Look at the Lights My Love - a translation of Annie Ernaux's Regarde les lumières mon amour

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Look at the Lights My Love

a translation of Annie Ernaux's *Regarde les lumières mon amour*

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by

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Introduction

Annie Ernaux was born on September 1, 1940 in Lillebonne, a small town in Normandy, France, and spent her childhood there and in other parts of the region. She currently lives just forty kilometers from Paris, in Cergy-Pontoise, where she is an active writer as well as a retired professor of literature. She began writing professionally in 1974, and has since won several awards for her books. However, she was not born into a family of writers. Instead, she comes from a family of petits-commerçants (which in this case means her parents owned and ran a grocery store) who were once farmers and factory workers, and in her youth belonged to the lower middle class. As a result of becoming a writer (and eventually a famous one) she now belongs to the upper middle class, but has not forgotten her origins; one of her books, La Place, is about her father and is a homage to his life as an ouvrier and a petit-commerçant. In addition, one of her latest books, Regarde les lumières mon amour (2014), takes supermarket shopping as its subject; it appears that though she is a celebrated writer, she is reluctant to fully remove herself from her origins as a grocer’s daughter.

Ernaux’s style of writing is often characterized as écriture plate [“flat” writing], and Ernaux herself even describes it as such in La Place, saying, “L’écriture plate comes naturally to me”\(^1\). This term refers to the precision of her writing, her use of a simple, neutral kind of language, and her tendency to avoid exaggerations and romanticizing what she is writing about. This style stems partly from the fact that many of her books are influenced by sociology, particularly by the works of

\(^1\) Annie Ernaux, La place (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 24.
Bourdieu, though for the most part they belong to the genre often called "life writing". Her writing aims to overthrow literary and social hierarchies by writing in the same way on subjects considered unworthy of literature and subjects considered more noble, and by associating them. In *l’Écriture comme un couteau*, a six-year-long email correspondence between Ernaux and Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, she says what she writes is not literature, but rather somewhere between literature, sociology, and history. Her books are in general neither novels nor pure autobiography, and often take the form of a journal, a format that Ernaux herself says corresponds most to her temperament. Two of her published works, *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* and *Se perdre* are specific kinds of journals – they are her private diaries published ten years after they were written. They also correspond directly, both in content and in time period, to two of her other works, *Une femme* and *Passion simple*, respectively.

The subjects of her books are often major events in her life such as the death of her father, the death of her mother, her cancer, her divorce, and her romantic relationships. Her first three books, *Les Armoires vides, Ce qu’ils disent ou rien*, and *La Femme gelée*, were published as novels. The “je” of *Les Armoires vides* refers to Denise Lesur, a 20-year-old woman who tells her story of abortion, a story very similar to Ernaux’s own experience. In her second novel, the main character’s name is Anne. The tendency toward autobiography seen in her first two novels is also vaguely present in the third; its topic is women’s role in society. Ernaux considers this last novel as a text transitioning toward an abandonment of fiction and toward

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her ultimate goal: to use a kind of writing that aims at depicting life truthfully and matter-of-factly, without embellishment or an outpouring of emotion. This change of intention behind the act of writing occurred definitively for her with *La Place*, a book about her father’s death and her own “defection” from the working class she was born into to a class of intellectuals she makes her own.

Ernaux also writes about the everyday aspects of life, those that are often disregarded in literature. She realizes the project of writing about one such topic, commuting, in *Journal du dehors*, where she records, among other things, what she observes and overhears in the RER. Equally, in *Regarde les lumières mon amour*, Ernaux picks a timeframe of almost exactly a year, a year of close observation and reflection on the everyday seen through the lens of a seemingly mundane task: grocery shopping. The topic is considered by some as unworthy of being the subject of a book, but is in fact exactly part of her long-term project of tackling daily life in her writing. She claims there is more to supermarkets and big-box stores than their role in "the chore of shopping", and that they are certainly a good place to draw material from for writing about our lives. Indeed, as Ernaux notes, these colossal stores are a part of the childhood of almost everyone under fifty years old in the Western world. They are for many of us, as they are for Ernaux, associated with different parts of our lives. In *Regarde les lumières mon amour*, Ernaux records her experiences, observations, and sensations from her trips to Auchan, a big-box store in the Trois-Fontaines shopping mall near her home. Her purpose is “to capture” something of the people and the objects, of all that goes on there. It is a project to
which Ernaux must have given some thought before, for Ernaux has written about supermarkets in her previous works, though never taking it as the main subject.

Though expression of emotion is rare in her books, it is not absent. There is a certain nostalgia and melancholy present in many of her works, nostalgia (and memory in general – in her writing she puts emphasis on the act of remembering) for bygone times, and melancholy for the loss of a mother, a father, a sister, etc. This melancholy is present in Regarde les lumières mon amour at the end of the book, when she foresees a certain nostalgia for the supermarkets she suggests may disappear in the future.

Annie Ernaux is someone who could be called a rebel. She was the first in her family to break away from its working-class origins and to pursue higher education. We see her rebel side a few times in Regarde les lumières mon amour. She tells us how she would eat packs of Smarties without paying when she was an au pair in London. This may seem like a small rebellion, but it escalates and leads to her raising a question others may have had before her: Why don't people revolt? Why don't people take products from the shelves and walk out of the store through the "exit with no purchase" door? Why should we let ourselves be subjected to what Ernaux might call the “dehumanizing” and “privacy-invading” checkout line? The answer is perhaps obvious. We see her rebellious side in that at the end of her book, the Auchan management introduces new machines for scanning your products yourself. Ernaux tears up her membership card to avoid the temptation of using this new technology. Also, it is at this point that she ends her journal, and so these two acts can be seen as a kind of revolt against our society of gadgets and gizmos.
Perhaps the biggest rebellion of the book is the choice she makes on taking the supermarket as her subject. The author herself will feel the weight of this choice, as many of her critics deem the topic unfit for a piece of literature. However, she will be gratified by most of her readers who will find the subject, and the book as a whole, a good one.

Just as there are many snares that can befall a shopper in a supermarket parking lot, there are many pitfalls a translator tries to avoid in translating. They will be of a different nature depending on the target and source languages, but one difficulty common to all languages is this: What do you do when there is no direct translation of a word in your text? This issue can be seen in Regarde les lumières mon amour, most notably with that word used so frequently in the original French, hypermarché. In American English, there is no word for a store selling groceries, clothing, large appliances, and practically anything else you could wish to buy, that is used as often as the French hypermarché. We have words in English such as supermarket, superstore, and big-box store, all of which approach the meaning of hypermarché, but aren't quite the same. The word “supermarket” does not include stores where one can buy appliances such as lawnmowers and washing machines; "superstore" is rarely used and also applies to any kind of chain store – whether it be Virgin Records or a clothing store – that is considerably larger than its other branches; and "big-box store" often has negative connotations, as in, "We don’t need another big-box store in our neighborhood." However, I have used these words
which, used together and in context, I hope will convey the meaning and register of the French hypermarché.

In British English, however, there is a word for this kind of store, "hypermarket". That I have not used this word leads to the question, is the target language of my translation American English or more broadly the English language as a whole? In general I have kept to American English, but every now and then a British-ism will appear, such as apples that "have turned" (these apples are overripe) and "pouf" (a kind of soft ottoman used as a seat or a foot stool). The meaning of these British-isms is often self-evident, either through context or, in the case of "pouf", through a certain onomatopoeia. It is probable that the American reader would be able to glean the meaning of the word "hypermarket" through the meaning of the two parts making up this compound word. Yet for all that, I have held to using words more familiar to the American reader when translating hypermarché.

In French, the word caddie is used for the English "shopping cart". There is also another kind of cart, a "poussette" (which can mean a baby stroller as well), usually made out of soft material, that French people often bring with them to ferry their groceries back home from the supermarket. This cart that you pull behind you is rare in America. I have called these carts "trolleys" and sometimes added that they are "brought from home" to give an idea of the difference between these two kinds of shopping carts.

Perhaps it is a characteristic of the French language more than one of Ernaux's writing, but many of her sentences, if their punctuation were transcribed
comma for comma, would be considered run-on sentences in English. I have gotten around this difficulty either by using a semicolon or by breaking the run-on sentence into two sentences.

One might think that as a result of the neutrality of her writing it is easy to translate Ernaux. After all, there are hardly any words in her books that would require a French person to look up their meaning. However, being faithful to her écriture plate is a great difficulty in translating Ernaux’s works. For example, she writes how going to Auchan is, for her, comme une rupture dans le travail d’écriture.

A direct translation of le travail d’écriture yields “the work of writing”. But this is not something we say in English. A translator might be tempted to use "throes": “like a break from the throes of writing”. Would Ernaux associate a word like “throes” with writing? Given her task of representing life as it is, probably not. Ernaux most likely does find writing difficult at times, but to suggest that there is intense pain or struggle involved in it would be to overdramatize the act of writing. It would be to deviate from Ernaux’s search for truth through the extraction of bare reality from all that she observes and experiences. A better translation might be "the task of writing". Recreating her tone of voice, which is in general neutral and void of much inflection, is also a challenge.

Solving these translation difficulties has both taken away from and added to the original text. What has been taken away most notably and as a result of the languages involved is gender. French is a language with masculine and feminine nouns, whereas nouns in English have no gender. You might say that to translate a noun from French to English is to deny it something of its essence. But books must
be read in other languages, and in this case, there is not much a translator can do. In her book Ernaux reflects that seeing with the aim of writing is seeing differently. In the course of reading, rereading, and finally translating, I have found, in the same way, that reading with the aim of translating is reading differently.

Though the supermarket is an unusual subject for a piece of literature, it is more common a subject for studies in the social sciences. Jean-Marc Poupard is the author of one such study, entitled *Les Centres commerciaux: de nouveaux lieux de socialité dans le paysage urbain*[^3], a study of many different aspects of the shopping mall, specifically the regional shopping mall of Créteil Soleil. Poupard notices many things that are similar to what Ernaux observes, notably that the shopping mall is a definite place of human interactions and that it has certain observable social realities. They also overlap on some more marginal topics. Poupard’s book, like Ernaux’s, considers the benevolence/malevolence of the marketing used by supermarkets. Poupard suggests that one function of shopping malls is to make the life of its users easier by offering every type of product they might look for. Supporting this idea, he reports on a study showing that two thirds of the people asked what the primary attraction of these centers is, responded that they are places where one finds everything. This same study reveals another similarity in the work of these two authors: both authors report on a lack of humanity and conviviality in the shopping malls, a lack that Ernaux notices particularly at checkout. Poupard notes that this sense of community, missing in places like the

Créteil Soleil shopping mall, was ever present in old town centers, and is still present in the few remaining open-air downtowns.

Both authors also pose the question of whether or not these shopping malls are at all appealing (for reasons other than the necessity of going there) to their patrons. In fact, a whole chapter in Poupard’s book is titled, ”The shopping mall, a place of attraction-repulsion?” Throughout Ernaux’s book the reader sees various factors that contribute to either a positive experience at the mall or a negative one. Ernaux herself seems to enjoy grocery shopping at the mall, once noting how much she had missed this place after being away from it on a writing retreat, even after weighing in the possible pitfalls these places present. She does not suggest, however, that everyone does or should enjoy shopping at these huge stores and acknowledges that talk about these places is often tinted with aversion. Poupard notices this contempt for superstores as well, but also that people seem to be very familiar with the layout of their local mall and what is sold there despite their supposed disdain. A final similarity is that both authors notice the diversity of the people who cross paths inside the supermarket, that is, the difference of origin, class, and condition that Ernaux observes and puts emphasis on repeatedly in her journal.

The roots of the shopping mall can be found as far back as the Greek agora. Later, commercial exchanges took the form of the medieval marketplace, and at the end of the 19th century, the marketplace was replaced as big stores started appearing. These new stores (which had a different architectural structure than the old marketplaces) offered merchandise divided into different categories rather than
everything a vendor offered piled into one stall. The stores often lined one long street, creating a downtown or centre-ville crowded with both pedestrians and cars. In France, with Haussmann’s new layout for Paris, it was decided that structures specifically for commercial activity would be built. In the United States, the concept of the shopping mall first appeared in Baltimore at the beginning of the 20th century with Roland Park, closely followed by Rockefeller Center in New York. In the 40s, with the rise of the automobile, shopping malls began to appear at cities’ peripheries, easily accessible by the new circumferential highways, and where pedestrian and automobile traffic were separated. These new places were closed off from the rest of the city, reinforced by the parking lots surrounding them, creating a sort of isolated island. According to Poupard, shopping malls’ creators were largely inspired by town centers, the characteristic of one long main walkway (or road) being present in both. It is not surprising, then, that both authors consider these places as updated versions of the public square. The difference, however, that no one lives inside the shopping mall and that they are owned by private companies, quite the opposite of the centre-ville, cannot be denied. That is the evolution of places of commercial exchange up to the present day. Later on we shall see the predictions of what these places might become in the future.

Poupard puts a lot of stress on the idea of the shopping mall as a social place. He goes so far as to say that shopping malls are places that catalyze social life. After all, the market is, as well as a place of commerce, the place of preference for the exchange of information. It is the multipurpose function of these places that characterize them. They are social places that, in Poupard’s words, strengthen the
ties between individuals. Even in the Middle Ages social places and commercial places were one and the same: in the same street where artisans worked in their commercial boutiques, social celebrations and festivals also took place. The role of the shopkeeper, too, has a social aspect about it. Although the shopkeeper does not wander around the mall crossing paths with hundreds of different people, the different people come to him. Poupard says he is a kind of public figure who relays events, news, and information that might be of interest to the many people with whom he interacts.

Can the shopping mall be an answer to a social need? Poupard addresses this question. He says that although the social element found in shopping malls does not replace more intimate relationships, it does contribute in the same way to a person’s equilibrium. It also lets people interact anonymously and without the complexity of other relationships. Poupard notes that some people with very few regular social interactions (people who do not work or who live alone, for example) seem to get a kind of ultimate social experience by coming to shopping malls on public transport and at busy hours (two things most people try to avoid). Though Poupard does not call these social interactions therapeutic, he does suggest they contribute to psychiatric and physiological wellbeing.

