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TIME TRAVELLING IN ERNAUX'S *MÉMOIRE DE FILLE*

Je ne cherche pas à me souvenir, je cherche à être dans ce box d'un foyer de jeunes filles en train de photographier, y être sans débord en arrière et en avant, juste en cet instant.¹

Ernaux's universally acclaimed *Les Années* was published in 2008, and crowned by three prizes that year; le prix Marguerite Duras, le prix François Mauriac de la Région Aquitaine, and le prix de la langue française. It was quickly followed by *L'Autre fille* (2009), a slim but poignant book about the sister who was born and died before her, and *L'Atelier noir* (2011), another brief but fascinating work comprised of extracts from her 'work' diary. Also in 2011 came another milestone of public recognition: although not an official 'œuvres complètes', *Écrire la vie* was a quarto edition containing twelve out of the sixteen books Ernaux had published at that time, as well as a number of essays and shorter texts. Subsequently, as so often seems to be the case when such a volume is created during the lifetime of an author, Ernaux swiftly brought out two more books: *Retour à Yvetot* (2013) and *Regarde les lumières, mon amour* (2014). These are both short if interesting works of no more than seventy-odd pages each, on the very specific subjects – respectively – of her relationship to the village in which she was raised and the sociology of the *hypermarché*.

By contrast *Mémoire de fille* (2016), Ernaux's most recent book to date, is comparable to *Les Années* in length, scope and autobiographical significance. What is

¹ Annie Ernaux, *Mémoire de fille* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016), p. 82. Henceforth, all references to this volume will occur in the text, preceded by *MF*.

particularly striking about *Mémoire de fille* is the way in which Ernaux is much more explicit – even theoretical – in it about her auto-ethnographical methods and the techniques she employs in order to retrieve certain aspects of the past from extinction, to record and understand a personal experience so that it will not have been ‘vécu pour rien’ (MF, 18). To this end, the metanarrative sections that have always been a characteristic of Ernaux’s writing, certainly since the time of *La Place*, are much more present and substantial in *Mémoire de fille*, and contain longer and more generous discussions of her writing strategies. This heightened self-awareness means that the place of *Mémoire de fille* in Ernaux’s œuvre is reminiscent of the position occupied by *Dora Bruder* in Modiano’s; both are self-consciously books about the act of remembering as much as about the events remembered.

Another similarity between Ernaux and Modiano was noted by Dominique Viart at a conference in Cerisy, where he argued that Ernaux’s turn to ‘microstoria’ from *La honte* (1997) onwards was precisely the same move as Modiano’s in *Dora Bruder*.² I understand ‘microstoria’ in this context as a narrative method of piecing together elements from a range of personal histories in an attempt – an attempt which more or less succeeds in *La honte*, and more or less fails in *Dora Bruder* – to create a composite portrait of a person from the past. In Ernaux’s case, of course, the person is herself, and the generic move is from autobiography to something more like an auto-sociobiography, a multiple portrait of various people including

² Dominique Viart, ‘Annie Ernaux, historicité d’une œuvre’, in Bruno Blanckeman, Francine Dugast-Portes and Francine Best (eds.), *Annie Ernaux: le Temps et la Mémoire* (Paris: Stock, 2014), pp. 27-49 (p. 34). Clearly this statement applies specifically to the context of Ernaux’s self-writing project given that *La Place* and *Une femme*, which both predate *La Honte*, make notable use of such documents in their attempts to reconstruct the personal histories of the author’s father and mother.

herself, as has been noted by a number of critics.³ This composite nature of Ernaux's self-portraits has become more and more marked in recent years, and the canvases on which they occur broader, and occupying multiple media. Philippe Lejeune, describing Ernaux's different autobiographical approaches to her self in 1989 in *Passion simple* and *Se perdre*, claimed the co-existence of the diary and the récit in the public sphere was 'presque comme une "installation" – qui dépasse la notion d'œuvre fermée ou de texte'.⁴ Following on from Lejeune's analysis, Akane Kawakami showed how Ernaux's self-portrait in and of 1989 became even more multifaceted after the publication of *Journal du dehors* and *L'Atelier noir*, arguing that the overall effect might be likened to that of a cubist portrait, or a moving portrait showing the artist at work on her self-portrait at the same time as she is sitting for it; in either case, it leads the reader to question the formal parameters of the autobiographical.⁵

But *Mémoire de fille* is just as experimental, in itself, as the collection of works – *Passion simple*, *Se perdre*, *Journal du dehors* and *L'Atelier noir* – that together formed Ernaux's self-portrait in 1989. In this article I want to show how *Mémoire de fille*, perhaps even more than *Les Années* which has widely been claimed as the apotheosis of her writing

³ See for instance Isabelle Charpentier, "Quelque part entre la littérature, la sociologie et l'histoire...", *L'œuvre auto-sociobiographique d'Annie Ernaux ou les incertitudes d'une posture improbable*, *Contextes* (1), (2006), p. 2.

⁴ 'Entretien d'Annie Ernaux avec Philippe Lejeune', in Fabrice Thumerel (ed.), *Annie Ernaux: une œuvre de l'entre-deux* (Arras: Artois Presses Université, 2004), pp. 253-58 (p. 255).

⁵ Akane Kawakami, "Annie Ernaux, 1989: Diaries, Photographic Writing and Self-Vivisection", *Nottingham French Studies*, 53 (2014), 232-46.

career,⁶ offers a self-reflexive overview of her corpus and methods as well as a startlingly ambitious attempt to retrieve, once again but in a much more direct fashion this time, the multiple selves of her past.

