Overstepping the Boundaries: Sexual Awakening, Trauma and Writing in Annie Ernaux’s *Mémoire de fille* and Christine Angot’s *Une semaine de vacances*

This article addresses recent works by two iconic disrupters of sexual/textual boundaries, Annie Ernaux and Christine Angot. The life-writing projects of both women offer a series of determinedly transgressive gestures and both have repeatedly courted risk, not least via their persistent disturbance of the public/private divide in defiance of what Ellen Rooney refers to as that binary’s “uncanny power […] to make things of interest simply disappear.”¹ Both writers are deeply preoccupied with form; both seek to lend appropriate shape to difficult or traumatic episodes of their lives and to draw us into structured consideration of the kind of limit-testing experiences which many of us feel unable to articulate but cart around as an unformulated residue. Both speak to us with a distinctively troubling if now familiar voice, and both have carved out their terrain by refusing containment within the confines of existing self-narrative practice.

The texts which I shall analyse, *Mémoire de fille*² and *Une semaine de vacances,*³ probe experiences of teenage sex which were painfully formative and which, while frequently alluded to in the work of both authors, had remained incompletely articulated. The texts share certain core similarities: the damaging nature of the experiences explored; their enduring presence as an epicentre whose extreme aftershocks mark indelibly everything that follows; the resolve to confront directly what is unpalatable or traumatic; the desire to access an inexperienced, pre-writing self; and the determination to find a viable textual form to convey the impact of sex as it was felt by a naïve and susceptible female subject. The tenor of this writing about sex experienced without understanding is striking in part because it feels so sharply at odds with the dominant emphasis on what Melanie Waters refers to as “the third
wave’s emphatic valorization of female sexual pleasure” and the guilt-free search for jouissance held out as a possibility by a raft of French women writers - Catherine Millet, Anna Rozen, Catherine Cusset, Régine Desforges, Alina Reyes and many others besides - from the 1990s onwards. While both works explore the multiple crossings of boundaries that are entailed in sex itself, and in the differently complicated act of writing about it, they are little concerned with pleasure. The ‘awakening’ in my title is, then, a wilfully ironic and anachronistic term, one which overlays the transition from innocence to experience with romantic overtones and which lingers around, yet is a poor fit for, the experiences explored. The texts elaborate instead vulnerability, coercion, abuse and objectification. Both writers spend years skirting around yet avoiding the challenge of putting the particular intensity of this early experience centre stage: for Ernaux it constitutes “le texte toujours manquant. Toujours remis. Le trou inqualifiable” (Ernaux 17), ‘trou’ signifying a lacuna, missing piece or perhaps tear in the author’s œuvre and psyche; for Angot it is similarly repressed yet violently present. Critically, these early traumatic experiences are seen by both writers as integral to the process precisely of becoming a writer.

Ernaux’s Mémoire de fille covers formative experiences undergone between the ages of eighteen and twenty, starting with the momentous summer of 1958 when she leaves her sheltered family home in Yvetot to be monitrice in a colonie de vacances and is catapulted into a permissive environment that she is ill-equipped to navigate. Here she develops a romantic obsession with a moniteur, H, in whose bed she spends two nights. Rejected by him, she hooks up with a series of other boys and becomes in the eyes of her peers a figure of mockery and the butt of jokes: “il n’y a pas à se gêner avec elle, putain sur les bords” (Ernaux 65). The narrative arc traces this period of disappointment and numb promiscuity as well as the subsequent eating disorder and cessation of the girl’s periods that the author views as a bodily reaction to inassimilable experience. The text explores overtly its own attempts to
apprehend the ongoing presence of the past, being focalized by the mature author and repeatedly looping back in time to examine various former selves categorized as *la fille de 58; la fille de 59; la fille de Londres* and so forth.