Of the shopping mall, the architect Victor Gruen said, “More than a place where one goes simply to buy, it must be linked, in our minds, to cultural activities and to relaxation”\textsuperscript{4}. This is essential for the future of shopping malls. In an article in \textit{Le Monde} -- an echo of Louis Hautecoeur’s prediction that one day there will be

\textsuperscript{4} ibid., 29.
doctors’ and dentists’ offices inside “big stores” -- it is shown how with the rise of online purchasing, something extra is necessary to keep bringing customers to these places. It used to be that the shopping mall had the appeal of being a place to go shopping away from the cold. Now, however, commercial centers are looking for other ways to attract customers, including bowling and movie theaters. Some are skeptical that even these attractions will be enough. Is it possible that shopping malls as we know them will soon disappear? Ernaux suggests that today’s children, when they are adults, will look back with nostalgia on visits to bygone supermarkets and shopping malls the same way people over fifty look back on going to the store to get milk with a metal jug.

Since ancient times, there have always been problems that plague democracy; while it may be easy to represent classes or castes, it is much more difficult to represent a society of individuals. You could say there is a common distinction between ideal democracy and real democracy. The Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen (1789) [Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen] addresses this old problem and states, "ignorance, forgetting, or disdain of the rights of man" are the only causes of "public unrest" and "government corruption".

Pierre Rosanvallon’s Le Parlement des invisibles, a book that is a sort of manifesto of a larger project of his, the collection of books raconter la vie, also addresses these problems, but in their modern form. According to Rosanvallon,

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5 ibid., 11. Louis Hautecoeur (1884-1973), French art historian and civil servant
6 “Fini les galeries marchandes, vive les centres de loisirs!,” Le Monde (France), June 16, 2015, Économie & Entreprise.
today many French people are exasperated and depressed by a sense that they are neglected. They consider themselves forgotten, misunderstood, and excluded from the legal world that is supposed to be representing them. Rosanvallon says there is a divide between society and those meant to represent society. According to him, the modern era marks the beginning of a new age of individualism, and that more and more French people would like to lead a personalized existence. However, being forgotten and negligence cause many people to become, in a way, invisible.

This old problem has an old solution. The working class, when they didn't have the right to vote, used to make the realities of working known to others through newspapers, songs, poetry, and literature. The Saint-Simonian Olinde Rodrigues used to speak of these "poet-workers" as "the real elected officials of the working class." They were representatives of a new kind in that they lead the same kind of life as those they were representing. In the past two centuries, works have been published that try to shed light on these "invisible" people. The idea behind the title of one such work, *Les français peints par eux-même* [The French as Seen by Themselves], is remarkably similar to the idea behind Rosanvallon’s greater project. This kind of writing can be seen also in Balzac's *Human Comedy*, Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, Charles Booth's *Life and Labor of the People*, George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London*, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* ("a man you don't see"), and countless others. This kind of writing seemed to have disappeared for many years, but it has recently resurfaced with Ernaux’s books, among others, and in the social

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8 ibid., 37.
9 ibid., 39
10 ibid., 46
sciences with Michel de Certeau’s *Invention du quotidien*, a project that aims at keeping a journal of "the anonymous".

Rosanvallon, too, has a solution to the problem: the collection of books *raconter la vie*, to which Ernaux contributes her *Regarde les lumières mon amour*. Rosanvallon envisions a democracy restored to its full capacity by creating a "representation-narration." This representation will be a "Parliament" made up of "invisible" people and will celebrate those who are not commonly celebrated. The development of this ideal democracy is based on two goals: to make democracy more participatory (allowing its citizens to participate not only during elections), and making democracy more deliberative (public decisions based on citizen discussion). Rosanvallon’s project responds directly to the first goal.

According to Rosanvallon, democracy also means awareness of everything and everyone, recognition of every condition, including those that often go unnoticed. He says democracy cannot exist without community-building, and that we can’t build anything with those of whom we know nothing. By writing about the life situations of which most people are ignorant, we gain knowledge about our fellow human beings and reduce the gap between theoretical and actual democracy. "Life writing", then, is the proposed means of reviving democracy and the basis of this collection, *raconter la vie*. There are already pieces of writing in journals and blogs about lives that get brushed aside, and the project aims to continue and expand these pieces of writing. The medium for this collection will not be limited to traditional autobiographical books, but will also include comic books and photos. Some examples of topics to be written about are a birth, a graduation, an accident, a
laying off; obscure professions to be brought to light are metro conductors, elevator operators, doormen, factory workers, etc. Crude writing will be as legitimate as professional writing, and anyone will be able to publish her story to the raconter la vie website. It might seem strange that Ernaux, a celebrated writer – hardly a silenced voice – should contribute to the collection. However, one goal of the project is not only to bring "invisible" people out of the dark, but also "invisible" places. This is just what Regarde les lumières mon amour does; it illuminates a place, namely the supermarket, often brushed aside as insignificant, as well as the people who shop there, for whom going to the supermarket is a necessity of subsistence. In this way, Ernaux's book contributes to the stabilizing of a "fragile" democracy, to bringing society out of the depths of anonymity and its forgotten state, and to ridding society of the fears and delusions [fantasmes] that undermine it.

Before the first dated entry in her journal, Ernaux gives a brief introduction to this yearlong project of transcribing her observations and sensations at the superstore Auchan. In this introduction and elsewhere in the book she tells us her aim in writing: “to give to people the same presence and the same role they have at the superstore”. This corresponds to the primary goal of the greater Pierre Rosanvallon project, which is to give to people “the existence and visibility to which they have a right”. Throughout the course of her trips to Auchan, she "pays a closer attention than usual" to everyone and everything that goes on at the supermarket. In so doing, she is able to produce a thorough account of the social realities that are present there, an account that hovers somewhere above literature and the social
sciences. In this introduction she recounts her experience at a supermarket in Kosice, Slovakia, the first one in the city after the fall of the communist regime. The shoppers in the store were bewildered at and almost in awe of this new capitalist entity. For most of us, supermarkets are such mundane places that we tend to brand them as uninteresting. Ernaux uses this anecdote perhaps to remind us that supermarkets were once places of wonderment, and shows throughout the book that they can be again.

There are many different characteristics and themes of Ernaux’s writing and the social observations she makes. Many of these observations, even though their focus is on the Auchan in the Trois-Fontaines shopping mall, can be applied to supermarkets in general. One theme that returns often is the nature of these huge stores as being a place where private becomes public. This may seem strange – after all, at the supermarket there are so few interactions with others that it hardly seems possible for one’s private life to become known to strangers. But Ernaux sees the products in these strangers’ shopping carts as an indication of their standard of living. In the entry dated February 13 Ernaux finds a previous user’s shopping list in her shopping cart. Contrary to the short-lived judgments Ernaux makes when passing other people in the aisles, this is a lasting declaration of the unknown shopper’s way of living, which becomes permanent as a result of its being published in a book.

By writing about them, Ernaux has the potential to reveal the lifestyles of the customers in Auchan to an even further extent. Yet she herself is not exempt from this unintentional self-display. At the checkout one day, a woman recognizes Ernaux
and even offers her her place in line. After heartily declining, she begins to unload her cart. It is at this point that she reflects with “malaise” how each product suddenly takes on a “heavy” meaning and reveals to this stranger her way of living. Though it is Ernaux whose role is that of the observer, she too is an object of observation, or in her own words, simply “an object”. All the more so in this particular instance because it takes place at the checkout; the checkout line is, according to Ernaux, the place where private becomes public the most. There, a customer’s anonymity disappears; through what you place on the belt you expose your way of living, your bank account, whether or not you are a foreigner, etc. The checkout is, as a result, a factor that contributes to the repulsion we sometimes experience of supermarkets. Which leads to the question: Is anonymity necessary to attract and to continue to bring people to the supermarket? And if so, do we maintain our anonymity when it is merely to strangers that we expose ourselves? According to Ernaux we don’t mind revealing part of ourselves to people we don’t know and don’t speak to.

As well as showing how supermarkets are still places of wonderment, Ernaux shows how they have the potential to be milestones in a person’s lifetime. She says how she associates certain supermarkets with each period of her life: Supermarket in a London suburb in 1960, Prior in Slovakia 20 years ago, Carrefour in Annecy in 1968, etc. In a way this elevates supermarkets to the same level as the issues in Ernaux’s books, which are often explicitly about a certain time in her life.

In addition to showing the reader the nature of supermarkets in general, Ernaux reveals a great deal about this specific hypermarché, the Auchan in Cergy.
Sometimes, however, she lets us judge for ourselves. For example, it is not clear whether this Auchan caters to the lower or upper classes. One day in November Ernaux sees an elegant young woman wearing a short-sleeved dress pulling a suitcase behind her. Ernaux calls the presence of this woman in the store an “anomaly”, which – assuming that her elegance of dress has something to do with her social status – suggests that most people who patronize the store do not have the luxury of owning such elegant clothing, and perhaps, by extension, that they are not part of the upper-class. On the other hand, this Auchan has a high-end groceries section Ernaux compares to the one in Le Bon Marché in the center of Paris. There a small bottle of oil costs 14 euros, and other products have high-end brand labels and are equally overpriced. However, she says this section is always deserted, and soon after writing about it she introduces the super discount aisle, prefacing her description of it by saying it is five times as big as the high-end section due to the fact that there are more very poor people than very rich people. The bargain-store-like quality of this Auchan does not stop at the super discount aisle; it sells 10 kg of salted cod for 65 euros and has other special offers for products in bulk. Perhaps a better way of describing this store is that it caters to the majority of whoever will buy. We see this when Auchan installs an aisle specifically for Ramadan. Does the Auchan management set up this section out of respect for the holiday? It is rather a commercial-centric scheme to offer commodities that appeal to Muslims, of whom there are many in that area.

To sum up this point, there are a few sections in Auchan carrying products you might see in an artisan food store, but there are more products on the same
kind of level (in both price and quality) as fast-food. Ernaux is skeptical about these low prices. She figures that a family of four who eat the low-priced meat (less than 1 euro per person) still spend 120 euros every month. She wonders about the weight of this meat (and one could also wonder about its quality) and concludes it comes to a meager 80 grams for one person. With all of these promotions, is the big-box store really striving to give its customers good deals? The previous example shows that it uses, in reality, a kind of devilish marketing to trick its customers into believing they are getting a bargain.

In the *hypermarché*, like other enclosed places (churches, libraries, the gym, etc.) Ernaux sees an implicit code of conduct, especially at checkout, where it is assumed we won’t cut in line, we will be polite toward the cashier, and we will let a pregnant or handicapped person go before us. This last courteous gesture overlaps with mass transit’s code of conduct, where people are asked to give up their seat for a pregnant, elderly, or handicapped person. In fact, there are other similarities between superstores and mass transit, besides the fact that Ernaux chooses to write books about both of them. These other similarities have mainly to do with the diversity of the people who frequent these two places. If there really is such a code for proper behavior, there is also one for less proper behavior; secretly eating one grape without paying is a common practice, while eating two is pushing it, and eating a whole apple is just not done.

Ernaux notices the general code of conduct is applied differently to different age groups. Some examples: young children gleefully stick their hands in candy jars; girls go shopping in groups or pairs; adolescents dart in and out of elderly couples’
carts; young couples hesitate before choosing a product; grandparents indulge their grandchildren by buying them toys. If the superstore has its own set of implicit rules, so does the greater shopping mall. Do these two places have different expectations for how we behave in them? In both we size each other up, either as we pass strangers on the moving walkways (the mall) or in an aisle (the supermarket). But the supermarket is set up as to allow for maximum purchasing (Ernaux compares it to a workplace designed for maximum productivity) and discourages resting, whereas the walkways in the mall are often filled with people merely browsing, and there are chairs in the mall that are rarely empty.

Ernaux’s book explores the following paradox: Are the supermarket and the shopping mall places of attraction or repulsion, and is the existence of this question enough to make them worthy subjects of a piece of literature? In other words, is the shopping experience an enjoyable one? It cannot be denied that talk about supermarkets is often tinted with disdain, and that many people refer to grocery shopping as "a chore". Yet whether out of attraction or necessity, stores like Auchan are visited fifty times a year by most people in France. Let us consider two examples: that of the author herself and of cashiers. Ernaux seems to enjoy her time at supermarkets. When she comes back from a solitary writing retreat, she realizes that she had missed Auchan and comes to the conclusion that the supermarket was in fact like an extension of her private world, and that by being away from it for so long she had been "deprived" of it. Ernaux often uses her trips to Auchan as a way of mixing with people, and also as a break from the solitude of writing. Indeed, many
people use the shopping mall as a social outlet, even when the interactions they have there are with mere strangers. The cashiers, however, are a different matter. One cashier sums up her working experience at Auchan by saying that things are getting "worse and worse", that the management is cracking down on its employees. And it is not just the management that makes working the register a more grueling task; customers stuck in a long line are quick to scrutinize the cashier, favoring those who seem deft and capable, but impatiently blaming the more uncoordinated for the length of the line. Are cashiers aware of this judgment? If so, how does this affect their experience of working at a superstore? Is the supermarket ever a place of attraction for a cashier? Despite the monotony of working the cash register, Ernaux comes across a young cashier who scans with astounding quickness, who is having fun. But this man's approach seems to be an anomaly rather than a trend.

Cashiers may have a hard time at the supermarket, but for customers, grocery shopping can be a pleasant experience, the big-box store a place of attraction. Ernaux describes the supermarket as a great human gathering or a performance, and calls the hustle and bustle "a ballet". She also says that when we shop at big-box stores we are "at the very heart of a hypermodernity", an asset for most people, though perhaps not for supporters of the way things were "way back when". Also, there are some people who wish to go in and out of a supermarket without being too involved in the shopping experience, without it disrupting the rest of their day. For these people there is self-checkout. With self-checkout, you can go to a supermarket "without a word or a glance at anyone else". One woman Ernaux encounters at the regular checkout doesn't say a word to the customers (her face is
"stubbornly" turned away from them) or to the cashier during the transaction. It would appear that the lack of human interactions typical of self-checkout is, for some people, characteristic of the regular checkout as well.

