *Le Premier Homme* and we are reminded of Camus' statement in the 1958 preface to *L'Envers et l'Endroit* that the work that he dreams of accomplishing will speak of 'une certaine forme d'amour'.

But if *Le Premier Homme* includes a lyrical evocation of 'une pauvreté perdue' and can, in some ways, be seen as an act of homage to the poor, to Camus' 'les miens', it nonetheless does not shrink from exposing the brutal reality of the condition itself. In his 'Avant-propos' in 1953 to the re-publication of his friend, Louis Guilloux's, first novel, *La Maison du peuple*, Camus refers to the D.H.Lawrence of *Sons and Lovers* as an example of a writer, born into poverty, who both reveres his place of origin and condemns its prevailing condition:

D.H.Lawrence rapportait souvent à sa naissance dans une famille de mineurs ce qu'il y avait de meilleur en lui-même et dans son œuvre. Mais Lawrence et ceux qui lui ressemblent savent que, si l'on peut prêter une grandeur à la pauvreté, l'asservissement qui l'accompagne presque toujours ne se justifiera jamais.<sup>89</sup>

Thus Lawrence believed that the best of himself and his work derived from his birth into a poor mining family, but that in no way condones the abject condition of poverty itself. Six years later in his drafting of *Le Premier Homme*, Camus returns to this theme. There is, for example, the passage where Uncle Ernest attacks 'Monsieur Antoine' and the narrator remarks:

Longtemps Jacques en voulut à son oncle, sans trop savoir ce que précisément il pouvait lui reprocher. Mais en même temps, il savait qu'on ne pouvait lui en vouloir et que la pauvreté, l'infirmité, le besoin élémentaire où toute sa famille vivait, s'ils n'excusaient pas tout, empêchent en tout cas de rien condamner chez ceux qui en sont victimes. Ils se faisaient du mal les uns aux autres sans le vouloir et simplement parce qu'ils étaient chacun pour l'autre les représentants de la nécessité besogneuse et cruelle où ils vivaient. (815)

Thus poverty may not excuse everything, but should prevent any ready condemnation of those who suffer under it. There is a clear distinction between the social and economic condition itself and those who are its victims. While Camus does not deny poverty's brutalising effects, he insists on the stoical strength and dignity of those he is portraying.

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<sup>89</sup> Louis Guilloux, *La Maison du peuple* (Paris: Grasset, 1953) p.11.

Unlike Georges Didier's bourgeois family whose name and historical significance are inscribed materially in family property of one kind and another in metropolitan France, the poor of Algeria, who Camus considers 'mon peuple', are anonymous, their existence unacknowledged and at risk of leaving no trace. *Le Premier Homme* may be seen as an attempt to redress this imbalance; by bearing witness, to rescue the poor from what Alain Finkielkraut calls 'cet anonymat fondateur'.<sup>90</sup> As Camus says in one of his notes included in the appendix to the published edition: 'Arracher cette famille pauvre au destin des pauvres qui est de disparaître de l'histoire sans laisser des traces'.<sup>91</sup> For Finkielkraut, the book is an 'œuvre rédemptrice' in which the author returns to his own past in order to introduce 'les muets' into the world of words through literature. In doing so, he argues, Camus is perhaps answering a need to expiate a sense of guilt at having abandoned his home, his 'terreau', in order to make his name in the wider world. Similarly, the Lecarmes identify his need to settle his account: '...Albert Camus, non sans un sentiment de culpabilité, tient à payer ses dettes envers ses parents pauvres'.<sup>92</sup> Certainly, as we have seen, Camus' repeated use of the word 'équilibre' indicates his quest to balance his present with his past, to find an equivalence between who he is and what he says and, in doing so, find 'une justice ou une amour' which will equal the 'admirable silence' of the mother.

It is towards the figure of the mother that the narrative is inexorably returning. If there is a question of expiation, for Camus, it is solely of the mother that pardon can be demanded. The Annexes to *Le Premier Homme* include Camus' notes and sketches for further sections of the work. There are several references to 'Maman' which throw further light on what Camus means when he refers to her 'admirable silence' – a patient stillness and a certainty set against the son's erring quests away from her:

Maman. La vérité est que, malgré tout mon amour, je n'avais pas pu vivre au niveau de cette patience aveugle, sans phrases, sans projets...Et j'avais couru le monde, édifié, créé, brûlé les êtres. Mes jours avaient été remplis à déborder – mais rien ne m'avait rempli le cœur comme...<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Alain Finkielkraut, ed., *Ce que peut la littérature* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006) p.54.

<sup>91</sup> 'Notes et plans' *OC IV* p.930.

<sup>92</sup> Jacques Lecarme and Éliane Lecarme-Tabone op. cit. p.234.

<sup>93</sup> 'Notes et plans' op. cit. p.936.



Camus' frequent use of the word 'vérité' in these notes suggests that the writer's return to his origins has led him to an awareness of certain abiding truths which he sets against his own deviation from them, and it is for this that he must seek pardon:

Il savait qu'il allait repartir, se tromper à nouveau, oublier ce qu'il savait. Mais ce qu'il savait justement, c'est que la vérité de sa vie était là dans cette pièce...Il fuirait sans doute cette vérité. Qui peut vivre avec sa vérité? Mais il suffit de savoir qu'elle est là...(936)

His parting from this place where truth resides is seen as a flight which will inevitably be repeated: 'Il fuirait sans doute cette vérité'. It is for this he must ask pardon: 'Non, je ne suis pas un bon fils: un bon fils est celui qui reste. Moi j'ai couru le monde, je l'ai trompée avec les vanités...' (943)

Bourdieu ends his sketch for an auto-analysis by asking himself 'Pourquoi et surtout pour qui ai-je écrit?' and speaks of providing the reader, as a point of professional honour (as a sociologist), with the sort of information he would have liked to find when he was trying to understand writers or artists of the past.<sup>94</sup> One of the last entries in the Annexes to *Le Premier Homme* is entitled 'Confession à la mère pour finir.' This provides a very different answer to Bourdieu's question: 'Tu ne me comprends pas, et pourtant tu es la seule qui puisse me pardonner.' The first half of the book – 'Recherche du père' – has been taken up with the quest for the father, but Camus has never known his father and has no sense of culpability towards him. Of whom else could he seek pardon? A queried marginal annotation in the manuscript referring to 'son ami Didier' is noted by the *Pléiade* editors. This is a reference to Camus' bourgeois schoolfriend, Georges Didier, who had become a priest. In his notebook for 20 July 1957 Camus writes: 'Une lettre du Supérieur de Georges Didier m'annonce sa mort dans un accident d'automobile en Suisse'.<sup>95</sup> In his letter of reply Camus contrasts Didier's faith and 'espérance' with his own lack of those things: '...pour ceux qui comme moi l'ont aimé sans pouvoir partager cette espérance, le chagrin est entier. Il reste, vous avez raison, le souvenir et l'exemple.'<sup>96</sup> It is surely the moral example of Georges Didier that Camus is recalling, but he is now dead, so that it is only from the silent, uncommunicative mother that he can ask forgiveness:

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<sup>94</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* op. cit. p.140.

<sup>95</sup> *OC IV* p.1258.

<sup>96</sup> *OC IV* p.1312.

Un seul être pouvait me pardonner, mais je n'ai jamais été coupable envers lui et je lui ai donné l'entier de mon cœur, et cependant j'aurais pu aller vers lui, je l'ai souvent fait en silence, mais il est mort et je suis seul. Toi, seule peux le faire, mais tu ne me comprends pas et ne peux me lire. Aussi je te parle, je t'écris, à toi, à toi seule, et, quand ce sera fini, je demanderai pardon sans autre explication et tu me souriras...(944)

Camus is writing in search of reconciliation and acceptance and forgiveness, but as the shift from present to future tense, and the move away from language to gesture, in the last sentence indicate, how can this be reciprocated, how can this come from someone who does not understand him, from his mother whose responses he must himself construct?

### Chapter III: Annie Ernaux

*Depuis le début, j'ai été prise dans une tension, un déchirement même, entre la langue littéraire, celle que j'ai étudiée, aimée, et la langue d'origine, la langue de la maison, de mes parents, la langue des dominés, celle dont j'ai eu honte ensuite, mais qui restera toujours en moi-même.*

*Tout au fond, la question est: comment, en écrivant, ne pas trahir le monde dont je suis issue.*

Annie Ernaux, *Retour à Yvetot*<sup>97</sup>

#### III.1 Literary-historical context

Two of the texts by Ernaux which deal most explicitly with the theme of 'l'ascension sociale' and are therefore of most concern to this study are *La Place* published in 1983, and *Une femme* published in 1989. It is one of the accidents of French literary history that the ahistorical issue of Camus' *Le Premier Homme* in 1994 should fall five years after these publications and it is necessary to give some consideration to what might be called the 'cultural moment' of its appearance alongside the texts of Ernaux.

Though Camus' 'roman autobiographique' had a long gestation, much of it was written in 1959, the year before the accident which killed him.<sup>98</sup> This was the era of Nathalie Sarraute's *L'Ère du soupçon* (1956), of Simone de Beauvoir's *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (1958), an era of radical literary experimentation exemplified most notably in the work of such writers as Beckett, Marguerite Duras and the *nouveaux romanciers*. Yet *Le Premier Homme* did not appear until 1994, over ten years after Annie Ernaux's *La Place* (1983) and nearly twenty years after Serge Doubrovsky had introduced the term 'autofiction' in his prefatory remarks to *Fils* (1977). Thus its appearance in 1994 was into a much changed literary landscape from that of its inception. This is not to suggest that Camus, as a novelist, was in any limiting sense a 'creature of his time' – each of his three novels can be shown to be markedly different and original – and, in any case, it is clear that *Le Premier Homme* marked, for him, a significant change of direction towards a more personal articulation, as though freed from the constraints of the philosophical discourses (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, *L'homme révolté*) which accompanied his earlier work.

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<sup>97</sup> Annie Ernaux, *Retour à Yvetot* (Paris: Éditions de Mauconduit, 2013) p.31.

<sup>98</sup> For a discussion of the long gestation of *Le Premier Homme* see Albert Camus, *OC IV* pp.1510-1514.

It is, perhaps, this return to the ‘personal’ that is the most illuminating notion when one seeks to make sense of the literary currents discernible in the years leading up to the appearance of Ernaux’s *La Place* and, ten years later, *Le Premier Homme*. Dominique Viart begins his article on *Le roman français contemporain* by registering a radical shift – ‘une profonde mutation esthétique’ – in the late 1970s.<sup>99</sup> Arguing that formal experimentation had reached a point of extreme radicality in the preceding decades, he identifies a movement away from the ‘enfermement solipsiste’, which carried with it the risk of ‘illisibilité’ and a divorce from the preoccupations of the reader, towards a reunion with the ‘récit’ and ‘le plaisir narratif’. Literature, declared ‘intransitive’ by Roland Barthes, once more concerned itself with objects – ‘traite à nouveau de l’homme et du lien social’ – without, however, abandoning the critical lucidity which two decades of rigorous textual examination had bequeathed. Hence there was no question of a simple return to traditional forms. The capacity of the realist novel to deliver the ‘real’ had been fatally undermined, nor could the historical novel in its traditional form adequately register the flux and flow of history. Traditional styles of writing autobiography or ‘le roman psychologique’ could not register the complexity of a fragmented and unstable subject. New forms were required to respond to new necessities.

In this context, Viart identifies the return of the subject as the first manifestation of this change of direction. From the second half of the 1970s, writers, recognised for their formal experimentation, sought new strategies for an ‘écriture de soi’ which avoided the well-known pitfalls of conventional autobiography. Barthes in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975) chose the form of a dictionary, Perec lists of socio-cultural preferences in *Je me souviens* (1978), or the intertwining of the fictional and the factual in *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* (1975). In 1977, Serge Doubrovsky in *Fils* proposed the word ‘autofiction’ for a ‘fiction d’événements et de faits strictement réels’. For Viart, the subsequent widespread critical use of the term ‘autofiction’ is problematic because it is never precisely defined and covers a range of diverse practices. He cites its proximity to the emergence of ‘la nouvelle autobiographie’ in the 1980s, referring *inter alia* to Robbe-Grillet’s *Le Miroir qui revient* (1984), Marguerite Duras’ *L’Amant* (1984) and Nathalie Sarraute’s *Enfance* (1983). None of these writers, according to Viart, transform their way of writing, but they each, at this point,

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<sup>99</sup> Viart, Dominique, ‘ROMAN-Le roman français contemporain’ *Encyclopædia Universalis* <<http://universalis.fr/encyclopedie/roman-le-roman-français-contemporain>> [accessed 23 May 2014].

turn their attention towards a more personal subject matter, and this inflexion signifies an evolution in aesthetic concerns for a new generation to explore in its own way.

Viart identifies the interrogation of ‘antériorité’, particularly of family origin, as one of the ways in which writers have managed an ‘écriture de soi’ without falling into the trap of attempting the kind of literary exploration of the self which psychoanalysis has rendered impossible. It is in this context that Annie Ernaux’s writing in the 1980s can be placed. In *La Place* (1983) and *Une femme* (1988) Ernaux attempts a ‘récit quasi-ethnographique’ of her own origins, staying as close as possible to factual accuracy and developing an ‘écriture plate’ to convey as objectively as possible and without literary flourish the reality of her parents’ existence. Viart notes a similar concern with origins in Pierre Bergounioux’s *La Maison rose* (1987) and *L’Orphelin* (1992) in which the author’s own family history is the context for a reflection encompassing sociological, political and geographical perspectives. Viart includes these texts of Ernaux and Bergounioux in a category of ‘enquêtes familiales’ which since the 1980s have shown many variations. He cites the ‘ironie amusée’ of Jean Rouaud in *Les Champs d’honneur* (1990), the ‘pudeur émue’ of Charles Juliet in *Lambeaux* (1995) with its account of the author’s two mothers, one biological, one adoptive, and the work of Richard Millet and Yves Ravey. Whatever the variation, Viart insists that these ‘enquêtes familiales’ adopt the same narrative position: that of a ‘restitution inquiète’ of what was, and a concern to reconnect with a past ‘mal transmis’ which is also often conceived as a homage. It is easy to see how Camus’ *Le Premier Homme* may be taken to fall into this category. For Viart, despite its posthumous appearance in 1994, it can be seen to reinforce an insistent phenomenon which is the concern of contemporary writers such as Pierre Pachet in *Autobiographie de mon père* (1987) and Leïla Sebbar in *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* (2003).

It is thus possible to establish a kind of filiation which connects Ernaux and Camus across the generations and supports the idea of a continuum in which Bourdieusian perspectives on ‘l’ascension sociale’ can provide a framework for analysis, and in which the later work of Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis can be accommodated.