Mémoire de fille starts with not one, but two preface-like parts which form the first of the numerous metanarrative sections in the work. The first consists of just five paragraphs, describing an unnamed relationship between a type of person – ‘il y a des êtres’ – and an ‘Autre’, in which the ‘ils’ are devoted to pleasing the ‘Autre’ until the day the ‘Autre’ loses interest in them. The abandoned people, now described as ‘vous’, are left to regret at leisure (‘Vous mesurez votre folie’, *MF*, 12). The second preface is ten pages long, and also starts with an ‘ils’, referring to those who were young in 1958 and of whom the narrator herself was one. But after a few paragraphs it settles quickly into the ‘je’, the writing ‘je’ of the present: ‘J’ai voulu l’oublier aussi cette fille. L’oublier vraiment, c’est-à-dire ne plus avoir envie d’écrire sur elle’. (*MF*, 16) Thereafter, the preface sketches out the various attempts – by the older Ernaux, not just at the actual time of writing in 2014 but at earlier stages also, for instance in 2003 – to write about ‘la fille de 1958’. These prefaces are similar to the metanarrative sections of her earlier works, but far longer and more detailed; more of them are to occur throughout the book.

Another new aspect of this self-aware narration is the way in which Ernaux insists repeatedly that she cannot identify with – or even recognize – the girl she was in 1958. ‘La fille de la photo est une étrangère qui m’a légué sa mémoire’ (*MF*, 21). In most of her other books, apart from *Les Années* which is famously narrated in the third person, this

⁶ Aurélie Adler refers to *Les Années* as a ‘livre-somme’ in ‘*Les années: livre-somme, retissant les fils de l’œuvre*’, in *Annie Ernaux: le Temps et la Mémoire*, p. 70.

identification of past and present selves has never been problematic; in her earlier works Ernaux had, it seemed, always slipped smoothly and easily into her younger self.⁷ The notable exception, oft quoted, occurs in *La Honte*:

Mais la femme que je suis en 95 est incapable de se replacer dans la fille de 52 qui ne connaissait que sa petite ville, sa famille et son école privée [...] Pour atteindre ma réalité d'alors, je n'ai pas d'autre moyen sûr que de rechercher les lois et les rites, les croyances et les valeurs qui définissaient les milieux [...] Être en somme ethnologue de moi-même.⁸

In *Mémoire de fille* also, this unbridgeable gap between past and present selves is acknowledged, and the ethnological approach scrupulously practised and foregrounded through frequent discussions of the difference between the writing self and its object. Finding that her younger self is both a 'présence réelle'⁹ and irreducible to her present self, Ernaux decides to acknowledge this difference with a personal pronoun:

Dans ces conditions, dois-je fondre la fille de 58 et la femme de 2014 en un 'je'? Ou, ce qui me paraît, non pas le plus juste – évaluation subjective – mais le plus

⁷ *Les Armoires vides* and *La femme gelée* are both novels; in *L'événement*, the narrator plans to 'descend' into the past until she reaches a physical confirmation that she has 'got there' (see footnote 16), and seems to achieve this with no problems; *La Place* and *Une femme* are focused on her parents' pasts rather than her own; in her diaries, she is of course always in her present.

⁸ *La Honte* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 37.

⁹ Ernaux was brought up a Catholic, so we should assume that her use of this term is in full awareness of its theological implications.

aventureux, dissocier la première de la seconde par l'emploi de 'elle' et de 'je', pour aller le plus loin possible dans l'exposition des faits et des actes. (*MF*, 22)

Having made and articulated this choice, Ernaux finally begins her tale.

The story of 'la fille de 58' takes up roughly one half of *Mémoire de fille*, and Ernaux tells it by alternating frequently between the past and the present, the 'je' and the 'elle':

'même sans photo, je la vois, Annie Duchesne, quand elle débarque à S du train de Rouen en début d'après-midi, le 14 août.' (*MF*, 23) The story continues to shift between the two timeframes, the narrative 'je' maintaining her distance from her younger self; she 'sees' her and her mother ('je la vois...') but is not able to 'hear' them ('impossible de dire si j'avais encore les intonations traînantes des Normands'), wonders how best to capture her identity ('que choisir donc de dire d'elle qui la saisisse?' *MF*, 25), and lists various objective details about her life to date, such as her ignorance of all matters from showers to sex, in an attempt to give the reader a sense of what her younger self was like. In some cases the narrator reveals that she is unable to remember – let alone reconstitute – the precise significance of a notion that would have been paramount in her younger self's mind, for instance the notion of 'perdre ma virginité' in 1958; 'la force inouïe du sens de cette expression est perdue en moi et dans la plus grande partie de la population française' (*MF*, 30).

The narrator's failure, or reluctance, to identify with 'la fille de 1958' persists as she finally allows both 'elle' and 'je' to enter the premises of the holiday camp where she is to work over the summer. She then attempts to recapture the language spoken by 'elle' by looking through some letters she wrote back then, and a notebook into which she used to copy out quotations; a classic Ernauldian strategy in which historical documents of a personal nature are consulted in order to introduce the authority of the 'real' into her narrative. Reality is also conferred onto the holiday camp of yore, designated as 'S' and described as an

‘aérium’, through an Internet search. The narrator subsequently Googles a number of names of the people she remembers from that summer – we are still unaware of which ones are to be the key players – and considers telephoning them to ask if they remember a certain ‘Annie D’.

