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An Infinite Present: Annie Ernaux's *The Years* and Modern French history

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When the Institute for the History of the Present Time was created in 1978, it focused on politics and international relations. It had originated in the French commission for the history of the second world war, formed in 1951: an historical enquiry into the rise of fascism and (in the hope of doing better in future) into the failure of liberal democracies, through successive crises, to stop it. In its way it was also an effort to make sense of the French defeat in 1940. As in other European countries, the attempt to make sense of the second world war soon required a return to, and reconsideration of, the first. The other transformative defeats of the French twentieth century, in the wars of decolonization, in the wars of decolonization were taking place as the commission went about its work. They featured in the institute's research programme from the start, although often in a low-key way.

The novelist Annie Ernaux was born in Normandy in 1940, amidst defeat and occupation, but the history she traces in *Les Années* (2008, English translation 2017) is of a different kind of 'present time'—not of party politics or diplomatic crises, but of the changing texture of everyday life in France from her early childhood to the onset of old age. Ernaux had worked on this book from her forties on, and explains, at its conclusion, that she was only able to write and complete it once her future started to run out: once she had become a grandmother, been treated for cancer, and noticed that women in *their* forties now thought of her, as she had thought of women in their eighties, as 'old'. It's a strange book, compelling and exhausting in equal measure. It isn't especially long, under 250 pages in both French and English, nor hard to read—Ernaux's trademark style is plain and dispassionate. But the density of detail and the way it is structured make it an immersive read: I found I had to stop frequently to come up for air.

This effect of submersion is intentional, as we'll see. The book is not a history of France since 1940: it makes no effort to offer a detached perspective on, or explanatory model for the past, and the narrative never, or nearly never, steps outside the course of events. Nor is the book an autobiography, although it is in a sense extrapolated from Ernaux's personal experience. It presents itself as a collective biography of the generation, especially the women, born in and around the war years, but unlike most biographies it provides no explanation nor imposes a coherent narrative, because that is not Ernaux's purpose. Instead she is interested in capturing what it felt like to live through these times, with no knowledge of the future, and with the past—collective and individual—gradually slipping out of consciousness.

Times were changing, from the poverty of the immediate postwar period to the social liberation and consumer revolution of the 1960s and into our digital new century. Ernaux doesn't ignore politics, but she suggests that the accumulation of material goods ultimately neutralized any pressure for more radical political change, as she traces the diminishing returns of May 1968 through to François Mitterrand's rapid abandonment of a left-wing programme soon after his election in 1981. "Progress was the bright horizon of every existence," (p38) she writes of the postwar years, but by the 1960s "The profusion of things concealed the scarcity of ideas and the erosion of beliefs." (p85). As much as she comments on this, Ernaux deliberately reproduces it, the names of consumer brands, pop songs, or media intellectuals pouring by as part of the torrent: the determinedly conventional evocation of the material (or rather, materialist) culture of her generation was surely part of the book's appeal to a French audience.

As a *source* for French history the book is extremely rich, not least because of Ernaux's near-total refusal of hindsight. She successfully simulates ignorance of the future. The pill, legal abortion, the relaxation of social attitudes to unmarried mothers all appear in their time, but the young women of the late 1950s are not to know this as they nervously check their underwear for an overdue period. The past is present in a different way, as something shaping, structuring, but alluded to more than analyzed: the second world war, say, slowly dropping out of ordinary conversation as the events recede further into the past. By the late 1960s, "In the mouths of the middle-aged, allusions to the war"—once the markers of a whole community's shared experience—"shrank down to personal anecdotes, full of misplaced vanity, which to the young sounded like drivel. There were commemorative speeches and wreaths for all that, we felt." (p90). Although at one point she says that "Of all the ways in which self-knowledge may be fostered, perhaps one of the greatest is a person's ability to discern how they view the past, at every time of life and every age," (p72) Ernaux is more interested in evoking a sense of how the present felt as it happened: at the end of the book she describes making plans for its composition, "in an unremitting continuous tense, absolute, devouring the present as it goes." (pp228-9)

The multilayered detail of the narration, and its deadpan lucidity, will make the book a valuable source for future historians, and offer plenty of possibilities for teachers looking for extracts to use in class. But it is not really as a primary source that I'm interested in the book here. Instead I would like to think about how it is written, as an exercise in what historians can learn from other genres: how they might help us write aspects of the past that straightforward historical narrative might struggle to capture, pin down, or—to use less constraining metaphors—summon up or evoke.