Bruno Blanckeman provides another perspective on the return to the personal in ‘De l’autobiographie aux récits de soi’ in Part III, ‘Retours critiques et interrogations

postmodernes' of the Michèle Touret *Histoire*.<sup>100</sup> He identifies two principal models of 'récits de soi' which have emerged since the 1970s. The first model he describes as 'autofictionnel', the exploration of 'le moi virtuel' where the writer presents the self as an 'other' (following Paul Ricœur's *Soi-même comme un autre*, 1989). The second model he describes as 'transpersonnel' where the writer researches the self through another person – a parent, an ancestor, some significant figure in the development of a character or a social trajectory. Both models raise questions about identity both in ontological terms (the human subject between identity and alterity) and in aesthetic terms (literature in relation to other disciplines: psychoanalysis for the 'autofictionnel' model, ethnography for the 'transpersonnel' model). In discussing the first, the 'autofictionnel' model, Blanckeman refers, among others, to Doubrovsky, Georges Perec, Patrick Modiano, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Philippe Sollers, Hervé Guibert and Louis-René des Forêts. But it is the second model, the 'transpersonnel' which is most relevant to a discussion of Annie Ernaux and the writers associated with the idea of a Bourdieusian heritage. Blanckeman distinguishes two principal variations in the 'transpersonnel' model – 'le modèle généalogique' and 'le modèle ethnographique'. In the first he includes writers such as Pierre Bergounioux, Richard Millet and Jean Rouaud referred to earlier. This category would also surely include Camus, whose *Le Premier Homme* begins with a section entitled 'Recherche du père'. The second category – 'le modèle ethnographique' – of course brings us to Annie Ernaux.

'Le modèle ethnographique' has more of a sociological orientation, the writer's own experience used as 'témoignage' of the human condition, not in a metaphysical sense but in a way which is 'strictement pragmatique'. Such writing attests to a personal situation which is also constitutive of 'la vie communautaire'. The act of writing involves the sinking of the subject into a 'mode impersonnel', using the self solely in order to bring into focus 'éléments de connaissance collectifs'. The 'Moi' is of no interest in itself, but only as it connects with what is representative. This writing targets 'le sujet commun' which at a given moment registers at the interaction between the 'intime' and the 'culturel'. Thus *La Place* begins with the death of Ernaux's father, *L'Événement* with her experience of abortion, while *Les Années* recounts her life since the Liberation. Such writing is seen to be 'une étude dépersonnalisante qui emprunte sa démarche à la sociologie'. Blanckeman's characterisation of this writing is worth giving in full :

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<sup>100</sup> Michèle Touret, ed., *Histoire de la littérature française du XXe siècle*, Tome II-après 1940 (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008) pp. 480-491.

L'écriture limite autant que possible l'effet de style singulier et la dérive romanesque, mais saisit à l'économie des traits d'époque, des arrière-plans significatifs, un environnement culturel, des valeurs historiques implicites liées à une micro-époque (années 1950 ou temps de l'enfance, années 1960 ou la découverte de l'âge adulte, années 1990 ou temps de la maturité). Acte de témoignage réfléchi, elle semble désinvestir l'auteur de son existence propre en refusant toute expansion anecdotique autonome, tout traitement pittoresque d'un 'moi' singulier, recomposé en carton-pâte de la mémoire.<sup>101</sup>

It is perhaps useful thus to bring Camus and Ernaux into the same area of consideration. Using Blanckeman's categories, both *Le Premier Homme* and *La Place* can be seen as examples of the transpersonal model of 'écriture de soi', while the distinction between the genealogical and the ethnographic helps to define the distinction between the autobiographical novel and Ernaux's charting of a course 'au-dessous de la littérature'<sup>102</sup>. Equally Dominique Viart's identification of a category of 'enquêtes familiales' provides a common context in which comparisons, however ahistorical, can form part of an analysis of 'l'ascension sociale' and the return to origins as reflected in the texts of Camus, Ernaux and the writers of the Bourdieusian heritage.

### **III.2 Definitions**

Annie Ernaux is a much more public writer than Albert Camus. The appearance of the four volumes of the *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* edition of the works of Camus in 2006 and 2008 has given readers privileged access to a hinterland of previously unpublished 'private' material – the notebooks, sketches and drafts – that lies behind the texts which appeared during Camus' lifetime. As we have seen, we have thus come to know something about Camus' intentions and preoccupations as a writer. If we recall Catherine Camus' remark that her father was a very private person, this may seem something of an invasion into an area which Camus would not have wished to make public. In contrast, Annie Ernaux is notable for the public articulation of her concerns as a writer, her public profile meaning that she is literally in dialogue with her readership. This is reflected in the generous manner in which she has responded to the questions of academic researchers as well as in the publication of texts such as *L'Écriture comme un couteau* (2003) and, more recently, *Le vrai lieu* (2014) and

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<sup>101</sup> Touret op.cit. p. 489.

<sup>102</sup> Ernaux herself proposes the terms 'récit auto-socio-biographique' and 'récit transpersonnel'. See Philippe Gasparini, *Est-il Je ?* (Paris: Seuil, 2004) fn. p.310.

*Retour à Yvetot* (2014) in which she has responded to questions from her interviewers. In 2014 a major conference under the auspices of the Centre international de Cerisy at which Ernaux was herself present has led to the publication of the proceedings under the title *Annie Ernaux: le temps et la mémoire*.<sup>103</sup> Whereas, so far in this study, a good deal has been inferred from what we have tried to show as implicit in the Camus texts under consideration, in the case of Ernaux, much about her intentions and writerly strategies is rendered explicit by the commentaries of the author herself.

At an early stage in the series of interviews with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet about her writing published as *L'écriture comme un couteau*, Annie Ernaux makes clear her dissatisfaction with terms commonly used in such discussions. She dismisses 'œuvre' and 'écrivain' as terms 'pour les autres', closed expressions for literary manuals after all the writing has been accomplished. She prefers 'écriture', 'écrire', 'faire des livres' as more accurately representing the activity in which she is engaged when she is at work.<sup>104</sup> It is, of course, not surprising that such linguistic precision should be important to a writer, but Ernaux's desire for exactness seems particularly illuminating when it comes to questions of genre. She acknowledges, for example, that there is a generic distinction to be made between her first three books, *Les armoires vides* (1974), *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* (1977) and *La femme gelée* (1981), described as 'romans', and 'une autre forme' which she introduced with *La Place* (1983). She reluctantly accepts that this form might be described as 'récit autobiographique' inasmuch as the 'je' of the text can be identified with the name of the author on the cover, that all 'fictionnalisation' is avoided, and that the events are recorded, unless through error of memory, truthfully in every detail.<sup>105</sup> Yet she finds the term unsatisfactory because, whilst it recognises the radical difference in the 'posture d'écriture et de lecture' between this new form and that of the novelist, it indicates nothing about the scope and structure of the text. Worse it imposes a reductive image of the author 'writing about herself' which is clearly not what she is about in texts like *La Place*, *Une femme* (1988), and *La Honte* (1997), which might, more properly, be termed 'auto-socio-biographiques' where 'il s'agit moins de dire le "moi" ou de le "retrouver" que de se perdre dans une réalité plus vaste, une culture, une condition, une douleur etc.' (23) The generic hybridity of *La*

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<sup>103</sup> Francine Best and others, eds., *Annie Ernaux: le temps at la Mémoire* (Paris: Stock, 2014).

<sup>104</sup> Annie Ernaux, *L'écriture comme un couteau* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011) p.17. Page numbers of further references to this book are given in brackets after the citation.

<sup>105</sup> Thus fulfilling the classic definition of Philippe Lejeune. See P. Lejeune *Le Pacte autobiographique*, 2nd edn (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996) p.18.



*Place* and *Une femme*, their mixture of biography, autobiography and ethnography, is reflected in the working title Ernaux used for *La Place* during the process of writing it – *Éléments pour une ethnologie familiale*. Siobhán McIlvanney comments:

In them, we find a third-person narrated and a first person narrating subject, leading to a fusion of the biographical and the autobiographical, despite the narrating subject's endeavours to dissociate them. The autobiographical is contained through emphasis on the biographical, which is in turn contained through emphasis on the ethnographical, in that, while the narrator's motivation for writing the work is acutely personal, it is the representative aspects of her parents' existence which she wishes to portray, the characteristics they have in common with those belonging to the same stratum of French society.<sup>106</sup>

In response to a later question from Jeannet she explains that she wishes to avoid any consideration of 'genre' which she sees as an unhelpful 'méthode de classification'. She prefers the idea of 'form' which she sees as being inseparable from 'content', agreeing with Flaubert that 'chaque œuvre à faire porte sa poétique en soi, qu'il faut trouver'. (53)

### **III. 3 The problem of form**

However, finding the appropriate form can be inherently problematic, a complicated and apparently contradictory process which is illustrated in what Ernaux has to say about her first ventures as a writer. Though written in the first person, Ernaux asserts that, for her, *Les armoires vides* and *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* are unquestionably novels in their intention and their structure – they are not even 'autofictions'. At that stage in her career as a writer all her intention was to 'faire de la littérature' and, for her at that time, this involved 'une transfiguration de la réalité'; she was not seeking protection from fiction in order to mask her own 'identity', nor indeed in order to spare the feelings of those close to her.<sup>107</sup> She had considered using a third person narration, but decided on the 'je' because, within the fictional framework, she wished to undertake an 'anamnèse' of her own 'déchirure sociale' in moving as the daughter of 'épiciers-cafetiers' via private school to the world of 'études supérieures'. And it is her own experience of abortion which is used in the context of the fiction to trigger the flashback. Thus, as far as the content of the novel is concerned, she is not engaged in a

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<sup>106</sup> Siobhán McIlvanney, *Annie Ernaux: the return to origins* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001) p.88.

<sup>107</sup> Ernaux points out that her mother suffered enormously in reading *Les armoires vides*, but she had 'joué le jeu', pretending that all was fictitious, and was, besides, enormously proud of her daughter's arrival as an 'écrivain'.

metamorphosis of reality; on the contrary, she is plunging into it ‘avec une grande intrépidité’. However, she points out that her clear, initial novelistic intention allows her the right to alter names and places, and to introduce new characters. Ernaux considers *Ce qu’ils disent ou rien* to be even more of a novel than *Les armoires vides*, though the proximity of the narrator’s name, Anne, to her own suggests ‘un besoin de lancer des signes autobiographiques’. For her it is truly a novel because she had the sensation in writing it of losing herself in the story, of becoming once again a fifteen year old girl, combining her own recollections with the observations she has made of her pupils as a teacher. Ernaux now sees her third book, *La femme gelée*, as a text which marks a transition towards her abandonment of fiction ‘au sens traditionnel’. Though the ‘je’ of the narration is anonymous, the reader is invited to believe it belongs to the author. The book reflects her own experience of ‘le rôle féminin’, and ‘la remémoration du parcours de femme’ is written ‘sur le mode autobiographique’ so that, despite its fictionality, no-one on its appearance read it as a novel but as a ‘récit autobiographique’. Ernaux was indifferent to this aspect of the book’s reception; for her, clearly, questions of generic distinction are beside the point: ‘À cette époque, en 1981 ... je me posais beaucoup de questions d’écriture et je ne confondais plus littérature et roman, littérature et transfiguration du réel. J’avais d’ailleurs cessé de définir la littérature. Aujourd’hui, je ne la définis non plus, je ne sais pas ce qu’elle est.’ (29)

#### **III.4 Style and social class : ‘l’écriture du réel’**

The consequences inherent in the displacements associated with post-war social mobility seem to be treated more seriously, less ironically, in France than in Britain. The relative detachment of, for example, the wry humour of Alan Bennett, the observational satire of Mike Leigh or the social commentaries of Richard Hoggart contrasts with the much more *engagé* posture of writers like Annie Ernaux and Didier Eribon. The French writers are much angrier, their language considerably more emotive. Though the idea of social shame (‘la honte sociale’) is certainly not absent from British writing of the period, it tends to be treated more dispassionately or humorously, as a matter of fact. English equivalents of words like ‘transfuge’ and ‘trahir’ are less likely to occur outside the context of later British writing which reflects the particularities of the tensions involved in immigrant communities (especially the second generation’s experience of being caught between two cultures). ‘Transfuge’, according to *Littré*, even in its figurative use, definitely carries the meaning of deserting one’s own side (‘drapeau’, ‘parti’) and going over to the other side (‘ennemi’, ‘parti

contraire’). Hence, when Annie Ernaux uses the term it is associated with a ‘sentiment de trahison de ma classe sociale d’origine’ (49) and with ‘culpabilité’ (57). She agrees with Jean Genet that ‘la culpabilité est un formidable moteur d’écriture’ and that it is ‘définitive’, the basis of her own writing. And it is in her writing that she finds the best means of expiating her sense of guilt and of demonstrating a political commitment: ‘J’ai l’impression que l’écriture est ce que je peux faire le mieux, dans mon cas, dans ma situation de transfuge, comme acte politique et comme “don”’. (57)

It is perhaps this idea of ‘giving back’ something that she owes to her origins which lies behind the stylistic choices she is called upon to make when she essays a reconstitution of her father’s life in *La Place*. She cannot escape her own consciousness of her ‘transfuge’, of her now having ‘une activité “luxueuse”’ – ‘quel plus grand luxe en effet de pouvoir consacrer l’essentiel de sa vie à l’écriture’. From such a position, how can one find a language and a style appropriate to the presentation in writing of a radically different – even ‘opposed’ – social context? And how can a focus be maintained objectively on the figure of the father when the writer, herself, is so closely implicated in his ‘story’? It is as if her writing is an act of solidarity, yet an act of solidarity in which she must efface herself. The choice of an appropriate style is thus problematic, and is a political as much as an aesthetic consideration.

Gérard Mauger touches on this problem when he asks whether an autobiography can be both ‘littéraire’ and ‘d’en bas’, and cites Bourdieu’s comment that ‘les classes dominées ne parlent pas, elles sont parlées’.<sup>108</sup> He concludes that it is problematic for children of the working class like Annie Ernaux or Richard Hoggart – ‘les intellectuels de première génération’ – to write about their childhood because their social advancement has excluded them from the spaces they seek to describe, or at least it obliges them to describe such spaces using means which are at odds with what is being described: ‘un code étranger à celui que leur témoignage donne à lire’. Mauger is suggesting here that such writing must necessarily be ‘literary’ because the authors have joined a bourgeois world of sophisticated language use from which there is no escape. Language in its written form is seen to be alien to the working-class milieux of the writers’ origins, so how can it be used to convey its ‘reality’? In this perspective the employment of a particular linguistic register specifies a particular kind of

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<sup>108</sup> Gérard Mauger, ‘Les autobiographies littéraires. Objets et outils de recherche sur les milieux populaires’ *Politix* 7. 27 (1994), 32-44.

discourse and a particular kind of stance towards what is being described, because each register enables, prevents or imposes meaning.<sup>109</sup> At the same time, choice of register designates a particular category of ‘destinataires’ defined by their mastery of a particular code. For Mauger, Ernaux’s evocation of the ‘mots de la tribu’ is seen first of all as a ‘procédé mnémotechnique’ in her ‘recherche du temps perdu’, but it is also seen to be underlining the problem of translating into the ‘mise en scène littéraire’ the ‘langue maternelle’. Mauger quotes Claude Grignon’s question: ‘Comment faire passer le parler populaire, langue orale par excellence, dans cette langue doublement écrite qu’est la langue littéraire?’

Frédéric-Yves Jeannet’s question to Annie Ernaux is pertinent here:

Qu’est-ce qui a motivé cet abandon d’une écriture plus littéraire, quoique d’un style familier, au profit d’une autre écriture que je qualifierais de ‘clinique’, que certains nomment ‘blanche’, et que vous nommez ‘plate’ dans *La Place* elle-même? (32)

In response, Ernaux explains that everything about *La Place* – its form, its content, its voice – was born out of the pain she endured as an adolescent when she began to grow away from her father, the former workman, subsequently *patron* of a small café-épicerie. She cannot give this pain a name – it is a mixture of guilt, incomprehension and revolt which leads her to ask why her father doesn’t read, or why he has coarse manners (‘des manières frustes’ as they said in novels). To this pain, of which she is ashamed and which could not be admitted to anyone, is added the pain of having lost him just after she had realised his dream for her of ‘ascension sociale’, of her entering into ‘l’autre monde’ (for ‘gens modeste’) of the highly-educated *agrégée*. Her quest was to find a way of writing about her father’s social trajectory from ‘paysan’ to ‘petit commerçant’ in a way which was equivalent to the living memory of that pain – ‘faire un livre juste, correspondant au souvenir vivant de cette douleur’.<sup>110</sup> But how could she do this from within the camp of ‘l’ennemi’? (She quotes Genet’s reference to the ‘langue de l’ennemi’, the ‘savoir écrire “volé” aux dominants’, and admits that she continues to feel that she has ‘conquis le savoir intellectuel par effraction’.) How could she find a language which did not betray (‘trahir’) her father and the world of her origins, that world of the ‘dominés’ which continued to exist?

