



Experience and Exteriors: Cergy-Pontoise's Suburban Space in Annie Ernaux's *Memoirs, Exteriors and Things Seen*

Aida Marrella

Université Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris

aida.marrella@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0701-621X>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59045/nalans.2023.29>

APA Citation:

Marrella, A. (2023). Experience and exteriors: Cergy-Pontoise's suburban space in Annie Ernaux's memoirs, exteriors and things seen. *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies*, 11(22), 229-244.

Abstract

This paper analyzes the relationship between Annie Ernaux's autobiographical writing and the external suburban space of Cergy-Pontoise in two memoirs: *Exteriors* (1993/2021) and *Things Seen* (2000/2010). The paper argues that in *Exteriors* and *Things Seen*, Ernaux's individual experience intertwines with the exterior space of the town. The critical exploration of the texts through the prisms of humanistic geography, spatial theory, and feminist spatial theory highlights how the author's spatial and biographical engagement with the new town operates in a twofold way. On the one hand, it works as a tool contributing to the casting of the identity of place. On the other, it results in an exchange configuring the external suburban dimension as a powerful source of the author's internal processes of self-investigation, meaning-making, and memory recollection. By shedding light on the points of intersection between life and place, experience and exteriors, the paper ultimately suggests that the place identity of Cergy-Pontoise is crafted by and through Ernaux's texts and that, concurrently, the suburban space of the new town informs Ernaux's experience, individuality, and memory. The paper concludes by reflecting on the spatial notion of exteriority as a stylistic device informing Ernaux's narrative.

Keywords: Annie Ernaux; Cergy-Pontoise; spatial theory; place; humanistic geography.

Introduction

The present article explores the relationship between Annie Ernaux's autobiographical writing and the suburban space of Cergy-Pontoise¹ in the memoirs *Exteriors* (1993/2021) and *Things Seen* (2000/2010) through the prism of spatial theory, feminist spatial theory, and humanistic geography. The article defends the hypothesis that the author's scrutiny of the external suburban space functions as a gaze contributing to the molding of the identity of place and as an instrument of self-investigation, truth-making, and memory recollection. By analyzing the texts' elements of interaction between life and place, between personal

¹ Cergy-Pontoise is an agglomeration community in the Val-d'Oise department that takes its name from the communes it covers: Cergy and Pontoise. Ernaux resides in the commune of Cergy. In the memoirs, she refers to Cergy (and not Cergy-Pontoise) as they were written and published before Cergy-Pontoise became an agglomeration community in 2004. The paper generally uses the designation of Cergy-Pontoise unless the texts specifically refer to Cergy as a single commune.

experience and exterior space, I highlight how the identity of Cergy-Pontoise is shaped by and through Ernaux's writing craft and, concurrently, how the space of the town informs Ernaux's experience, self, and memory. In the first section of the paper, drawing on Edward Soja's conception of "the inherent spatiality of human life" (Soja, 1996, p. 1) and Marc Augé's notion of non-place (Augé, 1995), I show how Ernaux's literary work and individual experience correlate with notions of spatiality. Firstly, I elucidate how the notion of place plays a fundamental role in her work. Secondly, I clarify how the notion of exteriority – intended as both "something exterior" and "the state or fact of being exterior" (Collins, n.d.) – is the privileged spatial dimension in her life and work. In the second section, drawing on humanistic geography studies and feminist spatial theory, I analyze how Ernaux's urban memoirs contribute to casting identity of place. Firstly, I show how Ernaux outlines the identity of Cergy-Pontoise in terms of extraversion, that is, as an extraverted, open place (Massey, 1994). I then shed light on how, by recording the town's changes, the texts function as preservers of an identity of place (Relph, 1976) and a memory of place (Nora, 2009). Finally, I argue that Ernaux transforms Cergy-Pontoise from space into place (Rose, 1993) by instilling it with personal meaning and significance. In the third section, I contend that *Exteriors* and *Things Seen* are memoirs where the excavation of the self entwines with the observation and the experience of the external suburban space. In this section, drawing on Malpas' conceptualization of place and experience (Malpas, 1999), I highlight how the scrupulous rendition of the exterior suburban space prompts the author's processes of truth-building, memory recollection (Lewicka, 2008) and meaning-making (Ignelzi, 2000) that inform the narratives of the self. In the final section, I maintain that the spatial notion of exteriority (Collins, n.d.) applies to Ernaux's writing style. I also formulate the hypothesis of a narrative "open to the exterior."

Experience and Exteriors: the interweaving of life and spatiality

Annie Ernaux's literary opus and individual experience disclose an intimate correlation with spatiality and, specifically, with the notion of place. The author attests to being "convinced that the place – geographical, social – where one was born, and where one lives, does not offer an explanation of the texts, but the background of reality where, more or less, they are rooted"² (Ernaux, 2014, p. 9). The image of a text rooted in the notion of geographical and social place is powerful. It suggests that the impact of place on Ernaux's autobiographical production transcends a mere background function, providing the field of reality in which the texts are inscribed and from which they draw narrative lifeblood.

The importance attributed to the notion of place within the process of life writing suggests the author's affinity with what geographer and urban theorist Edward W. Soja has defined as the "inherent spatiality of human life" (Soja, 1996, p. 1). According to Soja, "the spatial dimension of our lives" is constituted by several concepts, such as "place, location, locality, landscape, environment, home, city, region, territory, and geography" (p. 1). According to the geographer, place is the first notion that defines the inherent spatial quality of human lives. By identifying place as the root of her autobiographical works, Ernaux draws a line between spatiality and individual life experiences, resonating with Soja's idea that "we are becoming increasingly aware that we are, and always have been, intrinsically spatial beings, active participants in the social construction of our embracing spatialities" (p. 1). In

² All direct quotations from the French original (Ernaux, 2014) have been translated by the author of this article.