There are also some factors that make the shopping experience worse and repel possible customers. One of these is the knowledge of the low-wage labor and poor working conditions that employees of the factories where Western brands are made are subjected to. In one of her entries Ernaux reports that an eight-story building near Dacca, Bangladesh, a building where Auchan products were made, collapsed, killing 1,127 people (this is one of the times Ernaux’s journal functions as a newspaper). In a similar instance, a factory fire killed over 100 people who worked for a mere 29.50 euros per month. Nearly everyone who shops at big brand-name stores is aware of the living conditions they are furthering by shopping at places like Auchan. Yet Ernaux is of the opinion that knowing about these poor conditions does not cause people to shop any less at these stores. Though they may have scruples, Ernaux asserts that many unemployed French people (and probably even many of the employed) are glad to be able to purchase inexpensive clothing, among other things.

Then there are the signs. In the yellow signs Ernaux reads at once a presumptuous and degrading undertone. The same way the idea of a loyalty card rubs her the wrong way ("I am loyal to no one"), one of the signs regrettably uses the possessive "our" when referring to its customers. Ernaux is not the store’s property, and neither are any of the other customers! Another case where the signs overstep their bounds is when they prohibit reading magazines and newspapers in
the store. Happily, people often disregard this particular sign; in fact, Ernaux catches a few customers reading in peace directly beneath it. But what kind of place is one that forbids reading? The signs’ degrading aspect can be seen in the self-serve discount section. There a sign informs customers (the majority of whom, because they are frequenting the discount section, are most likely at the lower end of the social spectrum) that the weight and type of product they take will be randomly checked at checkout. Yet in the "normal" fruit and vegetable section, though it is self-serve as well, there is no such sign. This shows that Auchan is unjustly more suspicious of its customers who use the discount section than those who use the regular sections. And yet it is in the “normal” fruit and vegetable section that Ernaux sees people stealthily eating grapes.

In addition, for some families with small children, shopping at Auchan is a harrowing task. This is evident in one of Ernaux's entries: a woman appears with a small boy who heads for the self-serve candy and who has already plunged his hand into one of the dispensers before his mother can prevent him. For Ernaux it is a touching sight; for the woman (who avoids making eye contact with Ernaux) it is embarrassing and exasperating. Also, for poorer parents of small children, walking through the aisles filled with toys too expensive to buy must be a constant reminder of their situation. Ernaux notices a tendancy where loving one’s children seems to mean "buying them as many things as possible". This is not the case for parents like the mother Ernaux comes across on November 16, who, even with Auchan's low prices, rely on Green Santa Claus (the poverty-fighting Secours Populaire’s donation initiative) for Christmas presents for their children.
Another repulsion-causing factor of the shopping experience is the checkout, a place where any attractive forces supermarkets possess are frequently squashed. At self-checkout you must follow a complex set of instructions, or else the terrifying voice of the machine will repeat whichever step you are struggling with. And if, to avoid the daunting task of scanning your own products, you choose the traditional checkout, there is still the tiresome possibility that the person in front of you will take a painfully long time unloading and arranging their products on the belt. In either case, judgment and a meticulous calculation are involved: at the normal checkout we judge the speed and dexterity of the cashier, while at self-checkout this calculation is transferred onto the clumsy customer, who may or may not be about to crack because of the mounting impatience of the customers waiting their turn.

And since Ernaux explicitly says that she likes the supermarket but is repelled by the checkout line, should the latter be thought of as a place outside of, other than, the former? But perhaps there is a silver lining to the infamous checkout; waiting in line one day, the background noise puts Ernaux into a kind of trance similar to hearing the sea when you are "dozing on the sand". Even though the cons seem to outweigh the pros, Ernaux looks beyond the negative aspects of supermarket shopping and sees a fertile topic for a book.

Part of what allows *Regarde les lumières mon amour* to be so rich with anecdotes is that the supermarket is a place teeming with social realities, on which the book can be read as a comment. In observing these realities, Ernaux pays particular attention to race and religion, rank, and gender, and is even hyperaware of them. Early on in the book she comes across a dilemma concerning race: a woman
wearing a flowery dress considers a crate of salted cod sold in bulk. This woman is black and Ernaux does not know whether to describe her as such, as an African woman, or simply as a woman. She concludes that not mentioning her race would be denying her something of her being and would also turn her white in a sense, since the white reader would, according to Ernaux, imagine a white woman. Ernaux will, by this same reasoning, tell the reader the race or (presumed) religion of minorities she encounters. Ernaux also often notices Muslim women with veils, likening one to the nuns of her youth because of the wimples they wore. These Muslim women are in Ernaux’s thoughts often, and she wonders why their personal choices and liberty should trouble her more than that of other women.

Also in her thoughts are the rank of Auchan’s employees and the status of its customers. After encountering a woman operating a floor-washing machine, not only does Ernaux say her status as conductor is "majestic" and that she "dominates" the customers from her raised seat, but she goes so far as to compare her to the employees who stock the shelves, calling her task more *valorisante*. This woman “dominating” from her raised seat is an echo of the supermarket employee in Slovakia, surveying the customers from a platform at least four meters high, whom Ernaux likens to a jail wardress. Ernaux also observes an extra sales rep in the personal care section whose authority can be read on her face and in her gestures, and who is "no doubt above" the regular sales rep. Is it possible that all that can be read in her demeanor is simply boredom? With her mildly obsessive focus on rank and status (she almost asks the employee by the apples about his salary, but in the end doesn’t dare), Ernaux would say no. If this observation of rank is somewhat
illegitimate, there are others founded on sound evidence. The butcher, the baker, the cheese seller, and the fishmonger, make up a kind of "nobility", Ernaux notices. This stems from their having specific knowledge particular to their line of business, and their role as "artisans". Quite different from the status we unconsciously assign to employees simply because they are physically on a higher level (a raised platform or a raised seat). That Ernaux deems these workers "noble" is similar to how, for her, the Wireless Technology employees make up a kind of "aristocracy". Her word choice here reflects her perception of these workers as belonging to a definite hierarchy. Though Ernaux doesn't include customers in this same hierarchy, she finds a separate way to determine whether or not they are wealthy: taking products from the shelves without looking at the price is a sign of status.

Ernaux is also hyperaware of (and even appalled by) gender issues at Auchan. The issue that is most prevalent throughout the book is the stereotyping encouraged by the difference in boys' and girls' toys and other such products. In the toy section, products are separated "rigorously" by gender: cars and Spiderman for boys, Barbies and Hello Kitty for girls. The anger this separation causes Ernaux is understandable; after all what kind of message do toys like "My Iron" or "My Baby-nurse", where everything is “just like Mommy in miniature”, send to young girls? It also harks back to how women of Ernaux's generation were mainly brought up to play a solely domestic role, and how Ernaux went beyond this expectation. One would suspect that, with the rise of equality between men and women, the distinction between boys' and girls' toys would decrease; to Ernaux's chagrin the opposite is true. Another time Ernaux mentions this stereotyping is when she comes
across a veritable "fairy world" of a back-to-school section. There she finds brightly colored products and an emphasis on the link between new school supplies and the promise of happiness. But once again, she senses a sexist undertone from the Mickey Mouse notebooks for boys, and the Minnie mouse ones for girls. Schoolchildren of her generation would not have had this "magical school world"; they also would not have had the segregation between boys’ and girls’ products, a trade-off whose benefits are debatable. Curiously, while Ernaux is dismayed by this segregation, she feeds the flame of inequality between men and women, saying that women "always" (most likely because of societal norms) possess a greater culinary competence than men.

Ernaux shows that the shopping mall is not only a place where social observations can be made, but can also be a kind of social outlet. It can be viewed as a new kind of downtown, an enclosed downtown. Just as people used to “go to town” for no other purpose than to stroll about, some people come to Auchan without a shopping cart or a basket, suggesting that they too have come simply for leisure or for a distraction. Ernaux says we do not measure the importance of these huge stores on our relationship to others. Indeed, many people (mainly elderly people who live on their own) form new, though perhaps fleeting, relationships with strangers there. In addition, the pet section brings about the greatest amount of stranger-stranger interactions, as Ernaux notes after a man in that aisle asks her what kind of dog food he should buy. She says also that there is no other place where so diverse a group of individuals (with differences of age, income, culture,
geographic and ethnic origin, look) mix and become aware of the lifestyles of their fellow human beings, the metro being perhaps the only exception.

About halfway through Ernaux's book, the reader will find an explanation of where its title comes from. It does not promise a mushy love story like one might expect, but is rather a quotation taken from a familial anecdote inside the book. A mother notices the Christmas lights inside the mall and bends down to her daughter in a stroller and says, "Look at the lights my love!" Her readers may wonder if there is some irony behind this title. But in an interview with Chloé Brendlé, Ernaux clarifies that the title is not ironic at all, and that this motherly gesture is, rather, precious for her. Though it is a title made up of two clichés, it is the beginning of an account completely void (unless it be in the "flat" – or plate – style of writing) of platitudes.

Indeed, Ernaux's style of writing makes the labeling of her book somewhat controversial. Though, according to the author, the hypermarket can provide just as much meaning and human truth as a concert hall, many people would not agree that the supermarket is a legitimate subject for a piece of literature. Yet, to the question, is Ernaux's book a piece of literature, one could easily reply, does it matter? Does its status as literature or non-literature change its value as a book? Ernaux shows that because of the shopping mall's dual function as a place of attraction and one of repulsion, because the supermarket is not only a place necessary for subsistence but also a social place, and especially because of the many social realities that are

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present there, it is a topic just as suitable for a piece of writing as those we see in novels, plays, and poetry all the time.

There is an Italian pun, *traduttore traditore*, which translates to "the translator is a betrayer". In translating *Regarde les lumières mon amour*, I have done my best not to betray the author or the text.
Look at the Lights My Love

*The big supermarket down the road is always open: all day its electric doors slide stolidly back and forth, admitting and discharging streams of people. Its neon-lit space is so impersonal and so eternal that it emanates both comfort and alienation. Inside you can forget that you’re not alone, or that you are.*

Rachel Cusk, *Aftermath*

Faber and Faber Limited, Great Britain, 2012

Twenty years ago, I happened to be shopping at a supermarket in Kosice, in Slovakia. It had just opened and it was the first one in the city after the fall of the communist regime. I don’t know if it got its name – *Prior* – from that. At the entrance, a store employee was authoritatively handing out baskets to the puzzled customers. In the center, perched on a platform that was at least twelve feet high, a woman kept a close eye on the demeanor of the customers wandering through the aisles. Everything in their behavior indicated their unfamiliarity with the concept of self-service. They would stop for a long time in front of the products, without touching them, or hesitating, in a precautionary way, retracing their steps, indecisive, with that imperceptible wavering of beings venturing out into unknown territory. They were undergoing their apprenticeship of the supermarket and of the rules that the management of *Prior* was imposing without subtlety, with the obligatory basket and the wardress overlooking the scene. I was taken aback by this spectacle of a collective initiation, apprehended at the root, into mass consumerism.
I recalled the first time I went into a supermarket. It was in 1960 in the suburbs of London and it was called, simply, *Supermarket*. The woman employing me as an au pair had sent me there, equipped with a list of food to buy and pulling a shopping trolley – which annoyed me. I don't have an exact memory of my thoughts or my feelings. I know only that I felt a certain apprehension about going to a place that was foreign to me both because of its function and because I had a poor command of the language. Very quickly I got in the habit of strolling there in the company of a young Frenchwoman, who was an au pair as well. We were fascinated and excited by the wide variety of yogurts – while in the anorexic phase – and the abundance of candy – while in the bulimic phase – and took the liberty of eating the contents of a pack of Smarties in the store without paying at the cash register.

We choose the objects and the places we remember, or rather the atmosphere at the time decides what is worth remembering. Writers, artists, film directors contribute to the creation of these memories. Superstores, which most people in France have been going to around fifty times a year for about forty years, are only beginning to appear among the places worthy of representation. Yet when I look back, I realize that with each stage of my life there are associated images of supermarkets, with scenes, encounters, people.

I remember:

the *Carrefour* on avenue de Genève in Annecy, where in May 1968 we filled a shopping cart – not yet called a “caddie” in France – because we feared a total shortage of supplies.
the *Intermarché* in La Charité-sur-Loire, outside the town, with its sign "The Musketeers of Distribution", as a reward for my children in the summer after visiting castles and churches, just as going to *Leclerc* in Osny after school was a treat for them too. That same *Leclerc* where later on I met former students whom I didn’t recognize right away, where tears came to my eyes on realizing that I would never again buy chocolate for my mother, who had just died.

the *Major* at the foot of the rock of Sancerre, the *Continent* up above Rouen near the University, the *Super–M* in Cergy, chains that no longer exist, reinforcing the melancholy of time.

the *Mammouth* in Oiartzun where we never went despite our desire to get chorizos sausage and Spanish touron nougat before we crossed the border – but it was always too late – and which became an inside joke among our family, the symbol of bad timing and of the inaccessible.

Supermarkets and superstores are not reducible to their function of home economics, to the "chore" of doing the shopping. They generate thought, cement sensations and emotions in memory. A person could certainly write life stories through the lens of the supermarkets he or she visits. They are part of the childhood landscape of all those who are less than fifty years old. If you leave out a narrow segment of the population – inhabitants of the center of Paris and of large, old cities – the big-box store is for everyone a familiar place. Shopping there is a part of our lives, but we don’t consider its influence over our relations with others, our way of establishing a sense of community with our contemporaries in the twenty-first
century. But, when you think about it, there is no space, public or private, where so many different individuals (based on age, income, culture, geographic and ethnic origin, look) walk about together and mix. No enclosed space where everyone, dozens of times a year, is so much in the presence of fellow human beings, where everyone has the chance to get a glimpse of the mode of being and the lifestyle of others. Politicians, journalists, "experts", all those who have never set foot in one of these huge stores don't know the social reality of France today.