Christine Angot’s work conversely covers a single week and focuses unrelentingly and graphically on the formative sexual experiences to which the fifteen-year-old female protagonist is subjected by her father when the pair take a holiday together. Here we find no meta-textual dimension, no to-and-fro between the adult writer and the child subject, but an unbearably immersive present. If in 2007 Victoria Best and Martin Crowley felt able to claim that “the incest that is so repeatedly evoked by Angot is never dealt with in a transparent way” and that it is predominantly a trope, a device for getting at something else about contemporary cultures of transparency, visibility and intimacy, *Une semaine de vacances* makes this claim impossible to sustain.

In this article I analyse each work in its own right, but also draw parallels between them, using as bridging material ideas elaborated in Judith Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself* and *Senses of the Subject*. Butler’s ethically-driven investigation of responsibility, address and mutual investment in accounts of the self, her interest in the conditions of emergence and formation of the subject as “already interrupted by the other and […] embedded within prior social structures”, her affirmation of the inevitable failure of attempts to give a coherent and summative account of the self, as well as the persistent physicality implied in the term ‘senses’, can help to illuminate both Ernaux and Angot whose writings are eloquent on the instability and porousness of the subject and on life-writing as heuristic. Most notably, Butler encapsulates the position and ethos of overstepping boundaries in both writers when she speaks not of the construction of the self but rather of a “willingness to become undone in relation to others”, a concession to subjective fraying, fragmentation and vulnerability which entails “vacat[ing] the self-sufficient ‘I’ as a kind of possession” (Butler,
Giving an Account 136). In Ernaux and Angot alike this vacating is connected to what Butler calls ‘belatedness’, a temporal disjuncture which throws the personal pronoun into doubt when we try to trace our own formation: “I am speaking much later”, Butler says, “than the process I seek to describe. In fact, my retrospective position casts doubt on whether or not I can describe this situation at all, since strictly speaking, I was not present for the process, and I myself seem to be one of its various effects” (Butler, Senses 2). My reading of Ernaux and Angot through Butler in the current article demonstrates the potential of her thinking not only to crystallize some of the more slippery features of their writing, but more particularly to illuminate narratives related specifically to sexually abusive experience which disturbs the emerging ‘I’ - significantly a feminine (and therefore, I would argue, a distinctively and especially porous) ‘I’ - and renders the subject voiceless, at least for a time.

Mémoire de fille

How, then, does Ernaux vacate and undo the ‘I’ as she attempts to cross the boundaries between the writing self and the fille de 58 who has “une présence cachée, irréductible en moi” (Ernaux 22) such that this former subject, “qui n’est pas moi mais […] n’est pas une fiction” (Ernaux 20) is capable of engendering momentary psychic collapse, “une débâcle intérieure” (Ernaux 22) in the seventy-four-year-old writer? How does she situate herself with regard to this brutal awakening for which she was, yet was not, present?

Ernaux’s writing of the formative experience of sex around which Mémoire de fille is organized is fraught with anachronism and caught up in what she refers to as the “piège historique” (Ernaux 62) of life-writing. She could consider it, she notes, “avec le regard d’aujourd’hui où, hormis l’inceste et le viol, rien de sexuel n’est condamnable” (Ernaux 57), in other words from a perspective which concedes that there are few sexual boundaries left to
overstep; or alternatively from the point of view of French society in 1958, that inernalized
by her former ‘self’, “qui faisait tenir toute la valeur d’une fille dans sa « conduite » ”
(Ernaux 57). In the end her account is snagged productively between the two, inevitably so
for many contemporary readers since the list of the girl’s “ignorances sociales” (Ernaux 26),
resulting from both historical period and social class, separates her so sharply from us.