Ernaux's literary work, place intertwines with the course of personal experience. They nourish each other in a productive interplay, fostering the idea of the spatiality of human life. As film director Michelle Porte suggests, "all her work lies in place"³(Garrigou-Lagrange, 2018).

Spatially, the year 1977 marks the writer's pivotal passage from the French provinces, which she describes as "cities bearing the signs of history and the past" (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 11), to Cergy-Pontoise, a new town built from scratch in the early 1970s, forty kilometers north-west of Paris, which, on the contrary, is a place "bereft of memories" (p. 11). Cergy-Pontoise, devoid of a distinct identity and established conventional landmarks, appears as a non-place, "a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" (Augé, 1995, pp. 77-8). The shift from cities imbued with historical memory to a brand new town provokes in the author a sense of bewilderment and confusion, which she manages to tame by writing about the new place:

"When I arrived in Cergy, the new town, in 1977, I was deeply shocked. All my youth, I had lived in the provinces. Normandy first, then Bordeaux, and two years in Annecy: as traditional as possible. So when I arrived in Cergy, out of obligation, I was completely disoriented; I could not find any traditional landmarks. There was no past there. I immediately tried to write about what I could see. And curiously enough, all I could see were the buildings. I could not see the people" (Garrigou-Lagrange, 2018).

In the mid-1980s, Ernaux began a process of city writing which would span many years. Writing about the new town and its inhabitants is a way of appropriating the new place, interrogating herself on the meaning of being located in Cergy, and, ultimately, developing the willingness to stay and process a sense of permanence:

"I asked myself, 'What does it mean to be here, in Cergy?' and I started writing about everything I saw and that I thought was worth saying, about the people I met on the RER, or in big surfaces like Leclerc, Super-M, then Auchan. [...] I think it was also a way of appropriating the territory [...] Writing about Cergy, it was a way... yes... to say that I would stay here" (Ernaux, 2014, p. 18).

The decision to stay in suburban Cergy is an unusual choice for a major French writer, whom many would imagine living in a sophisticated neighborhood in Paris. This choice, I contend, is closely related to the spatial notion of exteriority. Exteriority is a concept that has a double meaning: it refers to both "something exterior" and to "the state or fact of being exterior" (Collins, n.d.). Geographically, Cergy-Pontoise configures as one of the satellite banlieues gravitating around the planet Paris as a peripheral area outside the borders of the pulsating urban center. Geographically, urbanistically with removing it, and coherently with the first definition, Cergy is something exterior. Besides, "the state or fact of being exterior" (Collins, n.d.) relates more intimately to Ernaux's personal experience. As someone born and raised in the provinces, the feeling of belonging outside is one Ernaux had felt since her youth:

"The dream of my childhood and adolescence was to go to Paris. If you can believe it, I did not go there before I was twenty! And we lived in Normandy, one hundred, one hundred and fifty kilometers from Paris! We never traveled. My parents never went on holiday" (Ernaux, 2014, p. 14).

³ All direct quotations from the French original radio broadcast (Garrigou-Lagrange, 2018) have been translated by the author of this article.

Many years later, as an accomplished writer, Ernaux keeps staying outside Paris. If she had a yearning for the city during her adolescent years, that desire no longer exists. The resolution to stay outside is definitive. It is a choice intimately connected to her identity as a small-town woman:

“Paris, the big dream, which I’m today thirty kilometers away from as the crow flies, but always outside. And I don’t want to get there anymore. It is as if I have found my place in the new town of Cergy, the place where I feel good. [...] I’m still a country girl because of my parents and a girl of the provinces, where gardens surround the houses” (Ernaux, 2014, pp. 14-15).

A connection between the author’s individual experience and the spatial notion of exteriority is thus established. Close enough to Paris, but always outside of it, Ernaux affirms a faithful adherence to her provincial identity through living in Cergy. Remaining outside is necessary for existential truthfulness: “Paris, I’m never getting in...” (Ernaux, 2014, p. 14). According to Jeff Malpas, identity and location are intimately tied together. He argues that “human identity is somehow inseparably bound up with human location” (Malpas, 1999, p. 4). Cergy as a human location – on par with her hometown, Yvetot – is where the author attributes the greatest coherence to her identity and persona.

A projection toward the outside also marks the author’s perception of Cergy as a location intended as “the position of a particular point on the surface of the Earth” (National Geographic, n.d.). In *Le vrai lieu*, referring to her house in Cergy, she declares: “What I love about this house is space. Interior space, and, even more, *exterior space*, this great view over the Oise’s valley and the lakes of Cergy-Neuville” (Ernaux, 2014, p. 14, emphasis added). In *Things Seen*, she refers to her mental experiment of going through the space outside her house: “via memory travel through the territory surrounding me, and in doing so describe and define the expanse of real and imagined space that is mine in the city” (Ernaux, 2000/2010, p. 59). Ernaux’s engagement with the outside space of Cergy-Pontoise is so intense it has resulted in two autobiographical works: *Exteriors* (1993/2021) and *Things Seen* (2000/2010). As I will show in the sections below, in these urban memoirs, a place identity of Cergy-Pontoise is crafted, and, in parallel, the exterior space becomes a powerful tool for extensive self-investigation.

The place identity of Cergy-Pontoise

Exteriors and *Things Seen* are set up as journals in which Ernaux annotates ordinary ephemeral scenes observed during the day in the new town. In the memoirs, Ernaux observes the town in the deployment of its connections and social relations, which, I maintain, ultimately outline the place identity of Cergy-Pontoise in terms of openness and extraversion.

