



## “I am She who does not speak about herself”: Annie Ernaux’s Impersonal Autobiography *The Years*

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### ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

Through the example of Annie Ernaux’s *The Years* (2008), this article examines how contemporary autobiographies question narratives told from a first-person viewpoint, associating the first-person pronoun with a certain philosophy of the subject. Making use of her knowledge in social sciences, Annie Ernaux favours a mode of remembering that is collective rather than individual, material rather than spiritual. As she foregrounds events and images of the past, and opts for a different system of pronouns, Ernaux advocates a new form of material life writing that resists egocentrism. But the absence of a personal narrative means that the narrator’s memories still fall prey to the capitalist production system that denies the body while technology takes over the past, eliminating the subject as the owner of her memories.

### RÉSUMÉ EN FRANÇAIS

Cet article étudie l’usage ou le non usage du pronom de la première personne dans les autobiographies contemporaines à travers l’exemple du récit *Les années* d’Annie Ernaux, publié en 2008, qui se veut une autobiographie impersonnelle, collective et matérielle. Comme d’autres écrivains avant elle, Ernaux associe le système des pronoms à une philosophie de la personne fondée sur l’intériorité et l’égotisme. Se voulant à contre courant de cette philosophie, la subjectivité narrative des *Années* évolue au rythme d’un «on» qui se confond avec l’évolution et l’incessant renouvellement des objets dans l’économie capitaliste. C’est

donc une vision nihiliste du temps et de la mémoire qui s'y développe à travers laquelle le sujet renonce à la possession de ses propres souvenirs.

**Keywords:** first-person pronoun, collective memory, anti-autobiography

The notion of autobiography as a product of a deeply personal, interior, and reflexive self still informs our thinking, as theorists and social scientists have argued (Taylor 1989). For some, modern autobiography is tantamount to modern identity (Giddens 1991). Hence the process of remembering the past is closely linked to that of the person who remembers. But this connection may overshadow the vividness and accuracy of our images of the past. Wouldn't memories be more truthful if they were not coloured by self-perception? Is it possible to remember without making the self the focus of all the attention?

Women's autobiographies have tried to move away from the model of the unique self, drawing on a tradition of a female self whose identity is formed in relation to others. Starting with Mary Mason's influential essay "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers" (1980), a number of feminist critics have dismissed the notion of an autonomous self, stressing what female identities owe to others.<sup>1</sup> Today, the concept of relationality has been identified as one of the main theoretical forces in autobiographical criticism (Smith and Watson 2010), informing men's and women's life writing alike (Eakin 1999).

Since the publication of her father's autobiography *La place* in 1980, French writer Annie Ernaux has written extensively about others' lives, from her parents to ordinary people around her. Drawing on her experience of class transfer as well as her reading in social science, she has politicized life writing, questioning the representation of dominated people. For Ernaux, relational life writing requires a specific language to express it, and a departure from the narrowness of the individual point of view. She finds that literary writing often embellishes and distorts memory, therefore increasingly relies on archival modes such as photographs to capture the past. Her autobiography *Les années* (*The Years*) published in 2008, offers a radical alternative to the personal, inner-centred and reflexive autobiographical discourse. Ernaux's project is to achieve an "impersonal" autobiography focusing on historical events and images of the past as they arise in the subject. Writing an impersonal autobiography implies changing the dominant language of autobiography, especially its system of pronouns: the first-person pronoun "I" is replaced by the impersonal pronoun "one" or the third person "she." The new phrase

“impersonal autobiography,” however, does not only imply “not speaking about oneself.” It is a change of focus, a way for the narrator to stress the material nature of memories and endow them with a wider social and historical dimension. But the radicalism of this approach seems to lead to a vision of the world where human agents are devoid of any control, as they are perceived as being increasingly surrounded by merchandise and manipulated by technology. Looking at the myth of the self and its relationship to personal pronouns, this paper explains how Ernaux’s practice gives a new meaning to “impersonal” and portrays a new subjectivity no longer constituted by self-narration. While her works belong to a certain tradition of life writing, one that resists egocentrism, she also links life writing to a new form of material history at the cost of eliminating the opposition between subject and object.