If Ernaux’s explicit, notational accounts of the physicality of sex feel contemporary in
mode they nonetheless set up a traumatic mismatch between the female subject and the
activity in which she is involved. The textual mechanics are blunt, clipped and perfunctory
and the sexual awakening with the man that the fille de 58 naively designates as her ‘lover’,
as well as her subsequent sexual forays, are dispatched with functional haste and read as so
many (textual) assaults: “Trois minutes entre les cuisses, toujours” (Ernaux 60); “Il force.
Elle a mal. Elle dit qu’elle est vierge” (Ernaux 43); “Il n’y a pas eu de caresses
préliminaires” (Ernaux 72); “Aucun orgasme jamais” (Ernaux 60). The paragraph describing
the culmination of her first “nuit d’amour” (Ernaux 46) as the girl chooses against all the
evidence to think of it, perhaps gives the best sense of this spare writing of the newness of
sex, echoing as it does the opening of Ernaux’s earlier Passion simple.9 That text, we
remember, begins with the author transfixed by an extreme close-up focus on penetrative
heterosexual sex in a film on the pay channel Canal +, seen without a decoder. The spectacle
holds her between diverging socio-cultural perceptions: what in the past “on ne pouvait
regarder sans presque mourir” has become “aussi facile à voir qu’un serrement de mains”
(Ernaux, Passion simple 12). Readers of Mémoire de fille are similarly held between different
‘takes’ on the sexual activity described:

La suite se déroule comme un film X où la partenaire de l’homme est à contretemps,
zeit pas quoi faire parce qu’elle ne connaît pas la suite. Lui seul en est le maître. Il
a toujours un temps d’avance. Il la fait glisser au bas de son ventre, la bouche sur sa
queue. Elle reçoit aussitôt la déflagration d’un flot gras de sperme qui l’éclabousse jusque dans les narines. Il n’y a pas plus de cinq minutes qu’ils sont entrés dans la chambre (Ernaux 44).

It is not that la fille de 58 does not experience desire herself: her own undeniable desire is “brut, simple – chimiquement pur – aussi forcené que celui d’un viol” (Ernaux 71) – the latter a surprising assertion in tune with, for instance, the energetic, somewhat aggressive desire to which Cusset gives expression in Jouir. But what the youngster seeks above all is less physical pleasure than repeated proof of her desirability such that “[s]on besoin de H, de le laisser maître de son corps la rend étrangère a tout sentiment de dignité” (Ernaux 54). Her crude forays into what was then the adult world of sex are filtered and processed by a particularly inadequate imaginary and by fantasies forged by romantic love plots. For the fille de 58 “[s]euls les mots mystiques” can account for the experience of being “déflorée”, a process which in her mind makes of H “son amant de toute éternité” (Ernaux 73). She speaks of “[j]oie”, “paix”, “don de soi” (Ernaux 73), and edges towards the kind of account of women’s sexual experience that stresses the momentous and irreversible boundary crossing that was (is?) the loss of virginity; accounts of seismic personal and societal change that are now buried in “des romans devenus illisibles, des feuilletons féminins des années 50” (Ernaux 73). And if something of the girl’s indiscriminate sleeping around makes of her, as Ernaux later notes, a Bardot avant la lettre (Ernaux 60) this is no help to her at the time. The text skilfully evokes, then, a tissue of chaotic feelings, sensations, motivations and desires as well as a distinct anaesthetization, an (emotional) vacating of the self even as the other is given unfettered access to it. Thus in the midst of the girl’s first experience of a man’s body, we are told: “[e]lle ne ressent rien” (Ernaux 43).

If the sex itself is rapidly despatched in this text, its repercussions – social, psychological and physical – endure. We are taken through the ensuing period marked by
alimentary disarray including tendencies both anorexic and bulimic. We also witness the discursive formation of the impressionable fille de 58, who is subject to the derision of her peers in the colonie and who carries a legacy of shame. Ernaux, whose ambivalent reaction to her former self leads her to write with some cruelty here, stokes the opprobrium, making it live once more by creating a list of the “railleries grasses”, “quolibets” and “insultes déguisées en mots d’esprit” with which the moniteurs constructed her as an object of distaste and inferiority (Ernaux 62), a position further reinforced in the following year when her reputation disqualifies her from a second summer in the colonie.

