



LITERATURE, POLITICS

Annie Ernaux: future prospects and the politics of time

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Abstract

This article considers the elaboration of time as part of the formal construction that relates writing and politics in Ernaux's work. Beginning with her claim that 'Écrire, c'est créer du temps', particular attention is paid to the role of the future in Ernaux's 'lived time', especially the future as anticipated in the past. Her accounts of the past, in both fiction and autobiographical writing, show how unquestioned expectations about the future serve to direct the course of human lives and sustain different forms of injustice. Assumptions about both class and gender underpin future prospects in childhood, education, love, sex, pregnancy and marriage. Finally, writing itself is conceived by Ernaux predominantly in relation to the future.

Keywords

Ernaux, lived time, future, autobiography, politics

[...] notre vie est essentiellement orientée vers l'avenir.

Minkowski, 2013: 73

The title of this volume – 'Writing, politics' – makes no assumptions about the relation of the two entities, joined as they are by a simple comma. In the case of Annie Ernaux, the question is not so much *whether* her writing is political, nor even *what* the politics of her writing might be ('*venger ma race*', as she has put it; Ernaux, 2022c), but *how* her writing is political. The word 'writing' is immediately suggestive since, unlike the word 'literature', it implies activity, a doing, as well as an object synonymous with, albeit broader than the aesthetically charged entity called 'literature'. Politics here is something *done* by writing.

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But let me begin with Ernaux's own thoughts on the subject. In 1989, she published an essay under the title 'Littérature et politique'. Note her choice of the word *littérature* which she links to politics with an 'and', thereby re-establishing a connection between the two which, at the time appeared to her more separate than they ever had in the past: 'La frontière entre la politique et la littérature est plus solide qu'elle ne l'a jamais été dans les siècles précédents' (Ernaux, 2020a: 39). Two decades later, the 1989 essay had lost none of its pertinence for her when she included it in the compendious *Écrire la vie* (2011), and, its relevance still topical, she reproduced it a further time in the much slimmer selection, *Hôtel Casanova* (2020). The argument is succinct and she makes two related claims: first, that the connection between politics and writing (despite the title of the piece, Ernaux uses the word *écriture* throughout) is not, as is often supposed, one of subordination, with writing placed at the service of the political agenda of a cause or a party. Her second contention is that literature can't *not* be political: 'L'écriture, quoi qu'on fasse « engage », véhiculant, de manière très complexe, au travers de la fiction, une vision consentante plutôt à l'ordre social ou au contraire le dénonçant' (Ernaux, 2020a: 40).

The timescale of writing's political impact is nevertheless not one of immediacy, and writing differs in this regard from direct political action. Allowance must be made for the delayed temporality of writing whose political potential works through the slower process of reading: 'Elle peut, *sur le long terme*, imprégnant l'imaginaire du lecteur, rendre celui-ci sensible à des réalités qu'il ignorait, ou l'amener à voir autrement ce qu'il considérerait toujours sous le même angle' (Ernaux, 2020a: 42; my emphasis). This change of perspective, says Ernaux, becomes possible only when there's a link between 'l'exercice de l'écriture et l'injustice du monde' (Ernaux, 2020a: 42). But – and it's significant – this doesn't entail any restriction of the literary dimension of writing. Rather the reverse, and as she goes on to state, her own aim in writing is to 'mettre toutes les ressources de l'art dans le désir de dire et transformer le monde'. For a political writer, and despite her repeated desire to distance her writing from the category of 'literature', Ernaux is notably insistent about the importance of form, while never treating it as a purely aesthetic consideration. Looking back in 2020 at her first novel, *Les Armoires vides* (1974), she describes the book as a false start because she had sought to implement a political agenda simply by 'writing against', and consequently the book 'lacks form' (Ernaux, 2020b: 82). 'Intervenir dans le monde pour le changer, si peu que ce soit, ce n'est pas affaire de choses à dire, de « sujets »', she explains (Ernaux, 2020b: 106). More is required, and to be politically efficacious, writing – whether fiction or non-fiction, novel or autosociobiographical *récit* (to use the term favoured in Ernaux studies) – requires formal construction.

