

# Annie Ernaux, homing in on herself

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Annie Ernaux  
 ÉCRIRE LA VIE  
 1,085pp. Gallimard. €25.  
 978 2 07 013218 8

L'ATELIER NOIR  
 203pp. Éditions des Busclats. €15.  
 978 2 36166 009 3

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Published: 8 October 2012

*Ecrire la vie* underlines Annie Ernaux's part in one of the most striking developments in literature over the past forty years. "Life-writing" has become not only a handy catch-all for what were previously considered discrete genres, but also the emblem of perceived affinities between different ways of capturing the warp and weft of lived experience, and of grasping how the various dimensions of a life "hang together", as Wilhelm Dilthey famously put it. The border post between fiction and non-fiction is now as deserted as Checkpoint Charlie, while long-established genres, such as autobiography, biography, essays, history, confessions, diaries and travel narratives, now appear strongly linked. And all sorts of phenomena, including institutions, practices, artefacts, and commodities, now eagerly respond to the injunction: "get a life".

Much of the initial running in this process was made by autobiography, refashioned by such critics as James Olney and John Eakin, who drew on the pioneering insights of Georges Gusdorf and Philippe Lejeune. Long considered to be secondary sources, providing background to the works of novelists, philosophers, or politicians, autobiographies now seemed capable of the felicities and subtleties that were the hallmarks of "literature". In France, this led to the creation of an autobiographical canon, with Rousseau, Stendhal and Chateaubriand at its forefront, and André Gide, Michel Leiris and Jean-Paul Sartre as twentieth-century standard-bearers. By the mid-1970s, strikingly new autobiographical forms were being devised, by writers such as Georges Perec, Roland Barthes and Serge Doubrovsky; and by the mid-1980s avant-garde novelists, who had up until that point eschewed autobiography, were being drawn to it. In 1981, Claude Simon's *Les Géorgiques* marked a decisive shift towards the autobiographical, while 1984 saw the appearance of two works rapidly consecrated as classics of the new autobiography: Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant* and Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance*. A year later, Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Le Miroir qui revient* inaugurated a trilogy of "autofictional" works by the former ringleader of the *nouveau roman*.

The publication of Ernaux's *La Place* in 1984 is part of this story. Yet in a number of respects *La Place* exemplified the advent of a new style of "life-writing". Doggedly antiliterary, it combined ethnographic precision with emotional ambivalence, and autobiographical urgency with biographical truth. What made it distinctive was a concern with social as much as private identity. A daughter's portrait of her working-class father, written a decade or so after his death, as the sense of distance and (on her part) betrayal that Ernaux had felt in his last years had been accentuated by her upward social mobility (she was now a highly qualified teacher married to a young executive), *La Place* brings the resources of fiction to bear on the material of the author's life.

Born in rural Normandy in 1940, Ernaux was brought up in the *café-épicerie* on the outskirts of Yvetot that her parents had acquired in their own, more limited, trajectory from the ranks of farm-hand and factory worker to that

of small shopkeeper. She was educated at a private Catholic school and developed a passion for literature that led to a Licence de Lettres Modernes at Rouen University. She settled first in Annecy, with two young children, and then, in her mid-thirties, shortly before her divorce, she moved to the new town of Cergy-Pontoise, 30 kilometres from Paris, where she still lives. In this period, Ernaux wrote three autobiographical novels that used interior monologue, multiple registers and irony, somewhat in the manner of Céline, to give a stylized account of her childhood, her experience of back-street abortion a decade before legalization of the practice, and, in the third book, *La Femme gelée* (1981), of marriage in an era when men went out to work and women sacrificed their careers to look after the children.

*La Place* went through several drafts, one entitled “Éléments d’ethnographie familiale”, before finding the form, and above all the tone, that have characterized Ernaux’s writing ever since. The text is set out in chapterless blocks of print, usually a page or so in length but sometimes consisting of a single sentence, with the spacing between the units also varying in extent. Description and figurative embellishment are avoided (there are few similes or metaphors); sentences are short and usually tersely declarative; enumerations are frequent, as are comments on register and rationale. The result is an appealing mixture of the prosaic and the poetic, as in this passage towards the end, following an account of the father’s death:

Il me conduisait de la maison à l’école sur son vélo. Passeur entre deux rives, sous la pluie et le soleil.

Peut-être sa plus grande fierté, ou même la justification de son existence: que j’appartienne au monde qui l’avait dédaigné.

Il chantait: C’est l’aviron qui nous mène en rond.

(He ferried me from home to school on his bike. From one bank to the other, come rain or shine.

His greatest pride, indeed his mission in life: that I should belong to the world that had spurned him.

Singing: *round and round we row*.)

The touching portrait of the father as a boatman, conveying the daughter from his world to the one from which she looks back, provides an emotional contrast with much in *La Place*, where a comprehensive picture of semi-rural working-class life is built up from a multiplicity of details concerning habits, gestures, pastimes, and above all bits of language, such as the snatch of song picked up here, and the father’s many complaints and saws, still redolent of the Pays de Caux. Ernaux sees the reconstruction of this archive as a form of reparation: memories of a “monde d’en bas” (lower world) she had repressed in her journey away from her roots. The “écriture plate” (flat style) she uses is derived from the letters she exchanged with her parents, in an idiom that masked the increasingly wide gap between her world and theirs. Not surprisingly, Ernaux found illumination in Pierre Bourdieu’s work on class distinction, the self-perpetuation of elites, and the enduring divisions between “dominants” and “dominés”. An eloquent tribute to the sociologist, on his death in 2002, is included in the Quarto volume.