We learn a little later in Mémoire de fille that in April 1959 the girl reads Le deuxième sexe and Ernaux gives us a powerful two-page account of her engagement with Beauvoir, a new kind of awakening which provided her with a retrospective understanding that she had colluded in her own objectification and which offered “les clés pour comprendre la honte” if not “le pouvoir de l’effacer” (Ernaux 110). Notably la fille de 59 deliberates about whether Beauvoir’s proposition that “la première pénétration est toujours un viol” applies to her own experience with H, although on balance she thinks perhaps not (Ernaux 110). We are also told, and this is key to the positioning of Mémoire de fille in Ernaux’s entire œuvre, that the beginning of the author’s self-realization through writing is rooted in the traumatic sexual awakening that this work explores. The text describes a moment that will become iconic: a Sunday afternoon on a warm late-summer day in 1960, when the girl sits on a bench in a garden near Woodside Park station in London and makes her inaugural gesture towards a writing life / towards life writing: “comme si tout ce qui a eu lieu depuis la nuit de la colonie aboutissait, de chute en chute, à ce geste inaugural. Ce récit serait donc celui d’une traversée périlleuse, jusqu’au port de l’écriture” (Ernaux 144) ; and in a diary entry of 1988: “Ces deux années, 58-60, m’ont « rendue » écrivain, je crois”.11
The formative experiences of sex undergone by the young protagonist of *Une semaine de vacances* lead Angot to describe a precisely similar moment, one on which her text closes, positing that the need to write emerges from the multiple boundary crossings and confusion of the (susceptible) subject entailed in the incestuous relationship that her narrative has just detailed. Before moving on to discuss Angot, and mindful of the objections that might be raised by my aligning her life-writing with that of Ernaux, I wish briefly to signal the striking similarities in focus, interests and goals that lead me to draw together these two particular works. Many of the meta-textual comments that Ernaux makes about her own evolving text constitute remarkably accurate descriptions of *Une semaine de vacances*. These involve, *inter alia*: observations on consent, responsibility and collaboration (Ernaux hesitates between “se résigner”, “consentir à” and “collaborer” when she speaks of losing her virginity (Ernaux 45)); descriptions of sex as orchestrated by a powerful male partner who abruptly abandons the protagonist, a partner whom Ernaux capitalizes – indeed generalizes – in her preface as “le Maître”; the female subject’s inability to make sense of what is happening to her; the deliberations about how to get at this problematic subject matter. The most powerful commonality between the works lies in Ernaux’s insistence on trying to render something that is paradoxically inaccessible given what Butler would term the ‘belatedness’ of writing: “l’incompréhension de ce qu’on vit au moment où on le vit, cette opacité du présent qui devrait truer chaque phrase, chaque assertion” (Ernaux 115). This is arguably the very aim that drives Angot in her own narrative of damaging sex, and also the very feat that she achieves. It aligns her with Ernaux’s observation in *Mémoire de fille* about the necessity of what she calls “la douleur de la forme” (Ernaux 18), by which I understand not simply the text’s controlled provision of an account of painful experience, but the effort to lend the text a performative quality that crystallizes, gives enduring shape to and rekindles what was most sharply experienced, in this instance the brutal urgency of her partner’s desire and the
unknowability of his designs; the numbness of her response; the despair that goes hand-in-hand with abandonment; and ultimately, on the part of the writer, the sense of urgency about a writing project born out of a moment of rupture, which is nonetheless repeatedly deferred.