According to geographer Edward Relph, the three elements that constitute the identity of places are: “the static physical setting, the activities, and the meanings” (Relph, 1976, p. 47). Ernaux’s gaze settles over different places (static physical settings) where social relations (activities) occur (or fail to): the post office, the train, the station, and the supermarket. The social interactions observed are often expressed as extraverted performances directed toward the outside. The train and the hair salon are places where people take part in little performances to catch others’ attention or approval. At the hair salon, the hairdresser talks loudly about a lice accident “as if she wants the greatest number

of people to know” (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 46). On the train, a girl tells a story to a friend, but her real audience is the other passengers, who know that they are “the center of attention” (p. 37). Trains are also places where Ernaux records the indifference towards beggars or homeless people, whose calls for help remain unheard (Ernaux, 2000/2010, p. 38), or where people plunge into solitude, experiencing the urban paradox of being in the middle of a crowd and yet completely alone (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 70). Both texts document the complex lattice of human relations, accomplished or missed, that occur daily in the town. Whether the people Ernaux observes communicate successfully or not, whether they show interest or indifference or perform agglutination or separation, their behaviors do not undermine the social quality of the shared urban places. As Fran Tonkiss – referring to Georg Simmel – remarks: “For Simmel, relations of indifference or even aversion are fundamentally *social* relations in that they offer the only feasible way of being together with countless strangers in the crowded spaces of the city” (Tonkiss, 2005, p. 11, emphasis in original).

By considering the city in terms of social relations, devoting detailed descriptions to the city’s social exchanges or their failures, Ernaux inscribes herself in a tradition of feminist approaches that consider places not in terms of boundaries, but rather in terms of openness and social connections. Feminist geographer Doreen Massey maintains:

“Instead of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings. And this, in turn, allows a sense of place which is *extroverted*, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local” (Massey, 1994, pp. 154-5, emphasis added).

Massey’s rejection of rigid spatial enclosures is consistent with Ernaux’s conception of an open town. Her conception of Cergy is as an extraverterd one. The author often refers to her perception of Cergy’s boundaries as blurred and undefined. When referring to Cergy’s territorial extension, Ernaux uses general terms that suggest imprecise, undetermined borders and evade geographical accuracy: “buildings are scattered over a huge area” (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 11), the town is “a place with undefined boundaries” (p. 11), located “half-way between the earth and the sky” (p. 11), her house is “a point in the indeterminate space of the new town” (Ernaux, 2000/2010, p. 59). Ernaux’s efforts to describe the new town and its perimeter accurately always fail: “I am unable to describe it, not knowing where it begins or ends” (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 46).

.The idea that the identity of a place lies in its interactions (Massey, 1994) does not apply only to the social relations the place hosts, but also to its relation to other places. As Massey argues: “understanding of any locality must precisely draw on the links beyond its boundaries” (Massey, 1994, p. 120). Ernaux’s conceptualization of Cergy often refers to a site whose identity and understanding must be found in its relation to a broader, global context. Cergy, a destination for the immigrant population, has welcomed people of different paths and backgrounds since its origins. As a crucial crossroads of diasporic paths, Cergy can be conceived as a place for the positive connection between the local and the global. Ernaux embraces this configuration by delineating the identity of Cergy as a transnational place, expressing the fascination exercised by the lives that go by there, but which started beyond its borders: “I began to enjoy living there, a cosmopolitan district, in the midst of lives started elsewhere – in Vietnam, the Maghreb, Côte d’Ivoire, the French provinces, or as was mine, in Normandy” (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 11). Ernaux praises Cergy’s ethnic,

social, and cultural intermingling and the absence of a bourgeois center, typical of the structure of traditional cities (Ernaux, 2014, p. 19).

In her narrative, the concept of a locality that irradiates connections with the rest of the world (Massey, 1994) is also embodied in imaginary connections that link Cergy to other cities, like Rome (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 56), Bratislava, Marseille, and Vienna (p. 66), in an extravert movement continuously propelling the town towards the outside. Furthermore, the extrovert nature of the town space is visible in Ernaux's recurring conceptualization of Cergy in integration with Paris in terms of spatial interconnectedness (Massey, 1994). In this regard, Cergy's identity presents properties of extraversion, whose outward thrust is articulated in real and imaginary bonds with other places, cultures, and other lives.

The identity of Cergy-Pontoise is also cast through the author's observation of urban changes over time. According to E. Relph, the essence of a place is connected to the modifications it undergoes and our reactions to them: "The changing character of places through time is of course related to modifications of buildings and landscapes as well as to changes in our attitudes" (Relph, 1976, p. 31). By reconstructing different locations, Ernaux's diary entries allow a recording of Cergy's urban evolution over time. Elements of Cergy's rapidly changing physiognomy over the years can be retraced following the chronological unfolding of the author's observations. One of the changes retraced in *Exteriors* is expanding Cergy's commuter rail system. Ernaux reports the implementation in 1988 of the RER A line (Regional Express Network), connecting Cergy to Paris and replacing the old Transilien suburban rail network:

"After tomorrow, Saint-Lazare station will no longer be the 'gateway' As you might know, we cannot change a quotation from a published translation. Please leave "getaway". into Paris for me and the other residents of the new town. We shall approach the city on the RER, stopping at the underground stations of Charles-de-Gaulle, Auber, Les Halles, etc." (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 53).

Ernaux's autobiographical narrative thus functions as a mode of preservation of the metamorphosing identity of place. The annotations of the transformations due to new means of transport allow a process of stratification of the new town's identity throughout, and within, Ernaux's text. Tracked through its urban readjustments, the changing identity of the place over time undergoes a process of layering within the autobiographical text.