Ernaux’s rejection of fiction in *La Place*, in favour of painstaking quasi-ethnographic reconstruction, laced with critical self-awareness, has been a constant through the dozen or so works of life-writing that have followed, up to the publication in 2009 of *Les Années*, a monumental account of twentieth-century French social history as refracted through the life of one woman. The recently published writer’s diary, *L’Atelier noir*, covering the years 1982–2007, reveals that the project that eventually became *Les Années* had been on the stocks for nearly three decades, since the writing of *La Place* in fact. Originally conceived as a “roman total”, with nods to Maupassant’s *Une Vie* and Simone de Beauvoir’s *Les Mandarins*, the work aimed to place the destiny of a single woman in the wider context of history. But as the project evolved into an “autobiographie objective”, with *À la Recherche du temps perdu* and *Gone with the Wind* as somewhat incongruous models, Ernaux found it hard to reconcile the wish “d’être sociologue de moi-même” (to be the sociologist of myself) with her sense that “je ne suis que du temps qui a passé à travers moi” (I am just time that has passed through me). *L’Atelier noir* shows Ernaux grappling with such issues as the choice of pronoun to use (“elle” eventually wins the day), or how to capture the intertwining

rhythms of collective and individual experience. But we also witness the gestation of other projects, many of which start out as parts of *Les Années*, and then split to form the works that turned Ernaux into one of France's leading writers.

*La Honte*, for example, her doleful reconstruction of an incident from her early adolescence, when her father nearly dispatched his wife with a carving knife during a blazing row at the Sunday lunch table, is for a time part of the larger fresco. But it gradually floats free as Ernaux recollects the social history of 1952 (hit songs and jingles, the accession of Elizabeth II, the murder of Sir Jack Drummond and his family by a French farmer that came to be known as *l'affaire Dominici*), and reconstructs meticulously the social geography of Yvetot at that time. Similarly, *L'Événement*, a haunting account of her abortion, which would have proved fatal without the ministrations of a fellow student one January night in the Cité Universitaire at Rouen, starts out as a tranche of *Les Années* labelled "63", designating the year, before developing its own momentum, and its specific formal identity, where the narration of past events is constantly sabotaged by the outrage and irony of the retrospective narrator. *Journal du dehors*, for its part, started life in the early 1980s as a fictional, then factual, portrait of a new town, but was eventually transformed, by dint of an "écriture photographique du réel", into a set of disconnected observations of everyday life, in the supermarket, at the hairdresser's, or on the RER: "Aucune description, aucun récit non plus. Juste des instants, des rencontres. De l'ethnotexte" (No description, no stories. Just moments and encounters. Ethnotext). A central strength of Ernaux's writing emerges here: the capacity to see bits of herself in her glimpses of others, thereby achieving a genuine integration of private and public identities. The statement by Rousseau that serves as epigraph to *Journal du dehors*, "notre vrai moi n'est pas tout entier en nous" (Our true self is not entirely within), will be echoed fifteen years later by the sentence from José Ortega y Gasset which prefaces *Les Années*: "Nous n'avons que notre histoire, et elle n'est pas à nous" (We have only our story, and it isn't ours).

The progress towards *Les Années* was interrupted by events that found a more direct passage into writing. The death of Ernaux's mother led to *Une Femme*, a pendant to *La Place*, while *Passion simple* records with considerable sexual precision a year-long affair with a married Russian diplomat. While bien-pensant commentators professed outrage at what they saw as Ernaux's feminist excesses, her growing readership recognized that the treatment of sexuality in her work was related to issues of social class, and to the author's sense of a connection – central in Rousseau, Gide and Leiris – between autobiographical writing and the willingness to risk social indignity through self-revelation. Ernaux's decision to publish "Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit", the moving diary she had kept while her mother's identity was eroded by Alzheimer's disease, was well received by those working in the emerging field of medical humanities. In the case of another published diary, *Se perdre*, the source for *Passion simple*, details of the varieties of lovemaking with "S.", when he managed to give his colleagues at the Russian embassy – and his wife – the slip, and drive over to Cergy-Pontoise in his official Mercedes, may at first seem merely lurid. But the evocation of a middle-aged woman in the grip of a sexual addiction, and her consequent self-abasement, is mesmeric.

Ernaux appears to have resumed work on *Les Années* in 2002, after retiring from her job with the French equivalent of the Open University, and the book was published to great acclaim seven years later. Reread in the light of its gestation, recorded in the pages of *L'Atelier noir*, *Les Années* seems more than ever concerned with time itself, or rather with the multiple temporalities, or "régimes d'historicité", as the historiographer François Hartog calls them, whose interweaving gives shape to particular lives enmeshed with historical processes. Switching between "nous" and "elle" (but never "je"), *Les Années* begins and ends with litanies of snapshot memories, some private, some public, most a combination of the two. In between, the passing years are staked out by meticulous descriptions of school and family photographs that gradually home in on an "elle" whom we recognize as Ernaux herself, and by evocations of family get-togethers. In the early pages, the "elle" is a child, vaguely aware of older family members reminiscing about the war; by the end, she is a grandmother, and she logs without self-pity the absence of a shared sense of the past during the occasional gatherings with her two sons and their families. The unremitting waves of social change recorded in *Les Années*, with particular attention to women's lives, sweep away the collective narratives Ernaux recalls from her childhood.

Ernaux's books are all in print, but the thousand-page *Écrire la vie* comes with a bonus: a hundred pages of photographs, accompanied by extracts from the unpublished diary Ernaux has kept since adolescence, and which she often draws on in her work. There is also a surprise: rather than date of publication, it is the age of the protagonist that dictates the order in which the books are presented. Although this stimulates new ways of reading familiar texts, it detracts from the sense, patent in *L'Atelier noir*, of a cumulative, lifelong, and consistently inventive, project. Overall, however, *Écrire la vie* highlights the current prominence of life-writing, and Ernaux's stature as a major European writer.

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