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<sup>109</sup> See A. Alia ‘Sociopoétique’ in G. Moliné, A. Alia, *Approches de la réception. Sémiostylistique et sociopoétique de Le Clézio* (Paris: PUF, 1993) p.171 quoted in Mauger op.cit.

<sup>110</sup> cf. Camus’ desire to ‘récrire *L’Envers et L’Endroit*’ and to place ‘au centre de cette œuvre l’admirable silence d’une mère et l’effort d’un homme pour retrouver une justice ou un amour qui équilibre ce silence.’ *OCI* p.38.

This is a concern which Camus shared. In this regard it is instructive to set alongside each other, what Camus has to say in his ‘Avant-propos’ to the re-publication of Louis Guilloux’s *La Maison du Peuple* in 1953 and Ernaux’s comments in *L’Écriture comme un couteau* fifty years later in 2003:

<p>Camus (‘Avant-propos’ to <i>La Maison du peuple</i>)<sup>111</sup></p> <p>Quelques hommes au moins...ont su trouver le seul langage qui convenait. Voilà pourquoi j’admire et j’aime l’œuvre de Louis Guilloux, qui ne flatte ni ne méprise le peuple dont il parle, et qui lui restitue la seule grandeur qu’on ne puisse lui arracher, celle de <u>la vérité</u>.</p> <p>Faut-il que la misère toujours soit volée <u>deux fois</u>...</p>	<p>Ernaux (<i>L’Écriture comme un couteau</i>)<sup>112</sup></p> <p>Le grand danger, je m’en suis aperçue, c’était de tomber dans le misérabilisme ou le populisme, donc d’échouer complètement à offrir <u>la réalité</u>, à la fois objective et subjective de mon père et du monde dominé.</p> <p>De trahir <u>deux fois</u> ma classe d’origine...</p>
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Both writers express an acute awareness of the problem of finding a just means, without condescension or complacency, of representing the ‘vérité’ (Camus), the ‘réalité’ (Ernaux) of the world of the ‘dominés’.

Ernaux’s solution to this problem is to try to reconstitute that life through objective facts and words actually spoken: ‘La seule écriture que je sentais “juste” était celle d’une distance objectivante, sans affects exprimés, sans aucune complicité avec le lecteur cultivé...’. This is what she refers to in *La Place* as ‘l’écriture plate’, the style, she explains, she used to use in writing to her parents. These letters were ‘toujours concises, à la limite du dépouillement, sans effets de style, sans humour, toutes choses qui auraient été perçues comme des “manières”, des “embarras”’. (34) Such a style eschews all novelistic embellishment, rhetorical flourish, appeal to the emotions in favour of conciseness, sparseness and an unselfconscious focus on external fact. In that way the artifices of the ‘savoir écrire’ can be avoided and justice can be done to the reality of her father’s life. For her, this is an ‘écriture du réel’:

Avant d’écrire, pour moi, il n’y a rien, qu’une matière informe, souvenirs, visions, sentiments etc. Tout l’enjeu consiste à trouver les mots et les phrases les plus justes, qui feront les choses, “voir”, en oubliant les mots, à être dans ce que je sens être une écriture du réel. (35)

<sup>111</sup> Albert Camus, ‘Avant-propos’ to *La Maison du Peuple* op.cit. p.12.

<sup>112</sup> Annie Ernaux, *L’Écriture comme un couteau* op.cit. p.72.

### III.5 Bourdieu

Responding to a question from Jeannet about the background of reading which may have been conducive to her forging this style of ‘écriture précise’, Ernaux explains that at various times in her early life she read ‘énormément, sans distinction’, at one point admiring Sartre as much as Steinbeck or Flaubert, at another admiring Breton, Virginia Woolf, Perec. It is the project of the writer rather than the specifics of a particular style that interests her. But, at a pivotal moment in her attempts to become a writer, it was a work of sociology rather than a work of literature which proved decisive. This was early in 1972 when her project to be a writer was at a critical point – ‘quelque chose à faire coûte que coûte’:

...ce que j’avais à dire – pour aller vite, le passage du monde dominé au monde dominant, par les études –, je ne l’avais jamais vu exprimé comme je le sentais. Et un livre m’autorisait, en quelque sorte, à entreprendre cette mise au jour. Un livre me poussait, comme aucun texte dit littéraire ne l’avait fait, à oser affronter cette “histoire”, ce livre, c’était *Les Héritiers* de Bourdieu et Passeron. (79)

In *Les Héritiers* Bourdieu and Passeron make a study of students in Higher Education in order to explore possible correlations between academic success and social origin.<sup>113</sup> They find that the theoretical notion that schools provide equality of opportunity for all pupils – ‘l’égalité devant l’école’ – does not stand up to scrutiny: formal equality of opportunity is not real equality of opportunity, and, therefore, the idea that academic success is based straightforwardly on merit – ‘l’idéologie du don’ – is a misconception.<sup>114</sup> If the school truly provided a ‘level playing field’, then it could be seen to be legitimate to recognise (and reward) those demonstrating most ‘ability’ (in, for example, the competitive environment of the ‘concours’). However this notion of ‘ability’ has a significant degree of social determination. This is to do with the ‘cultural capital’ which is inherited by the socially privileged and which is inscribed in the knowledge and understanding which forms the basis of the school curriculum, and more widely in the culture of the school (seen from this perspective to be a mechanism for the reproduction of social advantage). It is the recognition of the discrepancy between the cultural capital effortlessly possessed by the privileged and their own relative lack of it – an unequal contest between the ‘héritiers’ and the ‘intellectuels

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<sup>113</sup> P. Bourdieu and J-C. Passeron, *Les Héritiers: les étudiants et la culture* (Paris: Minuit, 1964).

<sup>114</sup> See M. Benquet, Fiche de lecture: *Les Héritiers*, Séminaire de formation à la recherche, ENS Lyon, <[http://socio.ens-lyon.fr/cour/methodes/methodes\\_fiches\\_bourdieu\\_passeron\\_1964\\_benquet.php](http://socio.ens-lyon.fr/cour/methodes/methodes_fiches_bourdieu_passeron_1964_benquet.php)> [accessed 12 May 2014].

de première génération’ – which is a source of the anger of Annie Ernaux (and, later, Didier Eribon). It is easy to understand, given Ernaux’s experience of negotiating such an élitist education system from ‘d’en bas’, that this work of Bourdieu and Passeron would speak to her, that she would recognise in its analyses some of her own recent experience, and that this would encourage her in her own determination to write about it in what was to become *Les armoires vides*.

Later in her writing career, when she was in the course of writing *La Place*, it was another work of Bourdieu – *La Distinction* – which had, for Ernaux, considerable significance in illuminating, from a sociological standpoint, what had been her own experience:<sup>115</sup>

*La Distinction* validait scientifiquement ce qui était en moi souvenir, sensation. Je reconnais la séparation – qui est le premier sens du mot ‘distinction’ – entre les modes de vie selon qu’on appartient à la classe sociale dominante économiquement et/ou culturellement, à la classe moyenne ou à la classe populaire. Je reconnais les formes invisibles par lesquelles s’exerce la domination... pour moi la confirmation lumineuse de mon expérience, celle d’un monde divisé – expérience au centre des trois livres que j’avais déjà écrits, de celui que j’étais en train d’écrire sur mon père.<sup>116</sup>

Among these ‘formes invisibles’ of domination Ernaux highlights Bourdieu’s identification of ‘la disposition esthétique’ as a way of looking which is expressive of a privileged position in social space, and which is denied to the less privileged ‘à qui l’école n’a pas enseigné ce regard’. Indeed the influence of school is seen to be marginal in comparison to the ‘ancienneté qu’on a dans le rapport à la culture’. Early exposure to literature and music in the context of the family is seen to be far more significant, especially in areas such as painting and music which are given little emphasis in school. In this paper, which she presented at the Institut Français de Tokyo in May 2004, Ernaux introduces her audience to key Bourdieusian concepts such as the various kinds of capital – economic, cultural, social and symbolic – which are operative in different social spaces or ‘fields’, and to the notion of ‘habitus’ which she describes as ‘le rapport de classe incorporé, qui fait agir, qui produit des jugements et des stratégies inconscientes’. The trouble, she points out, occurs when there is a divorce between ‘habitus’ and ‘field’ such as when, she explains (doubtless recalling her own experience), ‘une étudiante d’origine ouvrière est par hasard invitée dans une soirée bourgeoise’.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> P. Bourdieu, *La Distinction* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979).

<sup>116</sup> A. Ernaux, ‘*La Distinction*, œuvre totale et révolutionnaire’, in *Pierre Bourdieu: l’insoumission en héritage*, ed. by É. Louis (Paris: PUF, 2013), p.20-21.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. p.31.

She quotes Bourdieu's characterisation of three categories of 'taste' which form the 'habitus de classe' and 'style de vie' of different social classes: the 'sens de la distinction' (classe dominante), the 'bonne volonté culturelle' (classe moyenne) and the 'choix de la nécessité' (classe populaire). This last is a matter of adaptation to economic necessity – the choice of those who have no choice. In some working class contexts she remarks how the rhythms and order of the dominating world of the factory are replicated in a taste for order in the private sphere. Here, in a way which evokes the social milieu of Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims*, Ernaux identifies 'certaines valeurs populaires, comme la force physique, seule richesse des démunis, ou la virilité, accompagnée de mépris pour l'homosexualité'.<sup>118</sup>

Above all, Ernaux seeks to emphasise the social commitment and political dimension of Bourdieu's work. The 'travail gigantesque de sociologie' is informed by 'sentiments de révolte, de douleur, vis-à-vis de toutes les formes de domination'. At the same time, *La Distinction* is, in Ernaux's view, 'révolutionnaire au sens politique' because the tools for analysis it provides 'en permettant de comprendre concrètement par quels moyens les visions dominantes s'imposent et imposent leur pouvoir, sont aussi des instruments de liberté qui poussent à intervenir dans le monde, à ne pas accepter ce qui est'.<sup>119</sup> In this sense, Bourdieu's legacy, according to Ernaux, can be seen as a call to action.

### **III.6 La Place (1983)**

Ernaux, in *La Place*, attempts both an objective account of her father's life and its representative or ethnographic significance – in particular the story of his 'petite ascension' from 'ouvrier' to 'petit commerçant' – and, on the other hand, a record of her own growing awareness of the implications of – the tensions inherent in – her own changing social situation, as she is inexorably pulled away from her origins by her experience of an educational process which is seen inevitably to involve a species of 'embourgeoisement'. As we have seen, Bourdieu in *La Distinction* offered her what she termed 'la confirmation lumineuse' of the divided world which would be at the centre of the work she was in the process of writing on her father. In *La Place* this division is immediately present in the juxtaposition of the account of the narrator's experience of the practical CAPES examination, sign of entry into the professional bourgeois class, and the death of her father, the relatively

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid. p.37.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. p.47.



‘uneducated’ proprietor of the small café-épicerie where she grew up. The pragmatic adherence to the ‘règles de savoir vivre’ which meant that the café stayed open despite the father’s death is contrasted with the ‘larmes, silence, et dignité’ which would accompany such an event in a ‘vision distinguée du monde’.<sup>120</sup> The narrator’s bronzed, bourgeois husband seems alien in this environment: ‘Plus que jamais, il a paru déplacé ici.’ (440) Going through her father’s wallet, the narrator discovers an old photograph and a newspaper cutting which represent a further juxtaposition of two elements of this divided world. The newspaper cutting records the educational (and therefore social) success of the narrator in the concours for the École Normale des Institutrices; the photograph is of her father in the third row of a group of factory workers. The contrast is given a political inflexion by the narrator’s comment that the photograph is ‘typique des livres d’histoire pour “illustrer” une grève ou le Front populaire’. (442) These juxtapositions reveal a separation which is at the heart of what Ernaux wants to explore in writing about her father. She wants to write to acknowledge the distance which developed between them as she grew up. Such an acknowledgement brings with it perhaps a sense of restitution, an attempt at an explanation of something regrettable, if inevitable given the power of social determinations, but something which has in some way compromised the love between daughter and father:

Je voulais dire, écrire au sujet de mon père, sa vie, et cette distance venue à l’adolescence entre lui et moi. Une distance de classe, mais particulière, qui n’a pas de nom. Comme de l’amour séparé. (442)

In Ernaux’s portrait of her father there is much which relates to his sense of social inferiority. This shows itself in the absence of the necessary social and cultural capital so as to know ‘ce qui est beau, ce qu’il faudrait aimer’. (457) The narrator records his fear of being ‘déplacé’, of suffering the kind of social shame that Jacques Cormery experienced on his first day at the lycée. This is exemplified in his misspelling when he was called upon to write ‘lu et approuvé’ in front of the (bourgeois) notaire and writes ‘à prouver’. The narrator comments: ‘Gêne, obsession de cette faute, sur la route du retour. L’ombre de l’indignité.’ (457) Despite being open and talkative in his own circle, he was taciturn in front of ‘les gens qui parlaient bien’, choosing to always speak with caution for fear of letting slip ‘un mot de travers’. (459) It is a matter of language which lies behind his violent anger when his daughter brings into the home the language of the school and tells him that his locutions like ‘se parterrer’ and ‘quart moins d’onze heures’ do not exist. More pointedly, it is easy to

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<sup>120</sup> Annie Ernaux, *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011) p.439. Subsequent page references are to this edition and are given in brackets after the citation.

imagine his hurt and ‘malheureux’ reaction when his daughter asks him: ‘Comment voulez-vous que je ne me fasse pas reprendre, si vous parlez mal tout le temps!’ (459) His alienation from the ‘other’ world represented by his daughter’s (private, catholic) school is accentuated by this kind of linguistic humiliation and leads to him excluding himself, via what sociologists like Bourdieu and Eribon would term a process of ‘auto-élimination’, from school activities even when his daughter was taking part. He responds to his wife’s comment that there was no reason for his non-attendance by saying: ‘mais tu sais bien que je vais jamais à *tout ça*’. (463) Although he recognises that ‘*tout ça*’ (the language, manners and behaviours of an educated middle class) is not part of his world, and is not somewhere where he could find himself comfortable, he nonetheless wishes vehemently that this is the world to which his daughter should aspire. The narrator comments: ‘l’espérance que je serais *mieux que lui*’. (463)

The daughter’s immersion in the world of the school leads to her estrangement from the fabric of her daily life at home. She isolates herself from social interaction, focusing on her school work, reading, listening to records, finding the clichéd ideas and prejudices of her own social milieu ridiculous: ‘J’émigre doucement vers le monde petit-bourgeois’. (465) Her reading offers her patronising terms to describe her father; he falls into the category of ‘gens simples’ or ‘modestes’ or ‘braves gens’. While for the daughter education offers access to ‘la culture légitime’,<sup>121</sup> for the father ‘studying’ is the means to an end: ‘une souffrance obligée pour obtenir une bonne situation et *ne pas prendre un ouvrier*’. (466) The father’s manners, way of eating and speaking become something the daughter feels she has a right to criticise. She becomes closer to her mother during her adolescence, accompanying her on shopping trips to the more fashionable Rouen. The distance between father and daughter is described in terms of his apparent increasing irrelevance to the world to which she is gaining access, and of a developing silence between them:

Je pensais qu’il ne pouvait plus rien pour moi. Ses mots et ses idées n’avaient pas cours dans les salles de français ou de philo, les séjours à canapé de velours rouge des amies de classe. L’été, par la fenêtre ouverte de ma chambre, j’entendais le bruit de sa bêche aplatissant régulièrement la terre retournée.