Questioning autobiography as a literary genre and a mode of remembering has now become part of its rhetoric and has been taken into account in the critique itself. Jacques Lecarme has identified eight sources of hostility to the autobiographical genre.<sup>2</sup> One of them comes from the writers themselves who are often the first to condemn the genre while practicing it. This hostility may take various forms, from a rejection of the word “autobiography” to the testing of generic limits, such as the blurring of the line between fact and fiction in the autofiction trend and the disappearance of linear narratives. Nathalie Sarraute, for example, declared that she didn’t like the word “autobiography.”<sup>3</sup> Women writers especially have reluctantly embraced what they perceive as an ego-centred genre and have tended to choose the memoir form to tell their stories. Scholars Julie Rak or Helen Buss have shown that memoirs, whose origins precede autobiography, offer greater inclusiveness: they focus on the external world and the Others, and less on the intimate details of the writer’s life.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in her essay *Autogynography*, Germaine Brée, analysing the autobiographies of Sarraute, Duras and Kristeva, argues that women have contributed to producing new forms of life-stories, less centred on the self.

Most objections to the genre hinge on a conception of the self based on a certain philosophy of the subject: the phenomenological subject or the Cartesian ego that has become a model for the autobiographical self. This philosophy of the subject has its root in an ontological dualism between first and third person: a being may exist as a third person (seen from the outside, objectified), or as a first with access to the inner part of subjectivity. As Vincent Descombes points out, “the philosophy of the subject premises that the linguistic use of the first person is founded on the individual’s access ‘as a first person’ to their existence, or at least to the ‘subjective’ part of themselves” (232). This philosophy assumes that we

need the first person to have direct access to thoughts and feelings, which implies that there is a "self" anterior to language that the "I" symbolizes. As Gertrude Stein wrote in *Everybody's autobiography*, "I am I because my little dog knows me. But was I I when there was no written word inside me" (88). Emile Benveniste's linguistic theory on personal pronouns has reinforced this ontological dualism. For Benveniste, there is a major difference between first and second person pronouns and the third, which he calls a "non-person," in discourse. The difference is explained in terms of reference. The "I" is used to identify the person who is speaking while the third person is only an object of discourse.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the question of pronouns in life writing is not purely rhetorical. The narrative of one's life has been for a large part understood and practiced as a first-person story, and by implication as an inner self tale. Autobiography's association with the first-person pronoun singular is very entrenched: even memoirs still use it. Hence writers looking for alternatives to this discourse have for a large part focused on resisting "I" as a mode of enunciation and as a symbol of our interiority. The use of the first-person pronoun has been under attack ever since the seventeenth century when Pascal forbade the use of "I" on moral grounds. Later, Joseph Addison imported the term "egotism" from French into English in a 1714 *Spectator* essay warning against "the obtrusive or too frequent use of the pronoun of the first person singular."<sup>6</sup> A survey of modern literature demonstrates that the stigma attached to the use of the first person singular still hangs over writers. Alain Robbe-Grillet, who made his mark as an experimental writer and theorist of the "new novel" in the 1960s, confesses at the start of his 1984 autobiography *Le miroir qui revient* (*Ghosts in the Mirror*): "I have never spoken about anything but myself. As it was from the inside, however, no one really noticed. Fortunately, because with these two sentences, I have just used three dubious, shameful and deplorable words that I have largely helped to discredit and that will suffice to have me condemned by several of my peers and most of my descendants: 'myself' 'inside' and 'spoken about'"(10).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, James Olney (1998) shows that Beckett also distrusted the first-person pronoun, even writing a short play entitled *Not I* in which the only speaking character Mouth refuses to abandon the third person to tell her story (229–230). More than any mode of enunciation, the modern "I" symbolizes reflexivity and interiority, something to be avoided to attain a sense of the plurality and fluidity of selves.

In his half-biographical and half-theoretical autobiography, Roland Barthes dramatizes the system of pronouns while confirming that it is the key to postmodern autobiographical rhetoric. For Barthes, who dreams of a style of writing with no voice and no origins, the subject is

always elsewhere. But discourse forces us to choose pronouns that lead us to a kind of psychotic dance of subject positions from which it is hard to escape:

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The so-called personal pronouns: everything happens here, I am forever enclosed within the pronominal lists: “I” mobilize the image-repertoire, “you” and “he” mobilize paranoia. But also, fugitively, according to the reader, like the reflections of a watered silk, can be reversed: in “myself, I,” the “I” might not be “me,” the “me” he so ostentatiously puts down; I can say to myself “you” as Sade did, in order to detach within myself the worker, the fabricator, the producer of writing, from the subject of the work (the Author); on the other hand, not to speak of oneself can mean: I am He who does not speak about himself; and to speak about oneself by saying “he” can mean: I am speaking about myself as though I were more or less dead, caught up in a faint mist of paranoiac rhetoric, or again: I am speaking about myself in the manner of the Brechtian actor who must distance his character (168).

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Bridging the gap between psychoanalysis and linguistics, Barthes considers a work of art as having multiple subjects. The mad dynamism of pronouns produces numerous centres of enunciation, giving the text its fundamental heterogeneity while freeing the subject from predetermined positions. Barthes fully acknowledges that pronominal positions are interchangeable in discourse and that the “I” refers to more than one self. Following Benveniste, whom he greatly admired, Barthes also assumes that the third-person pronoun holds the position of the dead person in the discourse.