The big-box store as a great human rendez-vous, as a performance, is something I have experienced several times over. The first time, acutely, with a vague sense of shame. In order to write, I had isolated myself during the off-season in a village in the Nièvre region, and the words wouldn't come. “Going to Leclerc” three miles away was a relief: through mixing with strangers, "seeing people", finding, precisely, the world again. The necessary presence of people. Discovering in this way that I was just the same as all those who go wandering in shopping malls purely for pleasure or to escape from their solitude. Quite spontaneously, I began to describe the things seen in shopping malls.

And so, to “write life”, our life, today, I chose, without the least hesitation, the big-box store as my object. In it I saw the chance to give an account of the real practice of visiting one, far from what you conventionally hear (which is often tinted with aversion) about this supposed non-place and which in no way corresponds to the experience I have of them.

So I recorded most of my visits to the big-box store Auchan in Cergy between November 2012 and October 2013. I go there regularly because it is easy to get to
and for enjoyment, mainly because of its location inside Trois-Fontaines, the biggest shopping mall in Val-d’Oise. Accessible on foot by the pedestrian walkways from the RER commuter train station and by car directly off the A15 thruway, Trois-Fontaines is situated at the heart of the Cergy-Préfecture neighborhood. All the public agencies are concentrated there – administrative offices, main post office, Social Security, Treasury, RER and bus stations, savings bank, police station, theater, public library, music conservatory, swimming pool, skating rink, etc. – a number of higher-education establishments (Faculty of Arts, School of Management and Business, School of Engineering, National School of the Arts) and various banks. So much so that I would readily define the area – actually called, Grand Centre – as an accumulation, even an interlocking, of the masses, who together create a scene of milling humanity during the day that becomes a desert in the evening.

The shopping mall takes up the most amount of space in this area. Try to picture an enormous rectangular fortification of reddish-brown brick, whose big façade, the one facing the thruway, consists of mirror-windows reflecting the clouds. The opposite façade, the one looking out onto a high-rise and other buildings, is uniformly brick, like those old Northern factories. Since its construction in 1972, a perpendicular wing has been added on one end, where there is a branch of the cultural and electronic goods store FNAC. Immense parking lots, half covered and stacked over several levels, surround it on three sides. You get inside by passing through an array of ten gates; some of these are monumental and evoke the entrance of a Greco-Asiatic temple, their four columns topped with two disjunctive
roofs, in the shape of an arc, the highest one in glass and metal brimming over with grace.

The Trois-Fontaines mall forms a downtown quarter of a novel kind: privately owned, it is entirely closed, monitored, and no one can penetrate its walls outside of a strict schedule. Late in the evening, when you emerge from the RER, walking along its silent mass is more depressing than passing a cemetery.

Here are gathered over three levels all the businesses and all the paid services likely to cover the totality of a population’s needs – supermarket, fashion boutiques, hairdressers, medical centers and pharmacies, day care centers, fast food, newsagents, etc. There are free restrooms and wheelchair rentals. But the only café (Le Troquet), the movie theater (Les Tritons), and the bookstore (Le Temps de vivre) have disappeared. There are only a few high-end shops. Most of the clientele belongs to the lower and middle classes.

For anyone not used to it, it is disorienting, not in the way that a labyrinth like Venice is, but because the geometric structure of the place juxtaposes, on each side of the pathways at right angles, boutiques that can easily be mistaken one for another. The symmetry gives you vertigo, made worse by the enclosure of the space, even though it is open to daylight through large glass skylights that take the place of a roof.

Auchan, over two levels, occupies almost half the surface area of the mall. It is the heart of the place, supplying the ensemble of other businesses with its customers. Its supremacy is evident at the mall’s fronting, where its name is displayed in gigantic letters, eclipsing the smaller ones of FNAC and Darty. In the
parking lots, the shelters covering the battery of shopping carts all carry the store’s red logo, a bird. It is the only store that is open for so long – from 8:30 in the morning to 10 at night – when the others are only open from 10 to 8. Inside the mall, the Auchan itself is so huge that it constitutes an autonomous enclave, offering, in addition to groceries, domestic electronic goods, clothes, books and newspapers, as well as services – box office, travel agency, photo print stations, etc. In one way or another it has copied the offerings of other businesses, such as Darty – when it has not forced them to move outside the mall, where there is no longer a bakery, a butcher, a liquor store, etc. Level one, non-foodstuffs, has the form of a deep rectangle. An escalator connects it to level two, double the size, divided into two communicating spaces, but at a sharp right angle one from the other, which, by reducing the infinite horizon of goods, softens the impression of magnitude. Security guards watch all the entrances.

That is the way it looks, the place which, as is my wont, I wandered through with my shopping list in hand, forcing myself simply to pay a closer attention than usual to all the actors in this place, employees and customers, as well as to sales strategies. Not a systematic investigation or exploration, but a journal, the form that corresponds the most to my temperament, bent on the Impressionist capturing of things and of people, of atmospheres. A candid transcription of observations, of sensations, to attempt to grasp something of the life that unspools there.

2012

Thursday, November 8
It is gray and cold out. A thrilling sensation arose just now at the idea of going to Trois-Fontaines and doing some errands at Auchan. As a sort of break in the task of writing, an effortless distraction in a familiar place. As soon as you cross one of the barriers granting paid access to the parking lots, a chain of pitfalls may present themselves that immediately lend an irksome character to the shopping experience: being obliged to drive around for a long time before finding a spot not situated in the depths of a lot far from an entrance, noticing that you don’t have a euro on you to detach a shopping cart or that, in addition to veering unmanageably to one side, the one you just took contains a previous user’s trash. On the other hand, falling immediately upon a free spot or one just being freed up and very close to your favorite entrance is a satisfaction and a good omen. Another being to unlock a clean shopping cart that is easy to maneuver. I am lucky twice today.

Large crowds throughout the mall’s promenades – All Saints vacation is not over yet – fewer people inside of Auchan. Halloween being over, everything is gearing up for Christmas. At the entrance, a huge display of decorated bottles: Champagne - 6.31 euros per bottle with your Auchan card (20% off). The brand is not revealed. Boxes of chocolates. Christmas tree and table decorations. As far as the eye can see yellow signs with SPECIAL OFFER in enormous black letters. But very few people on this level, as if people were resisting the commercialism of the season, biding their time, or, more probably, waiting for their paycheck at the end of the month.

Toys occupy several rows of shelves rigorously separated into "boys", "girls". For the former, the masterstroke: Spiderman. Outer space, noise and violence: cars,
planes, tanks, robots, punching bag, all available in violent reds, greens, yellows. For
the latter, domestic and household toys, seduction, toys for a girl to play house with.
"My Little Mini Market", "My Household Accessories", "My Mini Frying Pan", "My Iron", "My Baby-nurse". A transparent "Food Bag" is hideously filled, reminiscent of
feces and vomit, with croissants and other plastic foods. Glimpsing a doctor's kit in
the middle of this household arsenal almost relieves me. The reproduction of the
role doesn't bother with subtleties or with imagination: everything just like Mommy
in miniature. Opposite this, the multicolored shades of makeup bags, dressing tables
with a mirror and a seat to make oneself up, Snow White and princess costumes.
Farther on, a long shelf packed with dolls from top to bottom. An ad for a Barbie at
the wheel of a Volkswagen, 29.90 euros. I feel angry and powerless. I think of the
Femen, it is here that you must come, where our subconscious is forged, to
thoroughly pillage all these transmissive objects. I will join you.

A bit farther on, in the bookstore area, a lone customer – a middle-aged
woman – walks among the tables. Each time I venture there, I leave sad and
discouraged. Not that my books are absent– some are there, on the "Paperback"
shelf, but, with a few exceptions, the suggested read obeys a single criterion, the
best-seller. "Best-sellers" are arranged in a vast display, numbered from 1 to 10, in
enormous numbers, like at the horse races in Longchamp. What one can designate
by the term "literature" occupies only the smallest part of a space devoted to how
to? books, games, travel guides, religion books, etc.

I notice a sign above:
Out of respect for our customers, reading the periodicals and the magazines in the store is prohibited. Thank you for your cooperation.

What irritates me the most in this interdiction is the possessive "our". Neither myself nor anyone else is the property of Auchan, even less so its associates: its customers don’t belong to me, to us. This "our" is characteristically duplicitous. 

Above, on the food level, a crowd, the atmosphere of school vacation is very noticeable. People are strolling about, and there is a sense of the carefree in the air. Many people have neither shopping carts nor baskets. The main path of foot traffic, perpendicular to the rows of shelves, is full of adolescents who hang about, scoot around elderly couples’ shopping carts, around women surrounded by children gleeful with running back and forth. One girl takes the headphones from her phone to respond to her mother. Another, in the bottled water area, at one end of the store, is on the phone with her head leaning against a pack of Evian: "Did you get permission to take photos or not?" You can isolate yourself and have a conversation in a superstore with as much serenity as in a garden.

The floor–washing machine operated by a blond woman, in her fifties, wearing a blue uniform, arduously opens up a passage through the crowd. This delicate function as conductor, which has a majestic side to it – dominating the shoppers from her raised seat – seems to me to have a higher status than that of the employees assigned to stocking shelves, perhaps wrongly so.

The other employees – sales clerks, aisle reps, pallet fork workers, etc. - maneuvering throughout the store wear the same uniform: a black sleeveless jacket, somewhat Mao-style, with AUCHAN in big white letters.
I see one who is talking casually with an Asian customer whose shopping cart contains only four large bags of ordinary rice. I realize that I don’t know anybody who works here.

Until now, I have always refused to get the Auchan loyalty card. To the question asked ritually at the cash register, "Do you have a loyalty card?", I used to reply just as ritually "I am loyal to no one!", which is a huge exaggeration. I simply didn’t want to submit myself to the consumerist incentive strategy practiced by all supermarkets. Today, I responded, "What do you do to get one?" out of curiosity to know what personal information I would be obliged to provide. To my surprise, none. I received right from the cashier a card marked "Auchan" with a barcode on the back. How could anyone be more quickly or discreetly roped into shopping there, through a system of a "jackpot" where earned euros are amassed by obeying the injunction to buy such and such a product?

Monday, November 12

Afternoon. At the entrance of Auchan, for my short shopping list, I took only a basket on wheels, deep, made of red plastic, easy to maneuver.

I walk by the almost deserted fish station. There is a strong odor, inevitable despite the ice because of the heat reigning over the whole of the store. To the right of the counter, an impressive layer of salted cod that overlap one another, like a sort of sloped roof made of old grayish tiles. On the floor, crates of cod, closed and stacked one atop the other: 60 euros for 20 lbs. A black woman in a long flowery dress stops in front of them, hesitates, walks away.
[Dilemma. Will I or will I not write "a black woman", "an African woman" – not sure that she is – or only "a woman"? I am faced with a choice that, oddly today, influences the way this journal will be read. To write "a woman", is to erase a physical characteristic that would have been impossible for me not to immediately notice. The result is, in fact, to make this woman white, since a white reader will imagine, out of habit, a white woman. It is to deny something of her being, and far from the least important, her skin. To textually deny her her visibility. Exactly the opposite of what I want to do, of what my task is in writing: to attribute to people here, in this journal, the same presence and the same place they occupy in the life of stores like Auchan. Not to create a manifesto in favor of ethnic diversity, only to grant to those who fill the same space that I do the existence and the visibility to which they have a right. So I will write "a black woman", "an Asian man", "Arab adolescents" when it seems fitting.]

Fruits and vegetables section. An island display filled with Italia grapes in bulk. Many people pick and eat one or two more or less discreetly, in a sort of collective authorization, self-limited to only a few grapes and constrained by the others who watch them. To do the same with apples or pears would be going beyond this tacit right. I am "by the apples" as it happens. An employee is unpacking some crates. I ask him if he has any Canada apples, as the few that remain on the display have gone over.

"Here! Just for you!" And he places a full crate in front of me.

"Are you going to make a pie with them? I put them in the oven, myself, I like them baked."
"I put them in the microwave, ten minutes is enough."

He shows me how to use the new electric scale. He is talkative. I am rather too old and he is rather too young for this exchange to be anything other than civility. I would like to ask him about his salary. I don’t dare. I can't manage to separate myself from my role as customer.

Suddenly there is a man who is pacing a spacious aisle, staggering slightly, an open can of Red Bull in his hand. Nothing else, neither basket nor shopping cart. His other hand in the back pocket of his jeans, which are sagging a bit. A wooly hat pulled down over his head. I begin to fear for him, because of the surveillance cameras – I have not yet spotted where they are mounted – and the security guards. Among the population that patronizes this Auchan, which has become more and more ethnically mixed with every year, the homeless person, on the other hand, the guy who is slightly drunk, has disappeared. A kind of "normal consumer" predominates, either because the security guards turn shady types away at the entrance, or through their own self-exclusion.

At the self-checkout, I am waiting behind a guy with a ponytail, a long black leather coat, and Doc Martens. This type of checkout, reserved for "10 items or less", is mostly used by young people, few shoppers beyond their fifties. I suspect that for many the operation of these machines seems complicated, even when an employee is posted a few steps away to show how they work. A machine is freed up. Once again, I spend lots of time with the different steps. As I am putting my groceries away in a plastic bag (three cents per bag), I notice that a second one remains stuck to it, unaccounted for by the machine. I have involuntarily committed fraud. I ask
myself after the fact if the automatic checkout is capable of detecting a barcode
swapped for another one, or any other ingenious scam. This type of contraption
encourages moral indifference. You do not feel you have stolen when you are facing
a machine.

Friday, November 16

5 p.m. Heading for Auchan’s health and personal care section, located inside
the store, not far from the other body and cosmetic products, but autonomous, with
its own cash register and a saleswoman prone to giving advice. Since the aisles are
so narrow, you have to leave your cart at the entrance. A sign **Friday – 30% off on
an identical item.** Because of a foreseen influx of customers – female customers
mainly, rarely men – there is an additional saleswoman, sure of herself, irritable, no
doubt "above" the regular saleswoman (her authority can be read on her face, in her
gestures). Enter a bunch of girls, white and black, among them a young mother with
a child in a stroller. They gather in front of the makeup section, discuss quickly
amongst themselves, their heads together. A Eurasian woman of a certain age
hesitates in front of the dietary products section and ends up taking a bundle of two
packs of Milical crackers on offer.

