‘Il aurait peut-être préféré avoir une autre fille’: 
Paternal Mourning in the Work of Annie Ernaux

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The loss of a child is one of the greatest psychological traumas imaginable and can have long-term and life-changing effects on the life of the father as well as the mother.¹ The theoretical foundation for our understanding of grief remains Freud’s seminal article ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ which appeared in 1917.² Since then, scholars have drawn on Freud’s ideas to analyse grief and mourning. Very little research has been done however, on the mourning processes of bereaved fathers. The possibility that men and women undergo the mourning process differently continues to be largely ignored by researchers with relatively few exceptions. It is only within the last twenty years that the unique experience of paternal grieving has been acknowledged, recognized and studied.³

In this article, we will examine Annie Ernaux’s perception of her father’s grief and mourning processes: Ernaux discovers, at the age of ten, that her sister, Ginette Marie Thérèse Duchesne, died of diphtheria on April 14, 1938, which fell on Holy Thursday, two years prior to Ernaux’s birth on September 1, 1940. Ernaux briefly mentions the circumstances of her sister’s untimely death in Une femme and then in several subsequent texts such as Les Années where, for example, we find the following description of an old photograph: “La photo floue et abîmée d’une petite fille debout devant une

barrière, sur un pont. […] Elle rit. Au dos, il y a écrit Ginette 1937. Sur sa tombe: décédée à l’âge de six ans le jeudi saint 1938’.\(^4\) The tragedy is related in greater detail in *L’Autre fille*: ‘En 1938, elle est morte de la diphtérie trois jours avant Pâques. Ils ne voulaient qu’un seul enfant pour qu’il soit plus heureux.’\(^5\) Ginette’s death was clearly profoundly traumatizing for Ernaux’s father, Alphonse Duchesne. Our close examination of several of Ernaux’s texts will be informed by Freudian concepts of mourning and grief and will also be enhanced by Cathy Caruth’s conception of trauma as ‘the story of a wound that cries out’.\(^6\) Ernaux’s mother, Blanche, recalls Alphonse Duchesne’s reaction: ‘*mon mari était fou* quand il t’a trouvée morte en rentrant de son travail aux raffineries de Port-Jérôme’ (*AF* 16).\(^7\) Ernaux reports that customers avoided the grocery for a week due to his grief-stricken state.

Alphonse Duchesne was born in 1899, the second son of a large, impoverished family. In 1914, he was mobilised, one of the eight million non-professional soldiers called up to fight for France in the Great War, and was based in Lorraine. In the post-war industrialisation, he obtained work in a factory, and in 1928 married Blanche Dumenil, seven years younger than he, whom he met in a rope factory where they both worked. With Alphonse Duchesne’s savings, the couple purchased a small retail business in Lillebonne in 1931. This did not generate a sufficient income during the economic crisis and Alphonse continued to work in construction until he had an accident following which he worked nights in Port Jérôme oil refinery, eventually attaining a supervisory role as foreman. After Ernaux’s birth, the couple purchased a grocery shop-cum-café near

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7. Ernaux uses italics throughout when quoting her mother’s words, as she remembers them.
Yvetot’s railway station. Alphonse and Blanche wished to have only one child so that their offspring would have every advantage.

Their daughter Ginette Marie Thérèse Duchesne was born on February 6, 1932 and died ‘comme une petite sainte’ (AF 16) in 1938. Ernaux’s harrowing description of Ginette’s death is reminiscent of that of little Marie in Mauriac’s Nœud de vipères and that of Philippe, Othon’s son in Camus’ La Peste. In the latter, the dying child is depicted as a ‘crucifié grotesque’,8 a harrowing parody of crucifixion. Ginette, who died on Holy Thursday with its symbolic connotations of Christ’s suffering in the garden of Gethsemane, was the perfect creature, angelic and prayerful, the incarnation of innocence. Like Marie in the above-mentioned novel by Mauriac, she died with a prayer on her lips: ‘Je vais aller voir la Sainte Vierge et le bon Jésus’ (AF 16). Ernaux’s description of Ginette’s agonising death clearly has Camusian undertones and Dostoevskian echoes, depicting a world full of suffering, in which the innocent are particularly vulnerable: ‘les peaux dans la gorge, l’étouffement […] elle est morte comme une petite sainte’ (AF 16). Ginette is the sacrificial victim of her parents’ poverty and we can surmise from Ernaux’s writings that her parents experienced profound feelings of guilt and self-blame due to their failure to have her vaccinated against diphtheria.