This construction metaphor is remarkably concrete, and in Ernaux's conception, writing a book is like building a house which the reader will enter 'as if into their own life' (Ernaux, 2020b: 91). More specifically, the construction will include a dimension of time: 'Écrire, c'est créer du temps. Celui où va entrer le lecteur' (Ernaux, 2020b: 106). In this regard, Ernaux is a successor to Proust¹ and time is present in several of her titles, most obviously in *Les Années* (2008), but it's also implied in *L'Événement* (2000) and *Mémoire de fille* (2016). Even *Le Jeune Homme* (2022) turns out to have a powerful temporal charge in the age difference that separates the younger man from the older woman.

Time becomes more explicit in the text of Ernaux's narratives. *Une femme* opens – in faint echo of Camus's *L'Étranger* – with a double note about dates: 'Ma mère est morte le lundi 7 avril à la maison de retraite de l'hôpital de Pontoise, où je l'avais placée il y a deux ans' (Ernaux, 1987: 11), recording the day and date of the mother's death as well as the length of time she spent in the care home. The time of writing is the present and the narrated past is precisely dated. The action of *Passion simple* is even more unambiguously situated in time with its opening sentence: 'Cet été, j'ai regardé pour la première fois un film classé X à la télévision, sur Canal +' (Ernaux, 2002: 11), and it continues in the following section with a striking statement of entry into the temporal

construct that is the book: 'À partir du mois de septembre l'année dernière, je n'ai plus rien fait d'autre qu'attendre un homme: qu'il me téléphone et qu'il vienne chez moi' (Ernaux, 2002: 13). This adds a further dimension to time by giving it a prospective presence with the emphasis on waiting, the anticipation of phone calls and visits.

Prospective time, anticipation and the future are a recurrent preoccupation in Ernaux's writing and constitute the terms in which she 'lives' time, to use the expression given currency in the 1930s by the psychoanalytic philosopher Eugène Minkowski (1885–1972) in work much inspired by Bergson's notion of *la durée*.² Ernaux's time is 'lived time'. It's the time that the reader enters and in which the long-term political impact of her writing can begin to take effect.

She rings the changes on Proust not, or not only by repeating the feats of memory in her recovery of past time (most obviously and most impressively in *Les Années*), but by building the *future* into these constructions³. Her books may permit the reliving of the past, but it's a past that contains and entails a strong sense of a future: 'Il y a toujours une dimension d'avenir dans ce que j'écris, de ce que pourrait être l'avenir. Mais jamais de certitude sur ce qu'il sera. Jamais un message...' (Ernaux, 2020b: 87). Free of any overt message, it's through this evocation of the future that politics obliquely, but perhaps all the more effectively, enter Ernaux's writing.

These futures are nevertheless not those of 'les lendemains qui chantent' in that virtually untranslatable French expression, a politically charged utopia projected forward in time. In any case, as Ernaux herself says (Ernaux, 2020b: 102), the notion of 'un lendemain qui chante' belongs to another era. (It's a 1930s future which has dated as much as so many other things from that distant decade.)⁴ The future in Ernaux's work is the future as it appears at a particular moment in time, *the future as anticipated in the past*. The variously imagined and anticipated futures of the past become increasingly integral to her portrayal of the present of the past, but stripped of all reference to the future as it actually transpired.

This limitation becomes a matter of principle for the writing of *Mémoire de fille* where Ernaux comments that if she is to write the book, 'il faudrait que je ne sache rien de l'avenir, de cet été 58' (Ernaux, 2016: 20). Immersion in the past is to be achieved without hindsight, without retrospect, and this has consequences for the form that the writing will take. As Ernaux explains, it requires the invention of what she calls 'a new syntax' to accommodate time, both the time of her writing (2014 in this instance) and the time of the narrative (1958), but without compromising either: 'Je rêve d'une phrase qui les contiendrait toutes les deux, sans heurt, simplement par le jeu d'une nouvelle syntaxe' (Ernaux, 2016: 57–58).⁵ With the dream of this new tense, the form of the writing is itself projected into a possible future ('une phrase qui *contiendrait*'), and I shall return later to this issue.