Some theorists, however, have objected that the ontological opposition between first and third person is overemphasized. They claim that the third person is not more impersonal, in the sense of not being a person, than the first. On a linguistic level, pronouns are not autonomous substances or modes of being but positions in an act of speech and are interchangeable. Using the system of quotations, the third person can speak as a first. In his essay “Individu et identité personnelle,” Paul Ricœur argues that “I” and “you” do not hold a privileged status in language. In fact, he says, all the personal pronouns can answer the question “Who”, and “self” can be used as a reflexive with all the pronouns. On a purely linguistic level, the opposition of first and third person makes no sense. Furthermore, most novels use he/she to refer to heroes and heroines, and they can hardly be called “non persons” (65) as in Benveniste’s terms. There is no opposition, whether linguistic or ontological, between pronouns. They are only modes of reference in discourse. The distrust for the first-person personal pronoun may not have any linguistic base. In this context, can

the removal of the first person suffice in radically transforming autobiographical subjectivity?

The question of pronouns also lies at the heart of Ernaux's collective autobiography, *Les années*. To change the focus of life writing to what lies outside ourselves and to give some solidity and objectivity to our memories, autobiography, she claims, must be impersonal. Associating the first person with an inward gaze, Ernaux believes that by removing the *I* from her narrative she can stop referring to an inward self whose thoughts and feelings dominate any perspective on the world in order to focus the process of remembering on what matters, the world and its objects. As Germaine Brée writes, "We have been so obsessed by the problem of the persona or self in the text that we have bypassed the question of memory and its complex layerings; so obsessed with life as story that we have tended to overlook the question of the world, the space we inhabit" (227). Ernaux precisely intends to foreground the question of the world and memory by offering a completely impersonal autobiography in the full sense of the adjective. But are narratives centred on the self and those centred on the world mutually exclusive?

Annie Ernaux, who has defined her own writing as "in-between" the discourses of literature, sociology and history, has consistently transgressed genres throughout her works. They have sometimes received a controversial reception despite Ernaux's winning a major literary prize in 1987. Moreover, up to the beginning of the twenty-first century, French academia demonstrated little interest in an author who wrote chiefly about her class origins and female identity, whereas British and American feminist criticism was attracted to those very aspects, as well as the marginal status they conferred on Ernaux, which the author entertained. But since the end of the 1990s, the increasing number of studies on autobiography have renewed interest in an author who, by importing the scientific approach of social sciences, has considerably marked the genre in France. Fabrice Thumerel (2004) points out that "Annie Ernaux is indeed the only contemporary French writer, and one of the rarest since Zola, whose work is informed by social sciences to such an extent."<sup>8</sup> A number of books on Ernaux have now been published both in French and English.<sup>9</sup> More than any of her other works in her output, *Les années* has had consensual reception and established Ernaux as a major French writer. In 2012, one of the famous "Colloques de Cerisy" (Cerisy Conferences)—a series of seminars which constitute an important reference in the recent history of French intellectual life, and which focus exclusively on major writers or thinkers and on new literary or philosophical ideas—was devoted to Annie Ernaux.<sup>10</sup>

*Les années* is the product of extensive research and thinking on life writing. This unusual autobiography expands on previous works devoted to

observing the contemporary world. In 1993, Ernaux published *Journal du dehors*, a diary of the outside world in which, instead of making herself the object of tiny daily observations, she transposed them to her surroundings. A similar diary, *La vie extérieure*, was also published in 2000. In 2008, the publication of her autobiography represents a vaster historical project, covering the postwar years to today. *Les années* represents yet another radical attempt to thwart cultural tendencies towards individualism. Her intention is to account for her life in a way that would make it appear as part of the world around her, blending her own personal time within the rhythm of her generation, and History.

Turning against the tradition of the inner gaze, whether psychological, psychoanalytical or religious, *Les années* portrays the development of a woman within her generation and the culture she traversed. The narrative alternates between accounts of linguistic idioms characterizing a year or a generation, popular songs, advertising, new objects, political and social events, and the precise description of the narrator and her family through photographs. She thus explores love, the family, politics, and consumption trends. The older narrator is always distanced; she maintains the objectivity of a social scientist, blending all events with the French imperfect tense, and establishing no hierarchy between them. Single events are treated in an iterative way, in the manner of Proust, such as when she recounts family meals. She also opts for discontinuous fragments rather than a chronologically or logically organized narrative, to circumvent the ideological effects implied in the emplotment of individual or collective events: any narrative order, with the selection and omission of events it implies, entails judgment and assessment. Instead she wants the narrative to “glide,” as she says, to retain as closely as possible a sense of the flow of time, her ultimate goal (240). And although the text follows a loose chronological order with occasional flashbacks, the general orientation from the past to the present is not dependent on a timeline.