Ernaux poignantly describes her parents’ grief: ‘Ils ont vécu ta mort. Ils sont des parents qui ont perdu un enfant’ (AF 42). It is this loss, the primal parental agony for a lost child, which is the root cause of Alphonse Duchesne’s hopelessness. In the light of the quote above, during an interview with Jacques Pécheur, Annie Ernaux quotes Freud as follows: ‘Rien n’est jamais vécu en vain sauf la mort.’9 Over one hundred years ago, Freud wrote in Mourning and Melancholia:

Although mourning involves grave departures from the normal attitude toward life, it never occurs to us to regard it

as a pathological condition and to refer it to a medical treatment. We rely on its being overcome after a certain lapse of time, and we look upon any interference with it as useless or even harmful.  

The depiction of Alphonse Duchesne’s grief in *La Place* is very moving and echoes Freud’s melancholic stage of mourning:

Mon père était aux raffineries quand elle est morte. À son retour, on l’a entendu hurler depuis le haut de la rue. Hébétude pendant des semaines, des accès de mélancolie ensuite, il restait sans parler, à regarder par la fenêtre, de sa place à table. Il se frappait pour un rien.  

Freud posits, as we will see below, that for the melancholic, grief is accompanied by self-recrimination, apathy, diminished self-esteem, anxiety and an expectation of punishment. According to Freud, mourning and melancholia are similar as they are both a reaction to loss and produce almost identical symptoms with one important exception as he outlines:

The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-reviling, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. […] With one exception, the same traits are met with in mourning. The disturbance of self-regard is absent in mourning; but otherwise the features are the same. Profound mourning, the reaction to the loss of someone who is loved, contains the same painful frame of mind, the same loss of interest in the

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outside world [...] the same loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love.\textsuperscript{12}

Ernaux's mother, based on the following description in \textit{Une femme}, seems to have grieved in a more stoic manner and coped significantly better than her husband with the grieving process: 'La douleur qui se recouvre, simplement le silence de la neurasthénie et la croyance d'une petite sainte au ciel. La vie à nouveau, au début de 1940, elle attendait un autre enfant. Je naîtrai en septembre',\textsuperscript{13} highlighting the difference between the mourning processes of the couple and Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia.\textsuperscript{14} According to Freud's theory, when one enters the stage of melancholia which is the pathological and self-destructive counterpart to healthy mourning, the lost loved one causes a diminishment of the ego.\textsuperscript{15} It is very interesting to note that Ernaux frequently omits the subject pronoun when describing her father. The following description provides one of the most compelling examples and appears directly after the description of Ginette's death in \textit{La Place}: 'Une photo prise dans la courrette au bord de la rivière. Une chemise blanche aux manches retroussées, un pantalon sans doute en flanelle, les épaules tombantes, les bras légèrement arrondis. L’air mécontent.'\textsuperscript{16} In another photograph taken when Ernaux was sixteen and also described in \textit{La Place}, Alphonse is depicted as a disembodied shadow of himself, a phantom figure without form: 'Une photo de moi, prise seule, au-dehors [...]. Je souris pour me faire l’air doux. J’ai seize ans. Dans le bas, l’ombre portée du buste de mon père qui a pris la photo.'\textsuperscript{17} A shadow is essentially an absence, and the reference to her father’s

\textsuperscript{12} Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 244.
\textsuperscript{14} This difference may also partly be explained by Ernaux’s mother’s religious belief which is highlighted in \textit{Une femme} and \textit{Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit} (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).
\textsuperscript{15} Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', pp. 243–58.
\textsuperscript{16} Ernaux, \textit{La Place}, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{17} Ernaux, \textit{La Place}, p. 78.
shadow here is clearly a metaphor for loss-of-self, a characteristic feature of melancholia according to the Freudian theory.