Ernaux's accounts of the past are nevertheless made distinctive by her ability to evoke its progressively evolving character. The past in her work is anything but static, and here *Les Années* is her supreme achievement as it moves, in an apparently seamless progression, through more than 60 years from the early 1940s to the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Narrated in a continuous imperfect tense (the 'eternal imperfect' whose use by Flaubert was integral to a style that Proust described as a '*Trottoir roulant*'),⁶ the evolution conveyed by Ernaux's writing includes her unusually acute awareness of the evolving futures of the past, the changing forms those futures took, and what they imply about attitudes and possibilities that the world held out for different groups and different classes at different points in that past: 'Ce qu'il me semblait important aussi de saisir, c'était l'évolution de la représentation de l'avenir, de l'image qu'on se fait de l'avenir en général', because, as she points out, 'La vision de l'avenir elle-même s'est modifiée' (Ernaux, 2020b: 100, 98). She is particularly conscious of the extent to which the future – or more precisely, prospective futures, the future as anticipated – constitutes an integral part of the experience of time which owes as much to a sense of what might lie ahead as to what has gone before. This orientation towards the future is fundamental to Ernaux's own way of living time.

The future is where, for Ernaux, the human mind is most actively engaged, as she suggests in *Passion simple* when she refers to ‘quelque chose qui doit être l’intelligence humaine (prévoir, évaluer le pour et le contre, les conséquences)’ (Ernaux, 2002: 14). Expectation, determination, desire, the weighing up of potential consequences are all means whereby the future enters and orientates the present, providing a gateway through which, amongst other things, ideology enters human lives and works to determine the course they take. Recognition of this gives Ernaux’s writing a marked political charge, revealing unspoken assumptions that ultimately and almost invisibly sustain different forms of injustice. Or to put it another way, assumptions about the future are often so tacit, so ingrained, that they constitute a form of the ‘*indicible*’ which, when written, brings their political implications to light (Ernaux, 2020b: 105). Spelled out by writing, a hitherto unarticulated *imaginaire* acquires the potential to change the *imaginaire* of readers and thus ‘intervene in the world to change it’.

For Ernaux, this intervention is geared primarily to avenging her ‘*race*’, her class, but also her gender. Both are brought into a sharp focus that begins with Ernaux’s account of her childhood where so much is filtered through a lens of expectancy and anticipation, and so saturated in a sense of the future that even the past events recalled by the adults at family reunions are imagined by the children as experiences that they will one day encounter themselves: ‘La mémoire des autres leur [aux enfants] refilait une nostalgie secrète pour cette époque qu’ils avaient manquée de si peu et l’espérance de la vivre un jour’ (Ernaux, 2017: 26).

Ernaux’s own childhood was marked by a parental injunction not to repeat their own lives and by their ambivalent wish for a future that would see their children ‘plus instruits, donc plus heureux, [...] « mieux » qu’eux’, while at the same time ‘ils voudraient qu’on reste identique à l’enfant qu’ils ont connu’ (Ernaux, 2020b: 51). The parents’ imagined future includes a future to be feared: for themselves, reverting to ‘la classe ouvrière’, and for their daughter, becoming ‘une fille mère’. It’s with this unspoken fear in mind and the intention of protecting the girl’s future, that Ernaux’s mother became the self-appointed ‘guardian’ of her daughter’s body: ‘elle se comportait en gardienne, gardienne de mon corps, mais aussi, pour le meilleur, en gardienne de mon *avenir*’ (Ernaux, 2020b: 39; my emphasis). Ideas about the future can be based in fear as much as in hope, and it’s in the body that that future can be played out.