One choice that Ernaux makes, crucial to her approach, is difficult to translate: the choice of pronoun by which she constructs her collective subject, but also creates distinctions within that collective. "There is no 'I' in what she views as a sort of impersonal autobiography," she says at the end, explaining the neutral stance she aims for, "There is only 'one' and 'we'." (p229). Usually the pronoun is the impersonal *on* that is so common and so flexible in French, nothing like the stiff and pompous

'one' that is its closest literal translation in English. The French *on* covers that range of meaning ("one would hope that..."), but can also be much less formal—unlike English "one" it is widely used colloquially—and it can refer to a group of which the speaker either is or is not a member: "et si on allait voir un film?" How about going to the movies; "On dit que...," they say that. (In the passage about self-knowledge above, the original uses *on*, while the English version uses "a person" and "they.") Sometimes the closest translation is the passive voice.¹

This flexible but also slightly slippery pronoun allows Ernaux to make the subject of her narrative more or less specific, and herself more or less a part of it, from paragraph to paragraph and even from line to line. At family occasions in the late 1940s, "they" (*ils*), unspecified adult family members, reminisce about the war; but meanwhile, "we" (*on*) were growing up in peacetime, starting school. "We lived in a scarcity of everything," or again, a little later, "We lived in close proximity to shit. It made us laugh." (pp34-35)

But *on* doesn't have to include the speaker, and there are times when Ernaux distances herself from the collective, or specifies another group within it: "Under Giscard d'Estaing we [*on*] would live in an "advanced liberal society". Nothing was political or social anymore. It was simply modern or not... People confused "liberal" with "free," and believed that the society so named would be the one to grant them the greatest possible number of rights and of objects." (p117) At times, though relatively rarely, Ernaux uses "people" in this way; at times she uses the more emphatic and specific "we," *nous*, to stress a more specific—and less dispassionate—group: "We, who had undergone kitchen-table abortions, who had divorced and believed that our struggle to free ourselves would be of use to others, were now overwhelmed by fatigue. We know longer knew if the women's revolution had really happened."(p165)

Meanwhile, abstract and concrete nouns become the subjects of the transformations of which this generation is the object:

The Free Market was natural law, modernity, intelligence; it would save the world. (p139)

The *banlieue* loomed large in the popular imagination in the shadowy form of concrete blocks and muddy vacant lots at the northern end of the bus routes and RER lines. Urine-soaked stairwells, shattered windows, broken-down elevators, and syringes in the cellars. (p140)

On the outskirts of cities, covered markets and gigantic warehouses, open on Sundays, flogged shoes, tools, and home furnishings by the thousands.

¹ In the English edition, the thoughtful translator's note by Alison L. Strayer discusses this issue (p234). I drafted this essay after reading the book in the original French: the English translation was released in the UK a few weeks later. All quotations are taken from Strayer's excellent version: Annie Ernaux, tr. Alison L. Strayer, *The Years* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2017).

Hypermarkets expanded, shopping carts were replaced by others so big that one could scarcely touch the bottom, short of leaning all the way over. (p141)

Only rarely does Ernaux use the first person singular, *je*. But she does appear in the book, not just by allusion ('We, who had undergone kitchen-table abortions') but directly, in recurrent scenes that focus on photographs or film footage of a girl, then a woman, at different stages in her life: at the lycée in Rouen, on holiday with a husband and two sons, as a long-divorced grandmother with a granddaughter on her lap. Describing this woman—herself—in the third person, Ernaux reflects on the experience of an individual over time without extracting herself from the collective subject of the narrative. It's a device of simultaneous alienation and rapprochement, which also allows Ernaux to present, as part of the collective experience, her individual efforts to live, and to write, as a woman: to make time for writing among the household chores of a young (and working) married mother; to enjoy, in late middle age and long after her divorce, an affair with a much younger man. The picture with her granddaughter contains a subtle comment on literary filiation. Ernaux names two authors whose books appear on the shelves in the background, one male and one female: Cesare Pavese, a noted misogynist, and Elfriede Jelinek, a childless Nobel Prize-winner.²