Alphonse Duchesne, as described by Ernaux, particularly in *La Place* and *La Honte*, displays many of the behavioural elements which Freud considered melancholic, including a decrease in self-regard: ‘In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself’. Freud also goes on to describe a self-directed animosity, an ambivalence toward the deceased that is turned toward the self. It is worth noting here that Alphonse Duchesne had a propensity for depression inherited from his mother’s side of the family, the Lebourgs: ‘Il était dépressif […] comme ils l’étaient tous, du côté de sa mère à lui, la lignée Lebourg.’ A relatively recent study by Gamino, Sewell and Easterling has shown that pre-existing mental health issues have been identified as predictive of profound and pathological grief.

There are many examples throughout Ernaux’s corpus of Alphonse’s unresolved grief leading to abasement, humiliation and apparent emasculation. Alphonse Duchesne is infantilized by his wife and this is particularly apparent following Ginette’s untimely death. We saw above that Alphonse was appointed foreman in the oil refinery where he worked prior to Ginette’s death, a position of authority in which by all accounts he excelled. There is a marked decrease in self-regard following the loss of his daughter: ‘Elle ne disait pas comme d’autres femmes “mon mari va me disputer si j’achète ça, si je vais là”. Elle lui faisait la guerre […] pour qu’il perde ses mauvaises manières.’

Alphonse wore blue worker’s overalls each day except on Sundays, a symbol of submission and disempowerment, whilst his wife wore a white shopkeeper’s coat symbolising authority:

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20. Ernaux, *La Place*, p. 27.
Elle était une mère commerçante, c’est-à-dire qu’elle appartenait d’abord aux clients qui nous ‘faisaient vivre’ […]. Les disputes entre mon père et elle n’avaient qu’un seul sujet, la quantité de travail qu’ils fournissaient l’un par rapport à l’autre. Elle protestait: ‘C’est moi qui fais tout ici.’

Ernaux confirms in *La Honte* that she deemed it quite unremarkable that her assertive mother would scold her father for his lack of ambition in the same way as she berated her daughter: ‘Comme ma mère était plus chrétienne que mon père, qu’elle s’occupait de l’argent et rencontrait mes maîtresses, je devais considérer comme naturel qu’elle crie après lui de la même façon qu’après moi.’ The role reversal eventually, however, became a source of embarrassment for Ernaux: ‘la gentillesse de mon père se transforme en faiblesse, le dynamisme de ma mère en port de culotte. Ça m’est venu la honte qu’il se farcisse la vaisselle, honte qu’elle gueule sans retenue’. As Véronique Maisier points out, Alphonse performs what is traditionally perceived as woman’s work: ‘Dans la famille Duchesne, le père s’acquitte le plus souvent des tâches ménagères et surveille les maladies infantiles de sa fille pendant que Blanche Duchesne fait marcher le commerce’. Interestingly, we read in *La Femme gelée*, ‘[n]on, ma mère ne sait pas cuisiner, même pas la mayonnaise, le ménage ne l’intéresse pas, et elle n’est pas féminine.’ It is a truism that conventional views of what one considers feminine or maternal characteristics — nurturing, tenderness, gentleness — are attributes that Blanche lacks. On the contrary, she embodies masculine traits while her husband assumes a typically feminine role, one that would be deemed unusual in post-war France: ‘Il sert au café et à

l’alimentation, il fait la vaisselle, la cuisine, les épluchages.’