J’écris peut-être parce qu’on n’avait plus rien à se dire. (467)

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<sup>121</sup> In her recent return to this subject in *Retour à Yvetot* (Paris: Éditions de Mauconduit, 2013), Ernaux writes of school as ‘un univers à part, très clos, diamétralement opposé à mon espace familial’ which was an ‘ouverture au savoir, à la pensée abstraite, au langage écrit’, an ‘élargissement du monde’ which gave her the power ‘d’écrire le “bon” français, le français légitime’. p.19-20.

Despite Ernaux's insistence that in writing about her father she would not seek to 'faire quelque chose de "passionnant", ou d'"émouvant"' (442), the poignancy of this evocation of estrangement is unmistakable.

In Ernaux's account of the daughter, as a young student, inviting some of her university friends home during the summer holidays, the two worlds she uneasily and incompletely inhabits are brought into awkward confluence. Though the friends have been chosen with care – they are '*sans préjugés* qui affirmaient "c'est le cœur qui compte"' – the father's over-elaborate and anxious attempts to honour their visit and to demonstrate a certain 'savoir-vivre' are contrasted with the ease and 'façon naturelle' with which the daughter is treated when she enters their bourgeois households. For she has earned that ease of access through a process of assimilation (via her education) which has led to her forgetting 'les manières, les idées et les goûts' of her own social background. (471) The introduction of the future husband into the home environment is shown to be equally uncomfortable. He is a bourgeois intellectual, a student of political science, in whose honour the father puts on a tie and his Sunday clothes, feeling proud to have gained such a son-in-law and looking forward to a close relationship – 'une connivence d'hommes'. (472) He shows him his garden and the garage that he is proud of having built himself. However, after a brief description of the father's awkwardness during the social interactions of the wedding, Ernaux leaves a space in the text, and follows this with the narrator's comment: 'Après, il ne nous a plus vus que de loin en loin'. (472) This is partly because they have moved to a distant part of France, but when it is a matter of returning home, the daughter goes alone. She hides the real reasons for her husband's absence which are anyway left unsaid or unsayable ('indicible') between them. But the narrator attempts to explain his indifference:

Comment un homme né dans une bourgeoisie à diplômes, constamment 'ironique', aurait-il pu se plaire en compagnie de *braves gens*, dont la gentillesse, reconnue de lui, ne compenserait jamais à ses yeux ce manque essentiel: une conversation spirituelle. (473)

Again it is a matter of language which is being highlighted here, and the association of the power of certain sorts of discourse with the power of the dominant social class. P.M. Wetherill makes the connection with the social analysis of Pierre Bourdieu, seeing such discourse as a form of 'domination symbolique'.<sup>122</sup> He quotes: 'les discours ne sont pas

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<sup>122</sup> Annie Ernaux, *La Place*, ed., P.M. Wetherill (London and New York: Routledge, 1987) p.123.

seulement...des signes destinés à être compris...ce sont aussi des signes d'autorité, destinés à être crus et obéis'.<sup>123</sup> Returning home, the narrator encounters once again the language of the home, and experiences the extent of her separation from it. Its spontaneity and naturalness is contrasted with the conscientiously correct usage which is now natural to her:

Au loin, j'avais épuré mes parents de leurs gestes et de leurs paroles...J'entendais à nouveau leur façon de dire 'a' pour 'elle', de parler fort. Je les retrouvais tels qu'ils avaient toujours été, sans cette 'sobriété' de maintien, ce langage correct, qui me paraissaient maintenant naturels. (475)

The radical nature of these linguistic dislocations and their intensely personal dimension is expressed in the narrator's remark that concludes the above paragraph: 'Je me sentais séparée de moi-même.'

Two of the author/narrator's concluding remarks make explicit reference to the theme of 'l'ascension sociale' and the costs of entry into the bourgeois world. The writer first of all comments on the completion of her task: 'J'ai fini de mettre au jour l'héritage que j'ai dû déposer au seuil du monde bourgeois et cultivé quand j'y suis entrée.' (479) What seems significant here is the use of the expression 'j'ai dû déposer' to convey the sense of putting down, of leaving on the threshold, the 'héritage' of her family and social origin, as a necessity, an obligation of entry into the cultivated world of the bourgeoisie. Returning to the figure of the father, the second remark reflects the forces of domination in creating the conditions which motivate one of the 'dominés' to have as an abiding ambition the social betterment of his daughter: 'Peut-être sa plus grande fierté, ou même, la justification de son existence: que j'appartienne au monde qui l'avait dédaigné.' (479)

### **III.7 Une femme (1987)**

The generic hybridity of these texts of Ernaux has already been noted. As in *La Place*, in *Une femme* she makes explicit at an early stage the stylistic implications of her desire to render a just portrait of her subject. The act of writing about her mother becomes an urgent necessity because 'elle est la seule femme qui ait vraiment compté pour moi' and the writer is incapable of leaving any time for reflection or analysis. (560) Again, it is imperative that she choose an appropriate style and attempts a degree of objectivity (the 'mode transpersonnel')

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<sup>123</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Ce que parler veut dire* (Paris: Fayard, 1982) pp.60,68.

in order to ‘saisir...la femme qui a existé en dehors de moi, la femme réelle’. She acknowledges that her project will be necessarily ‘littéraire’ because it can only be achieved through the use of words, but, as in *La Place*, she nonetheless wishes to keep ‘d’une certaine façon, au dessous de la littérature’. (560) As Gérard Mauger comments ‘au-dessous de la littérature...pas très loin de la sociologie’.<sup>124</sup> Certainly, the factual account of her mother’s early life and background has a sociological dimension, particularly with regard to the educational experience of her parents and grandparents. At school, the grandmother was an able pupil – ‘première du canton au certificat’ – who could have become a schoolteacher, but her parents refused to allow her to leave the village. Being separated from the family was seen to be a source of unhappiness. ‘Ambition’, the narrator comments, in the dialect of Normandy signified ‘la douleur d’être séparé’. (561) So the grandmother is obliged to leave school at eleven years old, another example of the ‘auto-élimination’ we have noted earlier. At the time of the mother’s attendance at elementary school (‘école communale’), the limited place of education in the life of the community is illustrated by the indifference of both parents and pupils. School was regarded, not as a pathway to social betterment, but as ‘un temps à passer en attendant de ne plus être à charge des parents’. There was no encouragement to aspire; academic ability was innate (‘dans eux’) – ‘personne ne “poussait” ses enfants’ – and the mother ‘ni heureuse ni malheureuse’ left school at twelve and a half. (563) The sociological dimension of the text is further illustrated by the author’s footnote on page 563 which comments, via a statistical analysis from *Le Monde*, on continuing low academic performance (in 1986) in Haute-Normandie.

A further sociological perspective is provided via Ernaux’s exemplification, in the cases of her grandparents and parents, of the historic migration of labour from the land to the urban factories. In the 1920s the mother is happy to have a job in a clean, dry factory, regarding this work as superior both to the work of ‘les filles de la campagne restées derrière leurs vaches’ and of the ‘bonnes des maisons bourgeoises obligées de “servir le cul des maîtres”’. (564) Like the father of Pierre Bourdieu who climbed from *métayer* to *facteur*, from *paysan* to *employé*, the mother has made a ‘petite ascension sociale’. But, at that stage in her life, her dream is to make further social progress and to become ‘la demoiselle de magasin’. However modest this ambition might appear, Ernaux’s portrait shows the mother to have, as an aspect of her habitus, the kind of determination to succeed we noted in

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<sup>124</sup> Gérard Mauger, ‘Les autobiographies littéraires’ op.cit. p.44.

Bourdieu's analyses of the social trajectories of some of the characters in Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale*. This shows itself in an obdurate pride (rather like the 'rétivité' Bourdieu ascribed to his younger self in the *Esquisse*) which fuels a refusal to submit to the destiny determined for her by her place in society: 'une clairvoyance révoltée de sa position inférieure dans la société et le refus d'être seulement jugée sur celle-ci'. (564) For many, Ernaux implies, the most probable destiny was 'la pauvreté sûrement, l'alcool peut-être'. (565) It was necessary, therefore, to maintain a respectability which would help avoid the obvious pitfalls, even if this meant submitting to the limiting conventions imposed on young women in the small town where she lived. Under constant surveillance, it was important, despite being a 'factory girl', to establish a good reputation: 'ouvrière *mais* sérieuse', 'une jeune fille comme il faut'. (564-565) This is seen to be a matter of effort and will: 'La jeunesse de ma mère, cela en partie: un effort pour échapper au destin le plus probable'. (565)

In the early part of the book, Ernaux's account of her mother's life maps the contours of her 'escape'. As 'pour une femme, le mariage était la vie ou la mort', her mother chooses 'naturellement, pas un gars de la terre' but a factory worker who didn't drink but saved all his pay for the housekeeping. (566) Ernaux emphasises again her mother's pride as a key motivation in her determination to succeed: 'Fière d'être ouvrière mais pas au point de le rester toujours, rêvant de la seule aventure à sa mesure: prendre un commerce d'alimentation.' (567) She becomes the 'volonté sociale du couple', the driving force in the marital relationship. It is again the mother who has the crucial role in creating the opportunity for the daughter's own social ascension through the medium of education. Mother and daughter share an intimacy centred on books whereas the father takes her to the circus or to Fernandel's films or teaches her to ride a bicycle. The mother is the dominating figure, the one who represents authority:

Elle me conduisait chez le dentiste, le spécialiste des bronches, elle veillait à m'acheter de bonnes chaussures, des vêtements chauds, toutes les fournitures scolaires réclamées par la maîtresse (elle m'avait mise au pensionnat, non à l'école communale). (572-573)

We noted the father's expressed hope in *La Place* that his daughter would be '*mieux que lui*'. A similar ambition is ascribed to the mother in the narrator's comment, 'Son désir le plus profond était de me donner tout ce qu'elle n'avait pas eu.' (573) In analysing the academic and social trajectories described by the writers with whom this study is concerned we have

already noted, in the case of Camus and Hoggart for example, their acknowledgement of significant interventions by sympathetic mentor-figures or teachers which supported their efforts to counteract the social forces set against their potential success. For neither the orphaned Hoggart nor Camus was there question of parental encouragement. Thus it is worth noting the significant role Ernaux ascribes to the father, and especially to the mother, in her account of the daughter's 'ascension sociale'. It is something to bear in mind when we come to consider the differing family circumstances reflected in the texts of Eribon and Louis in the next chapter.

Unlike the figure of the father in *La Place* who lacked the confidence to know 'ce qui est beau, ce qu'il faut aimer', the mother in *Une femme* is shown to have a clear sense of fashionable taste: 'Elle aimait le "beau", ce qui fait "habillé", le magasin du Printemps, plus "chic" que les Nouvelles Galeries'. (575) In its modest way, this regard towards a more fashionable world illustrates the importance of 'taste' and its link to social aspiration – the accruing of the store of 'cultural capital' necessary to social improvement – which is exemplified in Bourdieu's *La Distinction*. Father and mother are shown also to have different attitudes towards language. While the father has no desire to 'bien parler' and continues to use *patois*, the mother is happy to try out herself expressions she has encountered in her reading or has heard spoken by 'des "gens bien"'. (574) The mother has a fierce desire to learn:

...elle était ouverte aux connaissances. S'élever, pour elle, c'était d'abord apprendre (elle disait, 'il faut meubler son esprit') et rien n'était plus beau que le savoir. Les livres étaient les seuls objets qu'elle manipulait avec précaution. Elle se lavait les mains avant de les toucher. (575)

She pursues this desire to learn through her daughter's own studies, enjoying using the slang terms ('récré', 'compos', 'gym') used at school. She makes an effort to introduce her daughter to 'cultural' artefacts such as the historic monuments at Rouen, and reads the books set for her daughter to read at school, so that Dickens and Daudet replace a magazine like *Confidences*. The narrator comments: 'c'était, sans doute, davantage pour mon bonheur que pour le sien'. (576)

However, the daughter's experience of the more middle-class environment of the *pensionnat* leads to the kinds of tensions between home and school that we have noted in the accounts of Hoggart and Bourdieu. The mother ceases to be an appropriate model for the

daughter who is ‘en train d’émigrer dans un milieu différent’. (578) The narrator acknowledges the daughter’s sense of social shame when she views her mother’s way of behaving alongside that of ‘les mères de mes camarades petites-bourgeoises du pensionnat’. In contrast to the mother’s ‘manière brusque de parler et de se comporter’, the bourgeois mothers are described as ‘minces, discrètes, sachant cuisiner et appelant leur fille “ma chérie”’. (578) The daughter becomes painfully aware of the limitations of her mother’s cultural knowledge: ‘Ma mère avait besoin du dictionnaire pour dire qui était Van Gogh, des grands écrivains, elle ne connaissait que le nom’. (578) The daughter’s adolescent rebellion follows a bourgeois pattern: ‘Je vivais ma révolte adolescente sur le mode romantique comme si mes parents avaient été des bourgeois’. This is contrasted with the mother’s youthful rebellion which was a refusal to submit to poverty and a determination to work hard to gain money in order to be ‘aussi bien que les autres’. The estrangement reflected in these contrasting positions and its connection with issues of social class are summed up in the narrator’s comment: ‘À certains moments, elle avait dans sa fille en face d’elle, une ennemie de classe.’ (579)

As a piece of social history *Une femme* charts the trajectories of three generations of women – grandmother, mother, and daughter – and their resistance to the prevailing historical conditions of their eras, enabling a social ascension from rural *paysanne* via *petit commerçant* to Ernaux’s own social position as *agrégée* and distinguished intellectual. It is an illustration of resistance, of individuals seeking, however modestly, to intervene in the ideological construction of their identities, and to challenge the destiny which their social situation has allotted them. Thus, Ernaux may be the first in her family to have become an ‘intellectual’, but she is not the first woman in her family to have acquired as part of her ‘habitus’ a determination to succeed. Her own identity emerges more clearly as a result of her exploration of the characters and personalities of her parents. As Dominique Viart comments: ‘Le récit de l’autre – le père, la mère ou tel aïeul – est le détour nécessaire pour parvenir à soi, pour se comprendre dans cet héritage’.<sup>125</sup> But it is ultimately in personal terms that Ernaux wishes to remember her mother. Although she attempts to remain objective and to focus on her mother’s ‘histoire et...condition sociale’, she acknowledges the urge to free herself from the discipline of the ‘mode transpersonnel’ and to register the purely affective:

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<sup>125</sup> Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier, *La littérature française au présent* (Paris: Bordas, 2008) p.80.