If these moments captured on film permit Ernaux to draw out her individual experiences within the collective subject, another recurrent scene, of a family gathering, does something similar at the level of that smaller collectivity, the family. These scenes track the changing times through conversation, sometimes explicitly (adult talk in the 1940s and 50s always comes back to the war; by the 1960s and 1970s the subject is fading away, by the 1980s and 90s it is gone), and sometimes implicitly (children dying of preventable diseases, still commonplace in the 1940s, becomes unthinkable). More implicitly still, their changing nature reflects the societal shift from the boisterous reunions of the extended working-class family, cousins, aunts, and uncles, to the smaller-scale "modern" bourgeois nuclear family (parents, children, a grandparent) or post-nuclear family (a divorced grandmother, adult sons and their partners, a grandchild). The narrative's perspective on these gatherings shifts, too, from that of the children, listening to conversations that go over their heads, to that of the adolescents who are included in conversation but also patronized by it, and eventually to that of the adult responsible for hosting the event, and satisfied, despite a few worries, to have "been a good hostess." (p221)

These recurrent scenes give the book its rhythm and structure—things not provided by chapters, because there aren't any. The book opens with a nine-page sequence of brief snapshots, random thoughts and memories of the sort that might pass through your mind in an idle moment, introduced by the lapidary words "All the images will disappear." (p7) The final two pages end on something similar. Here, a passage describes the writer's changing ambitions over her lifetime, from hoping "to find an unknown language that would unveil mysterious things" to simply wishing to "capture the light that suffuses faces that can no longer be seen." It then breaks

² I would like to thank Ann-Christin Wagner for this observation, and for many other insightful comments on the book.

down into a set of things once glimpsed that she now wants to save, "a bar and a juke-box that played *Apache* at Tally Ho Corner, Finchley... the dazzling sun on the walls of San Michele Cemetery from the shadow of the Fondamente Nuove": to "Save something from the time where we will never be again." (pp230-1) Otherwise, though, the book is one long and even text, broken up only into unmarked paragraphs ranging in length from a sentence to a few paragraphs: a catalogue of discrete insights into the life of a nation over 65 years.

This structure is what gives the book its riverine "pull," and the reader the sense of being caught up and carried along (or even sucked under). It's a carefully managed literary technique: Strayer notes that "As in all Ernaux's books, it is worthwhile to pay attention to the spacing between sections. There is method in it." As used here, it reproduces both the unspooling of an inner monologue and the experience of being alive itself: no wonder the reader sometimes has to gasp for air. This is the opposite of what historical writing tries to do: structure, analyze, clarify the past. But historians relatively rarely discuss the literary choices they make in structuring their writing. Thinking about how Ernaux produces her effects through structure is an invitation to think about how we produce ours, just as reflecting on the nature of Ernaux's collective narration is a chance to think about who or what we make the subject of our narratives, and how.

Something similar is true of the larger cultural and political framework for the book, which remains resolutely national and French. Ernaux may have spent time as an au pair in London in the 1950s, but there is no evidence of this leaving any trace beyond the memory of *Apache* playing on a Finchley juke-box: no references to any lasting friendships, or any ongoing interest in or knowledge of British life.³ (To be sure, it would have been difficult to incorporate any detail of this kind without breaking the collective narrative.) This personal experience, like everything else in the book, is offered as representative, and from my own experience of talking to French people of Ernaux's generation I'm sure that it is. The family holidays of the 1960s and 70s, or later journeys in the 80s and 90s, show the expansion of middle class leisure travel and, implicitly, the growing freedom of movement within Europe—but these foreign trips are made as a French tourist. Nothing suggests that the European project has created a meaningful sense of belonging beyond the nation-state: it is barely mentioned. Similarly, when international affairs touch on the collective conscience they are read through a national lens, notwithstanding the vague sense of belonging to a capitalist democratic "West" during the Cold War. I mention these things not to point out the limitations of Ernaux's vision—it is quite possible that these are deliberate, conscious choices, like so much else in the book's fabric and texture—but because they accurately reflect the experience of this generation. The framework for a long and active life, in its intimate privacy and in its public engagements, was that of the nation-state. Whether this is the case for later generations, simultaneously more globalized and more Europeanized, and living in an age of attenuated but sharper-edged nation-states, remains to be seen. In the meantime, reading Ernaux