The health and personal care section – like certain organic foods sections –
induces people to stand about for a long time. They get lost in thought in front of the
products that help with weight loss, indigestion, sleep, being and living better. They
are the aisles of dream and desire, of hope. The psychiatric section in a certain way,
but the best part of the product is lost once it’s in your cart.
Though I have no intention of buying, the toy section nevertheless exerts a force of attraction on me. Perhaps the same one that has led three young people around twenty years old to walk leisurely through the aisle. They stop in front of the masks. One of them touches the clear plastic cover of a "Robot Disguise" and they begin to fervently evoke their memories – "I used to have one like that!" They seem happy, adorably childlike.

A young woman walks slowly through the doll section. The little girl, six to eight years old, who follows her insists on having one. Her mother drags her along saying, "Come on, you'll have one with the green Santa Claus". The green Santa Claus belongs to the Secours Populaire, which distributes toys to children of poor parents.

There is a line at the fish stand, seeming to suggest a widespread integration into the Catholic tradition. Actually, the only belief that prompts people to buy fish on Friday, is that it is fresher than on other days.

Close by, above the platters of freshly carved meat, lots of promotional signs:

**Meat - less than 1 euro per serving; The less expensive solution brought to you by Auchan; Cold cuts - 1 euro per person.**

Seduction's humanitarian language. The store calculates the cost of the portion on the plate, but how much does it weigh? Not visible, no doubt noted in fine print.

In the "International Foods" department, next to the halal and kosher shelves, there is a corner where nobody ever goes, a kind of high-end grocer's section like in the store *Le Bon Marché* but in miniature. With pretentious section headings: Oil Cellar, Pasta Cellar. The small bottle of *L'Olivier* oil costs 14 euros, and
everything else is in the same register, overpriced, spices, cookies and canned goods with the Albert Ménès and Table de Mathilde labels. Does this aisle, always empty, improve Auchan’s reputation? It is there, from beneath the jam shelf, that I saw a cute little mouse scurry away one day. It is certainly easier for rodents to evade the surveillance cameras than for us.

As there are more very poor people than very rich people, the discount section occupies a surface area five times as big. Until 2007, it was situated in a place close to the organic foods department, small at the time, at the intersection of the two communicating spaces on level 2, so that everybody had to pass it to go from one to the other. The management, no doubt considering it more profitable to extend and expand the more expensive organic products aisle in this strategic spot, moved the discount section right to the back of the same floor, in an enclave which it shares with the pet products. Where it is less out of place than right in the middle of the store. If you don’t have a dog or a cat you can very easily be unaware of its existence. It is for the “cheap food shoppers” – a phrase of Thomas Bernhard’s – and this is the implication of everything about it. As much as food for cats and dogs is presented in a delicious and joyful guise, with colored packaging, next to it the low end products for humans are that much less-than-attractive, piled up on pallets on the floor or in crates on wooden racks. Even the refrigerated foods have a pitiful appearance. Everything is sold in large quantities, eggs in cartons of 30, chocolate croissants in packs of 14 for 1.89 euros. No brand name, only the contents in large print – "Brussels Sprouts", “Pastry Bar", "Chocolate Cake“ – or unfamiliar brands,
Premium coffee, Larroche ratatouille – or brands promoting the quality of products with no quality, Belhuil oil.

Opposite, a large shelf, the self-serve discount, that offers in a series of containers all kinds of aperitif candy and cookies that you stuff into a plastic bag and then weigh on a scale.

Here, the customary language of seduction, built on fake generosity and promised happiness, is replaced by that of threats, expressed clearly. Along the whole length of the self-serve discount shelf, on the bottom, a sign reads in red: **No eating in the store** and another, above, more civilized:

**Sampling in the store is prohibited.**

**Thank you for your cooperation.**

**Life. Real life. Auchan.**

Above the scale, it is the temptation to cheat that is forestalled: "Dear customers, we would like to inform you that the weight and type of the products you purchase are randomly checked at the cash register."

Warning reserved for customers thought to be thus inclined since it does not appear above the scales in the fruits and vegetables section in the "normal" part of the store.

A woman appears with a little redheaded boy next to a stroller. He dashes towards the candy. "Sammy! Sammy!" shouts the mother. He has already plunged his hand into a container and he brings back to her, triumphantly, a fistful of candy. I smile at the sight. Not the mother, who avoids looking at me.

At the cash register, a quarrel between a grandmother and her granddaughter, about six to eight years old.
"Do you want the kiki toy or the perfume? Which one would you rather have? [The perfume is already in the basket, it seems.] You can't have everything in life. Do you think Granny has everything she wants? It's the same with you."

"I want the kiki toy."

The grandmother removes the perfume, Walt Disney brand, from the basket, places it on a neighboring display of candy while the little girl goes to look for the stuffed animal. She comes back with it, held tightly in her hand. It is a little monkey. Surreptitiously, the grandmother, with a swift hand, takes the perfume and puts it back in the basket, without saying anything, begrudgingly. She knows it is wrong to purchase it as well, but she can't stop herself from doing it. From wanting to make her granddaughter happy. From loving being loved by her. In the world of these huge stores and the free-market economy, loving one's children means buying them as many things as possible.

Tuesday, November 20

For a long time I didn't know that Auchan was owned by the Mulliez family, who also own Leroy Merlin, Kiloutou, Decathlon, Midas, Flunch, Jules, etc. Of all the people who have come here today, I suspect that only a few are aware of this. I ask myself what this knowledge has changed for me. They are a haunting presence. Mythical beings. In Annecy, where the first Carrefour was established, there was once a rumor that the Fournier family – its creators – ate off of gold plates.

Saturday, November 24
I get to Trois-Fontaines in the early afternoon. Traffic jam in the parking lot. As soon as I step inside I am struck by the fact that today's shoppers are different from other days', more couples and families, often with young children, more women with scarves covering their hair. The atmosphere is noticeably one of excitement and of spending money – or the wish to spend money – magnified by the number of people. Something of a Grand Stock-Up on supplies. Shopping carts are overflowing.

“The Christmas spirit” is evident throughout. Garlands hang in showers of silver above the escalators and the walkways. The mall never looks as much like a vibrant cathedral as it does at this time of year.

At the entrance to Auchan, some women with gray hair, dressed like do-gooders, are handing out clear bags. Today is the national collection for the food bank. One of the women hands me a brochure with the products you are asked to buy: canned goods, sugar, coffee, oil. She tells me they also need personal care products and baby food. Then, softly: "No pasta, please, last year we had 3 tons!" Ah! Damn you donors. Okay, I won’t be stingy with my goodwill. I’ll even try to be creative. The discomfort and headache that come with charity. I make a point of not selecting the least expensive products, of buying "as if for myself". The pleasant impression that taking the time to choose Blédina chicken with green vegetables baby food and Rik & Rok chocolate is more respectable than just giving money. Wholesome charity. [Later, at the cash register, while emptying the contents of the clear bag onto the conveyor belt, it seems to me that there are 50 euros’ worth of
products. After checking, I see that I have overestimated the value of my gesture: only 28 euros.]

By the cheese section, I notice a young couple. They hesitate, as if they are not accustomed to all this, as if this is new for them. Shopping for two for the first time marks the beginning of a shared life. It means agreeing on taste, on a budget, already being of one mind when it comes to food, our primary need. Asking a man or a woman to go shopping with you at the supermarket is on a whole different level than inviting him or her to see a movie or to have a drink at a bar. No romantic ulterior motive, no sweet-talk possible. Do you like Roquefort? Reblochon? That one there is farm-made. What about roasting a chicken?

There are fewer people in the toy section than expected. A pair of grandparents anxiously consider a large doll as if there would issue from its red lips and unmoving eyes a sign that it is the one, not another, that they should pick. A man drags his kid away from the remote control cars "Come on, let's go find manman." I heard and said manman my whole childhood, not the real word for mommy, maman. The man that has just reminded me of this is of African or West Indian descent.

We are constantly referring to weekend shopping as "a chore". Unconsciously or out of self-deception. One can think of it as the price of prosperity, as a task springing from the need for abundance. Subsistence has always necessitated work, much more so in the past than today, except for privileged people, whose servants would take care of that.

And the shoppers, this afternoon, are noticeably taking their time.
At the exit, there are flattened cardboard boxes spread out on the floor. The women from the food bank are organizing the donations, oil here, coffee there, etc. The cruel impression of a paupers’ market exposed in broad daylight.

Wednesday, November 28

A textiles factory in Bangladesh was ravaged by fire, 112 people are dead, mainly women, who worked for 29.50 euros a month. It was a nine-story building, the fire supposedly didn't get past the third floor. The workers were trapped inside, without being able to get out.

This factory, Tazreen, made polos, T-shirts, etc. for Auchan, Carrefour, Pimkie, Go Sport, Cora, C & A, H & M.

Of course, apart from crocodile tears, we who happily benefit from this slave labor cannot be counted on to change the way things are. The revolt can only come directly from the exploited ones, from the other side of the world. Even French people whose jobs have been outsourced and are out of work are glad to be able to buy themselves a T-shirt for 7 euros.

Thursday, November 29

An anomaly in one of Auchan's food aisles: an elegant young woman in a short-sleeved dress with a suitcase on wheels. No doubt getting out of the RER and taking advantage of the proximity of the mall to do some shopping.

Here, more than anywhere else, I have trouble pinpointing and describing the present moment, the meaning of all that happens in front of my eyes as I move
forward. I see only people’s bodies, their appearance, their actions. What they put in their basket, their cart. From this I determine more or less their standard of living. The essential remains invisible to me, hidden even on weekends when shopping carts overflow: that never-ending evaluation between the price of products and the need to feed oneself by which most people are constrained. The less money you have, the more going shopping demands a constant meticulous planning. More time. Making a list of the essentials. Checking off the best deals in the special offers catalogue. It is an obsessive financial task, not taken into account, that completely takes over a large number of men and women. The first signs of wealth – of the benefits of wealth – can be noted by the following: helping yourself to food products without looking at the price beforehand. The humiliation inflicted by merchandise. It is too expensive, and therefore I am worth nothing.

On level 2, if you want to sit down, your options are limited to two small plastic chairs situated in the passageway between the two wings, near a water fountain. The superstore is planned out so as to allow for the most efficient circulation. Seats would get in the way and encourage resting. A place of consumption is truly thought out in the same way as the workplace, with minimal breaks for optimal productivity. The chairs are very often occupied by older women, with their shopping trolleys from home, which they hold by the handle, in front of them, or by mothers making their children eat or drink.

In the books section, there is just one man flipping through The Secret Life of the Great Figures of History. Side-by-side, on display: The Holy Koran, The Koran for
Dummies, The Bible for Dummies. Perhaps it is only in superstores that one can find these books and flip through them without the fear of being judged by anyone.

People take pictures everywhere, all the time. Inside of Auchan, I have never seen anybody take a photo with his or her phone. Are you allowed to?

Wednesday, December 5

4 p.m. Rain. Inside the shopping mall, you don’t see time passing. It is not written into the structure of the place. It cannot be read anywhere. Shops get replaced, aisles get changed around, products get updated, there is a newness that doesn’t fundamentally change anything. That is always part of the same cycle, from the January sales to Christmas and New Year’s celebrations, with summer clearance and back-to-school shopping in between.

At this time of year, stepping inside the mall means suddenly stumbling upon the buzz and the whirl of the place, upon sights dazzling to the eye, a whole world that you don't expect when you are still outside in the cold of the parking lot, opposite this Kremlin made of bricks.

Many people in Auchan's toy section. Children. Divided dramatically. Not a single girl in front of the cars and the Spiderman costumes, not a single boy in front of the Barbies, the Hello Kitty toys, the crying Rik and Rok dolls.

A long time ago, my 2-year-old son wanted a doll. His show of interest in the opposite sex considered by his parents as springing from a legitimate desire and curiosity, we got him one.
In the large area for the phones and computers – where a sign **Latest Wireless Technology** is posted - a majority of male customers, and the sales representatives are all young men, generally easy to talk to, moving with ease between the counters, aware of their knowledge of new technology. Just looking at them, you see that they make up a kind of aristocracy, which allows them to assume a certain condescension with their customers, especially with women. Two, as it happens, are asking about a cell phone for a little girl, "but simple, just for coming home from school", which occasions laughter and jokes from the two guys at the stand. I need a memory stick. I am fully aware that asking a salesman to go out of his way to explain to me which number of gigabytes I should choose displays a lamentable ignorance, which his smirk confirms. It is a profoundly masculine section, where there are also the most sales reps, often with nothing to do. There are none in the books section.

Impossible to get to level 2 without seeing the fish section at the top of the escalator. They have eel, saumonette fish for 2.99 euros per pound, mussels for 1.99 euros, monkfish tails for 6.95 euros. The prices are in huge letters, always against the same acid yellow background. I notice that this excessiveness has a hypnotic quality about it; I would almost believe they are literally giving away their fish. The employees of this section move about quickly, wearing boots and blue aprons, with caps on their heads. The one who seems to be in charge, with a young face and gray hair beneath his cap, grabs large handfuls of ice from a tub and throws it on the display. He shows another employee how to lay the sea bass parallel to each other
before scattering a thin layer of ice on top. He asks if he can help me with anything.
"No, I'm just watching you."

"Ah, okay."

"It's for a book I'm writing about superstores."

Right away he is interested. I ask him how long he has been working at Auchan. "Twenty years!" he says with the pride that comes from doing something for a long time, a job, a marriage, even a life, etc. He clarifies, "Here, in the fish section, for eleven years!" Pride above all in his work, which is no longer that of a subordinate but of a supervisor in every aspect – choice, preparation and sale – of a food product with a short shelf life. Throughout our conversation, he doesn't take his eye off his stand. A customer has just arrived. Right away he excuses himself apologetically.