The registering of urban changes, like the introduction of the RER A or the renovation of the Port-Royal station in Paris (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 29), responds to the urge to preserve the identity of the town in its contingencies. This procedure of salvaging – which results in a detailed account of the historical changes of Cergy-Pontoise from the end of the 1970s to the mid-1980s – inextricably links personal experiences and exterior space. Reporting the subsequent urban changes in journal excerpts is part of a programmatic intent inherent in Ernaux's writing: salvaging the outside world, recording it like a camera, to save oneself (Ernaux, 2014, pp. 87-88). In *Exteriors* and *Things Seen*, Ernaux operates the fixing of the outside suburban space, of its alteration and development, as a method of witnessing her experience, to fix her "passage on Earth" (Ernaux, 2014, p. 76), inextricably joining the functions of experience and exteriors. The need to keep a record of Cergy's different layouts during its urbanization is deeply linked to the author's autobiographical ambition of saving something of herself. Saving oneself is inseparable from saving the outside world:

“To save, yes, through writing, but not by myself, not saving my life as the addition of personal events. It is necessary to save also the time, the world in which we were, in which we are. And this spans from everyday things, like people we passed in the street, to very far away scenes” (Ernaux, 2014, p. 87).

Through her memoirs, Ernaux contributes to shaping Cergy-Pontoise’s place identity by imbuing it with personal significance, thus producing what humanistic geographers consider the passage from space to place. As geographer Gillian Rose has remarked, humanistic geographers define places as “locations which, through being experienced by ordinary people, became full of human significance” (Rose, 1993, p. 41). According to Rose, “humanistic geographers tried to recover the ways in which places were perceived, arguing that it was impossible to make sense of the social world unless academics listened to the interpretations of those who lived in it” (p. 41). From the perspective of humanistic geography, the emotional involvement with the components of the spatial dimension and the filling of those spaces with personal meaning allows a transition from space to place. In her urban recollections, Ernaux pours personal meanings into places such as the public library, the parking lot, and the supermarket. These ordinary places acquire what geographer Yi-Fu Tuan defines as “unexpected meanings”:

“ ‘Space’ and ‘place’ are familiar words denoting common experiences. We live in space. ... Space and place are basic components of the lived world; we take them for granted. When we think about them, however, they may assume unexpected meanings and raise questions we have not thought to ask” (Tuan, 2002, p. 3).

In *Exteriors*, Ernaux describes her experience of the library space: the books protected by wire netting, the silent reading room, and the green forms to fill in. Since some of the books she requires are marked as “not available”, the library’s corridors suddenly become places filled with meanings of disappearance, absence, and the transience of life: “I retraced my steps along the corridor with wire netting. In sixty years’ time, everything that I have seen, loved and enjoyed may have disappeared, replaced by a stack of printed pages, to be consulted only for some obscure thesis” (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 68). In *Things Seen*, Ernaux describes how an empty supermarket becomes for her the epitome of beauty and abundance:

“Nine o’clock in the morning, Auchan, when it opens, practically empty. As far as the eye can see, mounds of tomatoes, peaches, grapes — on parallel shelves, lit up, yogurt, cheeses, cold cuts. Strange sensation of beauty. I’m at the edge of Eden, seeing the first morning of the world. And everything is edible, or almost” (Ernaux, 2000/2010, p. 13).

According to Y.-F. Tuan, what makes a generic space a place with a defined identity is a series of matters such as “the nature of experience, the quality of the emotional bond to physical objects, and the role of concepts and symbols in the creation of place identity” (Tuan, 1976, p. 269). In *Exteriors* and *Things Seen*, Ernaux shapes the identity of Cergy by displaying emotional connections with places. Trivial places in the new town can provoke intense feelings and trigger an “emotional bond” that gives them a human dimension. In the parking lot of Cergy, Ernaux experiences a communion with the town:

“The March sun beating down on the new town. No density, just shadows and light – the car parks blacker than ever, the dazzling concrete. A one-dimensional place. My head hurts. The feeling that this condition allows me to penetrate the

town's essence, the white and remote dream of a schizophrenic" (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 36).

In the Leclerc hypermarket, the music accompanying her grocery shopping arouses emotional upheavals: "In the Leclerc hypermarket, out shopping, I catch the strains of *Voyage Voyage*. [...] The feelings aroused by the song of *Desireless* are intense, almost painful, leading to a form of frustration which does not fade with repetition" (p. 45).

Ernaux illuminates the trivial spaces of everyday life with a human significance, turning them into places. Moreover, she confers human depth on ordinary people living in the suburbs. Referring to the citizens of Nanterre, she explains how, to her eyes, "other human beings are happy to be here, tucked away from the world" (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 37). Thus she undermines the unfortunate stereotype of the gray periphery, envisaging the suburb as a place where the potential of human richness and complexity is limitless. Ernaux insists on the human significance embedded in different places of the Parisian suburbs. During one of her commutes, she notes that nothing has remained of the housing for the immigrant population of Nanterre, another Parisian banlieue built in the 1960s. All that is left are "the concrete slabs marking the foundations of each house" (p. 65). She evokes the human significance of those remnants, places where people once lived, now abandoned and forgotten: "In 1990, many of the passengers traveling on the A line of the RER are unaware of the significance of these slabs, reminiscent of tombstones, and where the grass still only grows back in patches" (p. 65).

By exploring commuter trains, neglected supermarkets on the outskirts, and vapid small-town areas, Ernaux shirks the glamor narratives of sparkling capitals and confers meaning on the province, shifting literary attention from the center to the periphery, from the urban to the suburban. Often perceived as a non-place, a location lacking a relational or historical dimension (Augé, 1995), in Annie Ernaux's memoirs the suburb is given human significance. By making Cergy-Pontoise a major, lively presence, Ernaux builds a counter-narrative of the periphery as non-place, conferring literary interest.

Through the assignment of personal meaning, collective significance, and emotional bonding, Ernaux operates a transformation of Cergy-Pontoise – and, occasionally, other banlieues – from a mere space into a significant place brimming with personal resonance. Through attributing meaning, Ernaux contributes to forming an identity of the place, confirming Relph's assumption that "places can only be known in their meanings" (Relph, 1976, p. 47). In this perspective, even the most insignificant and ordinary places acquire significance, definition, and purpose: "Our experience of the world cannot be subject to classification. In other words, the feelings and the thoughts inspired by places and objects are distinct from their cultural content; thus, a supermarket can provide just as much meaning and human truth as a concert hall" (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 12).