Nevertheless, the future prospects of childhood are mostly recalled as positive and they applied to the whole of society. In the years following the end of the Second World War, ‘Le progrès était l’horizon des existences’ (Ernaux, 2017: 45). The future made itself felt with the continual introduction of ‘des nouveautés’ that brought change for everybody: new buildings went up under the policy of Reconstruction, labour-saving devices transformed everyday life with pressure-cookers and refrigerators, while biros, chewing gum, Tampax, neon lights, peppermint toothpaste, depilatory creams and tinned vegetables were rapidly normalized and obliterated all sense that things had ever been different. Ernaux’s father ‘modernized’ the family’s *café-épicerie* to remove all traces of the past. Children were carried along on the wave of this modernization. At the local *fête de la Jeunesse*, they were told that they *were* the future (Ernaux, 2017: 28), and the young Annie wants nothing so much as for that future to arrive: ‘il n’y a de sûr que son désir d’être grande’ (Ernaux, 2017: 38).

School, from which her parents expected so much on her behalf, was itself a matter of constant anticipation:

Les années devant nous étaient des classes, chacune superposée au-dessus de l’autre, espaces-temps ouverts en octobre et fermés en juillet. [...] On attendait avec impatience la communion solennelle, préalable glorieux de tout ce qui allait arriver d’important, les règles, le certificat d’études ou l’entrée en sixième. (Ernaux, 2017: 34, 48)

Politics, however, creep in as education, which is imagined by Ernaux and her parents as an escape from social reproduction, turns out after all to be one of the surest means of reinforcing it. This much becomes clear in the 1981 novel *La Femme gelée* when the narrator notes the departure of girls to the calling determined by their social origins: ‘D’abord les moins riches, parties en sténodactylo, ou vendeuses, puis les filles de commerçants qui vendent aussi, mais avec un autre air, les cultivatrices qui disparaissent définitivement dans leurs hectares de terre’ (Ernaux, 2022a: 81).

Just as (unjustly) inevitable are the ‘[d]estins cependant enviables de jolies demoiselles bien élevées, pures, instruites ce qu’il faut, le bac souvent, mais pas de métier ensuite puisqu’elles doivent se marier’ (Ernaux, 2022a: 63–64). These are girls with whom it was already, albeit tacitly, understood by all concerned, that the daughter of the *épicière* would not – could not – mix. Education promises a future which, instead of being wide open as first appeared, turns out instead to reinforce the ideologically sanctioned status quo. It nonetheless comes as a shock to the young protagonist when the teacher declares, ‘Tu seras épicière comme ta maman sûrement’ (Ernaux, 2022a: 54), especially as the girl herself had anticipated becoming an ‘institutrice’, which was about as high up the social scale as it was possible for the *transfuge de classe* to imagine going.

This image of a future self as *institutrice* is derived not just from the school context where, the nuns’ class prejudice notwithstanding, it features as a potential outcome of educational success. More pervasively, it’s also drawn from the magazines, the films and the songs of the time:

elle se voit, son corps, son allure, sur le modèle des magazines féminins, mince, les cheveux longs flottant sur les épaules, et ressemblant à Marina Vlady dans *La Sorcière* [...] avec une voiture à elle, 2 CV ou 4 CV, signe suprême d’émancipation, libre et indépendante. (Ernaux, 2017: 68–69)

Added to the pictured scene is ‘l’ombre d’un homme, l’inconnu, qu’elle rencontrera comme dans *Un jour tu verras*, la chanson de Mouloudji’. Marina Vlady (b. 1938, and so just 2 years older than Ernaux) appeared in several films from the 1950s onwards and had a reputation as a ‘sex bomb’. Marcel Mouloudji (1922–1994) was a singer, actor and composer of sentimental songs, like the one mentioned here whose every line is ripe with promises of a happy, story-book future: ‘Un jour, tu verras, on se rencontrera / Quelque part, n’importe où, guidés par le hasard / Nous nous regarderons et nous nous sourirons / Et la main dans la main, par les rues nous irons’ (etc., etc.; my emphasis).

