

## (Re)turns of Passion

Maro Bellou

"From September last year, I did nothing else but wait for a man: for him to call me and come round to my place."<sup>1</sup> These words describe a woman's experience of a passionate love affair with a man as portrayed in Annie Ernaux's emotional anti-novel *Simple Passion*. The narrative genre of the text is defined by the author as an "impersonal autobiography". The 'I' of the narrative appears detached: it casts on itself the apathetic, icy gaze of a clinical description: "I do not wish to explain my passion [...] I just want to describe it."<sup>2</sup>

The way Ernaux talks about passion in her book calls to mind Picasso's *The Bull* (1945). Just as Picasso begins with a detailed depiction of the animal and ends with a faint outline which captures it in the simplest possible form, Ernaux captures passion itself, stripped of any emotional sign, lament or melodrama. For Ernaux, passion in its most elementary outline amounts to the simple fact of waiting: "I would have liked to have done nothing else but wait for him."<sup>3</sup>

Ernaux states that her novel is not an archaeology of her passion. She has no intention of seeking this passion's origins, in the way that psychoanalysis would reveal them. In Ernaux's thinking, psychoanalysis explains, while she simply records the 'signs' of her passion without making them a part of an explanatory sequence. Besides, she mentions in an interview that she has never been interested in psychoanalysis. These reservations that Ernaux expresses, however, are far from constituting an obstacle to an attempt at a psychoanalytic reading of *Simple Passion*. We will start by pointing out that the main signifier of her passion is the unremitting wait for this man. The question is: what fuels this repetition? How can this fixation be explained? I will attempt to show that what unlocks these questions is the Lacanian concept of the drive.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Ernaux, *Simple Passion*, trans. T. Leslie, New York/London: Seven Stories Press, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

In *Seminar XI*, Lacan points out that drive can reach satisfaction without reaching its aim.<sup>4</sup> Its orbit is always circular, constantly rotating around the same thing. The paradox of drive is that satisfaction is not achieved through the conquest of the object of desire. The drive derives satisfaction simply from returning into circuit (*retour en circuit*). The source of the narrative ego's jouissance is therefore precisely what it exposes as a state of suffering: the intervals of agonised waiting that incessantly follow one another. It is this jouissance that explains fixation, that is, the (re)turn of the drive to/around an object *a*. In other words, the cessation of the metonymic slip of desire is not the consequence of suffering, but the result of repeated satisfaction. What Ernaux exposes as suffering is *explained* as jouissance.

Ernaux confesses that her passion “[is] meaningless, and [it was] for two years the most violent and unaccountable reality ever”. No further significance is attached to passion beyond that. Instead of giving meaning to passion, Ernaux's writing fully despoils it of meaning. She may have experienced it in a fictional way, but what she has finally managed to do is write about passion without any passion.

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<sup>4</sup> Lacan, J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. A. Sheridan, New York/London: Norton, 1998, p.165.