A town of one's own

Exteriors and *Things Seen* establish a deep connection between the author's human experience and the exterior space. In *The Influence of Place*, J. E. Malpas advances the idea that "the self is to be discovered through an investigation of the places it inhabits" (Malpas, 1999, p. 5). Ernaux's suburban diaries lead in the direction of such a discovery. The exergue that opens *Exteriors*, a quote by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, announces the text's preoccupation with spatial exteriority as bound to the authentic dimension of the self: "Our *real* self is not entirely inside of us" (Ernaux, 1993/2021, n. pag, emphasis in original). By referring to

Rousseau's notion of the inside, Ernaux implicitly evokes its opposite, the outside. She thus foreshadows what I contend is one of the text's underlying themes: the external spatial dimension as a catalyst of self-reflection and a source of internal meaning-making processes. The original French title of *Things Seen*, *La vie extérieure*, explicitly alludes to the dimensions of life experience ("vie") and exterior space ("extérieure") as deeply interrelated. Although the spatial reference is completely lost in the English title, its declinations and manifestations remain intact throughout the body of the text. *La vie extérieure* (literally "the exterior life") and *Journal du dehors* (literally "diary of the outside") combine life and external space, experience and exteriors, defining them as connected dimensions. This connection is a compelling force on the author's subjectivity by exterior space. As Brian Evenson has remarked, while in other autobiographical works, the focus is entirely on the inside, in *Things Seen* "the outside world is nearly all there is" (Ernaux, 2000/2010, p. vii). As the only existing reality, exterior space becomes an endless source of internal motion. In *Exteriors* and *Things Seen*, I contend that the outdoor suburban space and its practitioners trigger the writer's inner processes of memory recollection⁴, time perception, meaning-making, and self-reflection. This interaction corresponds to J. E. Malpas' idea that "the life of the mind is given form in the places and spaces in which human beings dwell and those places themselves shape and influence human memories, feelings, and thoughts" (Malpas, 1999, p. 5). Exploring Cergy, buying groceries in its supermarkets – Leclerc's, Auchan – running errands across the town, and observing its dwellers with me acutely are activities carried out outside, which turn into instruments of investigation of the inside. They become occasions of self-reflection, introspection, and self-knowledge, whose efficacy the author is aware of: "You can learn more about yourself by embracing the outside world than by taking refuge in the intimacy of a journal" (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 12).

Ernaux's engagement with the urban space performs a twofold function on memory-related processes, coherent with the double connotation that the notion of place memory may assume. Place memory can be considered as both the historical memory inscribed in buildings, monuments, and architecture (Nora, 2009) and the individual or collective memory of its inhabitants, created or activated through "urban reminders" (Lewicka, 2008, p. 214). As previously seen, Ernaux contributes to constructing the place identity of Cergy-Pontoise. It can be argued that the writer also participates in constructing its collective memory by recording its changes over time. At the same time, the place participates in her memory-related processes, consisting of both the activation of memories and the creation of new ones. In this respect, it is significant that the old train arriving at Saint-Lazare station becomes part of the memory of the place and, at the same time, part of the author's memory: "I shall no longer see the train drawing in between the blackened walls of Saint-Lazare station [...] This morning it all became memory" (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 54).

According to E. Relph, time is a fundamental part of the individual experience of places. He argues: "Time is usually a part of our experiences of places, for these experiences must be bound up with flux or continuity. And places themselves are the present expressions of past experiences and events and hopes for the future" (Relph, 1976, p. 33). In *Exteriors* and *Things Seen*, Ernaux describes places as evocative of past experiences. In *Exteriors*, memories are often induced by observing the external reality through "mnemonic aids" (Lewicka, 2008, p. 214): a scene of a mother reprimanding her daughter at Cergy-Prefecture

⁴ Although Memory Studies can constitute an effective framework of interpretation of Ernaux's work, the present research paper explores Ernaux's texts exclusively through the prism of Spatial Theory and Humanistic Geography. All the references to memory are to be taken exclusively in relation to the spatial field.

train station evokes reminiscences of the author's relationship with her parents (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 62). At the RER station next to Nanterre University, a group of people talking in a Norman accent reminds the writer of the expressions and words of her childhood, prompting a meditation on identity standing the test of time (p. 53). The 3M Minnesota building triggers Ernaux's anxious memories of the early days in the new town when she repeatedly lost her way, but kept driving because she was too afraid to stop (p. 24). The urban landscape can activate past-retrieving procedures where past and present overlap. Ernaux has clarified the structure of this perception of superimposed temporality in her conversation with M. Porte: "the feeling of the past re-enters the present, is 'superposed on it'" (Ernaux, 2014, p. 28) and in *Things Seen*, when she refers to how the sight of the Paris sign on Highway A15 reminds her of her youth: "the sensation of the past recurs in the present, superimposes itself." (Ernaux, 2000/2010, p. 14).

Furthermore, exterior elements mark the perception of time passing. The passing of time is modulated through the urban evolution of Cergy, including the already mentioned renovation of the commuter system: "Nine years of my life will come to an end because the train route to Cergy and Paris has been altered. From now on there will be the days of the Cergy-Saint-Lazare train and the days of the RER A line" (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 53). The renewal of Cergy's means of transport operates as a time-measuring device, separating Ernaux's internal time into two distinct periods. The suburban space components affect the author's internal temporal scan, according to a process that sees the influence of exteriors on the modes of experiencing.

The metamorphosis of Cergy's physiognomy shapes the writer's subjective sense of time, and, to her eyes, it also marks the change of era from a historical point of view. When Ernaux remarks that "The station of Saint-Lazare is no longer part of my life; all I can see and hear now are the RER stations, the silence at Auber... The twenty-first century succeeding the nineteenth century of Saint-Lazare Station" (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 61), she operates a transition of the conceptualization of the Saint-Lazare station from the individual dimension to the collective one. As a site able to mark the passing of time, Saint-Lazare station assumes both particular and collective significance. The process of recalling a personal memory associated with a place is intricately linked to the creation of a historical narrative.