Love, promised here by the shadowy figure of the ‘inconnu’, is the other major pathway to the imagined futures of Ernaux’s pasts. Her unusually explicit curiosity about sex and ‘doing it’ (‘faire ça’) runs in parallel with this culturally generated, powerfully gendered, future-oriented desire to be desirable (slim with long blonde hair, etc.). After what, in the summer of 1958, she feels has been her failure in the eyes of the older boy with whom she has had her first significant sexual experience in the *colonie de vacances* (a fiasco compounded by her promiscuous behaviour with the other boys), the protagonist of *Mémoire de fille* pictures a different version of herself for the following year when she plans to make a better impression:

La fille qu’il [the older *moniteur*] verrait apparaître à la colonie l’été prochain serait une fille nouvelle à tous égards, belle et brillante, qui l’éblouirait, dont il tomberait sur-le-champ amoureux et qui lui ferait oublier celle qui était passée de bras en bras entre les deux nuits avec lui. (Ernaux, 2016: 97)

This projection of her magically transformed future self derives inescapably from magazines like *Nous Deux* (founded in 1947 and still going strong), from songs on the radio, from the love stories that Annie Duchesne’s mother reads and the films she sees (*Gone with the Wind* is a

recurrent reference). The school photo taken a year later in 1959 is recalled in *Les Années* as the time of a similar future projection, when the girl's culturally determined ambitions are once again to be 'slim and blonde' as well as free, independent and 'useful to the world': an amalgam of another film star of the period, Mylène Demongeot, and Simone de Beauvoir (Ernaux, 2017: 80).

Inviting such socially conditioned projections, love is a domain where gender differences count for a great deal in the allocation of futurity. The inexperienced girl in *Mémoire de fille* may have her own – naïve – ideas about what might lie ahead (a combination of true love à la Moulidji and 'doing it'), but when actual boy meets actual girl, the boy has a distinct advantage in the handling of time. Lying naked on her bed with the *moniteur* in the *colonie de vacances*, the girl is constrained by the sense that 'elle n'[a] pas le droit d'abandonner cet homme dans cet état qu'elle déclenche en lui' (Ernaux, 2016: 44). It's his bodily relation to time that sets the pace. As in a porn film (the comparison is explicit), 'la partenaire de l'homme est à contretemps, ne sait pas quoi faire parce qu'elle ne connaît pas la suite. Lui seul est le maître. Il a toujours un temps d'avance' (Ernaux, 2016: 44). Being 'one step ahead', the man has mastery of the future, even if only of a future that goes very fast from arousal to enforced ejaculation into the girl's mouth (and up her nostrils).

The scene is narrated without overt denunciation and the boy, appalling as he sounds, has several social and cultural assumptions on his side: the nuns in *La Femme gelée* had already warned the girls about the allegedly unstoppable momentum of male desire – for which they, the girls, were supposedly responsible, as is quietly hinted here in the mention of 'cet état qu'elle déclenche en lui' – while the sexual ingénue is a cliché with wide popular currency in scenarios where the man is guaranteed the initiative. Any critique remains oblique, inferable only from the 'new syntax' that creates the future of the past, and of which the use of the conditional alongside the imperfect is the occasional concrete grammatical index: 'La fille qu'il verrait apparaître [...] qui l'éblouirait, dont il tomberait sur-le-champ amoureux', etc.

The encounter in the *colonie de vacances* is not the only moment of gendered difference in face of the future. Some years later, something ultimately similar occurs in the context of marriage. After the youthful and misjudged anticipation of a future in the guise of *institutrice* and her summary dismissal from the *école normale* (recounted in *Mémoire de fille*), *Les Années* picks up the story with the great good fortune of studies at university where Annie Duchesne meets her future husband. Despite the difference in the couple's respective social origins, the marriage as portrayed in *La Femme gelée* seems initially to be remarkably equitable. Even the arrival of a child doesn't appear to seriously destroy the equilibrium since the husband shares more or less equally in domesticity and parenting.