Une semaine de vacances

*Une semaine de vacances* is an extraordinarily unsettling work. It troubles in very particular ways the already complex arena of boundary testing that is in play in women’s writing about sex and furthers Angot’s ongoing preoccupation with the violent harnessing of children to adult agendas. It concerns a father who takes control of his daughter’s body and seeks to engineer in her a sexual awakening on his own terms. Like all incest narratives it explodes the boundaries of silence that help to make incest possible, but it differs from most other accounts in its unrelenting concentration on the abusive sex, and also in the excision of this sex from a more extensive life narrative which would set it in context and focus on its repercussions in later years. It is not, overtly at least, a survivor story. Instead it focuses on a single week, a ‘privileged period’ during which the daughter is permanently available to her father and their incestuous relationship goes uninterrupted. It is unique for the unrelieved intensity and proximity of father-daughter relations in which it entraps us, and for its temporal and spatial concentration. Further, it is not organized formally around the irretrievable memories, silences and textual gaps that, as Kathryn Robson remarks in a study of Béatrice de Jurquet, tend to characterize abuse testimony. On the contrary it is utterly immersive, and thus substantively different from the dispersal of incest memory throughout Angot’s other writings. It offers no conceptual reflection on its own aversive matter, no chapter divisions and few paragraph breaks. It is a present-tense account of the minutiae of a protracted sexual encounter that seldom comes up for air. I shall comment here on two facets
of the work: its insistence on the father’s moulding and penetrating of his daughter not just as
the satisfaction of his sexual desire but as a still more insidiously formative process; and
Angot’s intelligent choices of form and focalization.

Every bit as much as Mémoire de fille, even if the context is very different, Une
semaine de vacances constitutes an intensive depiction of the formation of an impressionable
girl by a barrage of externally imposed codes with which she is, at the point of the narrative,
unfamiliar. The text speaks to us of the impact on the subject made by a ‘higher’ authority
and focuses on how the girl is perpetually assessed and condemned or praised. We trace the
unopposed construction of her from the outside at a time in her life when she lacks the
resources to articulate what is happening to her and to wrest from the other the experience
that is so profoundly changing her. The text affords glimpses of how the father seeks to
educate and socialize his daughter outside the bedroom, directing and validating her
behaviour and taste according to his more privileged norms, but most of it focuses on the way
in which he constructs for her a vision of feminine sexuality, casts her as a Lolita figure and
seeks to dictate the terms of her pleasure in order to legitimize his exploitation of her. This
induction into his decidedly male-centred view of women’s bodies and sexuality is in itself a
form of ideological abuse, consistent with Butler’s (Foucauldian) contention that externally
imposed norms ‘require and intensify our impressionability’ (Butler Senses 5).

Angot’s text charts in minute detail a sequence of sensations and interpenetrations
experienced by the fifteen-year-old girl. In some of these it is hard to disentangle ordinary
fatherly love from incestuous love: take for instance the moment during a forest walk where
the pair hold hands, a moment which slides from the normative to the queasily transgressive,
keeping us alert to the question of what separates one kind of love from another as well as
offering a *mise-en-abyme* of the text’s overstepping of boundaries, pointing precisely as it does so to the slipperiness of incest and the difficulty of detecting what is going on:

Ils se donnent la main, avancent lentement dans l’allée. Il croise ses doigts dans les siens, bien au fond des jointures, puis les fait glisser comme pour s’en détacher, tout doucement, puis les reprend, avant de recommencer à s’en détacher. Ou il joue avec ses doigts dans sa paume (Angot 60-61).

More frequently the father’s overly penetrative, consuming desire takes explicitly sexual form. From the outset the emphasis is repeatedly placed on the girl’s malleability as a source of his pleasure. The text’s opening scene, an extended description of a sexual ritual that is referred to more cursorily elsewhere in Angot, conforms to the imperative formulated by Ernaux for her own writings of a “début qui crève la page – et place ma voix.”\(^\text{13}\) It entails among other things a ‘game’ in which the father asks his daughter to take with her teeth, and then eat, strips of ham or segments of mandarin orange that he has placed on his erect penis. As she kneels before him he kneads her breasts and launches the cycle of explaining, naming, narrating and eliciting that will accompany his sexual experimentation throughout the book as he persistently dresses up sex as education and requires from her evidence of a pleasure which she does not feel. Angot insists in these opening paragraphs on the daughter’s plasticity, on her body and, implicitly, her mind too, as so much modelling paste:

[il] s’amuse de sa matière mobile, de son élasticité, sa main semble avoir le pouvoir d’en modifier le dessin, le modelé, la densité, en pressant le dessus, le dessous, le côté, à volonté, de les faire paraître gonflés, dégonflés, par un côté ou par un autre, comme les deux têtes d’un sablier qu’on peut retourner, comme s’il jouait avec une balle de pâte à modeler d’une souplesse exceptionnelle, qui se prête comme rien d’autre à son désir de triturer’ (Angot 111-12).
The present-tense persistence of the narrative reproduces the immersive experience of being *formed* by the father, and filled by him, in a kind of vacancy to the self. What we have here is less narrative than evidence: evidence of the abuser seeking to condition the sexuality of a victim who is without agency beyond the imperative of obedience. In her psychoanalytic approach to the problem of domination Jessica Benjamin notes: ‘If the other […] is so far above me that nothing I do can alter his attitude toward me, I can only submit. My desire and agency can find no outlet, except in the form of obedience’.¹⁴ This repression of desire and agency, this trap of obedience and powerlessness are not openly articulated in *Une semaine de vacances* but are instead cleverly conveyed by the text’s formal properties. I shall focus briefly on two of these: its focalization and the highly visual, almost cinematic nature of its fragments.

First, let us consider the combined effects of the text’s third-person narration, its focalization through the daughter and its emotionally anaesthetized quality. Not only is there none of the rage, hurt, indignation and revulsion that come along with the recognition of experiences of abuse, not only are no emotions or reactions on the part of the daughter articulated, but she has in fact no voice at all. As Angot notes, she is not in a situation where she would be capable of producing “une parole sociale”¹⁵ and does not know that what she is experiencing has a name. Remembering her own silence and incomprehension in the face of her father’s advances the author observes: “Moi, quand j’ai eu à vivre cette chose-là, quand je l’ai rencontrée, et que j’avais treize ans, je n’ai pas pu parler. Je ne vois pas par quelle fiction mensongère j’aurais pu faire dire «je» au personage de mon livre.”¹⁶ Instead the daughter – and after her the mature author - vacates the subject position (hence the ironic ‘vacances’ of Angot’s title), constituting an extreme instance of Butler’s vulnerable, undone, vacated ‘I’ discussed in my introduction and affording a striking example of how the personal pronoun may be destabilized as we try to trace our own formation (Butler, *Senses* 2). This text’s
recourse to pure description and its associated affective numbness demonstrate a kind of avoidance, an unwillingness to acknowledge what is happening and a shutting down of the self so that while the focalization is manifestly that of the daughter it does not go beyond the act of recording: the daughter merely lists what her father did, touched, said. In this, Angot endows the notational neutrality that characterized Catherine Millet’s now notorious accounts of sex\textsuperscript{17} with a new rationale which comes to assume its own intense condemnatory power. We are not confronted here with the narrative voice that has become one of Angot’s hallmarks, that anxiously uncontrollable first-person rush – objectionable to some readers, pleasurable to others – that loops back on itself, borders on neurosis, evades containment and strays unfettered into areas of consciousness and imagination that are deeply transgressive. Here the narration belongs instead to some blank area of consciousness, recording as if from outside the self. If, as Best and Crowley put it in a discussion of explicit sex in recent French fiction and film, the trauma of child abuse “can neither be mentally contained nor symbolically processed”\textsuperscript{18} Angot’s book accordingly seeks to do neither, offering only thick description and refraining from commenting on, let alone condemning its own content.