He, along with the butcher, the baker and the cheese seller, enjoy, because of their expertise, an independence and a responsibility that set them apart. First, they are craftsmen, artisans. Being an Auchan employee comes second. They make up a kind of nobility, usually male.

There are long lines at the regular registers. Reluctantly, I head toward the self-checkout, reserved for ten items or less. There is only one man in front of me, in his fifties, with a slice of pizza for 1.75 euros, a baguette wrapped in cellophane, some bananas and mandarins. Behind me, students who reminisce about their high school. One of them is holding a tub of Häagen-Dazs ice cream. As is often the case, one of the four machines is out of order. I am relieved that the one I end up with is the farthest away from the line and the gaze which the other customers fix anxiously
on you, evaluating their chances of going quickly through the line according to your expertise or your clumsiness. A perversion of the self-checkout system is that the irritation a slow cashier causes is transferred onto the customer.

Indeed, it is a trying and terrorizing system, where you must follow the instructions to the letter to be able to carry away what you have purchased. A process broken down into steps impossible to get around, or else the stern automated voice will repeat, "Place the item on the scale. Present the barcode" every time you don’t follow the directions. You have the feeling that the machine is getting increasingly more annoyed, is judging you to be useless and incompetent. Today, I was not subjected to a single reminder from the voice, and with the vanity of a good student, I have the sense of having accomplished the task, on the whole, flawlessly.

I am more and more sure that the submissiveness of consumers is limitless.

Friday, December 7

8:45 p.m. In the mall, all the stores have been closed for forty-five minutes. Some, like the pharmacy, have lowered a sort of iron curtain. Others have a kind of metal veil pulled down over their front window, faintly illuminated, which lets the display be seen in a subdued light. The Christmas lights are partially turned off, the would-be streets in a kind of half-light. The people that I pass have a ghostlike appearance. More than the other evenings when I go at a late hour to Auchan – the only store open besides McDonald’s and Flunch – a sense of desolation. The magic has disappeared until tomorrow morning. I think of an unsettling short story by Jon
Raymond, *Young Bodies*, in which a boy and a girl get locked in a store in a mall for a whole night, unable to get out without setting off the alarm.

All the light has concentrated in the superstore, which is rather empty. In the personal care department, the cashier puts my shampoo in a bag and the money in the register without interrupting her phone conversation. In the evening, as closing time draws near, there is a sort of authorized slacking off, a sluggishness in the staff’s attitude.

The shelves are imperceptibly in disorder. With gaps in between the items. There is no more confectioners' sugar. Some pallets are half empty. There is the impression of having arrived at a feast when the guests have already left.

As usual, I notice that the evening customers, younger, more ethnically diverse, differ from their daytime counterparts. The time of day for going shopping segregates the people in these huge stores. Early morning is the time for retired couples, slow and well organized with their own shopping bags in their carts, their checkbooks, from which they carefully detach the check at the cash register, without forgetting to write down the total on the stub.

Mid afternoon there are lots of women, alone, – middle aged or young and with children – who come shopping with their own waterproof shopping trolleys, a sign that they have come on foot or by bus, because they don't know how to drive, or because they don't have a car.

Starting at 5 o’clock, a stream of people getting out of work. An upbeat, jostling pace takes hold of the place. School children with their mothers. High school students. Between 8 and 10 p.m., college students and, less common at any other
time of day, women in long dresses and expansive veils always accompanied by a man. Do these couples choose the evening for convenience or because they feel people stare less at this late hour when Auchan is less busy?

Some people, some communities, will never cross paths.

The local newspaper informs me that 130 nationalities are represented throughout the whole of Cergy. Nowhere else do they mix with each other as much as in the Trois-Fontaines mall, at Auchan. It is here that we get used to being at close quarters with one another, prompted by the same essential need of feeding and clothing ourselves. Whether we like it or not, we form here a community made up of desires.

For the last fifteen years, it is not the presence of "visible minorities" that I have noticed in a place, it is their absence.

**Wednesday, December 12**

They started charging you to get into the mall parking lot fifteen years ago because of the RER commuters who would park there for the whole day, preventing actual customers from parking. But, as we are reminded, the first two and a half hours are free. If getting into the lot is generally without a hitch – with the press of a button the machine gives you a ticket – getting out is sometimes more difficult, because you have gone beyond the allotted free time or because of an unexpected system shutdown, for which the first driver stuck at the head of the line is usually blamed. To get around paying, some people drive up close to the car in front of them when the barrier is raised (like certain truck drivers at highway toll booths). It is
common, late in the evening, to find these exit barriers already open, perhaps to avoid their deliberate vandalism.

The men and women who used to come up to me in the parking lot to ask for change have disappeared. There are more and more homeless people in society as a whole but fewer and fewer around the mall, with the exception of two places, which are not part of the mall’s private property:

near the covered entrance, in the recess between the blind wall that fronts Auchan and the Savings Bank building, a part of which has been turned into a university library. As soon as the sun comes out, they sit on a low wall along the library, watching the passersby, of which there are many in this part of the Esplanade that joins the administrative buildings, the RER and bus stations, the post office, etc., to the mall.

in front of the entrance that gives out onto a lively pedestrian street, lined with independent shops; a section of this street has covered arches that provide a good shelter. It is a place for begging but also for soliciting signatures for various causes more or less credible, inevitably accompanied by a request for a donation.

In the mall, there are several flights of escalators running in both directions between the different levels, among them a long moving walkway that lets you enter with a shopping cart. There is also one inside Auchan, joining the two levels, but with two going up and just one going down. In these moments when, stuck behind the person in front of you, you find yourself resigned to immobility, among the people going up and the people going down, eyes meet, you size each other up easily
and with curiosity, like the travelers in a station on two trains chugging slowly in opposite directions.

To what degree are we present to those around us?

At certain times, this place seems to me a smooth surface on which people are projected, with signs hanging above our heads.

Tuesday, December 18, afternoon

Dense crowds starting from the mall’s entrance. A loud humming through which music is faintly heard. The moving walkway, beneath the glass roof, takes you up toward the tinsel and the Christmas lights that hang like gemstone necklaces. The young woman in front of me with a little girl in a stroller looks up, smiles. She bends down toward the child: "Look at the lights my love!"

On my way out of Auchan, a very old man bent over double, in a raincoat that is too large for him, approaches slowly with a cane, dragging a pair of timeworn shoes. His head hangs over his chest, I see only his neck. With his free hand, he carries an old shopping bag. I am moved by the sight as if he were a noble beetle braving the dangers of an unknown land to bring back food.

2013

Monday, January 7

Dolls and toys piled up in bulk in a large fabric bin, half-price. Nothing better manifests their function as the *pure mark* of celebration. The holidays being over, the Barbies and the Hello Kitties have stayed the same, they have just lost their
festive value. Nobody rummages in this trash bin filled with new toys. Still, you could find a good bargain there on a doll, a costume, to give as a birthday present, or even for next Christmas. The toy’s downgrading to a reject item puts people off. When it comes to our desires, it is the large retailers that call the shots. Today, the Epiphany *galette des Rois* and household linen, from duvet covers to tea towels, make up the program of our desires.

There are some people, often not very young, who talk to themselves, standing in front of the shelves, conversing out loud with the merchandise. Expressing their opinion or their discontentment with a product, knowing that they are within hearing distance of nearby customers. It is better to be heard. There, a small woman looking at the canned sardines turns towards me, laughs: "Chili pepper sardines are not for me!" I smile at her in return. A vague way of expressing to her my implicit agreement on the reasons she has for being wary but also my intention to leave it at that. Called as a witness to her life, I want no part in it. Nevertheless these attempts at communication that come my way from strangers are inexplicably touching.

I take advantage of the super discount area’s being empty to take a cell phone picture of the notices prohibiting sampling. I hardly have time to push the button before a man appears at my side. From his badge, I see that he is from security.

"You’re not allowed to take photographs in the store; it’s prohibited."

"Why?"

"It’s prohibited. That’s the rule."

"I’m reporting on supermarkets."
"Then you have to ask permission from the management."

Which I won’t do. I want to keep the role I am used to, that of customer, not draw attention to my presence.

Tuesday, January 22

In the section for car accessories, empty, a small black child was playing with a large piece of cardboard lying in the middle of the aisle. I wanted to take a picture of him. Then I asked myself if there wouldn’t be an aspect of quaint colonialism in so doing.

The curious impression that time here stands still; it is a present repeated over and over again. That there is no History. Even my memory doesn’t speak. It is outside this place, transcribing all of this in my own home, that I remember scenes witnessed elsewhere, in other supermarkets, other eras.

Carrefour, in Annecy. Early 1970s. It was winter, in the evening, in the liquor section. Some guys, two or three, were standing in front of a girl on her own. One of them sneered: "I’m telling you it’s not mine!" and the others laughed loudly. Not her, serious and red, confronted with this bold public denial of paternity. A tragedy for her because legal abortion didn’t exist. That day, I thought for the first time that this graceless warehouse contained stories, lives. I asked myself why supermarkets were never a part of the latest novels, how much time it was going to take for this new reality to attain literary worthiness.

Hypotheses, today:
1) supermarkets are associated with subsistence, a woman’s affair, and it is women who have been shopping there the most. But a field of activity is traditionally invisible when it is more or less associated with women. It is not taken into account, just like housework. What has no value in life has none for literature.

2) up until the 1970s, the majority of writers, both men and women, were of bourgeois origin and lived in Paris where stores like Auchan were not established. (I can’t imagine Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute or Françoise Sagan going shopping in a supermarket; Georges Perec I can, but perhaps I am mistaken.)

Monday, February 4

In June 1978, I spent a month alone in the countryside. The very day I returned to Cergy, noticing that the cupboards and fridge were empty, I hurried over to Trois-Fontaines. Just as I went through door number 6, it dawned on me that I had missed this place and that I was coming back to it with a strange satisfaction. It was like an extension of my private world, of which, without even noticing it, I had been deprived.

I have often rushed to the mall to forget my discontentment with my writing by mixing with the crowd of people buying and strolling about. Today, it was the opposite. I went to Auchan, mid afternoon, after working since morning on my current book, which was satisfying. A way of filling in the gap that is, in this case, the rest of the day. Or like a reward. A way of being unoccupied in the literal sense. A pure distraction. It is perhaps in this way that my pleasure in coming here might most closely resemble that of others in this place, young people who wander with no
purpose other than a bag of chips, mothers who arrive by bus to spend the afternoon before school gets out, all those who come here – like people used to do, in town – to take a stroll.

On level 2, a woman in her fifties comes up to me with a smile and a certain embarrassment. "You’re Annie Ernaux, right?" I can’t get used to hearing this question, as if it would be a good idea to adopt a fake identity, without betraying any part of the deception. She has read several of my books and wrote to me fifteen years ago. She just published an autobiographical novel and was featured in an article in La Gazette du Val-d'Oise. She is surprised to see me here, she can’t stand Auchan, she never comes here. I tell her that I come here often, I like it. We part with the promise that she will send me her book.

I had to go down to level 1 to recover the comfort of my anonymity. I walk through the area with the books section. On a small bench hardly visible behind a wall that separates it from the empty "Information" desk, a young woman, stylishly dressed, is poring over a book whose title I can’t see. Next to her a kid is reading a comic book. Delighted to see that they are sitting just beneath the sign prohibiting reading in the store.

This rule is royally disregarded in the newspaper area, well-stocked, but Le Monde is not sold there in the evening like at all the news sellers in the Île-de-France, only the next morning. I look through various weeklies. A woman and a teenage girl are reading tabloids, and two young men, sports magazines. A man standing to the side is perfectly still reading a science journal. The display stand for dailies, Le Parisien, Libé, Le Figaro, L’Équipe, is half empty at this time of day.
Magazine covers are crumpled. The booklet *100 Photos for Freedom of the Press* bears the traces of repeated handling. Auchan is more concerned about stolen candy in the discount section than for newspapers that are falling apart.

I find this place pleasant, quiet, almost secret for its being barely visible, at the back of the store, next to a meager gardening section. Assembling a community of readers.

*Thursday, February 7*

Four thirty. Near the entrance to Auchan, two girls go past me, one chubby, dressed entirely in gray, including her veil, the other one thin, with a black veil and black boots. I see them again in the personal care and beauty section, talking quickly in front of the nail polish. Up to a certain age, girls never go to buy cosmetics or to the bathroom by themselves.

At checkout, a woman takes her scanned items and puts them in the Auchan plastic bags with a slowness that one suspects is calculated. She points out to the cashier that one of the bags has a hole in it and asks for it to be replaced. The cashier tells her to go look for another one. She goes off slipping past the customers in line, comes back without hurrying. Silently we follow her actions and her movements. Aware of the tension, the cashier helps the customer transfer the items from the bag with the hole into the new one. There is a noticeable atmosphere of disapproval around a person who lets herself *take her time* without being concerned about that of others. Who flouts the implicit rules of customer civility. Of a code of good conduct that fluctuates between one’s rights – refusing an item that proves to be
defective, checking one’s receipt for errors – and one’s obligations – not cutting in line, letting a pregnant woman or a handicapped person go first, being polite to the cashier, etc.

The hustling and bustling in every direction typical of supermarkets comes to a halt at checkout. The line, a web from which you can’t escape – except by running the risk of ending up in one much worse – fixes us to the spot, immobile. When they were walking through the aisles, the people were presences that you pass by and of which you are vaguely aware. It is only at checkout that they become individuals.

Going through checkout is the moment most charged with tension and irritation. Because of the cashier, whose speed one is quick to judge, and customers who:

have overflowing shopping carts (but no more than our own)
didn’t notice the bar code was missing from an item and have to go back to that aisle to exchange it
take a checkbook from their bag, the beginning of a well-established ritual – carefully detaching the check, verification of the ID, writing the ID number on the back of the check, signing the check, giving it back, goodbye and thank you – which all seems unbearable, the one ounce of patience you no longer have.

Waiting in line at checkout is the time we are closest to one another.

Observed and observing, overheard, overhearing. Or simply sizing each other up intuitively, fleetingly.