‘Mais je sens que quelque chose en moi résiste, voudrait conserver de ma mère des images purement affectives, chaleur ou larmes, sans leur donner de sens.’ (573)

## Chapter IV: A Bourdieusian heritage, Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis

*...une interrogation indissociablement personnelle et politique sur les destins sociaux, sur la division de la société en classes, sur l'effet des déterminismes sociaux dans la constitution des subjectivités, sur les psychologies individuelles, sur les rapports entre les individus.*

Didier Eribon, *Retour à Reims*<sup>126</sup>

In March 2013, a collection of essays entitled *Pierre Bourdieu, L'insoumission en héritage* was published by Presses Universitaires de France. The editor was a young student at the École Normale Supérieure called Édouard Louis. Contributors included Annie Ernaux and Didier Eribon. The following year Édouard Louis published his first novel, *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule*, dedicated to Didier Eribon. Part II of Eribon's 2013 *La Société comme verdict* is entitled 'En lisant Annie Ernaux'. There is thus an explicit filiation evident in the work of these three writers of different generations, each of whom acknowledges and shares a profound indebtedness to the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

### **IV.1: Didier Eribon, *Retour à Reims* (2009)**

As a twenty year-old young man, Didier Eribon, born into a working class family with a father whom he describes as violent and homophobic, and hugely disappointed with the quality of the academic environment he had encountered in the Philosophy department of the Université de Reims, decided on a radical break with his past and moved to Paris with the twin hopes of living freely his life as a gay man, and of becoming an 'intellectual'. In the 'Épilogue' to *Retour à Reims*, he offers a brief résumé of how, from that point, he became – what he now is – a university Professor of Sociology. A fortuitous encounter afforded by the way in which the 'subculture gay' in Paris facilitated a relative mixing of different social classes leads to him finding a position as 'journaliste littéraire' with *Libération* and the opportunity, as an early project, to interview Pierre Bourdieu with whom he develops a close friendship. He also comes to know Michel Foucault. Joining the *Nouvel Observateur*, despite detesting its 'clan universitaire' who claimed possession of its literary pages as by right, and despite its reflecting the 'basculement vers la droite du champ politico-intellectuel', affords him an unforeseen opportunity to gain access to 'le monde intellectuel'. (235-6) He publishes books of his interviews with Georges Dumézil and Claude Lévi-Strauss and writes

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<sup>126</sup> Didier Eribon, *Retour à Reims* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010) p.19. References to this book will be to this edition and will be placed in brackets after the quotation.

the first biography of Foucault. This has considerable success and leads to a new life at the cutting edge of ‘le paysage intellectuel’, dealing for the first time with issues which had been largely neglected. Hence, his *Réflexions sur la question gay* (1999). He responds to invitations to travel widely in Europe, Latin America and the USA, where Yale University recognise his stature with the award of the James Robert Brudner Memorial Prize. He thus acquires a distinguished, international intellectual reputation outside the structure of the French university system. Belatedly, he takes the necessary steps to move formally into academic life and becomes a professor. It is after delivering his paper at Yale responding to the award of the Brudner Prize that he has the idea of returning to the matter of *Retour à Reims*, early drafts of which he had been working on before the conference.

#### **IV.2: La honte sociale**

It is the question of social shame and the fact that he had not as yet addressed the issue in a book or an article which Eribon considers in the second chapter of *Retour à Reims*. He asks himself why he (who had written so much on ‘les mécanismes de domination’ has not addressed the question of ‘la domination sociale’). And why he who had accorded so much importance to the feeling of shame in the processes of subjection (‘assujettissement’) and subjectification (‘subjectivation’) had written practically nothing on social shame (‘la honte sociale’), despite the fact that shame for his milieu of origin was something he experienced so markedly when he moved from Reims to Paris, even to the extent of lying about his own social background or feeling profoundly disturbed at having to acknowledge it. (21) In a chapter of his *Réflexions sur la question gay* (published ten years earlier), he had recounted the ‘parcours fort classique’ of the flight to the big city of the young gay man.<sup>127</sup> He acknowledges the autobiographical element in this but recognises that it is only partially an analysis of his own trajectory because it focuses on the sexual and ignores the social element in his decision to leave Reims for Paris as a twenty year-old. He admits that it was easier for him to write about ‘la honte sexuelle’ than ‘la honte sociale’. He now is aware that as well as following ‘le parcours typique de gay qui va vers la ville’, he was also following a typical itinerary of the ‘transfuge de classe’:

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<sup>127</sup> Didier Eribon, *Réflexions sur la question gay* (Paris: Fayard, 1999).

Et je fus, à n'en pas douter, un 'transfuge' dont le souci, plus ou moins permanent et plus ou moins conscient, aura été de mettre à distance sa classe d'origine, d'échapper au milieu social de son enfance et de son adolescence. (25)

Eribon makes it clear, however, that this rejection of his working class origins is not accompanied by any change in his political stance and does not involve his sharing in the values of 'la classe dominante', particularly their routine hostility to 'des mouvements sociaux, des grèves, des protestations, des résistances populaires'. (26) However, at the same time as he feels a solidarity at a political level when he sees a documentary about the strikes of 1936 or 1968, he experiences a profound rejection of the 'milieu ouvrier tel qu'il est réellement'. When he is first in Paris and returns home he is disturbed by the contrast between the 'façons de parler' and the 'manières d'être' of his milieu of origin and those of the world he is moving into. He gives the example of 'un racisme primaire et obsessionnel' which is so far away from his own preoccupations, and cites approvingly Annie Ernaux's evocation of what he describes as:

...ce malaise que l'on ressent lorsqu'on *revient* chez ses parents après avoir quitté non seulement le domicile familial mais aussi la famille et le monde auxquels, malgré tout, on continue d'appartenir, et ce sentiment déroutant d'être à la fois chez soi et dans un univers étranger. (28)

The dilemma of the 'transfuge', caught between two irreconcilable worlds, to which Hoggart drew attention in 1957, is here being articulated by Eribon, over fifty years later, with a similar stress on belonging ('appartenir'), or not fully belonging, in two conflicting social spaces at the same time.

Like Annie Ernaux's *La Place*, Eribon's *Retour à Reims* takes the death of the father as the occasion of its inception. However, whereas Ernaux, as we have seen, is attempting an objective account of her father's life and its representative quality while, at the same time, revealing the pain of her own sense of separation from him, the death of his father provokes in Eribon an 'introspection sociologique' which fuses the personal and the political in an urgent enquiry into issues of class and the impact of 'déterminismes sociaux' on the construction of subjectivities. However, these wider socio-political concerns are rooted in an essentially personal quest. He had detested his father, 'l'homme...vociférant à tout propos, stupide et violent...qui m'avait inspiré tant de mépris'. (31) And yet, at his death, he realises he has hardly known him, and senses in himself:

l'impérieuse obligation de m'interroger sur moi-même, l'irrépressible désir de remonter dans le temps afin de comprendre les raisons pour lesquelles il me fut si difficile d'avoir le moindre échange avec celui que, au fond, je n'ai guère connu. (32)

The contours of this self-questioning and movement back in time are reflected in the rather diffuse and circular nature of the book's structure. It is divided into five, untitled parts, followed by an epilogue, a total of eighteen chapters or sections which mingle personal recollection and reflection with sociological analysis and political commentary. This chapter will seek to highlight Eribon's commentary on his own social origins and on the historical context of those of his parents and grandparents. In addition, Eribon's reflections on his experience of the lycée and, more generally, on the role of education in social trajectory will be considered alongside those already noted in the texts of Hoggart, Bourdieu and Ernaux.

From the outset, Eribon makes clear his belief that his father's personality and behaviour are explicable in terms of the violence of the social forces operating against people of his social class: '...mon père portait en lui le poids d'une histoire écrasante qui ne pouvait que produire des dégâts psychiques profonds chez ceux qui l'ont vécue'. (35) He rejects the notion that his father's 'semi-folie' and 'incapacité relationnel' had anything to do with his psychology as an individual: 'La clé de son être' is to be found in the harshness and constraints of the time and place in which he lived – 'où et quand il est né'. (35) Eribon presents the facts: his father was born in 1929, the eldest of 12 children, including a brother born in 1940, badly damaged during the evacuation from Reims at the time of the German invasion. During the Occupation, his father as a teenager, scavenges to find food for the family:

Dans le froid glacial de l'hiver champenois, il parcourait à vélo parfois jusqu'à 20 kilomètres pour se procurer des pommes de terre ou d'autres denrées. Il devait s'occuper de tout, ou presque, chez lui. (37)

Eribon's tone is objective; he does not seek to enter imaginatively into his father's experience at this time. In a way that is characteristic of the book, his commentary moves on to explore the sociological and political context of the family's being housed by a Catholic philanthropic organisation on their return to Reims. He refers to the 'propagande nataliste' which encourages the production of large families to combat 'la dépopulation qui menaçait la patrie', and to the traditional Catholic bourgeois emphasis on hearth and home ('le foyer') to discourage political resistance and to protect families from 'l'influence communiste'. (39) He comments on the success, nonetheless, of the Communist Party in attracting the almost

automatic support of the working class at that time, more as a matter of protest than support for any particular political programme. For his father, later in the 1960s, ‘le drapeau rouge’ represented ‘les ouvriers’ and not a communist political ideology. This class solidarity showed itself equally in his detestation for Giscard d’Estaing and what Eribon describes as his ‘*ethos de grand bourgeois, ses gestes affectés, son éloquence grotesque*’ when he saw him on the television screen. (45)

In the concluding section of Part One of *Retour à Reims* Eribon provides more information about the lives of his paternal grandparents before focusing on his father’s educational experience and his life as a factory worker. Again, the method of his ‘*introspection sociologique*’ is to present the factual detail as exemplification of the effects of the social forces of domination on the lives of his family and of those of their social class. Hence, the grandmother’s unashamed acknowledgement of her illiteracy – ‘*Je suis illettrée*’ (47) – is seen as an example of a submission and a resignation which enable her to tolerate the inevitability of her social destiny. The grandfather dies aged 54 having worked himself to death: ‘*...il se tuait littéralement à la tâche pour nourrir sa famille*’ (47-48) He dies of throat cancer as do three of his sons, a consequence, Eribon comments, of ‘*ce fléau par lequel étaient emportés à l’époque les ouvriers, qui consommaient un nombre à peine imaginable de cigarettes chaque jour*’. Eribon’s father starts work in a factory three months before his fourteenth birthday. This was his destiny as it was for all of his class: ‘*le déterminisme social exerça son emprise sur lui dès sa naissance*’. (50) He never gets beyond the *école primaire*. In a way reminiscent of Annie Ernaux’s father’s view of education as a ‘*souffrance obligée*’ which we noted in *La Place*, in this social milieu, Eribon comments, ‘*...on allait à l’école jusqu’à 14 ans, puisque c’était obligatoire, et on quittait l’école à 14 ans puisque ça n’était plus*.’ (50) Eribon contrasts the experience of the child of the bourgeoisie entering the lycée at 11 and having the right of access to ‘*la “culture” tout court*’ and the abrupt ending of education at 14 for the ‘*enfants des classes populaires*’ who have anyway only had access to ‘*les rudiments d’un savoir utilitaire*’. (53) There is ‘*une étanchéité presque totale*’ between these two social worlds, a line of demarcation which Eribon himself must cross if he is to prove the exception to the ‘*élimination scolaire*’ and the ‘*auto-élimination*’ which has become inscribed in the mindset of his social milieu. (51)

Eribon’s father works from the age of 14 until he is forced to retire over 40 years later aged 56, rejected, in Eribon’s view, by the system which had exploited him. During his

career he had attended night school and was proud of having become a foreman co-ordinating a team of workers: ‘Il tirait de ce nouveau statut un orgueil naïf, une image de soi plus valorisante.’ At the time Eribon finds his father’s reaction ‘risible’, but now recognises his parents’ desire to ‘s’élever au-dessus de leur condition’, acknowledging the fact that his adult self many years later still blushes in shame when he, like Camus’ Jacques Cormery, has to record the professions of his father (‘manœuvre’) and mother (‘femme de ménage’) on official documents. (56) This unsparing exposure of his own adolescent reactions to situations he can now view more dispassionately from the perspective of the objective sociologist he has since become is characteristic of Eribon’s method of ‘introspection sociologique’ in *Retour à Reims*. These differing perspectives are shown in sharp relief when Eribon records some of the more agreeable aspects of his father’s character. We learn, for example, that the father was a ‘bricoleur et fier de ces capacités en ce domaine’ who made a desk for Eribon when he was a lycéen. (57) After the purchase of a second-hand car, Eribon and his brother are taken on trips in the region and go as far as Bouillon in Belgium where they visit the château and buy chocolates and souvenirs. Hours are spent fishing from the banks of the Marne where the father ‘devenait un autre homme et un lien s’instaurait alors entre lui et ses enfants’. Often uncles and aunts and their children were present as they feasted on what had been caught during the day. The reader senses something close to an idyllic recollection of childhood being evoked. But this illusion is abruptly shattered, Eribon once again recalling the hostile reactions of his younger self: he soon finds all this ‘ridicule et stérile’ – he would rather read than waste his time holding a fishing rod. But his reaction goes beyond what might be thought of as ordinary adolescent rebelliousness:

Je me mis...à détester toute la culture et les formes de sociabilité liées à ce passe-temps: la musique des transistors, les bavardages sans intérêt avec les gens que nous y rencontrions, et la stricte division du travail entre les sexes – les hommes pêchaient, les femmes tricotaient, lisaient des romans-photos ou s’occupaient des enfants, préparaient le repas...Je cessai d’accompagner mes parents. Pour m’inventer, il me fallait avant tout me dissocier. (60)

In this sort of ruthless self-revelation, Eribon is clearly not setting out to court the sympathy of the reader, but to show the force of the social pressures which made him feel obliged to dissociate himself from his milieu of origin and to re-invent himself in order to forge a pathway towards a different way of life and towards a different conception of ‘culture’.