Après, je me suis demandé pourquoi je voulais faire ça, ce que je cherchais. [...] Je ne voulais qu’une chose au fond, entendre leur voix, même s’il y avait peu de chances que je la reconnaisse, avoir une preuve physique, sensible, de leur existence. Comme si j’avais besoin qu’ils soient vivants pour continuer d’écrire. Besoin d’écrire sur du vivant, sous la mise en danger du vivant, pas dans la tranquillité que donne la mort des gens, rendus à l’immatérialité d’êtres fictifs. (MF, 38)

The possible confusion of fictional and past beings, given that they are both ‘absent’ from reality although present in the imagination, is one which has preoccupied thinkers and philosophers since Plato and Aristotle. In recent times Proust is perhaps the writer who has been most exercised by the problem; on the side of the philosophers, Ricœur has discussed it at length in *La Mémoire, L’Histoire, L’Oubli*, starting with a simple posing of the question: ‘comment maintenir la différence de principe entre l’image de l’absent comme irréel et l’image de l’absent comme antérieur?’¹⁰ Ernaux’s response to the philosophical conundrum is emotional and practical. Her searches on the Internet and her desire to contact these figures come from her need to confirm for herself that they were and are real people, not just creations in her memory, as much as she needs reassurance that the younger self she is pursuing is, and was, also a real entity.

One consequence of the fidelity to reality of the portrait that slowly emerges from Ernaux’s search is that it is full of gaps, gaps where emotions and thoughts might have been

¹⁰ Paul Ricœur, *La Mémoire, L’Histoire, L’Oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), p. 306. See ‘L’Héritage grec’ for a discussion of Plato and Aristotle’s thoughts on the subject (pp. 7-25).

inserted if the older Ernaux had remembered them. For instance, following her account of Annie D's first sexual encounter with H, told brutally and dispassionately with Annie's feelings described as simple, objective occurrences ('elle voudrait être ailleurs mais elle ne part pas', *MF*, 43), the narrator admits:

Je suis incapable de trouver dans ma mémoire un sentiment quelconque, encore moins une pensée. La fille sur le lit assiste à ce qui lui arrive et qu'elle n'aurait jamais imaginé vivre une heure avant, c'est tout. (*MF*, 44)

The failure – and stark refusal – to fill in these gaps is new in Ernaux; in her previous books, she never so insistently foregrounded her inability to remember. The result is a deconstructive, not constructive narrative, which distinguishes this book from her previous ones:

Au fur et à mesure que j'avance, la sorte de simplicité antérieure du récit déposé dans ma mémoire disparaît. Aller jusqu'au bout de 1958, c'est accepter la pulvérisation des interprétations accumulées au cours des années. Ne rien lisser. Je ne construis pas un personnage de fiction. Je déconstruis la fille que j'ai été.

Un soupçon : est-ce que je n'ai pas voulu, obscurément, déplier ce moment de ma vie afin d'expérimenter les limites de l'écriture, pousser à bout le colletage avec le réel (je vais jusqu'à penser que mes livres précédents ne sont que des à-peu-près sous ce point de vue). (*MF*, 56)

The self-portrait that emerges slowly from the first half of *Mémoire de fille* is thus much more of a collage than a complete picture, made from facts pieced together from reality whose surface is bumpy ('ne rien lisser') and unfinished.

But in spite of the rough texture of this portrait, the gaps and the omissions, the distance between the narrator and her younger self – which is dramatized through the interplay of the ‘je’ and the ‘elle’ – slowly but surely narrows over the course of the first half of the book to culminate in their union:

Il me semble que j’ai désincarcéré la fille de 1958, cassé le sortilège qui la retenait prisonnière depuis plus de cinquante ans dans cette vieille bâtisse majestueuse longée par l’Orne [...]

Je peux dire: elle est moi, je suis elle. (*MF*, 79)

Now, this identification of her past and present selves, achieved over seventy-odd pages with considerable difficulty, has placed the narrator in an almost metaphysical conundrum that lies at the heart of the autobiographical genre. If the past self is truly an other, the present self can write about her whilst inhabiting her own time frame; but if a degree of identification is desired and achieved, the paradoxical result is that the self is then divided between two time frames. Indeed, earlier on in this metanarrative section that occurs towards the end of the first half of the book, the narrator describes her writing in the terms of the multiple time frames evoked in the process:

J’ai progressé très lentement, dilatant ces six semaines de la colonie durant une quarantaine d’autres, 273 jours exactement, pour les scruter au plus près et les faire exister réellement par l’écriture. Pour faire ressentir la durée immense d’un été de jeunesse dans les deux heures de lecture d’une centaine de pages. (*MF*, 77)

Ernaux has, in previous works, also marvelled at the contrasting amounts of time that are needed for writing, reading and living, but never so insistently.¹¹ One might argue thence that the units of time involved in the remembering and recreating of a summer in the writer's life are equivalent to different manifestations of her self. In other words, Ernaux seems to be describing selfhood in terms of time, *as* time; interestingly, she does not distinguish, here, between real, remembered and remembering selves.¹² By evoking the different units of time that correspond to the different forms in which her past selves are recalled, written and read, Ernaux enriches the autobiographical space that is her entire œuvre with ever more versions of her self; her metanarrative reflections explore the ways in which these selves are created by time, both in Ernaux's own time as well as that of her readers.¹³

The time – or place – in which the narrator finds herself at this half-way point of the book is one at which she cannot stop, as she explains:

Impossible de m'arrêter ici. Je ne le peux pas tant que je n'aurai pas atteint un certain point du passé, qui, en ce moment, est l'avenir de mon récit. Tant que je n'aurai pas dépassé les deux années qui suivent la colonie. Ici, devant ma feuille, elles ne sont pas du passé pour moi, mais, profondément, sinon réellement, mon avenir. (*MF*, 79)

¹¹ At the start of *La Place* (1984), for instance, or of *Une femme* (1987).

¹² See discussion relating to footnote 10.

¹³ Ernaux has always had a tendency, it seems, to see her self in terms of time: there are numerous instances in *Les Années*, but as early as *Passion simple*, the narrator was writing that 'je n'étais plus que du temps passant à travers moi'. *Passion simple* (Paris: Gallimard folio, 1991), p. 20.