Time passing is also measured through the changes undergone by urban components related to the production of goods. Locations such as shops, restaurants, or services, by changing their name, aspect, or function, provide a report of the mutating features of the town. The changing shop signs at the Trois-Fontaines mall in Cergy are meticulously registered through a long list of old and new stores in *Things Seen* (Ernaux, 2000, p. 10). The mall space rearrangement – encompassing disappearances, permanences, and new settlements – corroborates Ernaux's belief that external factors determine the internal perception of time:

"The sensation of time passing is not inside us. It comes from the *outside*, from children who grow up, neighbors who leave, from people growing older and dying. Bakeries that close and are replaced by driving schools or television repair shops. The cheese department moved to the back of the supermarket, which is no longer called Franprix but Leader Price" (Ernaux, 2000/2010, p. 10, emphasis added).

The mutating face of neighborhoods, transportation, and utilities marks the town's evolution while participating in the author's activity of self-investigation. The part taken by exterior space in the author's internal self-reflections can be interpreted through the

humanistic geographers' idea that "to be as sensitive to place [...] was to be fully human" (Rose, 1993, p. 49). The disappearance of the "Jean-Claude Monderer" shoe shop, which had itself replaced another shoe store, the "Espace 2M", is perceived as a personal loss: "Bars on the window of the "Jean-Claude Monderer" shoe store. [...] I try to remember all the pairs of shoes I bought here. Each disappearance of a store in the shopping center signifies the death of a part of oneself, where longing is strongest" (Ernaux, 2000/2010, p. 5).

Ernaux's reflections resonate with philosopher Jeff Malpas's contention that places are a part of one's essential self. As Relph maintains, "Malpas argues that place is a fundamental aspect of being, and that being is always articulated in and through particular places yet reaches out beyond them to grasp what it means to exist in the world" (Relph, 1976, Preface, n. pag.). To Ernaux, the self is also made of shops, supermarkets, and all kinds of sites of one's experience, as they constitute elements of one's individuality. The closing of one of them can determine the small internal death of parts of the self. In the passage mentioned above, the lost part of the self, the "death of a part of oneself, where longing is strongest" (Ernaux, 2000/2010, p. 5), pertains to longing and desire.

Exteriors and *Things Seen*, through scattered suburban fragments, suggest that meaning-making – defined as "the process of how people construe, understand or make sense of life events, relationships, and the self" (Ignelzi, 2000, p. 5) – can be prompted by external space. Furthermore, the experience of places can trigger larger considerations, connecting the self with the dimensions of society, politics, and culture. According to E. Relph, "place, both as a concept and as a phenomenon of experience, therefore has a remarkable capacity to make connections between self, community, and earth, between what is local and particular and what is regional and worldwide" (Relph, 1976, Preface, n. pag.). In Ernaux's urban memoirs, the different shopping locations the author visits in town can prompt global reflections on modernity, customs, and society. At the shopping center, the observation of people flocking into shops, hungering for consumerism, encourages a parallel to be drawn between the function of shopping centers and churches, today and in the past (Ernaux, 2000/2010, p. 80). The department stores in Boulevard Haussmann prompt a critique of capitalist culture and its ability to trigger material desires and false needs (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 40).

In the materiality of its buildings, landmarks, streets, and people, the city is configured as a place that participates in the author's processes of self-knowledge. However, realizations about the self and manifestations of personal beliefs are not prompted exclusively by observing the urban space. They can also arise from examining its practitioners: Ernaux extensively examines people, listens to their conversations, and scrutinizes their demeanor. Self-awareness arising from exterior spaces is thus extended from the town to its inhabitants. When witnessing an argument between two young persons, apparently unaware of the presence of others but conscious of them, the author establishes a parallel between the observed scene and her conception of writing (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 64). Casually listening to a conversation between two persons discussing salaries and working hours, Ernaux interrogates herself on "the material side of life" (p. 41). The focus on other city dwellers turns inwards and becomes an instrument of self-analysis. In *Exteriors*, the attempt of a mugger to rob her things prompts a series of considerations that lead her to question her physical appearance, femininity, and attractiveness (p. 71). Ernaux articulates the contribution of unknown persons to her self-exploration exercise in terms of spatial movements such as rippling, going through, and traversing. In *Exteriors*, she annotates a brief scene of a couple waiting for a taxi and discussing death and burial procedures. The

sequence is disquieting and triggers an intense observation: "I'm visited by people and their lives – like a whore" (p. 50). Even if it is not clarified how the couple's exchange impacts her, it is made clear that their experience traverses her, "traverser" being the original verb used by Ernaux to indicate a physical, emotional, and symbolic penetration. Meaning-making processes are accomplished both by traversing the city space and by being traversed by other inhabitants of the town, whose lives inform one's experience: "It is other people – anonymous figures glimpsed in the Métro or in waiting rooms – who revive our memory and reveal our true selves through the interest, the anger and the shame that they send *rippling* through us" (Ernaux 1993/2021, p. 13, emphasis in original).