³ Ernaux also misremembers the name of Tally Ho Corner, silently corrected by the translator from the original's "Telly O Corner".

allows us as historians to register the shaping role of the nation-state in forging the geology of the mental landscape, in a book that is only occasionally concerned with national politics, and not at all with the structures and actions of the state.

(Elections, more or less reduced to the personalities of the candidates, are simply one more periodically recurring event to add to the book's underlying sense of rhythm.) But we can also question the nation-state's dominance and ask what it obscures—like the international and increasingly global supply chains and markets underpinning the emergence of the 'consumer society' that Ernaux captures so precisely.

Or like the place of empire in France's history since 1940. This features in Ernaux's narrative, but peripherally. Imperial events punctuate the early years: the defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the onset of the 'events' in Algeria. They register, but without the close personal significance of either the second world war or the social transformations of the *trentes glorieuses*. They remain off-stage, though for men of Ernaux's generation military service meant Algeria: these were the men who, like the conscripts in René Vautier's 1972 film, turned twenty in the Aurès mountains.⁴ And the children of colonial and postcolonial migrations, too, remain off-stage. As Ernaux traces her generation's trajectory from poverty to prosperity, from village to provincial town to a commuter suburb of Paris, from working-class precarity to a secure white-collar career in the public sector (though never to the true center, Paris itself), she hints at other trajectories: from former colony to metropolitan banlieue, from *indigène* to *indigène de la République*. Those on this trajectory remain peripheral in French politics and public discourse, even if they are a primary focus for the actions of the state's coercive forces and a constitutive "other" in political speech. They figure in Ernaux's narrative like clouds on the horizon, a source of unease as well as guilt for the now comfortably bourgeois *Français-de-souche* left wing.

Ernaux captures this discomfort so well that it is, once again, probably a deliberate and diagnostic choice, not an unconscious marker of the limits of her vision. But one key episode in the transition from colonial past to postcolonial present prompts the only break in the infinite present of her narrative. The only point in the entire book where the authorial voice interrupts itself with an observation based on hindsight—the only occasion where the narrative departs from the perspective of what we knew *then*—follows a paragraph discussing the tail end of the Algerian war, and its implications in the metropole:

the immigrant worker, when he passed a French man or woman, knew more quickly and clearly than they that he bore the face of the enemy. That "Arabs" lived in slums, labored on assembly lines or at the bottom of pits, their October demonstration outlawed, then suppressed with the most extreme violence, and maybe even (that is, had we been aware of it) that a

⁴ Michael Vann discussed *Avoir vingt ans dans les Aurès*, along with Laurent Herbiet's *Mon colonel* (1982) in an essay for FFFH: <https://h-france.net/fffh/maybe-missed/the-dark-side-french-men-becoming-monsters-in-algeria/>

hundred of them had been thrown into the Seine, seemed in the nature of things. (p74)

And then, in parentheses in the English but in very awkward looking *square* brackets in the original:

Later, when we learned what had happened on October 17, 1961, we would be unable to say what we had *known* at the time... We felt the unease of *not having known*, though the State and the press had done everything to keep us in the dark, as if there were no making up for past ignorance and silence. (p74)

In a book so firmly committed to reconstructing the experience of the past as it felt at the time, and to a perspective that ostensibly rejects the benefit of hindsight, this interruption feels like more than a one-off structural glitch—still more so, coming as it does only a page or two after the author has explicitly stated that "Of all the ways in which self-knowledge may be fostered, perhaps one of the greatest is a person's—or, we might add, a society's ability to discern how they view the past, at every time of life and every age." *The Years* is a fertile source for historians of modern France, and it raises all sorts of questions for any historian about how, and in whose name, our discipline narrates the past. But historians will ask their own questions of the book, and what to make of this uneasy break with its own rigorous methods is one of them.