Exposing, more than anywhere else, our way of living and our bank account. Our eating habits, our most private interests. Even our family structure. The items
we place on the belt say whether we live alone, with a partner, a baby, small children, pets.

Exposing one’s body, one’s actions, one's expertise or lack thereof – one’s status as a foreigner when you ask the cashier to help you count your change. One’s concern for others – placing the checkout divider behind your own items for the next customer, putting away your empty basket with the rest.

But not caring deep down that we are exposed insofar as we don't know each other. And most of the time not speaking to one another. As if it would be absurd to converse with each other. Or simply unthinkable for certain people; they are there yet not there, showing that they are above the majority of the Auchan clientele.

*Wednesday, February 13*

3 o'clock. School is out, so there are groups of girls you hear laughing from one aisle to the next. I notice that one with lots of makeup is wearing bright pink lipstick that matches her shoelaces.

In the seasonal area, they have set up tables and some children are drawing. The start of the Year of the Snake was last Sunday and Auchan doesn't miss out on the event, proposing a "Chinese week" with "activities", Chinese calligraphy, etc.

As I am taking some bags of food for my cats from the shelf, a man with white hair addresses me:

"I have a six-month-old dog, can I give him canned food?"

I don’t have a dog but I think he can. "No, not those" – he shows me the senior cans – “he needs the junior ones."
I take a bundle of four cans from the shelf. He looks at them, puts them into his cart.

"Thanks a lot. It's my grandchildren who wanted a dog. The things we do for them!"

He smiles, walks a few steps next to me. He wanted to tell a woman he did not know that he has a six-month-old dog, just that. I noticed that, out of all the departments, it is the pet section that arouses the strongest desire to speak.

In the checkout line, a woman with two children recognizes another woman with two children as well, waves to her. The other exclaims "We're good here, we're not moving!", meaning to another line. The four children play together, the mothers chat, talk about the Chinese New Year with excitement [they are not Asian]: "At school, they had Chinese food!" Is it school or the superstore that educates? Perhaps both.

I found a list in black pen in a shopping cart:

*frisée*

*flour*

*ham, bacon bits*

*grated cheese, yogurts*

*instant coffee*

*vinegar*

I compared it with my own:

*Ricoré coffee*
lady fingers
mascarpone
milk, cream
white bread
cat [wet and dry food]
post-its

Stores like Auchan carry around 50,000 food products. Considering I probably use about 100 of them, there remain 49,900 that I am unfamiliar with.

Wednesday, February 20

Inside Auchan, foot traffic is fluid, without congestion or collisions between shopping carts (their "drivers", like real car drivers, I notice, do not look at each other). Children drag baskets on wheels almost as big as themselves.

In the frozen food area, among the special offers, a Buitoni pizza: "Meat supreme" for 3.99 euros; the old trick, the one cent short that brings the price down to the lower unit, must still be working. It could be that the superstore is selling off its meat-based frozen meals, because of the horsemeat-labeled-as-beef scandal that shocked the public.

The checkout line I am in leads to two registers. At a certain point, you must choose between the two cashiers, working away back to back. You have to calculate the apparent speed of each cashier and the number of items the customer in front of you has. Today, seeing the cashier on the left turning an item over in her hands and
peering above her glasses to enter the code, I bet on the other one, a young black woman with a black headband that wraps her head prettily, even though the customer in front of me here has a shopping cart that is quite full. This customer, a woman in her sixties, is animated by the wish to unload her cart methodically. She places a box of pasta on the belt, moves it, rummages around to unload certain items before others. She sighs several times, as if overwhelmed by the difficulty of her undertaking, which fails: her items are scattered all along the conveyor belt, making it impossible for me to unload my own. She takes out a red plastic bag, big and sturdy, shakes it vigorously to open it, goes to the other side of the cashier to retrieve the items she has bought. She shoves them in with a sudden dexterity, pays with her credit card. I notice in her demeanor the satisfaction of a mission well accomplished. It was not the shopping cart of a single woman.

Supermarkets and larger retail stores remain an extension of the female domain, the continuation of the domestic world of whose smooth and steady running they're in charge, walking through the aisles with everything that is missing from the cupboards and the fridge in mind, everything that they should buy to respond to the repeated question, what's for dinner tonight, tomorrow, the whole week. Women always possess more than men a culinary competence that lets them choose without hesitating the products a recipe calls for, while men, rooted to the ground, baffled in front of the shelves, call for help, their phone to their ear “Which kind of flour was it I'm supposed to get?”

A conversation on Radio France, several years ago, between two male journalists, in their thirties:
"My fridge is always full, it's my mom who keeps it stocked up for me!"

"Ha ha, well yes, that's the way it always is!"

They laugh with satisfaction. From having remained, in some way, infants.

*Thursday, February 28*

The dashboard in my car reads 37° outside. The sensation of well-being from being enveloped by the warmth as soon as you go through door 2 and into the mall, moving around in the regulated balmy air, a bit like getting off of the plane in Cairo, coming from Paris. Forgotten are the mud and the cold, the gloomy weather, the traffic. Slowing down your pace, giving yourself over to the warmth. Leaving behind the notion of time, which not a single clock displays. Girls are dressed for warm weather. Parents have taken off their children’s parkas, folded on their strollers. It is a summer stroll in winter.

Memory of my surprise when I went into the mall for the first time in the mid-1970s. Wandering, sheltered from the rain and away from cars, in clean and well-lit walkways, muffled at the time by the carpeting, going as I wished into boutiques with no doors, flipping through the books in *Temps de Vivre*, letting my children run about without fear. I felt a secret excitement at being at the very heart of a hypermodernity of which this place seemed to me to be the fascinating symbol. It was like an existential advancement.

Today, I watched people meander slowly in front of storefronts that they would only rarely look at. Two women were sitting on the bench opposite the escalator between the *C & A* department store and an expensive boutique where
they sell Karl Lagerfeld. Is coming to the mall a way of being admitted to the spectacle, of truly basking – not through a television screen – in the lights and the abundance? Of being worth as much as things? One can feel disoriented in this place, ill at ease, but never *looked down upon*.

*Thursday, March 14*

At the checkout in Auchan, in front of me, a woman whose face seems obstinately turned toward the cashier. I see only her veil, richly brocaded with green and silver, which flows from the roots of her hair down to her waist. She doesn't take her items out of her basket, waits for those of the customer in front of her to be scanned before placing them on the belt. Just a bag of 10 baguettes and several boxes of Panzani pasta. Her movements are not slow but imperceptibly lagging, hesitant. She opens a wallet, takes out a bill, some change, which she places on the belt. The cashier counts the coins, asks for another, and yet another. She takes a bit of time. She goes off, with the heavy bag of baguettes in her hand. She didn't utter a word during the transaction. I thought of how going to Auchan, alone, must have taken a toll on her, and that her veils were not sufficient to help her through it.

It's my turn. As usual, the cashier cranes to make sure I have really emptied everything from my shopping cart onto the conveyor belt. In it I had left *Le Monde*, which I didn't purchase at Auchan's newspaper section but at the mall's newsstand. The cashier quickly calls me out on it. I say that I didn't buy this newspaper here and, thinking I should explain myself, I add, with a subconscious presumptuousness, that this issue isn't yet on sale at Auchan, that it won't be until tomorrow morning.
As if it were part of her role as cashier to check the date of *Le Monde*. She repeats that everything bought outside the store must be kept in plastic at the entrance. "You see, if there’s a check, it’s me who’s going to get it. They’re cracking down on us more and more, it’s getting worse and worse."

I had just been put in my place for not having thought of hers. Her "worse and worse" weighs heavily on me. Among the 7 million low-wage workers in France, many are cashiers.

In supermarket jargon, a cashier’s "prod" is the number of articles scanned per minute. 3,000 per hour is a good figure.

*Monday, March 25*

10 a.m. When the superstore is practically empty, like this morning, there is a striking sensation of the excess of merchandise. Of the deathly silence of the merchandise as far as the eye can see. The customers seem to move around slowly, as if caught in a kind of torpor, arising from the almost surreal vision of the piles of food and other offerings. Or they are simply people who have all the time in the world on Mondays – workers with this day of the week off – or even all the time in the world all the time, retired people.

The shopping cart I took at the entrance to level 2 doesn’t steer well. I notice that it is bent on one side, the chain you use to attach it to another shopping cart has been removed. It’s a shopping cart that must have ventured outside the parking lot, been used to move house or to play bumper cars, etc. It’s crazy all the things one can hypothetically do with a shopping cart. I don't understand why people don't borrow
them more often; for one euro it's a bargain. More or less skillfully, I try to tame the one I have.

Surprise, the newspaper display stand has migrated to level 2, behind the household linen, near to one of the entrances and one of the checkout lines, a place that is more visible than before but also more exposed. Now it is a kind of hallway, large, with lots of light, with the newspapers and magazines displayed along two walls that face each other. You can’t sit down, even on a stack of newspapers. Not a single nook. All of this seems done to make the place inhospitable, to discourage loitering, browsing, reading. And indeed, there is no one there.

Easter eggs galore. Already. I had forgotten. Stores like Auchan don’t forget anything. There are no doubt bathing suits in boxes, ready to be unpacked, as well as gifts for Mother's Day. The commercial authorities shorten the future and make the past that is last week fall into oblivion.

A guy in a coat, balding, glasses, hums, his little plastic bag in his hand.

I notice that there is never any music inside Auchan. Perhaps so as not to compete with the music in the mall, just perceptible. I find myself deploring this absence, missing these songs that overwhelm your memory at a stroke and make you inexplicably happy at the very instant you are taking a pack of bottled water from the shelf. Once at Leclerc, it was Dalida, *Come prima*.

*Wednesday, April 3*

On level 1 in Auchan, it is "The Spring Wine Fair" in the seasonal promotions area. Mainly men on their own. Behind the wine, another promotion: two
perpendicular walls with women's shoes in flashy colors, green, red, pink, and, placed here and there, like in a living room, poufs you can sit on and try various shoes at ease. Even with this "invitation" – this must be the concept – people show no interest.

Level 2, food products; it seems to me that the yellow signs with the alluring prices are more and more blinding. Always the same calculation above the trays of meat, pork for less than a euro per person. After some checking, I learn that said person is supposed to eat 110 grams, which on the plate, after cooking and without the meat waste, no doubt corresponds to 80 grams. I quickly do the calculation: a family of four who eat this meager portion every day still spend 120 euros each month. These stores have mastered the art of making you believe in their generosity.

Dozens of bags of Easter eggs are marked down, tossed into discount baskets. A vaguely repulsive heap that appeals to nobody. It is three days after Easter.

A woman crowds the dairy products aisle with a double stroller turned outwards: a cute pair of twins watching keenly, who follow everything that goes on.

At checkout, where there is quite a long wait, a customer with a basket on wheels offers me her place. As I vigorously turn down her offer – do I seem so tired? so old? – she smiles at me saying she knows me to be a writer. We exchange remarks about the store, about the children who fill the place on Wednesdays. Placing my items on the conveyor belt, I think with a bit of embarrassment that she is going to see what I have bought. Each item suddenly takes on a very heavy meaning, reveals my way of life. A bottle of champagne, two bottles of wine, fresh milk and organic
Emmenthal, white bread with no crust, nonfat yogurts, dry food for neutered cats,
English ginger jam. I too am observed, an object.

Friday, April 5

Noon. Newspaper section in Auchan. I can’t get used to places where
ewspapers are sold without there being a news seller capable of telling you where
to find the magazine you are looking for. For want of being able to lay my hands on
La Quinzaine Littéraire, I take yesterday evening’s Le Monde.

No employee either at self-checkout where a girl seems lost, is getting
annoyed, not knowing where to place the items she takes out of her basket, driven
to distraction by all the people staring at her movements while the terrifying
automated voice orders and repeats in a loop "Place your items on the scale". As if it
were dealing with a dimwitted person. By an extraordinary reversal, it is the
machine that appears intelligent and the humans stupid. I can’t get used to this
system either. From here on out you can go into one of these big stores and leave it
as you would one of those low-priced Formula 1 hotels, without exchanging a word
or a glance with anybody.

Nearly a third of the cash registers have now become self-checkout stations,
in groups of four or six and requiring the presence of only one employee responsible
for the surveillance and proper functioning of the machine. During the daytime,
there are half as many traditional checkout stations open than the other kind. The
extinction of cashiers is moving forward.
Friday, April 12

In a walkway, I pass a woman whose hair is hidden beneath a black veil with a white band peeking through, similar to the cornet wimples worn by the nuns of my youth, the holy sisters we used to make fun of, less because of what they wore than by their lifelong vow of chastity, which seemed crazy to us – no man ever? how was that possible! Completely different for the woman with the veil, perhaps devoted to God but also to a man – there is one right there with her – which changes everything. Unless God and the man are one and the same. But there again, on the scale of pleasures, the veiled Muslim always wins. And on the scale of liberty? But how does one evaluate that? And why is it any of my business? Why should their liberty obsess me more than that of other women? In their place, I would be secretly proud to elicit so many questions, to which, besides, the press never gives them the chance to respond.

Tuesday, April 23

3:50. Young people have given up on the new newspaper section. Just a man stopped in front of a shelf stocked full with word puzzles and a woman taking an issue of a consumer magazine.

In the cleaning products section, three black youths deliberate, their heads together, in front of the different brands of detergent. I hold back the urge to advise them.

A woman, two little girls, an adolescent and an elderly woman, perhaps the grandmother, walk through the aisle with the toilet paper and paper-towels in
single file, walking fast, and with no shopping cart. The older woman, lagging behind, protests, "It's a really big store!"

Her remark surprises me. Getting used to a place means no longer noticing its dimensions. For me, being accustomed to it has erased the reality of the size – fifty thousand or so square feet – of Auchan. A reality registered nevertheless by my body, since I prefer to forgo an item forgotten at the other end of the store rather than to retrace my steps.

*Wednesday, April 24*

An eight-story building collapsed near Dhaka, in Bangladesh. There are at least 200 presumed dead. Various clothes-making firms had 3000 workers working there for Western brands. This information has been superfluous for a long time.