Closeness to strangers in shared urban spaces is a route to finding meaning and sense. Even if no direct communication is established, the presence of strangers moving in the city space raises emotions and reflections that help elucidate aspects of one's self through mirroring, physical proximity, or scrutiny: "I may also be trying to discover something about myself through them, their attitudes or their conversations" (p. 29). The author's self-concept is informed by innumerable urban inhabitants who cross her path daily and whose unknown lives, only glimpsed, enrich her self-representation and beliefs, nurturing her existence as an individual. Ernaux's affirmation to resemble "the glass surfaces of office towers" (p. 11) is not only suggestive of a fusional identification with the architecture of Cergy. It can also be understood as pointing to the light-reflecting function of the glass. Although in the early days of Cergy she reflects only the buildings, not the people (Garrigou-Lagrange, 2018), episodes of mirroring in Cergy's residents become increasingly frequent. Witnessing a woman stealing a pair of pantyhose, she identifies with her: "I imagine this woman's heady feeling" (Ernaux, 2000/2010, p. 5). Seeing a couple kissing on an escalator, she projects herself into the woman and meditates on her own sentimental life: "they were at the spot where, one evening last year, toward midnight, I was with F. Like the woman, I had my back to the wall. The empty escalator had continued down, interminably, clicking continually" (p. 12). While sitting in front of a woman in the transport, the writer often asks herself: "Why am I not that woman?" (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 29). Experiments of mirroring, recognition, and identification with other inhabitants of the town respond to the belief that truth and meaning can be extrapolated from the outside. Aspects of experience can be illuminated, even modified, by random encounters within the city space:

"Today, for a few minutes, I tried to see all the people I ran into, all strangers. It seemed to me that, as I observed these people in detail, their existence suddenly became very close to me, as if I were touching them. Were I to continue such an experiment, my vision of the world and of myself would turn out to be radically transformed. Perhaps I would disappear" (Ernaux, 2000/2010, p. 13, emphasis in original).

Writing from the outside

Ernaux's work, although eschewing a strict categorization within the genre of autobiography, continually draws on the realms of the personal, the memory, and the past. Rejecting the definition of novel for her works and asking publisher Gallimard to remove any reference to any literary genre from her books in 1983, Ernaux has molded a peculiar, hybrid style whose impersonal prose bears elements of autobiography, ethnography, and sociological inquiry. The different stylistic qualifications attributed to her works, from collective autobiography to "transpersonal narrative" ("récit transpersonnel", Charpentier, 2006, n. pag.) and "autosociobiography" (McAuliffe, 2019, p. 2), disclose a tendency to the narrative trespassing of the personal (auto) into the collective. The narrative's tendency to

veer from the personal (auto) into the collective, from the individual into the universal (transpersonal), from the internal into the external, which ultimately reveals, I would argue, the author's interest in what exists outside as unavoidably bound to the personal internal dimension. The author's refusal to define her work as autofiction is to ascribe to the quality of involution implied by this label. By refusing to define her work as autofiction, the author rejects the quality of involution implied by this label. The term autofiction, according to Ernaux, alludes to "something turned in on itself, closed to the outside world" (Ernaux, 2014, p. 108). An openness to the world, such as the one Ernaux generously grants to the suburban universe of Cergy, is the prerequisite for a narrative that I define as "open to the exterior."

In *Le vrai lieu*, Ernaux affirms: "Writing is my 'real place.' Of all occupied places, it is the only immaterial one, but also the one that I'm certain, in one way or another, contains all the others" (Ernaux, 2014, p. 12). The notion of place plays a crucial role in Ernaux's literary work, becoming a metaphor for the art of writing: the immaterial site that contains all the others, the recipient that harbors all other aspects of human experience. Place, intended as factual external reality, is also where the impulse for writing comes from. Ernaux defines her writing style as "factual" and "flat", explaining that she never sought journalistic tones, but rather a writing style devoid of judgment, characterized by observation, and as close as possible to reality (Ernaux, 2014). Moreover, a manifesto of this stylistic dogma is found in a casual scene witnessed on a train and mentioned in *Exteriors*: "From an essay a student was reading on the RER, between Châtelet-Les Halles and Luxembourg, one sentence stood out: "Truth is related to reality" (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 25).

The avoidance of abstraction results in a preoccupation with the external reality that permeates her whole work. In *The Years* (2008/2018), the concern with reality as the material source of writing is expressed through the use of photos as literary devices the narration takes its cue from: "A photo is, for me, reality" (Ernaux, 2014, p. 72). In *Exteriors* and *Things Seen*, it's the suburban environment, with its motions and happenings, that provides the external input for writing. Ernaux argues that: "writing is not enough; there need to be *external* signs, material evidence to define what a 'real' writer is. Yet these signs are available to all of us" (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 39, emphasis added). The suburban space supplies the external signs needed to nurture the practice of writing. In her urban memoirs, Ernaux seizes those signs and uses the "material evidence" for the purposes of self-investigation and meaning-making. Highly detailed descriptions are a stylistic device aimed at attempting to make sense of personal experience. She interrogates herself: "Why do I describe in detail this particular scene, like many others in the book? What is it I am desperately seeking in reality? Is it meaning?" (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 29). In this passage, Ernaux engages in self-questioning and seems to be contemplating whether there is a more meaningful purpose behind the act of describing these scenes.

The dynamics of a language that expresses inner experiences by describing external elements sounds out interiority throughout exterior elements are echoed by stylistic choices. Descriptive, impersonal, and objective, Ernaux's writing style literally remains "on the outside." Characterized by a camera-like technique, recording scenes, people, and facts from the outside, it can be argued that Ernaux's style is imbued with and constructed on the notion of exteriority. In *Exteriors* and *Things Seen*, the externality is a stylistic feature that captures reality without penetrating it, always remaining on the surface. Ernaux's language also stays detached in tone when capturing scenes and dialogues about sensitive matters, such as death, illness, euthanasia, poverty, and homelessness. The rich plethora of entities constituting the urban outer space is seized by employing a plain, non-intrusive language that does not go beyond the outermost layer of reality. What the author defines as "ethnowriting" (Ernaux,

1993/2021, p. 47), which is the need to write unembroidered fragments about external facts “without any ulterior motive” (p. 60), turns into the instrument that allows the grasping of personal meanings. Paradoxically, it is through a non-penetrating language that reality can be fully seized, unlocked, and made sense of.

