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Diaries, Photographic Writing and Self-Vivisection

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Regular readers of Ernaux will know that diary-writing has always been important to her, and to her sense of her self: ‘rien ne rend autant la permanence du moi que le journal.’¹ To date, she has shared with her readers at least four different kinds of diary: her ‘journaux intimes’, ‘journaux extimes’, and in 2011, a photodiary of sorts in *Écrire la vie*, whose prefatory section contains excerpts from her ‘journal intime’ alongside a collection of family photographs, and a pre-writing diary called *L’Atelier noir*. In this essay, I want first to consider briefly how diary-writing can be seen as a photographic act for Ernaux, resulting in a collection of verbal ‘snapshots’ which constitute the raw material from which her more constructed narratives are built. I then intend to focus on Ernaux’s acts of self-portrayal in 1989, through an analysis of the different diaries she kept that year as well as of a related non-diary work, to create a synoptic view of Ernaux’s self in that twelve-month period. 1989 was the year during which Ernaux was having a passionate affair with a Russian diplomat, the affair that gave birth to *Passion simple*. But at the same time, she was recording her internal turmoil in *Se perdre*, her impressions of the external world in *Journal du dehors*, and making notes for various literary projects in *L’Atelier noir*. My aim will be to bring together the entries from these three diaries, as well as the more sustained account from *Passion simple*, to create a composite portrait – or rather, a composite photograph – of Ernaux’s self at that point in time. Composite photographs, popular towards the end of the nineteenth and

the beginning of the twentieth century, were made up of separate semi-transparent images of a group of individuals which were superimposed on one another to produce a single image, with the aim of revealing the ‘type’ to which the individuals belonged.² The practice was used to detect family resemblances and shared traits, and is an apt metaphor, in my view, for Ernaux’s multiple and synoptic self-portraits which become superimposed upon one another in the consciousness of her reader.

By contrasting the differing images of her ‘self’ in 1989 obtained from these separate sources, I ultimately hope to show that all of these writings are connected if not pre-prepared elements of Ernaux’s long-term auto-ethnological project, and that the most complete – and most formally innovative – version of her ‘self’ is the collective impression that emerges from considering all of these different and at times contradictory portraits. Philippe Lejeune, speaking in 2004 after the publication of *Se perdre*, describes the co-existence of her diaries and récits in the public sphere as a new genre of self-writing: ‘c’est presque comme une “installation” – qui dépasse la notion d’œuvre fermée ou de texte’.³ I will show how, with the further addition of *Journal du dehors* and *L’Atelier noir* to the collection, the ‘installation’ becomes even more multifaceted, and sheds further light on Ernaux’s use of photography in writing about the self.

Diaries and photography

Hervé Guibert characterises diaries as a photographic form of writing: he describes both Goethe’s letters from Italy and Kafka’s diaries as ‘une écriture photographique’: ‘la trace la plus récente de la mémoire, [...] comme quelque chose qui semble encore vibrer sur la rétine, c’est de l’impression, presque de l’instantané.’⁴ Guibert’s description almost dispenses with the diarist as transcriber of the impression, inasmuch as the ‘trace’ seems to appear of itself – as would be the

case in photography – as an already visible print on a photosensitive surface, analogous to the retina.

Ernaux's diary entries – both internal and external – similarly ignore, on the whole, the extradiegetic role played by the diarist: the writer is relegated to the background whilst her emotions, observations and impressions take centre stage.⁵ In her external diaries, Ernaux explicitly sees her role as that of a photographer, more specifically of the kind who practises 'straight photography': a transcriber of impressions who attempts to remain as invisible and non-interventionist as possible. Accordingly, these diaries contain scenes which are clearly of the 'outside': from the city's supermarkets, its streets, its RER carriages. In her 1996 preface to the second edition of *Journal du dehors* (the first edition had contained no preface), Ernaux wrote that her aim in the book had been to practise a 'photographic' writing:

j'ai cherché à pratiquer une sorte d'écriture photographique du réel, dans laquelle les existences croisées conserveraient leur opacité et leur énigme. (Plus tard, en voyant les photographies que Paul Strand a faites [...] – les êtres sont là, seulement là –, je penserai me trouver devant un idéal, inaccessible, de l'écriture.⁶

I will show later that this is indeed an impossible ideal, and that her 'self' still remains faintly – but crucially – visible in these entries.