As she seeks what Ernaux refers to as “la forme la plus apte à saisir la vérité” (Ernaux, \textit{L’Atelier noir} 73), Angot seizes on the fragment and takes a lead from a visual medium. While Ernaux’s \textit{Mémoire de fille} works with the idea of stills from a film to be explored one by one, Angot’s formal solution involves a series of short, pornographic sequences which are dominated by a mobile, camera-like gaze. These visual tactics suggest a process of splitting whereby the self is detached from the activities in question. At one point in \textit{Une semaine de vacances} the father buys a book by Robbe-Grillet as a gift for his daughter. We instantly understand this as a glancing reference to this text’s own mechanisms: Robbe-Grillet’s insistence on the roving and probing eye, his obsessions (not least sexual ones) and his returns to the same motif are also at work in Angot’s pages. In particular, one
thinks of the claustrophobic atmosphere, the unarticulated sexual tension, the short-circuiting of affect, and the camera-like gaze that afford some insight into the protagonist’s psyche in the 1957 novel La Jalousie. Such techniques are adapted here by Angot to extremely troubling effect. We are witness, for example, to moments where the daughter’s gaze gives us a small purchase on her inner world: she follows with her eyes the direction of the clean T-shirt that she has just put on and that her father sends scudding over the dirty floor as he undresses her; she glances over at her book lying unread on the bedside table because her father’s sexual demands have not left her the opportunity to pick it up (the reading matter, we note, is Les Cinq compagnons, a work from the Bibliothèque verte destined for pre-adolescents); she gazes at an orange towel flapping on the washing line rather than attend to what her body is called to be involved in. And throughout there is no comment on the daughter’s sensations or reactions as pleasure – the pleasure into which her father seeks to induct her – but instead a litany of ‘necessary’ sufferance: the painful sensation of the tips of her wet hair whipping her face as she pleasures him; the discomfort in her jaw as she does the same; the difficulty or unpleasantness of certain physical positions. Here we intuit the daughter’s perspective but it remains unformulated, shadowy and no contest at all for the father’s overbearing certainties.

Angot explained when questioned about her motivation for writing this work that the word ‘incest’ is an abstraction, that its two fleeting syllables cover over the very concrete sexual dimension which it designates but which is too complicated to think about, and that she wanted resolutely to exchange abstraction for embodied experience. It is notable that whereas the word incest is blazoned on the cover of the novel L’Inceste published thirteen years earlier, that particular text holds back its unspeakable matter until its final pages. Conversely, Une semaine de vacances gives us uninterrupted access to the unhealthy huis clos of incestuous sex yet does not name what is happening at all. Philippe Forest has neatly
situated the two as companion texts, pointing out that “l’un des romans est comme l’envers de l’autre, le second retournant le premier comme un gant afin de mieux faire voir la matière même dont celui-ci était fait”.20

Unsurprisingly the critical reception of Une semaine de vacances was polarised: while Libération hailed it as “Le chef d’œuvre de la rentrée”, Ludovic Barbiéri, writing in Chronic’Art argued that the book, which begins with a description of sex in a lavatory, deserved no better than to be flushed away down one.21 What is misunderstood by critics such as Barbiéri is the real purpose of Angot’s text: to reproduce, so that we may look at it in fine-grained detail, the mechanisms of a persistent sexual coercion that we seldom see in action. Without doubt the most heinous misreading of Une semaine de vacances was that undertaken by the selection committee of the Prix Sade who, in 2012, awarded the prize to Angot’s text, thus further complicating the history of its reception and confirming its deliberately invidious openness to the wrong kind of reading, precisely because it is as yet uncontained by the discourses that should condemn it. Angot unsurprisingly set the record straight, quashing this attempt to reward the work by aligning it with the father and refusing both the prize and its implications.22