In an interview with Claire-Lise Tondeur, Ernaux says: ‘Mon père […] est une image de tendresse […]. La fonction du maternage était effectuée par mon père.’

Caring qualities are not Blanche’s strong point and she is clearly the dominant force in the relationship.

Ernaux writes: ‘Je n’attends rien de la psychanalyse ni d’une psychologie familiale dont je n’ai pas eu de peine à établir les conclusions rudimentaires depuis longtemps, mère dominatrice, père qui pulvérise sa soumission en un geste mortel, etc.’

Ernaux’s mother is scathing and domineering and he is emasculated and hen-pecked. Many of the insults he suffers are extremely demeaning; for example, referring to her husband as ‘lunatique comme une vieille chouette’, she adds, ‘si j’n’étais pas là vous mangerez de la merde.’

He was humiliated in death as in life, as his remains are treated in a rather degrading manner: ‘Le corps a dû être enveloppé dans un sac de plastique et traîné, plus que transporté, sur les marches jusqu’au cercueil posé au milieu du café fermé pour une heure. Ernaux informs us sardonically that none of the town dignitaries with whom her father did business, bothered to attend his funeral: ‘Naturellement, aucune de ces personnes «haut placées» auxquelles mon père avait eu affaire pendant sa vie ne s’étaient dérangée’.

The most startling example of his humiliation, however, is the derisory reference to his genitalia as his body is being prepared for burial. Alphonse Duchesne’s penis, symbol of his masculinity and manliness, is derisively dismissed and mocked by Ernaux’s mother: ‘Pour la première fois de ma vie, j’ai vu le sexe de mon père. Ma mère l’a

34. Ernaux, *La Place*, p. 20.
dissimulé rapidement avec les pans de la chemise propre, en riant un peu: “Cache ta misère, mon pauvre homme.”\(^{35}\)

In *La Honte*, Ernaux describes a photograph in which both she and her father feature. In this photograph taken in Biarritz, during a pilgrimage to Lourdes in August 1952, Ernaux has a broad smile but her father ‘sourit à peine, avec l’habituel air anxieux qu’il a sur toutes les photos’.\(^{36}\) Contrast this with the description of the only photograph in Ernaux’s work in which Alphonse Duchesne is actually smiling — one taken in Le Havre, a year prior to Ginette’s death and described in *L’Autre fille*: ‘Vous êtes trois sur un trottoir, à l’angle de deux rues. Mon père, grand, souriant, en costume croisé foncé, très endimanché, un chapeau à la main (je ne lui ai connu que des bérets)’ \(^{36}\) The contrast is striking. He is dapper, standing tall and smiling. Ernaux writes elsewhere that her father never smiles in photographs: ‘Il ne rit sur aucune photo’, and no longer walks tall: ‘Mon père marchait voûté.’\(^{37}\) The trauma associated with the loss of his daughter has inflicted on Ernaux’s father a deep psychological wound, which is the etymological meaning of the word trauma. According to Freud: ‘The complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound […] emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished’.\(^{38}\)

Alphonse Duchesne also fits in with the profile of the melancholic as defined by Julia Kristeva, who posits that melancholia brings the grief stricken one into passivity and ultimately despair, a living death. Alphonse Duchesne’s behaviour as described in Ernaux’s corpus shows a loss of self-esteem, and self-hatred which coexists with the overwhelming sadness of melancholia. He is, as Julia Kristeva describes, a victim of a past which will not release him, ‘un passé qui ne passe pas’.\(^{39}\) In *La Place*, Ernaux wonders if her

father ‘aurait peut-être préféré avoir une autre fille,’ a poignant reference to her deceased sister. This also confirms the conception of melancholia posited by the trauma studies expert, Dominick La Capra, who defines it as ‘characteristic of an arrested process in which the depressed, self-berating, and traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition, is possessed by the past [...] and remains narcissistically identified with the lost object.’ Melancholia can be defined as the inability or unwillingness to exorcize the ghost of the deceased, which we will study in greater detail below. Ernaux relates that she slept in Ginette’s cot until she was seven and that she was obliged to use Ginette’s cumbersome and old-fashioned brown schoolbag until the end of her primary school years:

Ils m’ont fait dormir dans ton lit en bois de rose jusqu’à sept ans environ. […] Ils m’ont fait aller en classe jusqu’en sixième avec la serviette en maroquin brun que tu avais eue pour entrer à l’école. Un modèle que j’étais seule à avoir, d’un usage malaisé. (AF 44–45)

Ginette proves, in Ernaux’s writings, to be a persistent, ever-ghostly, haunting and inescapable presence: ‘Tu es là, entre eux, invisible. Leur douleur’ (AF 42). There are many references to Ginette’s ghostly, invisible presence: ‘sans corps, sans voix’ (AF 12) ‘une ombre’ (AF 64, 66, 77), ‘la petite fille invisible’ (AF 12), ‘un mythe’ (AF 52) and ‘fantôme’ (AF 62). In her study of trauma, Cathy Caruth writes:

The pathology consists […] solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be

40. Ernaux, La Place, p. 82.
traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.\footnote{Cathy Caruth, \textit{Trauma: Explorations in Memory} (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 4–5.}

Ernaux admits that she is aware of the indestructible, possessive, intrusive and haunting presence of her deceased sister. In one harrowing anecdote, Ernaux describes a visit to her parents in Yvetot in 1965 with her now ex-husband, Philippe Ernaux, to show off their new-born son, Éric, Alphonse Duchesne’s first grandson:

En 1965, mon mari et moi, nous venons les voir de Bordeaux, avec notre premier né de six mois qu’ils ne connaissent pas encore. À notre descente de voiture, il est là, bouleversé par le bonheur de voir enfin son petit-fils et il s’écrie \textit{la petite fille est arrivée} ! Ce lapsus — dont je mesure aujourd’hui toute l’étendue, y compris de beauté — j’aurais voulu ne pas l’avoir entendu. (\textit{AF} 49–50)

It is evident from the quote above, that Ernaux’s father is haunted by Ginette’s death and that his grief remains unresolved. For Ernaux, writing \textit{L’Autre fille}, a letter to her deceased sister, was an attempt to exorcize this haunting presence and to remove Ginette’s claim on the present and on her father. It is significant that she writes: ‘Je ne fais ici que courir après une ombre’ (\textit{AF} 64). The process of writing is merely chasing a shadow that will never and can never be caught. Ernaux continues: ‘Peut-être que j’ai voulu […] te faire revivre et remourir pour être quitte de toi, de ton ombre’ (\textit{AF} 77). Ernaux wishes to conjure up Ginette’s absent-present spectre, to confront it and (re)bury it in order to assume her (Ernaux’s) rightful place in her father’s affection. In \textit{L’Autre fille}, Ernaux refers clearly to Ginette’s spectral presence: ‘Entre eux et moi, maintenant il y a toi, invisible, adorée. Je suis écartée, poussée pour te faire de la place. Repoussée dans l’ombre tandis que tu planes tout en haut dans la
lumière éternelle’ (AF 21). This brings us to the Derridean concept of ‘hauntology’, a concept developed as an opposition to ‘ontology’ in his work *Spectres de Marx*. For Derrida, the process of grieving and mourning is an encounter with an implacable, intrusive, justice-demanding spectre. As we have seen above, Ginette is depicted in this way in *L’Autre fille* as her spectral presence literally hovers as a haunting reminder of the trauma of the past and, in Derrida’s words, ‘habite sans y résider.’ Her physically absent but haunting, angelic, lingering presence demands recognition and makes appropriate mourning and eventual closure for Alphonse Duchesne impossible. It is interesting, in this context, that Ernaux feels that love and grieving are inextricably linked and considers her father’s grief as a measure of the love he had for Ginette: ‘Le deuil et l’amour sont pour moi une seule et même chose dans ma tête.’ In *L’Autre fille*, she measures grief as a proof of the love lavished on Ginette bringing her to write poignantly and perhaps a little enviously: ‘Les parents d’un enfant mort ne savent pas ce que leur douleur fait à celui qui est vivant’ (AF 51).