Remaining “impersonal” is the key word in this account, and the search for impersonality starts with the grammatical pronouns, which serve as ontology, rhetoric and politics. “Impersonal autobiography” is the phrase she uses to characterize the undertaking of *Les années* after trying respectively the terms “objective autobiography” and “empty autobiography,” as entries from her writing diary, *L'atelier noir*, testify.<sup>11</sup> Towards the end of *Les années*, the narrator writes: “No ‘I’ in what she considers as a kind of impersonal autobiography, but “one” and “we”, as if it was her turn to narrate the days past” (204).<sup>12</sup> The narrator keeps “autobiography” for want of a better word, thus remaining within the framework of the genre and its horizon of expectation, assuming the reader will draw a link between the author, the narrator, and the events related. The yoking together of



“impersonal” and “autobiography” creates a paradox, whether we understand “impersonal” in the grammatical sense of referring to action with no subject, or the philosophical one, as something that does not constitute a person, for autobiography is usually understood to be a very personal mode of writing.

One of the keys to the impersonality effect Ernaux strives for rests on the use of personal pronouns. Her obsession with pronouns dates back from the origins of her project, in the 1980s and 1990s, as numerous entries from *L'atelier noir* attest. Since the publication of *La Place*, Ernaux has also claimed that the “I” she used was an “impersonal I,” carrying the words of another rather than hers.<sup>13</sup> To write *Les années*, Ernaux hesitated between first and third person, a concern she shares with a number of contemporary writers. In *L'Amant*, Marguerite Duras uses alternatively “I” and “she”. Yet, *Les années* remains an autodiegetic narrative: the third person has primarily a distancing effect. Ernaux comments on her family photos using “she” to maintain an objective distance. Used interchangeably, the first and third-person pronouns participate in a certain autobiographical rhetoric, like figures of speech. “The third person in autobiography,” Philippe Lejeune suggests, “is more often used for internal distancing and for expressing personal confrontation. [It] brings both relief and tension to the text” (36). For Philippe Lejeune, the third-person pronoun reveals a division of identity usually masked by the unity of the “I” (for example, between the old and the young).

In *Les années*, however, the use of the third-person pronoun is made more complex and singular, for it alternates with the first-person plural pronoun “we” and the indefinite pronoun “one” while the “I” seems to disappear. There is hardly any “I” in the narrative although critics have argued that “I” may be included in the first-person plural “we,” so “I” would be diluted in “we.” Commenting on the use of personal pronouns in *Les années*, Emmanuel Bouju notes that the “I” is not so much absent, as it is used reluctantly. For Vincent Descombes, however, the pronoun “we” does not refer to several first persons; rather, it signifies several individuals making one single subject (195). The singularity of the first person is gone in it. The use of the French indefinite pronoun “on” (one) is even more unusual. If the third person pronoun in autobiographies has already been practiced by a number of writers “on” is rarely practised as a personal pronoun. Formally used for generic sentences, the indefinite “on” is the most neutral and anonymous of French pronouns. Today, it tends to replace “we” in French, but it retains some of its impersonality so the collective is tuned down. “On” (one) and “nous” (we) are already used in Ernaux's biography of her father, *La Place* (1983) to move beyond “individualism” and “personal experience,” as Gharavi and



Moeini (2013) note. In *Les années*, not only “on” is a substitute for “we”, but also for “I”; “I” has become “on”, a remote, genderless even more distanced voice than “she.” Ernaux also employs the formula “nous, on” (we),<sup>14</sup> which for a long time was thought to be agrammatical, even incorrect. Ultimately, personal pronouns seem to become a nuisance as they confront the writer with unsatisfactory choices. In her writing diary, like Barthes and Beckett, Ernaux dreamt of a new kind of enunciation made of verbless sentences, in which speech could not be attributed to anyone.