Conclusions

In *Exteriors* and *Things Seen*, Annie Ernaux collects blunt observations of Cergy-Pontoise's spaces and inhabitants in the form of a diary. This paper demonstrates how, far from being trivial or meaningless, the ordinary practice of the Parisian suburbs performs a double operation that brings into play the dialectic of the inside-outside as a device of exploration of the self while, at the same time, crafting an identity of place. The correlation of Ernaux's experience and work with notions of spatiality (Ernaux, 2020; Ernaux, 2014) finds in *Exteriors* and *Things Seen* an outcome that reveals an interest in the connections between interiority and exteriority. In *Exteriors* and *Things Seen*, Ernaux uncovers her fascination with how inner thoughts and feelings connect with the outside world. By adopting a feminist geography perspective (Massey, 1994), an outline of Cergy-Pontoise's identity in terms of exteriority and unboundedness can be identified. In the light of humanistic geography theory (Tuan, 2002; Rose, 1993) – which explores the connections between humans and places – Ernaux's practice of permeating ordinary sites of the new town with personal meanings allows for a transformation of Cergy-Pontoise from space into place. Furthermore, the adoption of a geographical humanist lens allows for a definition of Cergy-Pontoise as a place endowed with significance and identity, discarding the notion of the suburb as a non-place (Augé, 1995). Ernaux's engagement with the suburban space of Cergy-Pontoise is far from going in just one direction. If Ernaux's texts outline an identity of place through the notion of exteriority, the preservation of the memory of place, and the attribution of personal significance, the suburban environment, conversely, exerts an influence on the author's self and experience. In *Exteriors*, Ernaux reveals the apparatus through which the external dimension affects her interiority: “It is outside my own life that my past existence lies, in passengers commuting on the Metro of the RER; in shoppers glimpsed on escalators at Auchan or in the Galleries LaFayette; in complete strangers who cannot know that they possess part of my story; in faces and bodies which I shall never see again” (Ernaux, 1993/2021, p. 74). In this context, the paper shows how exterior space operates as a dimension affecting the author's experience – intended as “human existence as it comprises capacities to think, to feel, to grasp, to act and so on” (Malpas, 1999, p. 16) – acting on the processes of truth-building, memory recollection (Lewicka, 2008), and meaning-making (Ignelzi, 2000). The suburban space, its social interactions, and its dwellers result in a lens through which the author's self-identity comes to be seen, realized, and understood. The engagement with the suburban area of Cergy-Pontoise, observational and interactive, reveals the place-bound nature of Ernaux's experience. The tie between self and place knotted in *Exteriors* and *Things Seen* reflects the idea of humanistic geographers that “there is no possibility of understanding human existence – and especially human thought and experience – other than through an understanding of place and locality” (Malpas, 1999, pp. 15-16). Ernaux's emotional, intellectual, and experiential closeness to the multifarious facets of the suburban landscape ultimately results in an autobiographical work that operates a discovery of the self while contributing to delineating the place identity of Cergy-Pontoise.

References

- Augé, M. (1995). *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Verso.
- Charpentier, I. (2006). Quelque part entre la littérature, la sociologie et l'histoire... L'œuvre auto-sociobiographique d'Annie Ernaux ou les incertitudes d'une posture improbable. *COnTEXTES*. <http://journals.openedition.org/contextes/74>
- concept of place. (n.d.). In *National Geographic*. <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/resource-library-concept-place>
- Ditum, S. (2022, September 15). *Annie Ernaux looks back at her teenage self – and sees a stranger*. The Spectator. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/annie-ernaux-looks-back-at-her-teenage-self-and-sees-a-stranger/>
- Ernaux, A. (2020). *A Man's Place*. Fitzcarraldo Editions.
- Ernaux, A. (2021). *Exteriors*. Fitzcarraldo Editions.
- Ernaux, A. (2014). *Le vrai lieu*. Gallimard.
- Ernaux, A. (2010). *Things Seen*. University of Nebraska Press.
- exteriority. (n.d.). In *Collins*. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/exteriority>
- Garrigou-Lagrange, M. (2018, January 15) *Série Annie Ernaux, épisode 1: La vraie vie*. [Radio Broadcast]. France Culture. <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/la-compagnie-des-auteurs/annie-ernaux-14-la-vraie-vie>
- Ignelzi, M. (2000). Meaning-Making in the Learning and Teaching Process. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* Issue 82, 5-14.
- Lewicka, M. (2008). Place attachment, place identity, and place memory: Restoring the forgotten city past. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 28, 209-231. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.485.8877&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Malpas, J. E. (1999). *Place and Experience*. Cambridge University Press.
- Massey, D. (1994). *Space, Place and Gender*. University of Minnesota Press.
- McAuliffe, S. (2019). Autosociobiography: Annie Ernaux and the Collective Sensorium. *Terra Critica VII: Critique and Society*. Whose Society? Kings College London, United Kingdom 4-6 July 2019. http://terracritica.net/wp-content/uploads/pospaper_SamMcAuliffe_London2019.pdf
- Nairn, I. (1965). *The American Landscape*. Random House.
- Nora, P. (2009). *Les lieux de mémoire 1 (Quarto) (French Edition)*. Gallimard.
- Porte, M. (Director). (2013). *Les mots comme des pierres* [Words as heavy as stones] [Film]. Folamour Productions.
- Relph, E. (1976). *Place and Placelessness*. SAGE.
- Rose, G. (1993). *Feminism and Geography*. Polity Press.
- Soja, E. (1996). *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Tonkiss, F. (2005). *Space, the City and Social Theory*. Polity Press.

*Experience and Exteriors: Cergy-Pontoise's Suburban Space in Annie Ernaux's Memoirs,
Exteriors and Things Seen*

- Tuan, Y.-F. (1976). Humanistic Geography. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 66(2), 266–276. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2562469>
- Tuan, Y.-F. (2002). *Space and Place: the Perspective of Experience*. University of Minnesota Press.