However, once they move to Annecy, where the husband lands a job as *cadre* in the local administration, gender differences (early signs of which the narrator had previously chosen to ignore) re-establish themselves, and she feels she's running after an ever more elusive equality as a certain image of the future recedes. Hampered on the one hand by a timetable dictated by the baby's needs, and on the other by the husband's expectations of a clean interior and a proper meal on the table at lunch- and dinnertime, preparation for the CAPES has to be squeezed into whatever spare moments remain. The justification for all this is the fact that the husband has a job with prospects: "une situation d'avenir" (Ernaux, 2022a: 154; my emphasis).

Once again, the future has given men the whip hand as wives comply with a set of social expectations expressed as a social 'order' which requires that meals are served on time, the wife be welcoming, and the 'boss' able to rest and relax before going back work feeling restored. As she becomes increasingly conscious of the acquiescence of other women to this male-dominated order (vocally supported by her bourgeois mother-in-law), the protagonist ruefully concedes, 'De lui ou de cet ordre, je ne sais pas lequel des deux m'a le plus rejetée dans la différence' (Ernaux, 2022a: 151). It's not just the brute force of men and their mastery of the future that

ensures the injustice of gender difference, imposing one kind of future (as wife and mother) and ruling out another (as teacher).

And yet the marriage that has brought this situation about and which seemed to have started so auspiciously is based on a gamble with the future surreptitiously initiated by the woman. The narrator describes the decision to marry as a kind of Pascalian wager as the couple throw themselves into matrimony to see how it turns out later. However, she tips the scales with what she calls her unspeakably shameful cowardice: 'je désire que mon ventre se fasse piège et choisisse à ma place. Faire l'amour comme on se tire les cartes pour savoir l'avenir' (Ernaux, 2022a: 123). The future, naively imagined by both partners as an 'adventure', is clinched by the 'accidental-on-purpose' pregnancy engineered by the woman, oblivious of its real, long-term consequences.

L'Événement tells the full story of what this fundamental physiological gender difference can mean for women as it plays out in time. 'Women's time' (to repurpose that expression) is dictated by the 'calendrier Ogino' (the rhythm method), according to which it's possible, in principle, to predict ovulation and to pinpoint the days of the month when there is no risk of conception. The temporal dictates of this 'calendar' were the only option for avoiding pregnancy in the days before the arrival of condom dispensers, let alone the contraceptive pill, which didn't become available in France until 1967. (Abortion was legalized only in 1975.)⁷

Ernaux's narrative demonstrates how very different the experience of a euphemistically labelled 'unwanted pregnancy' is for men and for women. The man in the story knows virtually nothing of what happens when, from the moment she takes a pregnancy test and is given a projected due date, everything changes for the woman. The story then becomes *all* about time: 'Avec ce récit, c'est du temps qui s'est mis en marche', writes the author-narrator, and its telling is aimed at conveying 'un événement qui n'a été que du temps au-dedans et au-dehors de moi' (Ernaux, 2022b: 26). Internal, physiological time is bound up with a future whose consequences are quite unlike those of the gamble of sex as the means of arriving at a decision about whether to get married. In this instance, there are only two possible outcomes: the time-limited option of an illegal abortion or the birth of a child whose existence would put paid to the very different future that Annie Duchesne had previously been anticipating for herself.

Given the importance of the future for Ernaux's sense of time, the violence of the change brought about by this most un-Pascalian of pregnancies is worth underscoring (un-Pascalian because there is so little chance of grace):

Le temps a cessé d'être une suite insensible de jours, à remplir de cours et d'exposés, de stations dans les cafés et à la bibliothèque, menant aux examens et aux vacances d'été, à l'avenir. Il est devenu une chose informe qui avançait à l'intérieur de moi et qu'il fallait détruire à tout prix. (Ernaux, 2022b: 30)

The pregnant woman's time is entirely conditioned by the future whose horizons shrink drastically with the urgent need to find out how to obtain an illegal abortion before it's too late. Failing this, there remains only the expectation of becoming a 'fille mère', the thought of which had so alarmed Ernaux's mother for reasons that the pregnant student now understands only too well:

J'établissais confusément un lien entre ma classe sociale d'origine et ce qui m'arrivait. [...] j'avais échappé à l'usine, au comptoir. Mais ni le bac ni la licence de lettres n'avaient réussi à détourner la fatalité de la transmission d'une pauvreté dont la fille enceinte était, au même titre que l'alcoolique, l'emblème. [...] ce qui poussait en moi, c'était, d'une certaine manière, l'échec social. (Ernaux, 2022b: 31–32)

The potential, temporally determined consequences of this pregnancy underscore the social underpinnings of Ernaux's kind, 'sa race', as it plays out in the lives of women.⁸⁸

An account of the ‘event’ requires Ernaux to come up with a form of narrative that will do full justice to it, and the political stakes for her tale are high: ‘La révolution des femmes n’a pas eu lieu. Elle est toujours à faire’ (Ernaux, 2020b: 55). As she goes on to observe, ‘si je ne vais pas au bout de la relation de cette expérience, je contribue à obscurcir la réalité des femmes et je me range du côté de la domination masculine du monde’ (Ernaux, 2022b: 58). The need to create a link between ‘the practice of writing and the injustice of the world’ is as great as ever. Time remains of the essence in the composition of the narrative as the reader is taken step-by-step through the construction of what the author calls ‘une expérience humaine totale, de la vie et de la mort, du *temps*, de la morale et de l’interdit, de la loi, une expérience vécue d’un bout à l’autre au travers du corps’ (Ernaux, 2022b: 124; my emphasis). Less overtly denunciatory than *Les Armoires vides* or *La Femme gelée*, the writing of this later text is also less fictional, less conventional. And more powerful.

It’s not fiction so much as autobiographical writing with its latently complex temporalities that leads Ernaux here to call on ‘all the resources of art’ in her elaboration of new constructions of time – constructions capable of working to change the imaginary of the reader and, in consequence, the world. Unlike fictional narrative, the retrospection of autobiographical narrative has consciousness of the present built into the writing as its necessary counterpart. The ‘real person’ of Philippe Lejeune’s famous definition (Lejeune, 1975: 14) looks back from a real point in time at a life whose course, explicitly or implicitly, connects past to present, inviting comment and self-conscious reflection. In Ernaux’s case the perception of time and awareness of her place within it become increasingly explicit in her autobiographical self-commentary.

This comes to the fore in *Les Années* which begins with an evocation of a distant future where, anticipating her own demise, none of what is remembered here will have survived. ‘Toutes les images disparaîtront’, she writes, and recall of the world will vanish: ‘S’annuleront subitement les milliers de mots qui ont servi à nommer les choses, les visages des gens, les actes et les sentiments, ordonné le monde, fait battre le cœur et mouiller le sexe’ (Ernaux, 2017: 11, 15). In the meantime, Ernaux’s own advancing years have progressively altered her individual experience of time: ‘Ce qui a le plus changé en elle, c’est sa perception du temps, de sa situation à elle dans le temps’ (Ernaux, 2017: 247). Her sense of the future is particularly affected by these changes: ‘Elle a perdu son sentiment d’avenir, cette sorte de fond illimité sur lequel se projetaient ses gestes, ses actes, une attente de choses inconnues et bonnes qui l’habitait’ (Ernaux, 2017: 248). Instead, she is ‘ravaged’ by a new feeling of urgency, where the future appears in a different mode: limited, finite and no longer open to the multiple possibilities of earlier years.

With the emphasis in *Les Années* on the construction of an ‘impersonal’ autobiography, a further new syntax systematically replaces ‘je’ with ‘elle’ and the individual is shadowed by the collective to provide a common record of the larger world which is registered just by living, ‘rien qu’en vivant’ (Ernaux, 2017: 250). The futures of the past matter as much as they ever did, and if the anticipated future of a vanished world seems to lie beyond any political horizon here, futures are nevertheless a constant presence in the text’s evocation of the past as life brings its own changes in the perception of future time.