What is this ‘certain point du passé’? One simple metatextual explanation is that it is the point at which her written self starts again; in other words, she has already written books that cover the period from that point onwards. The remark is therefore a nod to the whole of her autobiographical space, and reminds us that this book is destined to cover one of the few periods of her life which has not yet been narrated.

The second half of the book, which we know now will still be concerned with uncharted territory, starts with the description of a photograph. For those of her readers who have looked through the photographs in *Écrire la vie*, it is recognizable as one of the pictures in the ‘photoalbum’ section of the quarto volume, a snapshot taken in Ernemont:¹⁴

C’est une photo carrée de cinq à six centimètres à bords dentelés en noir et blanc. De droite à gauche, on voit, alignés contre une cloison à lattes verticales, un lit à barreaux de métal et, tout contre, une petite table rectangulaire en bois avec un tiroir. [...]

Au-dessus de la table et occupant le milieu juste de la photo, il y a une robe d’été, sans manches, qui pend le long de la cloison. (*MF*, 80)

Ernaux’s ekphrastic use of photographs has been much discussed;¹⁵ in *Les Années*, as is well known, each chapter starts with the description of a photo, and many of Ernaux’s earlier books also contain verbal descriptions of photos which set off the narrative. In *Mémoire de fille*, however, the photograph is used differently, as part of an extraordinary attempt by the narrator at time travel.

¹⁴ This particular photo is to be found in *Écrire la vie* (Paris: Gallimard Quarto, 2011), p. 45.

¹⁵ See for instance Véronique Montémont, ‘Beyond Autobiography’ in Nathalie Edwards, Amy L. Hubbell and Ann Miller (eds.), *Textual and Visual Selves: Photography, Film and Comic Art in French Autobiography* (Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), pp. 29-49 (31-32).

Examining the photo carefully with a magnifying glass, the narrator explains:

Je ne cherche pas à me souvenir, je cherche à *être* dans ce box d'un foyer de jeunes filles en train de photographier, y *être* sans débord en arrière et en avant, juste en cet instant. Dans l'immanence pure de cet instant où je suis une fille de bientôt dix-neuf ans qui photographie le lieu qu'elle quitte, elle le sait, pour toujours. De fixer mon regard sur la lumière blanche étalée sur la porte amène un flux de sensations auditives. La cloche sonnait toutes les heures. [...] Le craquement sur le parquet des pas d'une fille qui rentre des cours [...] une chanson qu'elle fredonne en rangeant ses affaires. 'Gardez vos joies, gardez vos peines. Qui sait quand les bateaux reviennent. Amour perdu ne revient jamais plus.' C'est là que j'y *suis* vraiment, dans la même sensation de désolation, d'attente ou plutôt de rien de dicible, comme si d'y être plongée de nouveau supprimait le langage. (MF, 82-3)

The narrator is attempting – by staring at the photo, and writing about it – to return to that particular room, at that particular point in space and time, 'dans l'immanence pure de cet instant où je suis une fille de bientôt dix-neuf ans'.¹⁶ She does not want to remember; she

¹⁶ For a discussion of how photographs can ease this move from 'représentation' to 'expérience' (although perhaps not quite as immediate an experience as the one evoked here), see Annie Ernaux's response to Florence Bouchy at the Colloque de Cerisy in 2012: 'Je tiens à vous dire que votre communication m'a permis de comprendre [...] pourquoi je n'arrivais pas, longtemps, à écrire *Les Années* : je voulais rester dans la « représentation ». Et vous avez, à très juste titre, cité le passage de la photo de 1955, qui définit la méthode que j'ai trouvée et utilisée, qui ne relève pas de la représentation mais de l'expérience : « c'est avec les perceptions et les sensations reçues par l'adolescente brune à lunettes que l'écriture

wants to *be* there. The fact that this is a photograph of inanimate objects rather than a photograph of her younger self makes it easier for the seventy-seven year-old Ernaux to attempt this experiment. And it is the ‘sensations auditives’ which are generated in her when she looks at the light on the door – footsteps, a bell, a song – that seem to plunge her back into that time – ‘c’est là que j’y suis vraiment’.

A comparable if slightly less immediate version of this thought experiment occurs earlier in Ernaux’s work, at the start of *L’événement*, when the narrator is preparing to dive back into her past:

Je veux m’immerger à nouveau dans cette période de ma vie, savoir ce qui a été trouvé là. Cette exploration s’inscrira dans la trame d’un récit, seul capable de rendre un événement qui n’a été que du temps au-dedans et au-dehors de moi. [...] Je m’efforcerai par-dessus tout de descendre dans chaque image, jusqu’à ce que j’aie la sensation physique de la ‘rejoindre’, et que quelques mots surgissent, dont je puisse dire, ‘c’est ça’. D’entendre à nouveau chacune de ces phrases, indélébiles en moi, dont le sens devait être alors si intenable, ou à l’inverse si consolant, que les penser aujourd’hui me submerge de dégoût ou de douceur.¹⁷

This text is very similar to the one under scrutiny here from *Mémoire de fille*; the sense of entering fully into the past environment (‘m’immerger’), the physical quality of this experience (‘la sensation physique de la « rejoindre »’), and the recourse to auditory evidence (‘entendre à nouveau chacune de ces phrases’). The experience in *L’événement* is more

ici peut retrouver quelque chose qui glissait dans les années cinquante ». *Annie Ernaux: le Temps et la Mémoire*, p. 102.

¹⁷ *L’événement*, in *Écrire la vie*, 278.

mediated, and importantly, it is told in the future tense, as a plan of action; only in *Mémoire de fille* does the narrator go on to succeed in her attempt, in the writing present. The similarities in theme and structure between the two texts are, however, remarkable and support my sense that what Ernaux foregrounds of her methods in *Mémoire de fille* grows seamlessly out of what she has always been doing, although perhaps less consciously, in her earlier works.