In Part Two of *Retour à Reims*, Eribon records the social itinerary of his mother. Again, as with the father, the harshness of time and place are shown to play a determining role in her life. She was born when her mother was only 17 and had been evicted from the family home by her father for having become pregnant. Like the grandmother of Annie Ernaux, she later shows herself to be an able pupil and has an ambition to become a primary school teacher. Eribon quotes her saying: ‘J’aurais aimé devenir institutrice...à cette époque-là, c’est ce qu’on pouvait faire après les études’. (65) However, this ambition is thwarted because on the brink of entering the lycée – an exceptional step for someone of her class – she is part of the population which is forced to flee before the German invasion. Later abandoned by her mother who volunteers to work in Germany, she is placed in a ‘hospice de la Charité’ which, when she becomes 14, sends her out to work as an ‘employée de maison’. Placed initially with teachers who are kind and pay for her to begin a secretarial course, she has the ambition to become a secretary. Once again, however, she is obliged to ‘renoncer à ses rêves’. The rules of the charity insist on a change of situation each year. Eribon comments: “‘Bonne à tout faire’ elle était, ‘bonne à tout faire’ elle resterait’. (66) Eribon sees these frustrated ambitions as having a decisive effect on his mother’s character:

Sa vie durant, elle porta en elle ce drame personnel: elle aurait pu devenir autre chose que ce à quoi elle était promise, mais la guerre avait brisé net ses rêves d’enfant. Se sachant intelligente, elle ne parvint jamais à admettre cette injustice. (79)

A consequence of this ‘injustice’, according to Eribon, is that she has continued to think that she could have been ‘une intellectuelle’ and could have married someone other than her husband – ‘quelqu’un de plus intelligent’. But, noting that the laws of the ‘endogamie sociale’ were just as strong as those of the ‘reproduction scolaire’, Eribon registers the inevitability of his parents’ encounter: ‘elle était femme de ménage, et elle rencontra un ouvrier qui n’avait pas eu la chance lui non plus de pouvoir suivre des études.’ (79)

They marry at 20 and have two children, Eribon and his older brother. They live in a situation ‘d’extrême pauvreté, pour ne pas dire de quasi-misère’. The marital relationship is described by Eribon in terms of an often violent mutual hostility: ‘...ils semblaient incapables de s’adresser la parole autrement qu’en s’invectivant de la façon la plus méchante et la plus blessante possible’. (80) The mother is shown to be just as violent as the father: ‘La détestation de l’autre érigée en mode de vie’. (81) This marital conflict is not presented as anything so banal as a ‘clash of personalities’, a matter of individual subjectivities, but as a



consequence of the social conditions under which the father and mother have laboured and which Eribon has been at pains to describe. He now recognises how some of his own attitudes are, in turn, a reaction to this family situation, with important psychological consequences. It is easy to see how such a situation may have played a significant role in the development of that set of predispositions which Bourdieu calls the *habitus*, and in his determination to flee his milieu of origin:

Ce climat de guerre conjugale, ces scènes itératives d'affrontement verbal, ces hurlements, cette folie à deux avec les enfants pour témoins comptèrent sans doute beaucoup dans ce qui détermina ma volonté de fuir mon milieu et ma famille (et pendant longtemps l'idée même de famille, de couple, de conjugalité, de lien durable, de vie commune, etc., me fit horreur). (82)

Eribon retains one image, 'précise et obsédante' of his father's violence when, returning home drunk, standing at one end of the room, he picks up bottle after bottle of whatever is to hand – oil, milk, wine – and flings them at the opposite wall where they shatter. Eribon retains an image of himself and his brother crying, huddled against their mother, who calls out in a mixture of anger and despair: 'Fais quand même attention aux gamins'.<sup>128</sup> (96)

Retrospectively, Eribon regards the retention of this image as significant, not in a psychological or ideological sense, but in its social dimension, because he sees in the image an identification of himself or of the self he might become as a social being: 'une reconnaissance de soi comme ce que l'on est et ce que l'on va être'. And this has the effect of instilling in him 'une volonté patiente et obstinée de contredire l'avenir auquel j'étais promis...', of re-inforcing his determination to escape. (97)

As we have seen to be the case with Hoggart, Camus and Ernaux, it is, of course, through education – crucially the first step of entry to the lycée – that any change of social milieu becomes a possibility. It is to his mother that Eribon expresses his gratitude for this opportunity. Though she has never directly said so, Eribon wonders whether, as we noted with Ernaux's parents, this was a matter of wishing in some way to compensate for her own disappointments and lack of opportunity: '...je crois qu'elle me percevait comme celui qu'elle pourrait aider à profiter d'une chance dont elle n'avait pas bénéficié. Son rêve déçu s'accomplissait à travers moi'. (82)

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<sup>128</sup> Cf. Camus' mother's plea in 'Entre oui et non' in *L'Envers et l'Endroit*: 'Ne frappe pas sur la tête' when she saw the grandmother beating the children. *OC I* p.49.

### IV.3: Lycée

Eribon's entry, aged 11, to the 'lycée de garçons' is presented as a definitive step, 'une véritable rupture' in the history of his family. He is the first to gain access to 'l'enseignement secondaire' and the divergent subsequent pathways of his brother and himself provide a telling illustration of the powerful role played by education in social reproduction. The exceptionality of Eribon's trajectory is contrasted with the way in which his brother's follows the norms and expectations of someone in his social position. Hence, the brother, although two years older, remains in elementary school ('resté scolarisé dans le primaire'). Eribon shows how what he would describe as 'auto-élimination' is operative in his brother's decision to leave school at the earliest opportunity: 'Il ne voulait pas aller à l'école, où il s'ennuyait et considérait qu'il perdait son temps'. (109) From this point, the lives of the two brothers are shown to take a radically different course: 'le filtrage scolaire intervenait...directement et brutalement'. The elder brother becomes an apprentice butcher and the kinds of differences in taste, in the ways of talking and behaving of different social classes which Bourdieu addresses in *La Distinction*, are apparent in the way the adolescent identities of the two brothers begin to form. While Eribon wants to stay at home reading, his brother (like those described by Hoggart as the 'gang which clusters round the lampposts in the evenings') is out with his friends – 'traîner avec ses copains, jouer au football avec eux, draguer les filles'. (109) While his brother and his friends like Johnny Halliday, Eribon opts for 'chanteurs "intellectuels"' such as Françoise Hardy, Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. Eribon shows how his brother's incarnation of 'un *ethos* populaire' attaches him to the social world in which they live, whereas he is in the process of making for himself 'un *ethos* lycéen' which is taking him away from it. He reveals, not without humour, an image of his adolescent self dressed in a duffle-coat and desert boots discoursing on the 'lutte des classes' and the 'révolution permanente' while his brother takes absolutely no interest in politics. Eribon describes how the later itinerary of his elder brother continues to show its adherence to the norms of their social milieu, while his own was to show a marked divergence:

Lui correspondait sans problème et sans distance au monde qui était le nôtre, aux métiers qui se proposaient à nous, à l'avenir qui se dessinait pour nous. Moi, je n'allais pas tarder à éprouver et cultiver l'intense sentiment d'un écart que les études et l'homosexualité concourraient à installer dans ma vie: je n'allais être ni ouvrier, ni boucher, mais autre que ce à quoi j'étais socialement destiné. (111)

In Chapter One, we set alongside each other Hoggart's depiction of himself as a scholarship boy in a grammar school in the north of England during the 1930s and Bourdieu's account of his schooldays as a lycéen in Pau during the 1940s. What Eribon has to say about his own experience of the lycée in Reims during the 1960s reveals much that is already familiar from these earlier texts. Despite radical differences in geographical place and historical period, the three accounts reflect the remarkably similar experience of the working class child entering into the alien territory of a highly selective (and therefore élite) educational institution in which new conceptions of 'culture', of ways of thinking and speaking and behaving, are inscribed. There are echoes, too, of Ernaux, and of Camus in Eribon's text. For example, just as Camus in *Le Premier Homme* shows Jacques finding the crudities of his way of talking condemned by the horrified bourgeois, Georges Didier, so Eribon records the 'réponse outragée' of one of his classmates, the son of a magistrate, to the 'crudité verbale des gens du peuple' which he routinely employed. (163) Whereas Camus shows Jacques moderating his language in front of his bourgeois friend but continuing to talk freely elsewhere, Eribon, characteristically, describes himself taking up the cudgels against what he describes as the grotesque, class-based assumptions of his classmate, and stepping up the uncouthness of his expressions.

However, it is with Bourdieu's account of his schooldays in *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* that Eribon directly engages. At the beginning of his further reflexion on the material of *Retour à Reims* in 2013 in *La Société comme verdict*, Eribon expresses his pleasure at Annie Ernaux's remark that *Retour à Reims* was 'auto-analyse poussée à l'extrême'.<sup>129</sup> As we have seen, he describes his own method as 'introspection sociologique' rather than 'auto-analyse', but, whatever the generic discriminations, he takes Bourdieu to task for holding back on his own self-analysis in the *Esquisse*. When he starts to write about his own experience of the lycée in Part IV of *Retour à Reims*, what he says is immediately reminiscent of Bourdieu – an excellent pupil (intellectually) who is insolent and always in trouble: 'Je participais à tous les chahuts'. But he then criticises Bourdieu for his taciturnity: 'Hélas, Bourdieu ne pousse pas assez loin, ici, l'auto-analyse'. (164) He is insufficiently open: 'Il écrit avec trop de réserve, trop de pudeur.' Eribon refers to this as a 'prudence parsimonieuse' and goes on to ask precisely those questions which occur to the reader of Bourdieu's text who is interested in 'l'ascension sociale', its exceptionality and in some

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<sup>129</sup> Didier Eribon, *La Société comme verdict* (Paris: Fayard, 2013).

explanation of how these exceptions occur. How does it happen that the social pressures, for example, 'l'auto-élimination', are overcome in these cases? 'Comment et pourquoi survécuit-il?' How is it that Bourdieu finds his way to the *classes préparatoires* of Louis-le-Grand? 'Comment et pourquoi cette transformation se produit-elle?' He accuses Bourdieu of being psychological rather than sociological:

...les éléments qu'il met en avant quand il s'agit de sa jeunesse, et la manière de les mettre en avant, nous renvoient au registre de la psychologie plutôt qu'à celui de la sociologie, comme s'il s'était agi pour lui de décrire les traits de son – mauvais – caractère personnel et non la logique des forces sociales s'exerçant sur lui comme individu. (165)

He also refers to Bourdieu's highlighting of 'les valeurs populaires sportives et masculinistes auxquelles il ne cache pas qu'il adhérerait pleinement', thus echoing what was noted earlier about Bourdieu's assertion of masculine pride and aggression. In this context Eribon notes Bourdieu's fleeting reference to a classmate 'reconnu comme homosexuel' who played the violin and had to suffer 'une véritable persécution'. He talks of the classic aesthete/athlete split and refers to Bourdieu's labelling of Foucault as 'esthète'. He is amazed that Bourdieu does not realise that he is being homophobic. In a footnote on page 168 he points out that he brought this to Bourdieu's attention, and that Bourdieu was intending to re-work this passage but did not, in the end, have time. Eribon's often self-lacerating account of his schooldays contrasts with the much cooler approach of Bourdieu. Clearly there is a sociological dimension to both texts – the terms of Bourdieusian sociological analysis are widely deployed – but Eribon raises the important question of what happens when the sociological gaze is directed at the self, when the self that is the writer and the narrator and the main protagonist becomes the object of sociological scrutiny. What guides the choices, the selection among all the possibilities, that the writer makes? Are they driven by sociological or what might be called 'autobiographical' imperatives? To what extent can the writer escape from consideration of the image of himself that he is, through his selection, creating? Eribon is clear that he stays true to the sociological imperatives, whereas Bourdieu, in his view, does not.

Eribon's lycée in Reims has a largely bourgeois and petit-bourgeois population, and he acknowledges that if it had been otherwise, if he had been surrounded by boys of his own social class, it is likely that he would have become caught up in the 'engrenage d'auto-

élimination’. (163) He records a teacher telling him ‘en classe de sixième’ that, as a result of his poor behaviour, he would not go ‘plus loin que la seconde’. (164) He is going to have to change if he is to succeed in his project of re-invention. Having initially resembled those who, in Bourdieu’s account, ‘chahutent et refusent la culture scolaire’ he is going to have to align himself more with the ‘aesthete’ – like Bourdieu’s violinist – to choose ‘la culture contre les valeurs populaires viriles’. (169-70) He shows how the ethos of the school operates against pupils from the ‘classes populaires’, inducing ‘un sentiment de non-appartenance et d’extériorité dans la conscience de ceux qui rencontrent des difficultés pour se plier à cette injonction sociale que le système scolaire...adresse à ses usagers.’ To achieve his ends he must adapt and accept what is demanded by the school: ‘Résister, c’était me perdre. Me soumettre, me sauver.’ (172) Joining the ‘culture scolaire’ meant for Eribon ‘le désapprentissage de ce que j’étais’. At this point he makes use of Bourdieu’s term ‘habitus’ and shows that ‘habitus’ is not (just) a set of inherited predispositions, but is something capable of transformation. A long and painful process to learn what comes naturally to others ‘allait profondément transformer toute ma personne, mon habitus, et me placer de plus en plus en porte-à-faux avec le milieu familial que je retrouvais chaque soir’. (171)

#### **IV.4: Habitus clivé**

A common feature of the accounts offered by Bourdieu and Eribon of their years as *lycéens* is associated with the notion of the ‘habitus clivé’, that is to say the growing awareness of the distinctions and tensions inherent in their problematic presence in two co-existent and apparently opposed social spaces. Bourdieu introduces the term when he is commenting on the contrast between the academic and the social dimensions of his experience as an *interne* at the Pau lycée: ‘le contraste, immense, entre le monde de l’internat et le monde, normal, parfois même exaltant, de la classe’.<sup>130</sup> The classroom as a space where curiosity is aroused, where reflection is encouraged in a calm and regulated manner is contrasted with the anti-intellectual rough and tumble of the world of the *internat* inhabited by boarders drawn from the surrounding countryside:

...les internes venus des campagnes ou des petites villes des environs qui – à l’exception des quelques originaux, facilement suspectés, dans cet univers de haute masculinité, d’être homosexuels – lisaient *Miroir-Sprint*, *Midi Olympique* ou *J’irai cracher sur vos tombes*, aimaient parler de filles ou de rugby, copiaient leurs

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<sup>130</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* op.cit. p. 124.

dissertations de français sur les anciens ou dans des recueils de corrigés, préparaient des ‘fausses copies’ pour les épreuves trimestrielles d’histoire.<sup>131</sup>

This characterisation of the *internes* contrasts with the depiction of the *externes*, the sons of the Pau bourgeoisie who, living in the town, attend the lycée as day pupils. These are seen as ‘sortes d’étrangers un peu irréels’ who dress differently in their ‘vêtements apprêtés’ in contrast to the ‘blouses grises’ of the *internes*. More significant are the distinctions in their manners and their interests which seemed, Bourdieu tells us, to evoke ‘un monde inaccessible’. This growing awareness of co-existing, contrasting social worlds has for Bourdieu a lasting impact on his sense of a ‘décalage’ between his social origins and his academic aspirations. The notion of the ‘habitus clivé’ expresses the inherent tensions and contradictions in this ‘coïncidence de contraires’.

For Didier Eribon, decades later in Reims, the sense of ‘décalage’ is closer to home. A different social and geographical configuration means that Eribon attends his local lycée as a day student, returning each evening to his working-class home. For him the contrast between the two worlds is stark, and to succeed at the lycée he must re-educate himself as a *lycéen*, which involves a radical transformation of himself. Eribon’s immersion in the culture of the lycée means that, as a consequence, he becomes more and more out of step with the culture of his home and family, and he belongs to neither. In time this becomes a rupture which is not without violence:

...le type de rapport à soi qu’impose la culture scolaire se révélait incompatible avec ce qu’on était chez moi, et la scolarisation réussie installait en moi, comme une de ses conditions de possibilité, une coupure, un exil même, de plus en plus marqués, me séparant peu à peu du monde d’où je venais et où je vivais encore. Et comme tout exil, celui-ci contenait une forme de violence. (171)

At the time he is unaware of this ‘violence’ because the separation that his immersion in the lycée imposes upon him is done with his consent. To ‘belong’ in both worlds is not possible. It is necessary for him to perform differently in these two disunited contexts, to swap registers between his two social identities. These become less and less compatible, leading to the strains and contradictions remarked by Bourdieu, producing in him a tension ‘difficile à supporter’ and ‘fort déstabilisante’.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid. p. 124.