But Ernaux’s uses of personal pronouns go beyond simple rhetorical effects. Hers is also a politics of pronouns as they are closely linked to her vision of the social world and of her place within it. In *L’atelier noir*, the project of writing an autobiography is discussed at length and linked to the author’s class position: “I tell myself only I can undertake this, the story of a woman, habitus, and ideologies because I am a spectator of myself due to social rupture” (122).<sup>15</sup> This social rupture, which creates a division of the self, enables self-observation and sociological self-analysis. Ernaux’s biographical trajectory is one of class transfer through education, which separated her from her parents’ social class. She was born in 1940, a single child in a family of shopkeepers in Yvetot, Normandy. The small house where she grew up contained no bathroom; a fact which she knew revealed to her peers her inferior social rank. She was raised in an uptight after-war society with few comforts and ruled by a rigid moral code. By marrying and becoming a teacher, she moved away from her original social class, a transfer she remained keenly aware of throughout her life. Ernaux experienced moving to the intellectual middle-class as a kind of betrayal of her family and class. She has remained very attentive to class gaps all through her life. She made it the subject of her books, and created a poetics, “l’écriture plate” (simple writing) to deal with this rupture on a stylistic level. So switching pronouns in *Les années* is also a cultural and political move. “Nous, on” belongs to the language of dominated classes, the ones who are not entitled to speak and to whom Ernaux’s parents belonged. The phrase “Nous on” enables her to retain some of the language of her origins.

As references to the word *habitus* suggest, this vision owes a lot to the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, whom Annie Ernaux felt closeness to, almost kinship. In an article written after his death, she declared that Bourdieu changed her outlook on the world.<sup>16</sup> The narrative of *Les années* makes implicit and explicit references to his works, for his approach had both an existential and an epistemological effect on her. Not only did Bourdieu’s work on class distinction, the self-perpetuation of elites, and the principle of domination throw an illuminating light on Ernaux’s life, but the trauma of class transfer (the word “déchirure” in French suggests

pain) also enabled Ernaux to objectify her position in the social world, thus meeting the prerequisites necessary for the sociological analysis that Bourdieu established in *The Craft of Sociology*. Class transfer confers legitimacy to her account as she can analyse her class of origins both from the inside and the outside. She even made up the word “autosociobiographie” to characterize what she was trying to achieve. Hence the notion of *habitus* is central to her autobiographical projects as it implies both individual agency and social structure. It is reflected in the system of personal pronouns in *Les années* where the “I” no longer predominates but is included in a social “we” or “one.” In *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), Bourdieu defines *habitus* as “an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted” (95). *Habitus* derives from our past, family upbringing and education, but shapes our present dispositions. It is both structured and structuring as it informs our practices and behaviour and is so ingrained that we are not aware of it. Thus, our consuming tastes are marked by our class habitus. “Young middle-class couples bought distinction with a Hellem coffee machine” (90), writes Ernaux. Bourdieu also insisted on the material embodiment of habitus, which Ernaux applies to photos of herself and her family. Instead of focusing on what’s unique about herself, she describes different bodily shapes and social positions (240). Thus, she acknowledges individuality but not singularity, and shows how the outer and the inner selves shape each other.

Ernaux, however, does not want to replace literature with sociology. Rather, sociology can bring new knowledge to literature, and especially transform life writing. While other social scientists eagerly embraced life writing as a new form of knowledge on the social world, Bourdieu (1986) denounced what he called the “biographical illusion”, that is, attempts to recreate certain coherence in an individual’s life history (69). In Bourdieu’s view, the individual is first an agent, a producer of acts, so the history of the individual can be completely accounted for by its class, education and *habitus*: “Since the history of the individual is never anything other than a certain specification of the collective history of his class or group, each individual system of dispositions may be seen as a structural variant of all other group or class habitus, expressing the difference between the trajectories inside and outside the class” (86). Unlike Bourdieu, Ernaux believes in a life writing practice that will include foregrounding class and education.

Ernaux’s practice of fragmented narrative with a shift in pronouns may also be interpreted as a desire to escape from the “biographical illusion.” If she chooses “we” instead of “I”, it is because she believes in collective rather than individual remembering, while “nous, on” also represents

the voice of a silenced class. Although we believe that our memories are unique, autonomous and individual, they are in fact profoundly social in nature. This is what Ernaux learnt from Bourdieu and through him from Maurice Halbwachs (1950), who posited that we could only remember through others, and that individual memory was only a point of view on collective memory. As a result, Ernaux feels it is possible to ascribe her own experience, even the most intimate emotions, to others. As an epigraph to *Journal du dehors*, she chooses a quote from Jean-Jacques Rousseau: "Our self is not entirely in us."<sup>17</sup> *Les années* represents a step further in suppressing the voice of the individual "I". The incipit warns the reader not to expect any expression of subjectivity or inwardness: "From the open mouth nothing will come out. Neither I nor self" (18).