*Tuesday, April 30*

In front of the entrance to Auchan on level 1, at the foot of the big main moving walkways, going in both directions, there is a space laid out like a small waiting room, with brown imitation leather chairs, arranged like inverted loveseats. They are rarely empty, often occupied in the morning by elderly North African immigrants. Sitting there, at your leisure you can watch the ballet of customers entering and exiting, the comings and goings of the security guard – a huge black man – who outside paces the length of the cash registers, watching out for possible incidents, in particular those brought about because you are not allowed to enter with a backpack or products bought elsewhere – which must be sealed in clear
plastic wrapping by a temperamental sealing machine. As on the terrace of a café, except for free, you can watch the world move along and go about its business. *Forging oneself* in contemplation.

This afternoon, there is a man sleeping soundly there, a walking stick leaning against the armrest. Two women are chatting.

*Monday, May 6*

I have the impression that certain products are never purchased, certain sections never visited, even at different times.

On the other hand, there are always crowds of people in front of the boxes of natural remedies, orthosiphon, royal jelly, seaweed collagen (?). A man is there, in contemplation. I read **Burn calories; Eliminate excess water weight; Shed unwanted pounds.** I imagine his body exuding water from all the pores of his skin, burning fat. Well located, right in the passageway from one wing of the building to another on level 2, this section is the complement of the others overflowing with food; it takes care of the guilt of eating too much.

When I am done shopping, I go to the bookstore section to buy *Two Lives Are Worth More Than One* by Jean-Marc Roberts for someone. Without getting my hopes up, I look for it on the display of bestsellers that takes up nearly ten feet with only ten titles, as if these were the only books that should be read, as if they were necessarily the best. There is Marc Lévy, Françoise Bourdin, Laurent Baffie, Régine Deforges and, surprise, Roberts, but it is an American whose first name is Nora. It’s not on the tables either, where novels, nonfiction, and biographies are spread out
pell-mell. Some books are worn. A man – perhaps the employee in charge of the section, never seen until now – goes over to a sort of desk in a busied manner, opens a register, takes notes. I have the impression that I would be disturbing his bookkeeping by asking for a book I can’t find. Sad and humiliated in advance by his evasive reply, that no, they don’t have it. As if I were looking for an item that never existed.

Indeed, placing a book on the checkout conveyor belt always embarrasses me, like a sacrilege. Nevertheless I would be happy to see one of my own there, extracted from a shopping cart, sliding between a pack of butter and a pair of tights.

*Friday, May 10*

4:30. Mother’s Day is advertised throughout the mall. In Auchan, there is a space reserved for it, filled with food processors, vacuum cleaners, coffee machines – apparently a must – perfumes, etc.

School is on break and the customers are mainly women with shopping carts and children. I imagine the impressive line that all these mothers, dispersed here with their shopping carts and their children, would form, women tied up with raising animals to feed their families. A prehistoric image.

*Wednesday, May 15*

The death toll from the collapse of Rana Plaza in Bangladesh is 1,127. In the rubble they found *Carrefour, Camaieu, and Auchan* brand labels.
Thursday, June 27

At the mall the long banner hanging over entrance 2 says, way up high, **Clearance.** Beneath this, a close-up of the smiling face of a women in her thirties, and more in the background, those of a man and a child. Nothing has changed since Zola’s *The Ladies’ Delight;* women are always the main target – the main consenting target – of commerce.

To avoid the crowd I chose to come shopping at Auchan after all the other stores close at 8:00. Throngs of people, nevertheless, in the food and cleaning supplies aisles where the clearance consists of offering the same products but in bulk. A woman pushes a full cart topped with several packs of toilet paper balanced above the other items, 50 rolls at least. The inescapable logic of stocking up: "A home with no peas is no home at all" says that old commercial – and you always need toilet paper, shampoo, oil, long-life milk, etc. The books and movies about famine are insufferable.

Surprise – a principle of these kinds of stores: always surprise people – the supplies for this year’s back-to-school shopping have already appeared in the seasonal promotions area. A little girl sitting on the ground unfolds a map of the world. On level 2, it is "Middle Eastern food week"; couscous, dates stuffed with almond paste, candied lemons and powdered Turkish delight, irresistible. It brings me back to my childhood yearning and, for a few seconds, I am filled with elation that such a place of abundance exists.

Wednesday, July 3
7:30. Set up in its usual place now, the back-to-school section glows vibrantly with all its backpacks, pencil cases, notebooks, pens and pencils, each one more colorful than the next. A magical school world that children twenty years ago would never have dreamed of. **Donate your old backpack and receive a check for ten euros**, to count toward, so it seems, a new one purchased there. Never too early to instill in people the value of new things, whose merit we are well aware of, to the detriment of the value of the old. How does one resist this promise of happiness, sporting on that first day, still far off, a new bag, becoming in short a new student embarking on a new year... But what happens to the old backpacks?

I look at the assignment books. It seems that this schoolchildren’s staple gets used right from first grade, kindergarten even, since the covers are so geared toward that age group – dinosaurs, monsters, Spiderman, etc. – and sexist. Mickey Mouse sternly grills the boy-owner of the book, "Have you done your homework?" while Minnie Mouse disgracefully flatters her female counterpart: "You’re the best!"

As I walk away, I notice the strange pleasure I got from this department.

Tonight, the checkout lines are never-ending. I resign myself to waiting. I fall into a kind of torpor where the background noise in Auchan at this time of day when it is crowded makes me think of the sound of the sea when you are dozing on the sand.

*Thursday, July 11*

Mid afternoon. On level 2, I try to detach one of the shopping carts linked to the others by inserting a euro, to no avail. I go up to the black security guard who
paces all day long next to the checkout. With a tool, he frees up the faulty shopping cart, gestures to the next one. Tired and impenetrable. He returns to the surveillance of people’s actions and their bags, of the insides of shopping trolleys, with that nonchalance of boredom.

The fruits and vegetables section is a madhouse. Collisions between shopping carts. Determined faces, arms and hands plunging into a mountain of apricots for one euro per kilo, testing for ripeness, rejecting, shoving into bags, with the joyful frenzy of harvest. The fruit is hard as rock.

Nearby, in the section installed for Ramadan, an ecstatic little boy is holding a box of dates stuffed with pink and green almond paste.

Indifferent to the xenophobic fears that grip a part of our society, big stores like Auchan adapt to the cultural diversity of their customers, meticulously keep track of their holidays. No particular ethics behind it, just "ethnic marketing". Nevertheless, liberals would have a hard time showcasing this real, egalitarian and integrative function of the Market.

I notice that a new kind of veil has appeared, decorated with pearls, hiding the wearer’s hair while leaving the neck visible. It reminds me of some of the old headdresses of provincial France, from the images they showed us at school.

I wander around the non-foodstuffs floor, among the bathing suits and the undergarments. I look up at the ceiling – for the first time – but who ever does that in stores like this? Above the fluorescent lights spreading their blinding brightness over the world of the merchandise, I see a sort of box where pipes and cables are tangled between the beams in the ceiling, with unidentified metal objects. A dark
assembly, cold, which contrasts with the overall brightness of the store. At this instant the thought comes to me that perhaps my attitude seems suspicious, as if I were trying to locate the cameras. **We would like to remind you that this aisle is under video surveillance,** I read as I pass by the stockings and tights.

The old fitting rooms, discrete and overseen by an employee, no longer exist. They have been replaced by three tiny nooks, squeezed into a recess in the wall, with only a curtain separating them from the pathway where customers walk. There is no store employee. Instead, a notice: **We would like to inform our valued customers that the fitting rooms should ONLY be used to try on clothing (3 items max).**

In other words – I am always translating the language of these stores – sleeping, eating, making love in the fitting rooms is prohibited. At the moment, with the curtain open, a tired adolescent sits and talks quietly to her mom, who is standing in front of her.

Here, one evening of another summer, I was stuck in a checkout line so long that it started in the cookie aisle, far from a cash register that was invisible in the distance. The people in line were not talking to each other; they looked straight ahead, trying to evaluate the speed of the line’s progress. It was very hot. The question that I ask myself over and over again, the only one that is worth anything, came to my mind: why don't people rebel? Why not fight back against the wait imposed upon us by stores like Auchan, which cuts down on its expenses by not hiring enough staff members, by deciding all together to take cookies from their boxes, chocolate bars from their wrappers, to allow oneself a free sampling to while
away the waiting time to which we are condemned, stuck like rats among endless amounts of food which, more obedient than them, we do not dare nibble on? How many people have this same thought? There is no way of knowing. If I should set the example myself, nobody would follow my lead, which is what the movie *Le Grand Soir* demonstrates. All of us too tired, and soon we will be outside, finally out of the frying pan, oblivious, almost happy. We are a society of desires, not one of action.

My dream as a child during the war, fed by the stories of pillaging in 1940, was to go into the deserted stores, not hindered by anyone, and to take everything that caught my fancy, cakes, toys, school supplies. Whether others had the same fantasy or not, it is perhaps this dream that floats confusedly in these stores. Curbed, repressed. Considered childish and shameful. Glass is no longer there to protect the sardines from Jacques Prévert’s famous poem, “Grasse Matinée”. There is no need. The preserves, the steaks, the boxes of Saint-Michel cookies and the Haribo candy, everything that you can touch, take in your hands – but never put in your mouth – is much better protected by this freedom constantly under surveillance. By the internalized fear.

At the "exit without purchase", the security guard keeps an eye on people’s hands, their pockets. As if leaving without any merchandise were a suspicious irregularity. In fact, you are a guilty party when you don’t buy anything.

*Wednesday, July 17*

Inside the mall, the stores are closed. The background music is more noticeable than in the middle of the day when it is covered by a general humming.
Life has taken refuge around Auchan. I realize that I have never seen it closed, never seen the security gate down – or being pulled down – in front of the checkout. Nobody sees the gate except for the security guards since it’s the first store to open and the last one to close in the mall. You can get inside McDonald’s, Flunch, and the bowling alley from outside.

My feet lead me once again to the books. It is interesting – in a manner of speaking – to see the eternality of the language of a century ago in the titles of the books on the “romantic” shelf: Married in the Summer, Engaged for a Night, The Dreams of a Married Woman, A Blind Date.

There is a plethora of cookbooks. I flip through the one by Ginette Mathiot, from which I learned years ago how to make food other than spaghetti and yogurt for other people. It is a new edition, much has been changed. On the cover, a photo of a young woman, brunette, wearing a T-shirt in her kitchen. In her right hand she is holding a whisk and in the other Ginette Mathiot’s book, which she is reading with the smile of someone immersed in a hilarious novel. The eternal image of woman with her kitchen pots. I walk away, disconcerted. Perhaps I only came to Auchan this evening to see my 25-year-old self again.

I point out to the young black cashier that he scans with astounding speed. He is having fun. He is not there, like I assumed, for a summer job. He exclaims: "I’ve been working at Auchan for four years!"

"I come here often and I’ve never seen you..."

"Yeah, that’s because I usually work in the aisles, I unwrap and shelve things."
"Which do you prefer? Working at checkout or in the aisles?"

He says it’s harder working in the aisles, that you always have a backache from bending over so much.

The sun has gone down. People are sitting outside at the McDonald’s tables, opposite the half-full parking lot where cars move more quickly than during the daytime. I take the ramp which connects the lower parking lot to the one on top. With its mirror windows in the darkness, the compact mass that is the mall seems covered with black mica.

Monday, September 30

There are now at the entrance to Auchan on level 1 dozens of small devices, all alike, in cases, and aligned parallel to one another on a display stand. They look like oversized cell phones, or remote controls. But they are neither. They are machines used to scan yourself the items you take from the shelves. They display your total as you go along. When you are done, you pay at one of the Express checkouts on level 2 without having to take your shopping out of the cart. Self-scanning. A white notice specifies the primary condition of use: you must have an Auchan membership card. Fickle customers, these machines are not for you. For the rest of you, read the text highlighting the ease and the time-saving but with veiled threats interspersed here and there. The user is thus informed that he will have to show ID when he pays. That a review of his purchases as well as random checks may be implemented.
Right away I imagine the scene. One or two security guards appear. "Hello. Would you please empty your shopping cart?"

"Why?"

"To verify that you have paid for everything."

I wonder what the cameras will pick up, what clues will warrant the inspection. Whether the emptying of the cart will take place there in front of the other customers or whether you will be taken somewhere, and where. Going through checkout will become more dangerous than going through customs.

Online I read that the machine used for scanning is called a pistol and that consumers seem to be satisfied with the system. With the weapon that does away with cashiers and at the same time hands us over to the discretionary power of the big-box store.

A simple political step: refuse to use them.

To avoid the temptation – I am aware of the insidious coercion of large retailers and my weakness as a consumer – I tear up my Auchan card.

\textit{Tuesday, October 22}

My journal has ended.

Like every other time that I have stopped recording the present, I have the impression of removing myself from the world's goings-on, not only of no longer writing the present day, but no longer seeing it as well. Because seeing with the aim of writing in mind, is seeing differently. It is \textit{distinguishing} objects, individuals, mechanisms, and conferring upon them a value of existence.
More and more over these past months, I have measured the level of control which large retailers have in their various spheres – in ways that are real and in imagination – by stirring up the will to buy at any moment they choose. I have gauged their violence, consisting as much in the bright colors of all their yogurts as in the dullness of the super-discount aisles. Their role in people’s adaptation to low income, in the preservation of social resignation. Whether placed in a small pile or in a tottering tower on the conveyor belt, the purchases at these stores are almost always among the least expensive. Often, I have been overwhelmed by a sense of powerlessness and injustice as I leave big stores like Auchan. Yet for all this, I have not ceased to be attracted by this place and by the collective, subtle, and specific way of life that is led here. It could be that this way of life will soon disappear with the proliferation of individualist commercial schemes, such as ordering online and picking up at the store, which, it seems, is daily gaining ground among the middle and upper classes. So today’s children, when they are adults, will perhaps remember with melancholy going shopping on Saturdays at stores like Auchan, just as those over fifty remember the fragrant grocer’s stores of yesteryear where they would go to get milk with a metal jug.
Bibliography