To return to the quotation from *Mémoire de fille*, what exactly is the ontological status of the ‘sensations auditives’ which come flooding into her consciousness as she stares at the photograph? They are presumably not exactly the same as sounds in the present, *pace* Proust; or are they? Ernaux does call them ‘sensations’, which suggests that they are not the same as aural memories because she can feel them in her present body. Is this then a case of Proustian involuntary memory, albeit voluntarily triggered in the way that Proust said was impossible, the re-creation through a visual stimulus of an aural sensation from almost sixty years ago?

One thing that is missing from the experience – if it is what we know of as involuntary memory – is the profound sense of joy that, in Proust at least, accompanies it; a joy that is founded in an awareness of immortality, if only for a moment, which comes from the extra-temporal status of the artist who can inhabit past and present at the same time:

Ces diverses impressions bienheureuses et qui avaient entre elles ceci de commun que j’éprouvais à la fois dans le moment actuel et dans un moment éloigné le bruit de la cuiller sur l’assiette, l’inégalité des dalles, le goût de la madeleine, jusqu’à faire empiéter le passé sur le présent, à me faire hésiter à savoir dans lequel des deux je me trouvais ; au vrai, l’être qui alors goûtait en moi cette impression la goûtait en ce qu’elle avait de commun dans un jour ancien et maintenant, dans ce qu’elle avait d’extra-temporel, un être qui n’apparaissait que quand, par une de ces identités entre

le présent et le passé, il pouvait se trouver dans le seul milieu où il pût vivre, jouir de l'essence des choses, c'est-à-dire en dehors du temps. Cela expliquait que mes inquiétudes au sujet de ma mort eussent cessé au moment où j'avais reconnu inconsciemment le goût de la petite madeleine puisqu'à ce moment-là l'être que j'avais été était un être extra-temporel, par conséquent insoucieux des vicissitudes de l'avenir.¹⁸

In Proust, this ability to be outside of time is an integral part of being a writer. So it is with Ernaux, as we will see in the second half of *Mémoire de fille*. Unlike Proust, however, Ernaux does not theorize or generalize the experience, describing it rather as part of a singular, personal quest:

Je me demande si je n'ai pas voulu, en fixant interminablement cette photo, moins redevenir cette fille de 1959, que capter cette sensation spéciale d'un présent différent du présent réellement vécu – celui où je suis en ce moment assise à mon bureau devant la fenêtre – un présent antérieur, d'une conquête fragile, peut-être inutile, mais qui me paraît une extension des pouvoirs de la pensée et de la maîtrise de notre vie.
(*MF*, 83)

Ernaux then goes on to describe a peculiar phenomenon that forms part of her experiment:

Au moment que j'écris, quelqu'un que je ne peux appeler moi emplit la chambre d'Ernemont, quelqu'un réduit à un regard, une ouïe, avec une forme corporelle floue.
(*MF*, 83)

¹⁸ Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé, À la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), pp. 177-78.

Who or what is this strange creature? Is it a Proustian extra-temporal being, possessed of vision and hearing but with an indeterminate corporeal presence (Proust did not specify what his extra-temporal self might look like)? Or is Ernemont in a parallel universe of the kind that Modiano often evokes in his more recent novels?¹⁹ Or a kind of dormant ‘place’ that is activated only when it is being perceived by the writer, a Berkleyian ‘esse est percipi’ world?

Michèle Touret notes two similar instances in *Les Années* of Ernaux describing, in the present of writing, what appears to be a physical version of herself existing simultaneously in the past.²⁰ The first one is a passing reference to what happens when she recalls various specific past instances: ‘elle se retourne souvent sur des images de quand elle était seule [...] Il lui semble que ce sont ses moi qui continuent d’exister là’.²¹ The second is more detailed, and significantly akin to the experience described in *Mémoire de fille*:

Dans ses insomnies, elle essaie de se rappeler de manière détaillée les chambres où elle a dormi [...] Dans ces chambres, elle ne se revoit jamais avec la netteté d’une photo, mais de façon floue, comme dans un film sur une chaîne cryptée, une silhouette, une coiffure, des mouvements, se pencher à la fenêtre, se laver les cheveux [...] arrivant parfois à se re-sentir dans son corps d’avant, mais non comme on l’est dans un rêve, plutôt dans une sorte de corps glorieux, celui de la religion catholique,

¹⁹ Parallel universes appear for instance in Modiano’s *Accident nocturne* (2003), *L’Horizon* (2010), and *Pour que tu ne perdes pas dans le quartier* (2014), and are discussed in Akane Kawakami, *Patrick Modiano* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), chapter 8.

²⁰ Michèle Touret, ‘Les lieux dans les romans d’Annie Ernaux ou “Sauver sa circonstance (ce qui a été autour d’elle, continuellement)” (An, Quarto, 1059)’, *Annie Ernaux: Le Temps et la mémoire*, pp. 104-120 (p. 117).