The suppression of the first person and its supposed access to inwardness is also called upon by cultural and historical conditions that contribute to erase individuality at its core, the body. In Ernaux's vision of the contemporary world, the body can no longer mark and inscribe the "I". From the very start, a dark, nihilistic vision of the world seems to prevail in Ernaux's narrative. "Everything seemed oppressive," she notes (226). In the opening lines of the autobiography, negative aphorisms worthy of Emil Cioran abound: "The world lacks faith in a transcendental truth" (19). There is no redemption in ideas, not even feminist: "Having read Simone de Beauvoir only served to verify the curse of having a uterus," she writes (82).

One of the reasons for this pessimism lies in the consumer society, in our desire for objects that resist time, unlike the body, and whose growing abundance reduces human life to insignificance. Born in 1940, Ernaux experienced both postwar scarcity and the birth and development of the consumer society. Commenting on patterns of consumption, she rejects both the myth of Western progress and its counter-model, the lost paradise. After the war, life was restricted by scarcity: "Everything was scarce: objects, images, entertainment, explanations of oneself and the world" (39). Later abundance, however, equally limited intellectual and spiritual life: "The profusion of things hid the scarcity of ideas and the weakening of beliefs" (91). Through the poetic device of chaotic enumeration, she lumps together discourses, objects and ideas as if ideas were also part of the capitalist system of production. For Ernaux, there is no transcendence, no higher level of life containing ideas: objects and ideas have the same value. In terms of women's liberation, Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is the equivalent a book on how new appliances can free up women (95). Lofty ideals such as liberty or equality cannot resist the logic of the capitalist system. After May '68, the new era of freedom is short-lived as capitalism takes over the new discourse to make it part of its system: "The May ideals

were transformed into objects and entertainment" (117). Ernaux's analysis of the "age of affluence" reminds us of what Jean Baudrillard wrote in *The Consumer Society* (1970): "There is all around us today a kind of fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance, constituted by the multiplication of objects, services and material goods, and this represents something of a fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species. Strictly speaking, the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous ages, but by objects" (25).

Affluence does not bring more equality or democracy; on the contrary, it creates more class differentiation as people compete for the possession of objects. Ernaux remembers: "We had time to desire things [...]. Possessing them didn't disappoint us; they were offered to the admiration of others" (43). The capitalist market economy is a sign system that functions on seduction, as Baudrillard showed. It can absorb discourses and their opposites so that any anti-capitalist discourse may become part of it. Everything is caught in the semiotic logic of capitalist exchange (308). Instead of performing symbolic acts of consuming which reinforce a group as in traditional societies, the semiotic exchange treats all the signs as equivalent. Baudrillard illustrates it in relation to the mass media, which deals with news items and adverts in the same way, while Ernaux conveys it through the device of chaotic enumeration.

Both Baudrillard and Ernaux insist that consumer modernity and postmodernity have changed our temporalities, with advanced information technologies and globalization even accelerating the process. They both stress the culture of speed inherent to consumer societies imposed on us by the cycle of production. "We live by object time" wrote Baudrillard in 1970, "by this I mean that we live at the pace of objects, live to the rhythm of their ceaseless succession" (25). In 2008, Ernaux made the same point, finding the endless renewal of objects oppressive when opposed to the slower effect of time on the body: "As the wear slowly marked our skin, as it gradually affected our bodies, the world was pouring new objects on us" (220). The slow ageing of the body contrasts with a fast cycle of production. Most importantly, this culture of speed also threatens our ability to remember by erasing the past: "As objects kept on arriving more and more rapidly, the past was receding." As a result, "We lived in an endless present" (223). Finally, there is no more need for people to remember as "the process of remembering and forgetting was taken over by the Media" (224). It is the ultimate alienation for the individual: to be cut off from their own history. So Ernaux shares a widespread tenet in social theory since the 1970s: in our contemporary world, everything is about "speed, excess and waste", as Zygmunt Bauman wrote

in his book *Consuming Life* (85). We live in the tyranny of the moment, which threatens our past and future.

Thus, Ernaux's project of collective memory derives from a historical condition as much as an ideological choice. Only collective memory can bring about a sense of totality of being, and therefore produce a certain satisfaction, when our mode of life based on consuming depletes our memories and condemns us to constant yearning (238). Even the urge to talk about oneself participates in the capitalist economy. Autobiographies are products that we consume. In this context, personal memories are only worth saving if they lead to a more collective form of remembering in which memories are not attributed to a self, but to a broad all-encompassing conscience. Thus, collective memory is also closer to an objective truth, in terms of determining our place in the world when memory is not reflexive. In 1999, Lyn Thomas had already noted that Ernaux's attitude towards memory had evolved a great deal since the writing of her first texts, as she had moved from a total rejection of memory to a limited use of it. *Les années* represents a step further in this evolution; the narrator's memories now derive from individual and collective archives rather than her conscience. Memory is redeemed by archives, as looking inward no longer seems possible.