Melancholia, according to Freud, can produce intense anger or hatred, which is predominantly primarily self-directed but can also be directed outward. In *La Honte*, Ernaux relates the traumatic episode of her father’s attempt to kill her mother on a Sunday afternoon, June 15, 1952, when Ernaux was twelve:

D’un seul coup, il s’est mis à trembler convulsivement et à souffler. Il s’est levé et je l’ai vu empoigner ma mère, la traîner dans le café en criant avec une voix rauque, inconnue […]. Je me suis précipitée au bas de l’escalier, j’appelais ‘Au secours!’ de toutes mes forces. Dans la cave mal éclairée, mon père agrippait ma mère par les épaules, ou le cou. Dans

44. Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, p. 43.
son autre main, il tenait la serpe à couper le bois qu’il avait arrachée du billot où elle était ordinairement plantée. Je ne me souviens plus ici que de sanglots et de cris. Ensuite nous nous trouvons tous les trois dans la cuisine. [...] Je pleure sans pouvoir m’arrêter. Mon père n’était pas redevenu normal, ses mains tremblaient et il avait sa voix inconnue. Il répétait ‘pourquoi tu pleures, je ne t’ai rien fait à toi.’ Je me rappelle une phrase que j’ai eue: ‘Tu vas me faire gagner malheur.’ Ma mère disait, ‘allons c’est fini’. Après, nous sommes partis tous les trois nous promener à bicyclette dans la campagne des alentours [...]. Il n’a plus jamais été question de rien.

In L’Autre fille, Ernaux revisits this traumatic incident and views it, as concrete proof of a father driven demented by grief for the dead child:

En juin 1952, il l’a traînée dans la cave, il voulait la tuer. Je me suis interposée. Je ne sais si c’est à cause de moi ou de toi qu’il ne l’a pas fait. Je me souviens avoir pensé juste après il est fou comme quand elle est morte et lui avoir demandé en pleurant, à elle, ‘est-ce qu’il a déjà été comme ça?’ espérant qu’elle dirait oui. Elle ne m’a pas répondu. (AF 50–51)

Cathy Caruth defines trauma as ‘a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event.’ It is no accident that when describing her father’s life journey, Ernaux refers to Dante’s nine circles of hell thus depicting the suffering that Alphonse endures as a journey through an earthly incarnation of hell. We should remember that Alphonse Duchesne must also grieve the loss of his remaining daughter, Annie Ernaux herself, who, as an adolescent, began to distance herself from

46. Ernaux, La Honte, pp. 15–16.
47. Caruth, Trauma, p. 4
48. Ernaux, La Place, p. 35.
her father: ‘Je travaillais mes cours, j’écouteais des disques, je lisais, toujours dans ma chambre. Je n’en descendais que pour me mettre à table. On mangeait sans parler. Je ne riais jamais à la maison. Je faisais de “l’ironie”.’ Ernaux believed that her father was uncouth and that they had nothing to say to each other: ‘Mon père est entré dans la catégorie des gens simples ou modestes ou braves gens. Il n’osait plus me raconter des histoires de son enfance. Je ne lui parlais plus de mes études.’

It is evident that this rejection was very painful for Alphonse Duchesne: ‘À cette époque, il a commencé d’entrer dans des colères, rares, mais soulignées d’un rictus de haine. Une complicité me liait à ma mère […]. On n’avait pas besoin de lui.’