²¹ *Les Années*, in *Écrire la vie*, p. 988.

censé ressusciter après la mort sans éprouver ni douleur ni plaisir, ni froid ni chaud ni envie d'uriner. Elle ne sait pas ce qu'elle cherche dans ces inventaires, peut-être, à force d'accumulation de souvenirs d'objets, redevenir celle qu'elle était à tel et tel moment.²²

The Catholic notion of the 'corps glorieux' to describe the self in another timeframe is an interesting choice. Ernaux suggests that this incarnation is not possessed of all of the senses – it feels 'ni douleur ni plaisir, ni froid ni chaud ni envie d'uriner'²³ – but that it is, somehow,

²² *Les Années*, in *Écrire la vie*, p. 1041. Several critics have noted that *rooms* are a recurring trope in Ernaux's time travelling: Élise Huguény-Léger describes it as 'ce retour éternel vers la chambre des origines' (61). She goes on to enumerate the rooms, 'chambres devenues points d'ancrage mythique': 'la chambre des dimanches après-midi de l'enfance [...], la chambre d'hôtel de Rome en 1963, la chambre de l'avortement clandestin, la chambre de la première rencontre avec S dans *Se perdre*, ou, dans *L'Usage de la photo*, la chambre de l'institut Curie qui se superpose avec celle de l'Hôtel-Dieu de Rouen et qui suscite la réflexion suivante : "Ne peut-on voir la vie derrière soi comme une série de chambres en abyme jusqu'à celle, définitivement opaque, neigieuse tel un film mal enregistré sur magnétoscope, de la naissance" (*L'Usage de la Photo*, 130).'²² This image of 'chambres en abyme' is reminiscent of Ernaux's favourite painting, Dorothea Tanning's *Birthday*, to which she refers at various points in her œuvre. Huguény-Léger points out that actually returning to these places many years later, which is something that Ernaux likes to do, cannot 'faire revivre les événements – cela ne peut se faire que par le biais de l'imagination et de l'écriture'. (57)

²³ These are not the differences spelled out in the Bible between the earthly body and the resurrected body; this seems to be Ernaux's personal list.

still her. It is also not exactly the same as the one evoked in *Mémoire de fille*, who is described as feeling the same emotions it did of yore, if not the heat or cold: ‘la même sensation de désolation, d’attente ou plutôt de rien de dicible’. A few paragraphs later, Ernaux says that this entity cannot be called ‘moi’, and is possessed of the senses of sight and hearing as well as a vague corporeal shape.

I would argue that, by claiming this entity is ‘quelqu’un que je ne peux appeler moi’ (MF, 83), Ernaux is not disowning it but simply recognizing that it does not have all the qualities that she possesses in the present. In other words, in both *Les Années* and *Mémoire de fille*, time travel is not entirely successful; the self that travels through time seems to lose a certain number of its senses or qualities. But the sense of physically existing in a past timeframe whilst continuing to exist in the present occurs in both works; the ‘thought experiment’ yields a physical sensation, although one belonging to the ‘higher’ senses of sight and hearing and the realm of the emotions.²⁴

In neither *Les Années* nor *Mémoire de fille* does Ernaux offer any abstract structures with which to analyse her experience of time travel, which has the effect of putting it into the context of her autobiographical project rather than that of a more general theory of time, like Proust’s; Ernaux contents herself with describing the experience, adding another layer to her

²⁴ Laurent Demanze, in an essay on *Les Années* that he wrote well before the publication of *Mémoire de fille*, claims that ‘Annie Ernaux abandonne ainsi à mesure le désir de résurrection d’une vie singulière’ (Laurent Demanze, ‘Le dictionnaire palimpseste d’Annie Ernaux. Remarques en marge des Années’ in Dominique Viart and Gianfranco Rubino (eds.), *Écrire le présent* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012), pp. 51-61 (p.56).) He was, of course, discussing the whole of *Les Années*, but it is perhaps worth noting here that it contains some exceptions to this statement; also, that in *Mémoire de fille*, Ernaux takes up the challenge again to resurrect one chapter, at least, of ‘une vie singulière’.

self-portrait of her self writing about herself. For although she is happy to conduct thought experiments of this kind, the most important thing for her is to *write* about it. Writing is what makes Ernaux herself; indeed it is what made her, and immediately after the thought experiment we are given an account of the creation of Ernaux the writer, in Ernemont and in Finchley, London.²⁵

In this second half, indicated quite clearly as such (*MF*, 79), Ernaux recounts how she spent the two years following the summer of 1958. They are drab years; she studies for and passes the entry examination to the Ecole normale d'institutrices, spends the summer at another holiday camp having no sexual encounters and developing bulimia, then becomes uncertain about the future she appears to have chosen and takes a break from it all in England as an au pair. It is also a period which she experienced – at the time, as well as in retrospect – as being ‘outside’ of time, not in the extra-temporal fashion described earlier but in a supremely female context: she stops menstruating, although she is not pregnant. The young Ernaux thus feels excluded from the cyclical time that is shared by all women between childhood and old age:

Exclue de la communauté de filles, celle du sang perdu régulièrement chaque mois, dont l'arrêt n'est pas imaginable en dehors d'un 'malheur' ou d'une lointaine ménopause voisine de la mort [...] j'étais sortie du temps – sans âge. (*MF*, 90)

²⁵ In the ‘photojournal’ section of *Écrire la vie*, where personal photos are interspersed with extracts from her as yet unpublished diary, Ernaux quotes – on the page facing the photograph of her room in Ernemont, discussed earlier in detail – an extract from her August 1988 diary confirming how formative these years were for her subsequent career: ‘Ces deux années, 58-60, m'ont “rendue” écrivain, je crois, et 52. Ce sont deux abîmes.’ *Écrire la vie*, p. 44.

This intensely physical exclusion from a particular kind of time characterizes the two years, which are therefore seen to be blighted, but formative of the writer she is to become. In London, dividing her time between light housework for her au pair family and devouring any number of French novels, she becomes very friendly with another French au pair. The two take up petty theft as a daring pastime and go on stealing excursions together, pilfering a chocolate bar here, a tube of lipstick there, until one day her friend is caught attempting to steal a pair of gloves from a shop on Oxford Street.