Thus the tensions associated with the ‘habitus clivé’ are seen by Bourdieu in the context of a ‘décalage’, a ‘coïncidence de contraires’, while for Eribon they are seen in terms of a ‘coupure’, an ‘exil’ containing ‘une forme de violence’. In each account, an encounter with the figure of a middle class fellow pupil – a sort of bourgeois other – is given some significance. In Bourdieu’s *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* this otherness is represented first of all in the figure of an outsider to the provincial Pau lycée, a ‘réfugié’ with a (more socially distinguished) ‘accent pointu’, that is to say of Northern France. He is depicted as someone who sat always in the front row, oblivious of all around him, and who wrote poems. In *Retour à Reims* the encounter with ‘the bourgeois other’ is seen as a significant part of the process of acculturation necessary to Eribon’s re-invention of himself; it is given a much fuller and more avowedly personal treatment. (173-179) He describes his ‘étroite amitié’ at the age of 13 or 14 with the son of a university professor. For Eribon this is an intense ‘attachement affectif’ which he has no means of expressing. The boy offers him a model of what he wants to become: ‘Il me fascinait et j’aspirais à lui ressembler’. His otherness is manifested unconsciously in the range of cultural references with which he is associated – in Bourdieu’s terms the cultural and social capital he brings with him into the field of education: he likes the kind of classical music which is immediately switched off at Eribon’s home (‘on n’est pas à la messe’); his brothers and sisters are studying in Paris; at his house – ‘une grande maison’ in a ‘quartier aisé’ near the centre of town (in contrast to Eribon’s ‘cité nouvelle à la périphérie’) – the talk is of Godard and Beckett. Eribon copies him even to the extent of imitating his handwriting. A ‘bon élève’, he nonetheless enjoys demonstrating ‘une distance dilettante’ with the world of the school, and Eribon learns to play the same game though without the same assets: ‘de jouer le même jeu, alors que je ne disposais pas des mêmes atouts’. This reference to the ‘règles du jeu’ and to ‘atouts’ recalls Bourdieu’s work on Flaubert’s *L’Éducation sentimentale* where he describes the Paris of the 1840s as the ‘field’ into which the various characters are propelled, with their ‘capital’ in the form of their hands of cards, to play out their roles in a game whose aim is the achievement of social success.<sup>132</sup> Eribon certainly acknowledges that his friend had a determining role in preventing him from an early rejection of the culture of the school for which his social origins predisposed him.

Eribon’s method of ‘introspection sociologique’, where an account of personal experience precedes the sociological analysis, is illustrated in his treatment of an incident

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<sup>132</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l’art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, 2nd edn (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998) pp. 19-71.

involving the boys' choices of nom-de-plume for pieces of writing they were doing. Again Eribon is imitating his bourgeois friend who writes short stories of the 'fantastique' genre. Eribon's nom-de-plume is an elaborate piece of artifice, while his friend simply uses one of his middle names and his mother's maiden name. His friend's poking fun at him for this hurts Eribon: 'J'étais sans cesse renvoyé à mon infériorité...il était cruel et blessant, sans le vouloir, sans le savoir'. From this personal experience Eribon draws the sociological observation that this kind of unwitting behaviour is the result of the coming into play of social and hierarchical structures of which the agent is not consciously aware. Friendship, however close, cannot escape the 'lois de la pesanteur historique'. Through a sort of 'inertie des habitus' one class clashes with another.

Eribon's encounter with his 'bourgeois other' brings him a taste for books, an adherence to the literary and the artistic (at first played at but becoming more and more real) and the enthusiasm and desire to access a new range of social and cultural experience. He learns to perform in a new social domain. His initial impulse to reject the 'culture scolaire' is transformed into a passion for the avant-garde, the radical, the intellectual – Duras, Beckett, Sartre, Beauvoir. He is delighted to be regarded as a 'snob'. He becomes an adept performer, disguising his ignorance by pretending a contempt for the classics he had not read: 'Je m'inventai une culture, en même temps qu'une personnalité et un personnage'.

Like Bourdieu, Eribon has little to say about any encouragement he might have been given within the institution of the lycée to pursue an academic career. There is one reference to a 'professeur de lettres qui se souciait de ma réussite'. This is in the context of Eribon's choosing Spanish as a second language option in imitation of the bourgeois classmate for whom he harbours amorous feelings. In terms of the rules of the game in the 'force field' of the lycée, this is a bad choice. His teacher points out that 'le choix de l'espagnol m'engageait dans une filière de second ordre et m'imposait de végéter au milieu des plus mauvais élèves du lycée.' (181) Later, at university, Eribon describes the abject quality of the teaching as an aspect of the 'machine à éliminer' those coming from the *classes populaires*. He is scathing about his naiveté in believing that by choosing to study philosophy at a provincial university he was placing himself in the same social and intellectual milieu as Sartre and de Beauvoir at the Sorbonne. He only passes his first year exams via the *rattrapage* and, despite being told that he is by far the brightest student they have ever seen, rarely achieves more than 10/20 because of his non-conformist, (Marxist) views. Nonetheless, he decides to persevere and



cites all the negative pressures as a kind of ‘stimulus’. What is being offered is ‘Rien! Si ce n’est, malgré eux et contre eux, le désir chez quelques-uns de leurs étudiants, d’aller voir ailleurs et de lire autre chose.’ (188-9)

In *La Société comme verdict* Eribon reflects on his reasons for writing *Retour à Reims*: ‘Pourquoi revient-on vers ce qu’on avait tant voulu fuire?’<sup>133</sup> He speculates about the magnetic power (‘la puissance d’aimantation’) of the family which seems inscribed into the mysterious unconscious. Whatever the divergent trajectories of family members, these are rarely sufficiently powerful not to come up against ‘la logique affective, le sentiment de culpabilité, le respect de certaines obligations sociales.’ (24) He acknowledges the cost involved in a transformation of the self: ‘...les soubresauts et les remords qui accompagnent toute transformation de soi.’ (25) What, then, is his motivation for writing this book? He accepts that there is an impulse to set off in search of the father whom he detested and whose image he had cut off from the photograph on the cover of the paperback version of *Retour à Reims*: ‘Je voudrais savoir plus, et savoir mieux...’, but adds (this is insistent) not, as in autobiography, to find out more about himself or his father, but to take account of ‘les déterminations sociales...et politiques.’ It is for the lack of just such an attention to the social pressures on the self that he criticises Bourdieu’s ‘auto-socio-analyse’ in the *Esquisse*. Whereas he claims that in *Retour à Reims* he starts from the self and moves outward towards sociological analysis, Bourdieu, he says, ‘n’évoque les déterminismes sociaux que pour aller vers lui-même, et vers lui-même en tant qu’auteur.’ (76) And Bourdieu’s ‘discretion’ and ‘pudeur’ and ‘omissions volontaires’ when it comes to his social origins are major obstacles in the project of auto-analysis. For Eribon, Sartre’s *Les Mots* and Bourdieu’s *Esquisse*, though radically different, have in common the relegation to a secondary position of childhood and family, as though they wish to avoid the possibility of the reader’s tracing a strong link between the social conditions of their learning about the world and their subsequent intellectual orientation. (81) This amounts, for Eribon, to a relegation in the importance which should be accorded to the role of one of Bourdieu’s own key concepts, that of the ‘habitus’. It is as though the intellectual choices that Bourdieu makes at a university level – in that particular ‘field’ – are directly linked to the specific issues internal to the domaine. Eribon insists that the options an individual chooses in a given field can only be

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<sup>133</sup> *La Société comme verdict* op.cit. p.23. Subsequent references in this paragraph are placed in brackets after the quotation.

understood by taking into consideration the dispositions incorporated, the internalised social past that is invested and deployed there. (80-81)

These differences of emphasis made by two writers essaying sociological self-analysis show that the application of Bourdieusian concepts to social trajectory is not unproblematic, especially as the object of sociological scrutiny is the self. As noted earlier in the context of *L'Éducation sentimentale*, Bourdieu claims that Flaubert the sociologist gives us Flaubert the man. It is open to question whether in the *Esquisse*, Bourdieu the sociologist is equally self-revealing. Eribon's comment that Bourdieu starts with the sociology and moves on to the self seems a just one if one considers the generalised nature of the temperamental characteristics, such as 'rétivité', which Bourdieu ascribes to his Béarnais background. In contrast, it is possible to agree that Eribon begins with the self before moving out to a vigorous denunciation of the social forces which bear down on the *classes populaires* and succeed in ensuring that, for the most part, they stay where they are. In both writers the tensions and contradictions of the 'habitus clivé' are registered. Eribon is at some pains to explain what lies behind the exceptionality of his trajectory; Bourdieu is less communicative about any of the practicalities which may have facilitated his success: for him, it seems, they are the 'miraculés', who stand out against the inert majority. The reader is left wondering: is it just their determination, against all the odds, to succeed? Is it just their intellectual giftedness that has made the difference?

#### **IV.5: Édouard Louis: *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (2014)**

The collection of essays which the young student, Édouard Louis, gathered together under the title *Pierre Bourdieu: L'insoumission en héritage* in 2013 is less a homage to Bourdieu's work than an insistence on the urgency of its continuing relevance. In his introduction Louis stresses the need to ensure that Bourdieu's work does not become incarcerated within a purely academic domain but is brought out into the realm of practical, political struggle:

S'adresser...au monde, à l'espace politique, multiplier les 'interventions' et les 'contrefeux' pour tenter, si ce n'est de changer l'état des choses, au moins d'interroger, d'écailler les certitudes et les injustices qui structurent la société.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Édouard Louis, ed., *Pierre Bourdieu: L'insoumission en héritage* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013) p.12.

Bourdieu's legacy is seen as his exposure of the violence of 'le monde social' and his provision of the means of 'insoumission' – the refusal to submit to it:

L'ouvrier qui travaille à la chaîne et peine à se nourrir correctement, l'enfant des classes populaires dépossédé de la possibilité de faire des études, l'homosexuel qui subit sans cesse l'injure, en bref, toute la violence qui tisse le monde et qui se reproduit si facilement, toutes 'les conditions d'existence les plus intolérables' qui apparaissent 'si souvent comme acceptables et mêmes naturelles'.<sup>135</sup>

Louis' first novel, *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule*, which appeared less than a year later in January 2014 can be seen as in some ways a graphic illustration of the violence of the social world that Bourdieu had exposed in his sociological studies, and of one man's struggle to free himself from its predetermined consequences. Without claiming an equal distinction, Louis sees himself as following in a tradition of political engagement running from Sartre through Bourdieu, Ernaux and Eribon: 'Je m'inscris dans cette filiation de Sartre, d'Annie Ernaux qui a consisté à dire que la littérature est déjà une littérature politique', he explains in a recent interview on France Culture.<sup>136</sup> He says that, behind his book, there is a 'volonté politique' which he recognises in the work of Annie Ernaux and Didier Eribon. There is a sense in which certain texts of Ernaux, Eribon's *Retour à Reims*, Bourdieu's *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* and his works of sociology like *Les Héritiers* and *La Distinction*, and now, the recent publications of Édouard Louis may be said to be in dialogue with each other. Ernaux and Eribon reference each other's work, and *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* is dedicated to Didier Eribon who also reviewed it in a recent edition of *Le nouvel observateur*. Certainly the way in which these texts demonstrate the operations of the mechanisms of domination in different social contexts within French society have much in common. To Bourdieu's evocation of the social world of Pau in the 1930s, Ernaux's of Lillebonne and Yvetot in the 1950s, Eribon's of Reims in the 1960s can now be added Louis' reconstitution of the world of a marginalised underclass in an industrial village in decline in Northern France in the 1990s.

*En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* recounts the experience of growing up in a family and a community where Eddy's 'difference' – he is physically not robust and is effeminate in manner – clashes with a prevailing set of values in which a brutal version of 'masculinity' is the mark of distinction and success. Racism and homophobia are an integral part of this identity. To meet expectations, particularly those of his violent father, it is necessary to be a

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid. pp.8-9. Louis is quoting from Bourdieu's *La domination masculine* (Paris: Seuil, "Liber", 1998) p.7.

<sup>136</sup> *L'Invité des matins*, France Culture, 31 January 2014.

‘dur’ in a social milieu in which men routinely beat their wives and fight with each other. Economic decline has led to increasing numbers being laid off from the local factory. There is unemployment, alcoholism, criminality. At the same time as he is locked into this brutal world, Eddy – spat at and routinely humiliated at the local *collège* – discovers his homosexuality. He makes repeated attempts to modify his own physicality – his way of walking, talking, moving his arms – and of channeling his sexual feelings in an attempt to meet expectations. Inevitable failure leads to his successful negotiation of a ‘flight’ to a lycée in Amiens where he boards away from his family and embarks on a specialist course in theatre studies. This is his means of escape, leading to a reconciliation with himself and his own nature. The ‘Eddy Bellegueule’ false identity has to be discarded. ‘Eddy’ becomes ‘Édouard’, later ‘Bellegueule’ disappears altogether and becomes ‘Louis’. The radical nature of this transformation of the self, in which he acknowledges the influence of Bourdieu, has even a physical dimension. He is able to train his body and his voice and even to secure dental treatment, as he explains in an interview published in *Libération*:

J’ai acquis un nouveau corps, de nouvelles dents, une nouvelle voix, un nouveau nom. J’avais pris *La Distinction* de Bourdieu et je le lisais comme un guide pratique.<sup>137</sup>

Louis denies that this trajectory represents a rejection on his part of the context into which he was born. Rather, he asserts that it is his milieu of origin which, in fact, has rejected him, though it is not the individuals – even those who had spat at him – who are to blame, he insists, but the social conditions which have created the abjection and the brutal behaviour.

The book defies generic categorisation (like those of Ernaux); it can be described as a work of autofiction, of autobiography, of sociology. Like Ernaux, Louis has to find a way of reconstituting a social world – in his case that of a marginalised underclass – in a literary form. Like Ernaux in *La Place*, but to a much greater extent, Louis juxtaposes the local vernacular in the mouths of his characters and the ‘literary’ language of his narration. Much of the brutality and impoverishment of that world – and the narrator’s alienation from it – is conveyed through this juxtaposition. For example, the opening paragraph of a chapter ironically entitled ‘La bonne éducation’ reads as follows:

Mes parents veillait à me donner une bonne éducation, *pas comme les racailles et les Arabes des cités*. La vanité que ma mère en tirait: *Mes enfants sont bien élevés, je les*

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<sup>137</sup> Anne Diatkine, ‘Délit de “Bellegueule”’, *Libération*, 18 March 2014.

*dresse bien, pas comme les voyous ou – et je ne sais d'où lui venaient ces informations, peut-être des propos que lui tenait son père, ancien combattant de la guerre d'Algérie – Mes enfants sont bien élevés, pas comme les Algériens, tu sais ce sont les pires les Algériens, quand tu regardes bien ils sont beaucoup plus dangereux que les Marocains ou les autres Arabes.*<sup>138</sup>

Like Ernaux's first three books, *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* carries the label 'roman', but the extent to which the experience communicated has been fictionalised is much less. The identity of the author, the narrator and the main character are the same despite changes of name. This is something Louis publicly acknowledges and explains that the fictional elements in the book are largely a matter of protecting certain individuals.<sup>139</sup> Clearly he has run the risk of wounding those who were close to him in laying bare details of their life together, a risk also taken by Ernaux and Eribon. In seeking to establish 'un espace littéraire' where it is possible to represent the 'invisible' and the 'indicible', this is perhaps the painful price to be paid for authenticity.

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<sup>138</sup> Édouard Louis, *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (Paris: Seuil, 2014) p.101.

<sup>139</sup> *La grande librairie*, France 5, 9 January 2014.