Alphonse is repeatedly infantilized by his daughter, who attempts to correct his eating habits and humiliates him by pointing out his linguistic shortcomings: ‘Je lui faisais des remarques sur sa façon de manger ou de parler.’ Ernaux highlights here, of course, the deconstruction of the paternal function and Ernaux’s father must have experienced this as yet another type of bereavement. He is humiliated mercilessly as he does not measure up to his daughter’s newly learned, arrogant and self-righteous bourgeois standards: ‘La dispute éclatait à table pour un rien. Je croyais toujours avoir raison parce qu’il ne savait pas discuter.’

Eating together at family meals is meant to be a symbolic act of communication and intimacy. Due to Ernaux’s antagonistic and contemptuous attitude towards her father, mealtimes become fraught with conflict and tension. In *Les Armoires vides*, Ernaux’s first, autobiographical, novel, Denise Lesur’s father says sadly: ‘on aurait été davantage heureux si elle n’avait pas continué ses études.’ This is not surprising as in the passage below, it

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49. Ernaux, *La Place*, p. 79. See also p. 23.
50. Ernaux, *La Place*, p. 80 (emphasis in original).
51. Ernaux, *La Place*, p. 82.
52. Ernaux, *La Place*, p. 82.
53. Ernaux, *La Place*, p. 82.
is almost as if the father is symbolically filling in the grave, turning the final sod on their dead father-daughter relationship:

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

J’écris peut-être parce qu’on n’avait plus rien à se dire.55

Alphonse Duchesne is powerless as his surviving daughter alienates herself emotionally, geographically, linguistically and of course socially in order to succeed. She emigrates through education and her subsequent marriage to Philippe Ernaux, to the upper classes, gaining access to a mysterious, incomprehensible and unknown world: ‘Le moment où j’ai éprouvé le plus de culpabilité, c’est dans les premières années de mon mariage, quand j’ai quitté complètement mon milieu, en allant vivre en Haute-Savoie, en devenant professeur et en me voyant vivre comme la bourgeoisie culturelle.’56 Ernaux visits home rarely; we read in La Place that it is an annual occurrence at best.

Alphonse Duchesne died on June 25, 1967 aged sixty-seven and is interred beside Ginette in Yvetot: ‘En juin 1967, le cercueil de mon père a été descendu dans la fosse ouverte juste à côté de ta tombe’ (AF 48). Ernaux knows that she will not rejoin them after her own death: ‘Trois semaines après leur retour à Yvetot, ils ont acheté une concession au cimetière juste à côté de toi. Il y a été déposé le premier, en 1967, elle, dix-neuf ans après’ (AF 77). L’Autre fille thus concludes poignantly as Annie Ernaux confirms that she will never be

55. Ernaux, La Place, pp. 83–84.
interred with her parents and sister in Yvetot: ‘Je ne serai pas enterrée en Normandie, près de vous. [...] L’autre fille, c’est moi, celle qui s’est enfuie loin d’eux, ailleurs’ (AF 77). That last line is itself haunted and pregnant with symbolism. Rifling through her deceased father’s jacket, Annie Ernaux finds a newspaper cutting, recording her second place in the merit list in the Entrance examination to the teacher’s college showing his pride in her scholastic achievements which were the death-knell for his relationship with his daughter. The newspaper cutting can be seen to symbolise an obituary for their dead relationship. Ernaux addresses her dead sister as follows using uppercase letters so that the significance will not be missed: ‘JE TE VOIS COUCHÉE À MA PLACE ET C’EST MOI QUI MEURS.’ (AF 32) Ginette has reclaimed her place. Ginette’s loss was clearly a traumatic life-changing event for Alphonse Duchesne and this is evident from the intensity and duration of his grief response to his first-born daughter’s untimely death. His mourning process appears to have been more intense and complex than that of his wife and, based on Ernaux’s corpus, certainly caused the deep psychological wound of melancholia which seems to have followed him throughout his life, never reaching closure until he was reunited with Ginette in the tomb in Yvetot.

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57. La Place, p. 22.