Ernaux herself is never caught, thanks to her particular gift: ‘une perméabilité particulière de ma personne à la présence et au regard d’autrui’ (*MF*, 139). Although she does not say so, this is a characteristic which is part and parcel of her abilities as a writer; a hypersensitivity, an ability to make one’s body into a surface on which the outside world can leave its mark.²⁶ The young Ernaux begins to write creatively soon afterwards, producing a short novel which she sees as the ‘aboutissement’ of everything that has happened to her since the summer of 1958. She then returns to France and becomes a student of French literature; her bulimia ceases, her period returns, and life returns to normal.

But her life has also changed. Ernaux writes that it is in London that ‘j’ai commencé à faire de moi-même un être littéraire, quelqu’un qui vit les choses comme si elles devaient être écrites un jour’ (*MF*, 143). And this is the position that she will maintain thereafter;

²⁶ ‘Ce que ce monde a imprimé en elle et ses contemporains’ (*Les Années*, 238). This is also exactly what happens in books such as *Journal du dehors* and *La vie extérieure*; in them Ernaux offers up her mind as the photosensitive surface on which external images are recorded. For a discussion of this move, see Akane Kawakami, *Photobiography: Photographic Self-Writing in Proust, Guibert, Ernaux, Macé* (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), pp. 118-19.

everything that she lives is lived fully, but always with a view to being turned into writing at some later stage. This latest book has turned into writing one of the last of the events of her life that had remained unwritten, and that is perhaps one reason why she has spent so much time in it thinking about her writing methods. Nearing the end of her book, she reflects again on writing time and lived time:

Le début de mon texte me paraît très loin. Il y a une homologie entre la vie et l'écriture : je me sens aussi loin du récit de la première nuit avec H que je devais me sentir, à Finchley, loin de la réalité de celle-ci. Ces deux durées, à y réfléchir, ne sont pas si différentes : il y a treize mois que j'ai fini d'écrire la nuit d'août 1958 et, quand j'étais à Finchley, cette nuit-là avait eu lieu une vingtaine de mois auparavant. L'une et l'autre de ces durées sont également vécues et imaginaires. (*MF*, 135)

Perhaps this is an acknowledgement of the similarity between fictional and past beings, mentioned earlier as an issue by Ricœur, but which Ernaux sees as inevitable within the context of the remembering and writing process; her book, as this quotation acknowledges, has given rise to both past and imaginary versions of herself at various points in her writing of it.

The last few pages of the book are almost nostalgic in tone and structure, which is not unusual; Ernaux often takes leave of her books slowly, with a sequence of what appear to be loosely related thoughts or events that constitute a coda for the story she has just told.

Mémoire de fille ends with a visit to S in the company of a female friend in 1962, the almost obligatory visit to the 'scene of the crime';²⁷ an acknowledgement of her first novel, refused

²⁷ The return to 'the scene of the crime' is a recurring trope in Ernaux's works, of which this will have been the first, as she acknowledges immediately afterwards: 'une sorte de préalable

by two publishing houses; the loss of her virginity in 1963, recorded here as proof that she had not lost it earlier to H; then a quick comment on the writing of the book we are about to finish reading: ‘il me vient l’impression que tout cela aurait pu être écrit autrement’ (*MF*, 150). She ends the book with two thoughts that sound almost like proverbs, about the differences between the past and the present, the differences between the experience of living in the present and remembering that experience afterwards.

The first one, ‘c’est l’absence de sens de ce que l’on vit au moment où on le vit qui multiplie les possibilités d’écriture’ (*MF*, 151), is reminiscent of Proust’s distinction between past and present, or rather absence and presence, the deconstruction of which is the miracle of involuntary memory. Proust maintains that when we are faced with a beautiful object, we cannot appreciate it fully because we can only interact with it using the senses; it is only when it has left our presence that we can enjoy its beauty using our faculty of the imagination:

Tant de fois, au cours de ma vie, la réalité m’avait déçu parce qu’au moment où je la percevais mon imagination, qui était mon seul organe pour jouir de la beauté, ne pouvait s’appliquer à elle, en vertu de la loi inévitable qui veut qu’on ne puisse imaginer que ce qui est absent.²⁸

What involuntary memory does is to bring the beautiful object back from the past in such a way as to allow the senses and the imagination to appreciate it at the same time. Ernaux’s point is not the same, but analogous: she suggests here that when we are living in the present, experiencing things through our senses, we cannot see the meaning (‘sens’) of what we are

nécessaire, bénéfique à l’écriture, de geste propitiatoire – le premier d’une série qui me fera plus tard retourner dans divers endroits’ (*MF*, p. 149).

²⁸ Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé*, pp. 178-79.

living; we only see those meanings later, which can then lead to various writings and rewritings of the event.

The second thought seems to be about past realities:

Explorer le gouffre entre l'effarante réalité de ce qui arrive, au moment où ça arrive et l'étrange irréalité que revêt, des années après, ce qui est arrivé. (*MF*, 151)

For Ernaux, attaining reality is and always has been the ultimate aim of her art. This, as I have argued elsewhere,²⁹ is the source of her fascination with photography; and her desire to return to the 'present' of a past event, as in the case of her room in Ernemont, comes from the same obsession with reproducing the 'real'. This desire is still what drives her to write, as she acknowledges:

Je me demande ce que ça signifie qu'une femme se repasse des scènes vieilles de plus de cinquante ans auxquelles sa mémoire ne peut ajouter quoi que ce soit de nouveau. Quelle croyance, sinon celle que la mémoire est une forme de connaissance? Et quel désir – qui dépasse celui de comprendre – dans cet acharnement à trouver, parmi les milliers de noms, de verbes et d'adjectifs, ceux qui donneront la certitude – l'illusion – d'avoir atteint le plus haut degré possible de la réalité? (*MF*, 88)

