

## Shame, A Sign of Emptiness

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Annie Ernaux's book *La Honte* (Shame) is the story of failure. The first sentence is the depiction of a traumatic scene from her childhood: "One Sunday in June, in the early afternoon, my father wanted to kill my mother."<sup>1</sup> The book is Ernaux's attempt to grasp the objective reality of the scene. This event took place in 1952, and until 1997, she was unable to write a single word about it, not even in her diaries. The scene remained "an image without words or phrases."<sup>2</sup> From that day on, a filter was installed between her and everything she experienced; everything became "artificial."<sup>3</sup> She waited for the scene to be repeated, but in vain.<sup>4</sup> She tried comparing it to other painful events in her life, but nothing worked.<sup>5</sup> So, she decided to conduct an ethnological study of herself by returning to the rituals, beliefs, values, discourses, and rules of conduct of the summer of 1952 through the archives and studying them as documents. She rejects the world of fiction, because, she says, it would mean inventing, instead she wants to research it. Alas, after a detour through the archives, after a detour through the writing of these archives, that Sunday still cannot find its place. Ernaux fails and sinks into shame.<sup>6</sup>

As an author, she should have written about the event in the form of fiction. There are many stories that take this form. As Patricia Bosquin-Caroz reminds us, the objective reality of a trauma can, in fact, never be attained. Rather it is "about re-establishing a continuity between the holes by telling a story [...] a discontinuous history made up of scattered bits, fragments, emergences and revelations."<sup>7</sup> However, for Ernaux, nothing is revealed or discovered, and it is this failure that leads her to shame, which belongs to a different register than that of the signifier. Instead of Otherness where variety reigns, a gaze and a kind of nakedness emerge, according to Jacques-Alain

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<sup>1</sup> Ernaux, A., *La Honte*, Paris: Gallimard, 1997, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 116.

<sup>7</sup> Bosquin-Caroz, P. "VARIETY: Variations of Truth in Psychoanalysis," *Presentation of the NLS Congress Theme 2026*, p.7. Available at: <https://nlscongress2026.amp-nls.org/en/presentation-of-the-congress-theme-2026/>

Miller.<sup>8</sup> The writer describes shame as the ultimate truth in the last part of the book, where she moves from one scene of shame to another, all marked by nakedness.<sup>9</sup> Is this yet another variety of truth? Éric Laurent draws attention to the final lesson of Seminar XVII, where Lacan makes of shame “a sign (and not a signifier) that circulates beyond meaning.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it is this shame that remains with Ernaux as “the ultimate truth”, or rather what brings this ultimate truth to the real, acting as an empty shell that refers to nothing other than the emptiness of the trauma that emerged in all its transparency after the failure of its objectivity; a discontinuous history of the truth of trauma made up of the signifying nature of shame.

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<sup>8</sup> Miller, J. A., “On Shame,” *Reflections on Seminar XVII*, eds J. Clemons & R. Grigg, Durham/ London: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 121.

<sup>10</sup> Laurent, É., “The Power of the Impossible”, *Returning to Lacan’s Seminar XVII*, eds. R. Litten & C. Wright, New York: Lacanian Press, 2022, p. 368.