The future also becomes the tense used about the writing itself, and, in a move whose example in Proust’s *Recherche* Ernaux has explicitly acknowledged, it applies to the writing of the book in hand (Ernaux, 2013). Writing *about* the future here includes writing *in* the future, and the future tense dominates in Ernaux’s account of what she presents, even in the closing pages, as a project still to be realized, not a finished achievement:

Ce que le monde a imprimé en elle et ses contemporains, elle s’en *servira* pour reconstituer un temps commun. [...] Elle ne *regardera* en elle-même que pour y retrouver le monde. [...] Ce *sera* un récit glissant,

dans un imparfait continu, absolu, dévorant le présent au fur et à mesure jusqu'à la dernière image d'une vie. (Ernaux, 2017: 251; my emphases)

Just three pages before the end of *Les Années*, writing is still being presented as lying ahead, entailing prospective forms of action as Ernaux anticipates using the record of the world contained in her own life, looking inwards to recover that world, and creating narrative time through the use of a continuous imperfect tense.

Over and above the specific literary resources, the form and the syntax of *Les Années*, it's writing in general that Ernaux conceives as prospect, and the future tense is the only one in which she feels able to discuss it. As she said subsequently (to Michelle Porte in *Le Vrai Lieu*): 'C'est devant soi, l'écriture, toujours devant soi. Je ne parle pas avec facilité des livres que j'ai écrits parce que je pense toujours à ceux qui sont devant moi' (Ernaux, 2020b: 32). Ironically, it's this future of writing that the Nobel prize has taken from her because the ensuing publicity has left her no time for it, a point she made in an interview when, as reported in *The Guardian*, she said: '[The Nobel prize] fell into my life like a bomb. It was an enormous disruption; since winning it, I have been unable to write and the act of the writing was always my future.'⁹

Notes

1. This is despite Ernaux's reservations about Proust's class-based treatment of Françoise, or the individualism of his account of memory (Ernaux, 2013). Her indebtedness to Proust is more obliquely and more neutrally expressed in her contribution to the *Cahier de l'Herne*, a selection of diary entries made over the years (Ernaux, 2022d). Lyn Thomas describes Proust as a 'ghostly presence' in several of Ernaux's texts (Thomas, 2008: 95), while Maya Lavault argues that Proust is 'une référence majeure dans l'œuvre d'Annie Ernaux' and serves as 'un lieu stratégique dans la définition de son rapport à la littérature' (Lavault, 2015: 33, 34).
2. *Le Temps vécu: études phénoménologiques et psychopathologiques* was first published in Paris in 1933. Eugène Minkowski was a medically trained psychoanalyst with philosophical interests in phenomenology.
3. A dimension of time that is central to Minkowski's account of the subject. Although Minkowski's book has seen several reprintings, there's nothing to suggest that Ernaux ever read it. On her own admission, she was never much drawn to philosophy.
4. The expression comes from a poem by the writer-député Paul Vaillant-Couturier following the election of the Front Populaire in 1936. Under the title 'Jeunesse', an eponymous youthful generation promises to build 'un lendemain qui chante'. For a suggestive discussion of future perspectives in the interwar period, when the future seems to have acquired a significant place in the cultural and political imaginary, see Panchasi (2009).
5. For a discussion of the complexity of the temporal structure of *Mémoire de fille*, see Kawakami (2019).
6. 'Ce grand Trottoir roulant' (Proust, 1971: 587). Ernaux's own narrative could also be described as a moving pavement, as she herself comes close to doing when she envisages the narrative of *Les Années* as 'un récit glissant, dans un imparfait continu' (A, 240). In a 2004 interview with the Japanese writer Yuko Tsushima, she refers to her use of the tense as an 'escalator' (Ernaux, 2023).
7. Even then, time is still of the essence, as abortion was legalized only for the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, a limit recently (in February 2022) extended to 14 weeks. Abortion is due to be enshrined in the constitution as a right.
8. Lyn Thomas has discussed the social reality of this shame as portrayed in popular magazine fiction of the 1940s. See Thomas, 2014.
9. Reported in Raphael, 2023.

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