Ernaux's use of personal pronouns therefore has ontological implications. In the writing diary, *L'atelier noir*, the question of the nature of the "I" resurfaces in relation to the project of writing an autobiography, which suggests a mode of thinking still dependent on the Ego philosophy, even though she rejects some of its premises. Without the "I", the narrator of *Les années* aims at ending the opposition inside/outside that is structuring our modern self, as Charles Taylor has shown. In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor demonstrates that "our modern notion of the self is related to, one might say constituted by, a certain sense (or perhaps a family of senses) of inwardness" (111). By contrast, *Les années* promotes an existential subject that is not separated from the world and does not define itself by its interiority. As the narrator also denies the reflexivity inherent to the modern self, as well as any notions of a proper interiority, what is left is an ambiguous spirituality as a refuge for the subject and its history, as if a mode of "being" rather than "having" could only happen in flitting epiphanies, as a memory of a lost transcendence. Sitting on a beach in Normandy, as she contemplates a Muslim woman walking into the sea with her clothes on, she suddenly has a "biblical" vision and dreams of "resurrecting from time in a shroud of light" (217). She experiences a brief contact with eternity, something that Freud describes as "oceanic feeling:"<sup>18</sup> a sensation of oneness with the external, in which the self no longer feels separated from the outside world. Thus, a religious, almost

Christian subject resurfaces at the margins of the narrative. In particular, the word "sauver," (save) meaning retaining or redeeming in a Christian sense, occurs several times: it is the ending line of the autobiography, the narrator's parting wish: "To save something of the time to which we won't belong anymore" (205). Yet the religious moment is not reflexive. The narrator does not wish to save herself, but to save images of the past. For Ernaux, retaining the past leads to a kind of tentative redemption.

However, does reflexivity, the act of looking inward, necessarily exclude attention to the world? Similarly, does collective memory preclude the possibility of individual memory? These positions have been seen as mutually exclusive. On the one hand, the sociological discourse of collective remembering posits the reality of social phenomena only; on the other hand, phenomenological tradition states that only our consciousness gives meaning to what we perceive. Hence a "paralyzing dilemma," in Paul Ricœur's words, results from this opposition of individual memory to collective memory, which goes against all the philosophical tradition and common experience of remembering (2004: 93). There seems to be two problems: the reflexivity of the self and the act of attribution of memory to someone.

Ricœur (2004) points out that the tradition of the inward gaze is built on the common experience of remembering one's past and on common language. In French, the verb "se souvenir" is reflexive (96). Remembering is always a reflexive process, which does not necessarily exclude the world, for with a person's memories always come those of others and of places. When Ernaux declares to be looking into herself only to find the world, what she reacts against might be an idealized, solipsist subjectivity that excludes everything but conscience. In terms of ascribing memories to someone (who remembers), the different possibilities (I, we, one) are not mutually exclusive: there may be some exchanges between them. Furthermore, when subjects ascribe memories to other people, they can only do it by analogy to their own memories. For Ricœur, therefore, there is no opposition between a collective and an individual form of remembering. Finally, there also exists an intermediate form of memory, which, according to Ricœur, may bridge the gap between the two seemingly opposite discourses: the memory of people close to someone, who can remember a person and tell them where they belong. Paradoxically, although there is no nostalgia for the postwar years as such, Ernaux points briefly to this form of recollection as she evokes her childhood family dinners, where an important ritual of commemoration was performed. Family memory gave her a sense of place, positioning her in a genealogy and social order: "Social narrative and family narrative were similar," she writes, and concludes: "The memory of other people placed us in

the world" (28). This contrasts with the more contemporary dinners with her own sons, when she does not feel the presence of a shared past.

For Ricoeur, too much attention has been paid to the question of "who remembers" whereas "what we remember" should be the first question in discussing the process of memory: "If one does not know what is meant by the experience of memory in the living presence of an image of things past, nor what is meant by seeking out a memory, lost or rediscovered, how can one legitimately ask oneself to whom this experience or this search is to be attributed?" he asks (93). It is to recreate this living experience of remembering that Ernaux's autobiography opens and closes by conjuring up vivid images from the past. This is also the reason why, like a historian, she increasingly relies on archives such as photographs to relate the past. But she denies the attribution of memories to a singular self, and abandons the search for a self in the manner of Proust (239). Hence an experience of remembering that is passive and pathic (in the sense of pathos). The cost of this non-reflexive conscience and the resulting absence of personal memories are high for the subject. Wanting to escape the trap of inwardness, Ernaux ascribes her memory to an impersonal world that relentlessly churns out people, memories and objects, discarding them as soon as they are no longer useful. There is an elegiac, almost nihilistic mood enveloping memories and images toward the end of the narrative.<sup>19</sup> This shows that subjectivity still marks memories whether presented as personal or impersonal.