## Conclusion

In this study I have set out to demonstrate how the sociological analyses and commentaries of Richard Hoggart and Pierre Bourdieu can provide a way of enhancing our understanding of issues of class and social trajectory as they are reflected in the diverse texts I have selected from the work of Albert Camus, Annie Ernaux, Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis. In Chapter I, Hoggart's account of cultural uprooting – the psychological, emotional and intellectual pressures on the working-class boy climbing out of his milieu of origin through 'the use of his brains' and forever feeling between two worlds – is set alongside Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, and his analysis (with J-C. Passeron) of the determining role of social factors in educational success. Key sociological concepts such as 'habitus', 'field' and 'cultural capital' are demonstrated as useful tools of analysis, both by Bourdieu himself with reference to a literary text (*L'Éducation sentimentale*) and when applied to Bourdieu's own sketch of social self-analysis in *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*. Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* was, of course, written before these key concepts had been fully developed, yet his personal articulation of the ways in which the contrasting 'fields' of home environment and grammar school were operative in the shaping of his attitudes and predispositions (his 'habitus'), and of the importance of intellectual ability as a kind of currency ('capital') in his social trajectory provides a concrete exemplification of these sociological abstractions. Hoggart and Bourdieu can thus be seen to complement one another in providing both a theoretical perspective and an illustration from which to consider how the theme of 'l'ascension sociale' and the return to origins is addressed by the chosen authors.

### **Genre: 'Ceci n'est pas une autobiographie...'**

Despite the evidently autobiographical dimension to much of their material, none of the writers featured in this study would accept the term 'autobiography' for their work. As this study shows, they would have a legitimate reluctance to accept such a term, for their focus has not been on themselves as the prime focus of their writing. Though they have each in one way or another returned into their own pasts, this has been with the intention of representing the people and places of their social origins and of demonstrating the wider social significance of the stories they have to tell. For this, they have forged new ways of writing which do not fall easily into conventional generic classification. Édouard Louis' *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* can reasonably be placed in the category of 'autofiction', or a

fictionalised autobiography, a text which, in the French manner, has ‘roman’ printed on the cover, but which nonetheless fulfils Lejeune’s classic definition of autobiography as having author, narrator and main character identical. We have seen how Hoggart’s ‘discourse of empathy’, in Melissa Gregg’s phrase, has appealed to a French audience for the way it has revealed what is sociologically significant in a personal story.<sup>140</sup> The two ‘professional’ sociologists, Bourdieu and Eribon, connect aspects of their own lives with social and political commentary in different ways, as Eribon points out, and they are precise in their ascription of generic terminology to their texts. Thus Bourdieu engages in ‘auto-analyse’ or ‘auto-socio-analyse’ in his work, while Eribon prefers the term ‘introspection sociologique’ for his recent work of this kind. In both cases there has been a desire to use their own individual experience to illustrate the operation of the social forces which they see as consolidating the status quo in an intractably divided society. To move on to Camus, Ernaux and Louis may appear to be to turn from the sociological to the literary domain. Yet, as we have seen, any such distinction is over simple. Famously, Ernaux sought in *La Place* to make use of a non-rhetorical ‘écriture plate’ to represent her father’s world, which would be ‘au-dessous de la littérature’ and which would seek to demonstrate the wider, socially representative significance of her father’s story. Camus’ early writings show him struggling to balance his desire to represent, as a witness, the ‘vérité’ of the poor social world of his childhood, with a wish to be more objective in the construction of a work of art. After writing the novels and plays and philosophical works which earn him the Nobel Prize, he returns in *Le Premier Homme* to a more personal way of speaking ‘in his own voice’ of his own people and of his own past, although, as we have noted, it is essential to recognise that the text as we have it is unfinished and is unlikely, in the opinion of his daughter, to have been published without his masking his own feelings to a much greater extent in its final version. In Chapter III, we noted that Annie Ernaux, in response to a question from Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, dismissed genre as simply an unhelpful ‘méthode de classification’. In finding new forms, appropriate to what they have to say about ‘l’ascension sociale’ and their return to origins, these writers are staying faithful, with Ernaux herself, to Flaubert’s principle that each work of art must find its own means of expression: ‘chaque œuvre à faire porte sa poétique en soi, qu’il faut trouver’.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Melissa Gregg, ‘A neglected history: Richard Hoggart’s discourse of empathy’, *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 7.3 (2003), 285-306.

<sup>141</sup> quoted by Ernaux in *L’Écriture comme un couteau* op.cit. p.53.

## Les miraculés

Each of these authors, as well as Hoggart and Bourdieu themselves, have in common the relative modesty of their social origins, though this ranges from the poverty evoked in Camus' depiction of the world of the *pied noir* in 1930s Algeria, through Ernaux's description of her early life in the *café-épicerie* in post-war Normandy, to Louis' illustration of a disadvantaged underclass in contemporary Picardy. What they also have in common is that they chart, in a variety of different ways, their own or their characters' movement away from the homes and environments of their birth. In this process, the opportunity to take advantage of an educational opening proves to be decisive. Their individual success runs counter to the experience of the many. On both sides of the channel, during the post-war years, sociologists challenged prevailing orthodoxy and argued that education was, in practice, more a mechanism for the consolidation of social division than a way of addressing the problem. The original innovative view of the Third Republic, at the end of the nineteenth century, that education was meritocratic and had a social function, and, equally, the British government's belief, after the second world war, that grammar schools were accessible to the most able, irrespective of class, were found to be fundamentally flawed.<sup>142</sup> Educational outcomes were found to be largely socially determined; educational success was thus largely the preserve of the better off, the middle-class, the *bourgeoisie* – those possessing the economic, social and cultural capital to flourish within an educational system which privileged precisely those things with which their upbringing had endowed them. Yet each of the authors in this study demonstrates how it is that they – without those endowments – become the exceptions to this overwhelming social trend. In doing so, they register what have been the costs involved in the apparently inevitable estrangement and dislocation involved in their change of social milieu.

## Transfuge de classe

The plight of the 'transfuge de classe', the sense that a movement away from home into a new social environment carries with it an inescapable sense of 'culpabilité', of betrayal, consistently features in the various texts we have been examining. In Bourdieu's case, according to Derek Robbins, there is a sense in which he is a double *transfuge* because the

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<sup>142</sup> for a discussion of Bourdieu's views of education in the 1960s see Derek Robbins 'Theory of Practice', in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, ed. by Michael Greenfell op.cit. p.31.



élite education he acquires is ‘betraying the egalitarian ideals of a socially mobile father’ by betraying the hopes he had invested in an egalitarian schooling system.<sup>143</sup> In one of Camus’ earliest pieces of writing, the sketch for *Louis Raigneard*, he expresses, as we have seen, his hero’s anguished realisation that each book he discovers, each more refined thought he encounters, is having the effect of separating him from his mother. He is left with a sense of guilt for which, as we see in the character of Jacques Cormery in *Le Premier Homme*, he must finally seek pardon. In the case of Annie Ernaux, we have noted her registering of the indescribable pain – a mixture of guilt, incomprehension and revolt – that she experiences when her immersion in the middle-class setting of the lycée leads her to deplore the coarse manners of her father. Like that described by Édouard Louis in *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule*, Didier Eribon’s departure from his home environment is a matter of rupture and flight from a context he wishes to radically reject. Yet, ultimately, it is the violence of the social world that Eribon holds to account for its effects on his own behaviour as well as that of his father. Similarly, it is the violence of the social world that Louis claims has precipitated his dissociation from his family. Eribon, however, reproaches himself for having allowed this to happen, while Louis has found himself at the centre of media attention for having ‘betrayed’ his family.<sup>144</sup>

As we saw in Chapter I, Hoggart speaks of the ‘exceptional’ newcomer in the unfamiliar environment of the grammar school being prey to a sense of ‘social shame’ when home and family meet: ‘the stigma of cheaper clothes, of not being able to go on school-holiday trips, of parents who turn up for the grammar school play looking shamefully working-class’.<sup>145</sup> We remember, too, Jacques Cormery’s ‘honte et la honte d’avoir eu honte’ on filling in the word ‘domestique’ for his mother’s occupation on his enrollment form for the lycée. When Ernaux recalls her encounter with the parents of her middle-class friends at the lycée, she contrasts her mother’s ‘manière brusque de parler et de se comporter’ with their more refined manners, and registers the moment when she becomes conscious of the limitations of her mother’s cultural knowledge in comparison to theirs.<sup>146</sup> But it is Didier Eribon in *Retour à Reims* who is most explicit on the subject of social shame. He recalls his horror at the prospect of being with his bourgeois Parisian friends should he by chance encounter his grandfather on his mobyette plying his trade as a shop window cleaner.

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<sup>143</sup> Derek Robbins op.cit. p.27.

<sup>144</sup> See David Caviglioli, ‘Qui est vraiment Eddy Bellegueule’, *Le nouvel observateur*, 6 March 2014, pp.6-9.

<sup>145</sup> *The Uses of literacy* op.cit. p.267.

<sup>146</sup> *Écrire la vie* op.cit. p.578.

Subsequently he cannot escape ‘un écrasant sentiment de mauvaise conscience’ and asks himself why his immersion in the bourgeois world has so compromised his convictions and has led him to ‘renier ainsi ma famille et à avoir honte d’elle à ce point’. (72) Shame and the shame of having been ashamed are thus shown to be a characteristic, if not an inescapable, aspect of the experience of the *transfuge de classe*. Eribon’s anguish is representative of these writers’ resentment that the power of the social order has imposed these unwelcome feelings upon them in complete contradiction of their own moral and political principles.

### **Habitus clivé**

Bourdieu first uses the term ‘habitus clivé’ in *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* to signify the tensions and contradictions – the ‘coïncidence des contraires’ – which he experiences in negotiating his Pau lycée. He attributes these tensions to a discrepancy between his social origin and the élite nature of his academic pathway which has left him with an enduring ambivalence towards ‘l’institution scolaire’. On the one hand, he has submitted to the ‘règles du jeu’, and learned to operate them adeptly; on the other hand, he has retained ‘la hauteur, l’assurance du “miraculé” ... porté à défier les dominants sur leur propre terrain’.<sup>147</sup> This degree of ‘rétivité’ we have also noted in Eribon’s behaviour in his early years as a lycéen, before his realisation that he, too, should submit to the rules of the game in order to survive and succeed in his ambition to escape. More generally, the notion of ‘habitus clivé’ can be applied to the experience of being caught between two conflicting worlds in which the culture of the home and the ‘culture légitime’ represented by the school are in opposition. What Jacques Cormery in *Le Premier Homme* takes home from school is ‘inassimilable’ there. In Ernaux’s *La Place* the daughter humiliates the father by demanding: ‘Comment voulez-vous que je ne me fasse pas reprendre, si vous parlez mal tout le temps’.<sup>148</sup> Eribon’s mother is furious when her son comes home from school and recites her a poem he has learned in his English lesson. She is furious because she does not understand English and Eribon realises that ‘une coupure s’était installée...entre cet extérieur du domicile familial que représentaient le lycée, les études, ce que j’apprenais, et l’espace intérieur du foyer domestique’.<sup>149</sup> Louis’ alienation from his home environment is another kind of ‘habitus clivé’, but of a different character. It is a matter of his discovering his difference, his sense of

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<sup>147</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* op.cit. p.130.

<sup>148</sup> *Écrire la vie* op.cit. p.459.

<sup>149</sup> *Retour à Reims* op.cit. pp.82-83.

not belonging to the world of the ‘dur’, to that version of brutal masculinity which his environment is imposing upon him.

### The return to origins

What has prompted the desire to return, in their writing, to their origins is, as we have seen, a matter that each writer in some way or another addresses. For the most part, the texts considered are works of their authors’ maturity. Hoggart is nearly 40 when he publishes *The Uses of Literacy* and 70 when *A Local Habitation* appears. Camus is writing *Le Premier Homme* at the time of his death, aged 47. Ernaux is in her forties and Eribon in his fifties at the time of the appearance of *La Place* and *Retour à Reims* respectively, while the French edition of Bourdieu’s *Esquisse* appears after his death, in 2004. The notable exceptions are Camus’ very early *L’Envers et l’Endroit* written when he was 22, and Édouard Louis who was 21 at the time of the publication of *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule*. These are very different pieces of writing; Camus’ lyrical and reflective evocation of ‘richesses perdues’ contrasting with Louis’ urgent representation of the radical dislocations of recent experience. Yet both texts represent a return, even if it is only to the recent past. Camus’ illness, his educational experience at lycée and university, his early marriage have opened up a distance between himself and his origins which is the occasion for his ‘nostalgie pour une pauvreté perdue’.<sup>150</sup> Louis, on the other hand, in inventing for himself a new identity, has distanced himself so decisively from his recent past that *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* can be seen as a distinct movement back in time to the former ‘Eddy Bellegueule’ self of his childhood and adolescence.

In writing about the Algerian novelist, Mouloud Mammeri’s evocation of his homeland in the mountains of Haute Kabylie in *La Colline oubliée*, Pierre Bourdieu uses the phrase ‘l’odyssée de la réappropriation’, suggesting the exile’s long, wandering journey homeward in a quest to re-possess something of what has been lost.<sup>151</sup> For Eribon in *La Société comme verdict*, implicit in the idea of the ‘odyssée’ is the quest for a reconciliation with the father because it is often the death of the father which has prompted the desire to return into the past. This is a quest for reconciliation with ‘la famille, avec le milieu ou la culture d’origine, dans la mesure où le père est bien souvent déjà mort, et que c’est peut-être

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<sup>150</sup> *OC II* op.cit. p.795.

<sup>151</sup> Quoted by Didier Eribon in *La Société comme verdict* op.cit. p.90.

même cette mort qui a déclenché le mouvement du “retour”<sup>152</sup> Ernaux’s *La Place* and Eribon’s *Retour à Reims* both, as we have seen, take the death of the father as their starting point. Hoggart’s father died when Hoggart was eighteen months old, and Camus’ father was killed at the Battle of the Marne when Camus was two. Yet, the first section of Camus’ *Le Premier Homme* is entitled ‘Recherche du père’ and an early scene describes the mature Jacques Cormery contemplating his father’s grave and realising that he is now much older than his father was when he died:

Soudain une idée le frappa qui l’ébranla jusque dans son corps. Il avait quarante ans. L’homme enterré sous cette dalle, et qui avait été son père, était plus jeune que lui.<sup>153</sup>

This image of the son, in an alien cemetery in northern France, filled with tenderness and pity not simply in memory of the dead father, but in compassion for an ‘enfant assassiné’, heralds the return to Alger, to the past, to the family, to the place of his birth which the novel proceeds to reconstitute, or, to use Bourdieu’s term, ‘re-appropriate’. At the end of *Retour à Reims*, Eribon describes how, on coming to the end of his reading of Raymond Williams’ *Border Country*, at the moment when the son learns of the death of his father with whom he has just had time to ‘renouer les liens d’une affection disparue ou simplement oubliée’, he feels his eyes filling with tears. (247) He asks himself what he would be crying for, for characters in a book or for his own father? In an expression of regret for a missed reconciliation, he replies:

Le cœur serré, je repensai à lui et regrettai de ne pas l’avoir revu. De ne pas avoir cherché à le comprendre. Ou tenté de lui parler. D’avoir, en fait, laissé la violence du monde social l’emporter sur moi, comme elle l’avait emporté sur lui. (247)

Thus, the ‘réappropriation’ signalled by Bourdieu can never, in any full sense, be realised. The quest for expiation or reconciliation is finally an exploration of the self and of memory because those with whom reconciliation is sought are dead, or, like Jacques Cormery’s mother, not in a position to pardon. At the same time, the texts which document these returns to origins have the effect of rescuing from oblivion and anonymity the people and places which would otherwise disappear without trace: as Camus puts it in setting out his aims for *Le Premier Homme*: ‘Arracher cette famille pauvre au destin des pauvres qui est de disparaître de l’histoire sans laisser des traces’.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid. p.90.

<sup>153</sup> *OC IV* p.754.

<sup>154</sup> ‘Notes et plans’ *OC IV* p.930.

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