Conclusion

“I am letting you know”, says Judith Butler, “that when I say ‘I’, I mean you” (Butler, Senses 1). I conclude with some thoughts about the collective value of the autobiographical ‘I’, a sense of the subject which characterizes the life-writing of Ernaux and Angot alike, since both forge a convincing alliance between the personal and the transpersonal and press for the creation of intimate accounts that dislodge writer and reader from familiar positions.
At the outset of this article I observed that the tenor of sexual experience in the texts I set out to discuss feels out of step with the emphasis on women’s sexual desire, agency and guilt-free pleasure in the raft of female-authored experimental writings about sex that have become, since the late 1990s, an established phenomenon in the cultural landscape in and beyond France. And yet, as feminist theorist Ashley Tauchert notes, the new context set for modes of human behaviour by today’s almost ubiquitously hypersexualized culture comes with its own insidious pressures; a catalogue of ‘prescriptions’ rather than ‘proscriptions’ which “increasingly demand an extraordinary level of sexual performance by women in the name of liberation”.

Pinpointing notably the popular confessional mode of sexually explicit writing by women – that found on the Erotic Literature stand of high-street book stores – she notes that these contemporary substitutes for romance privilege “bodily over spiritual states of ecstasy” and suggest that ‘liberation’ for a single woman “hang[s] by a thread on the performance of her ‘right’ to ‘sleep around.”

I should like to argue that, while they return us to adolescent and teenage experiences of respectively sixty and forty years ago, Mémoire de fille and Une semaine de vacances are nonetheless timely and resonate very forcefully with concerns about the formative sexual experiences of young women in the current decade, especially through their emphasis on being impressionable, moulded and subject to coercion. One could list these concerns: the practice of sexting now normalized even in school environments; the influence on early exploratory sex of widely-available, misogynistic hard-porn; widespread experiences of self-harm and depression that are a consequence – especially for young women – of pressures to conform; the epidemic of nude selfie-taking, and the way in which it is the girls who figure in them, not those who circulate them, who are blamed, shamed and ridiculed (we might see here a digital up-dating of a particularly humiliating episode in Mémoire de fille where the draft of a love letter written by the teenage Ernaux was fished from the waste-bin and pinned
up on a communal notice board); the fact that the frequently coercive nature of online sexual experiences that are now integrated into the development of young people’s sexuality can, if studies are to be believed, be even more traumatic than being coerced into physical sex; and the difficulty of processing such traumatic experiences – of giving an account of their relation to and influence on the self - both at the time and in hindsight. One might also detect a special prescience of such emphases given the recent balance ton porc and me too campaigns which have raged in the wake of the 2017 Harvey Weinstein allegations.

It is in their courageous narration of early sexual experiences that are characterized by varying degrees of abuse, bullying and grooming; that show an apprenticeship in becoming a sexual object; and that illustrate the conditions upon which may hang a subsequent entrapment into silence, powerlessness or self-harm, that Mémoire de fille and Une semaine de vacances overstep sexual / textual boundaries. Both show female protagonists faced with experiences they are not equipped to process and make this trauma not just legible, but newly, sharply accessible even as the authors’ narratives - to return to Butler - mark ‘the paradoxical condition of trying to relate something about [their] formation that is prior to [their] own narrative capacity and that, in fact, brings that narrative capacity about’ (Senses 2). Both raise afresh questions of how young women are sexualized, how they make themselves available sexually, how they process ideas of sex, how they talk about and share their experiences of it, and what they say about the boundaries between coercion and consent. The insistence of both authors on what Ernaux refers to as “l’obéissance à ce qui arrive” accompanied by “l’absence de signification de ce qui arrive” (Ernaux 46) remains a common experience for adolescents and teenagers even in today’s sexually saturated culture. It is the harm, not the pleasures of sex that both Ernaux and Angot are in their own ways exploring. And it is this, along with their constructive determination to tease out the terms and conditions of shaming and disturbing episodes of their teenage years - “breaking with what
breaks you” as Butler might put it (Butler, *Senses* 9) - that makes their respective ‘awakenings’ vital reading matter in the current climate.


19 See “L’Inceste est une affaire sociale”.