This ideal of attaining, in writing, the 'highest degree of reality' is also an aim that has set her – repeatedly, over the course of her career – at odds with Proust. Like a great number of her contemporaries she clearly owes him a huge debt as a writer, as is evident from her diaries; her relationship with his writing has developed over the years, with Ernaux always admiring of her illustrious predecessor but also frequently enraged by his social prejudices, and

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choosing more and more as the years progress to maintain a calculated distance from her ‘model’.³⁰

A comparison of the endings of *La Recherche* and *Les Années* shows how the ideal of ‘reality’ is something which divides the two writers. The two endings are quite similar in that they both recount how the authors plan to write the book that the reader now holds in her hands. They both say, in effect, what kind of book they would write if they are spared, but one clear difference between the two endings³¹ is that Proust’s is in the first person and the conditional tense (‘si elle m’était laissé assez longtemps pour accomplir mon œuvre, ne manquerais-je pas d’abord d’y décrire les hommes’),³² whereas Ernaux’s is in the third person, and the future tense (‘ce ne sera pas un travail de remémoration... ce sera un récit glissant’).³³ Many characteristics attach to these tenses and persons which do not operate in every case, but I would argue that here the combination of third-person and future tense in Ernaux creates a more impersonal, and thereby less *fictional*, space for the birth of the work in question, whereas Proust’s combination of the first-person and conditional tense conjures up a definitively novelistic space from which his work will emerge. That the works have

³⁰ For a useful discussion of Ernaux’s intertextual relationship with Proust, particularly in *La Honte* and *Les Années*, see Maya Lavault, ‘Annie Ernaux, l’usage de Proust’ in R. Kahn, L. Macé and Françoise Simonet-Tenant (eds.), *Annie Ernaux, l’intertextualité* (Rouen/Le Havre : Presses universitaires de Rouen et du Havre, 2015).

³¹ It is not just the endings, of course, of the two works that are contrastive: Demanze writes of *Les Années* that ‘le roman proustien fonctionne moins das le récit d’Annie Ernaux comme un modèle que comme un contrepoint’ (Demanze, op. cit., p. 55).

³² Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé*, p. 353.

³³ *Les Années*, p. 240.

come into being is not in question, but the moods of their engendering are different. For Proust, the fictional nature of a work does not detract from the value of its content: the very act of creation, whether of time or of narrative, is by definition fictional and therefore not to be feared. But Ernaux, whose commitment to truth-telling is one of the fundamental tenets of her writing and who has always been suspicious of ‘literature’ is defiantly anti-fictional at the end of *Les Années*.³⁴

To return to the final words of *Mémoire de fille*, do they confirm – once again – that reality is the reason why she writes, or is there a slightly different nuance to the pursuit of reality in this, her most recent work? The proverb-like final words (‘explorer le gouffre...’) are actually a self-quotation from the past, as the preceding paragraph makes clear:

Déjà le souvenir de ce que j’ai écrit s’efface. Je ne sais pas ce qu’est ce texte. Même ce que je poursuivais en écrivant le livre s’est dissous. J’ai retrouvé dans mes papiers une sorte de note d’intention:

Explorer le gouffre entre l’effarante réalité de ce qui arrive, au moment où ça arrive et l’étrange irréalité que revêt, des années après, ce qui est arrivé. (*MF*, 151)

The short sentences making up the paragraph before the quotation describe a new, disturbing experience, that of forgetting and oblivion. Suddenly Ernaux seems lost, with no memory (‘le souvenir de ce que j’ai écrit s’efface’); like an Alzheimer patient,³⁵ she looks at her text and

³⁴ The fiction/reality opposition in the endings of these two works is discussed in more detail in Kawakami, *Photobiography*, pp. 120-21.

³⁵ Ernaux’s mother, as we know from *Une femme* and ‘*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*’, suffered from Alzheimer’s for some time before her death.

does not recognize it ('je ne sais pas ce qu'est ce texte'); the much-discussed aim of attaining reality dissolves into nothingness ('ce que je poursuivais en écrivant le livre s'est dissous'). Why does this happen? At the start of the book, Ernaux suggested strongly that *Mémoire de fille* might be her last work: 'le temps devant moi se raccourcit. Il y aura forcément un dernier livre, comme il y a un dernier amant, un dernier printemps, mais aucun signe pour le savoir.' (MF, 18). As a prefatory remark, this statement appeared as an obvious trigger for the writing of the book; but does the evocation of oblivion at its end indicate that this is in fact to be her last – not just latest – work?

There can be no definitive answer to this question, but we can note that Ernaux's description of forgetfulness and dissolution comes, importantly, *before* the self-quotation that reminds us of the book's aim, which is to evoke both the reality and unreality of human experience, to explore the ways in which we deal with both, and to hold both experiences in the same mind. For that is surely the point of juxtaposing the two statements: both of these selves, the one who has forgotten what her text was about and the one who was purposefully setting out to write it, are her; the writer with a goal, and the writer who has just achieved that goal. Here, as in the moment when she was able to inhabit the room in Ernemont at the same time as her study in Cergy, and thus captured 'cette sensation spéciale d'un présent différent du présent vécu', Ernaux gives us an example of 'une extension des pouvoirs de la pensée et de la maîtrise de notre vie'. (MF, 83) Here, on the last page of the book, are two more 'Ernaux' to enrich the autobiographical space of her œuvre; an œuvre within which the writer and reader can constantly return to past realities and inhabit them through the acts of reading and writing. The ambiguity in French of 'un dernier livre' – the latest, the last – perfectly captures the playful nature of this atemporal space; the latest self may turn out to be the last, but it co-exists in eternity with Ernaux's collection of multiple selves in the 'installation' that is her lifelong autobiographical project.