With its fragmentation and absence of "I", *Les années* is thus a radical example of a material life narrative that both enlarges and narrows down the scope of autobiography. While Ernaux fully participates in the autobiographical turn that has affected modern literature, she also shares with her contemporaries a certain distrust for the genre. The canonical autobiography, with its personal and confessional voice is accused of hiding the social and material nature of our memories behind a coherent narrative. Ernaux's system of personal pronouns reduces the importance of the "I" in an attempt to thwart cultural tendencies towards individualism. In doing so, however, she entrenches the division between individual and collective forms of remembering. Moreover, as collective memory, from songs to historical events is foregrounded in *Les années*, autobiographical subjectivity does not merely become intersubjective; rather, the work presents a dissolved self who has lost its voice and agency. The accumulative form of the narrative, mirroring capitalist modes of production, and the elegiac discourse of the narrator erase identity and agency in the deployment of narration. Remembrance comes in the form of disconnected images and the subject renounces the possibility of owning memories, thus establishing a new form of dereliction.



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## NOTES

- 1 About the tradition of the relational self, see also: Susan Stanford Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice," *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Shari Benstock. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988, 34–62; Nancy K. Miller, "The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir." PMLA 122.2 (March 2007), 537–548; Carolyn Steedman's memoir, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*. London: Virago, 1986.
- 2 In his essay "L'hydre anti-autobiographique," Jacques Lecarme identifies eight sources of hostility to the autobiographical genre, namely the press, school, politics, religion (especially Roman Catholicism), a few thinkers, the French notion of Literature, psychoanalysis and autobiographers. (*L'Autobiographie en procès*. Ed. Philippe Lejeune. Paris: Presses universitaires de Paris Ouest 14 (1997), 19–5.)
- 3 Nathalie Sarraute, quoted in Jacques Lecarme and Éliane Lecarme-Tabone, *L'Autobiographie*, Paris: A. Colin, 1997, 15.
- 4 In *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the memoir is defined as "a record of events, not purporting to be a complete history, but treating of such matters as come with the personal knowledge of the writer" while autobiography, described as "an account of a person's life written by that person," stresses individuality.
- 5 For Benveniste, "I" is one of the hinge points between language, as an abstract Saussurean structure of oppositions, and the discourse as a specific instance of language use.
- 6 "Egotism." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. Print.
- 7 My translation.
- 8 Fabrice Thumerel, "Avant-propos: Annie Ernaux: une œuvre de l'entre-deux" in *Annie Ernaux, une œuvre de l'entre-deux*. (23; my translation).

- 9 Denis Fernandez-Récalata, *Annie Ernaux*. Monaco: Editions du rocher, 1994; Claire-Lise Tondeur, *Annie Ernaux ou l'exil intérieur*, Atlanta & Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996; Lyn Thomas *Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer and her Audience*. Oxford & New York: Berg, 1999; Siobhan MacLavanney, *Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2001; Loraine Day, *Writing Shame and Desire: The Work of Annie Ernaux*. Élise Hugueny-Léger, *Annie Ernaux, une poétique de la transgression*. Peter Lang, 2009.
- 10 The seminar on Ernaux was entitled "Annie Ernaux: Time and Memory," and a number of papers focused on *Les années*.
- 11 *L'atelier noir* (Editions des Busclats, 2011) is Ernaux's writing diary from 1982.
- 12 Annie Ernaux, *Les années*. Paris: Gallimard, 2008. All subsequent quotes will be translations by the author of this essay from this edition.
- 13 Annie Ernaux, "Vers un je transpersonnel," *Autofictions & Cie*, eds. S. Doubrovsky, J. Lecarme, Ph. Lejeune, *Cahiers RITM*, 6, Université de Paris X-Nanterre, 1993.
- 14 In French, «nous, on» functions as an emphasis to the personal pronoun.
- 15 *L'atelier noir*, 21 December 1994.
- 16 Annie Ernaux, "Bourdieu, le chagrin," *Le Monde*, 5 February 2002.
- 17 The complete sentence is: "Our sweetest existence is both relative and collective, and our true self does not reside solely within us," Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Rousseau, juge de Jean-Jacques, in *Oeuvres complètes de J. J. Rousseau: 4: Dialogues*, 1856, p. 71.
- 18 In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930/1957) Freud defines the "oceanic feeling" as a sense of a bond with the whole of the universe and sensations of infinity and eternity in which the self no longer feels separated from the world (14).
- 19 It is worth noting that Baudrillard also wrote a short essay on nihilism in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981).