In her 'internal' diaries, Ernaux does not use the term 'photographique' to describe her style or aims, but makes use of related metaphors all suggesting that her diary entries are actual traces of her passage through time. In *Se perdre*, she refers to the type of writing contained in it as an 'écriture immédiate'.⁷ Her description suggests that the words which make up her entries are not so much a result of an act of composition as dictations from reality, almost like material deposits on the paper: 'Les mots qui se sont déposés sur le papier pour saisir des pensées, des sensations à un moment donné ont pour moi un caractère aussi irréversible que le temps' (*SP*,

preface). Elsewhere too, Ernaux declares that she would never change a word in her diaries, let alone consider rewriting them; they are the raw material of her experience. This attitude is especially prevalent in the works in which photography plays an important role. In *L'Usage de la photo*, Ernaux compares her writing to stains, and then links both to photography:

Je m'aperçois que je suis fascinée par les photos comme je le suis depuis mon enfance par les taches de sang, de sperme, d'urine, déposées sur les draps ou les vieux matelas [...]. Les taches les plus matérielles, organiques. Je me rends compte que j'attends la même chose de l'écriture. Je voudrais que les mots soient comme des taches auxquelles on ne parvient pas à s'arracher.⁸

Like the series of images she created with a former lover, Philippe Vilain, composed of his sperm and her menstrual blood on pieces of paper,⁹ one of her ideal models for writing is the indelible stain, an ungainsayable trace of 'ça-a-été';¹⁰ and this is the kind of writing contained, as we will see, in her diaries.

Se perdre and Passion simple

These two volumes give us the fullest account of what Ernaux, or at least a part of her, was going through in 1989: as mentioned earlier, *Se perdre* – although only published in 2001 – is the diary she kept from autumn 1988, throughout 1989 and into 1990, for the full length of the affair she was having with the unnamed Russian diplomat and its aftermath, another account of which she published subsequently as *Passion simple* in 1991. The preface to *Se perdre* tells us about the relationship between the diary and the 'book':

Après son [S.'s] départ de France, j'ai entrepris un livre sur cette passion qui m'avait traversée et continuait de vivre en moi. Je l'ai poursuivi de façon discontinue, achevé en 1991 et publié en 1992 : *Passion simple*. [...]

En janvier ou février 2000, j'ai commencé de relire les cahiers de mon journal correspondant à l'année de ma passion pour S., que je n'avais pas ouverts depuis cinq ans. [...] Je me suis aperçue qu'il y avait dans ces pages une 'vérité' autre que celle contenue dans *Passion*

simple. Quelque chose de cru et de noir, sans salut, quelque chose de l'oblation. J'ai pensé que cela aussi devait être porté au jour. (*SP*, p. 14)

Se perdre, at first sight, is very much what one might expect the diary of an affair to be. The progress of the affair is chronicled through descriptions of their meetings, the long periods of her waiting, her feelings, dreams and imaginings, and passages of self-analysis. The style is concise, at times to the point of being telegraphic, often written in one-word sentences which are essentially notes, frequently dispensing with verbs and articles. The diarist is never to be found in the extradiegetic position which would offer some perspective on the external or psychological events taking place: the events are simply offered, seemingly unmediated and unedited, to the reader.

On the level of discourse rather than syntax, the prioritisation of notation over narrative results in the inclusion of lists. There are numerous lists in *Se perdre*, sometimes numbered, sometimes not, but their abbreviated form always creates a sense that the items in question – be they 'external' or 'internal' – are being described objectively, presented as 'photographs':

Début de cahier. Souhais : avoir une relation de plus en plus forte avec S. – écrire comme je le désire un livre plus vaste à partir de début 89 – ne pas avoir de problèmes d'argent. (*SP*, p. 40)

20 h 45. L'appel. Chaque fois, le 'destin', l'appel téléphonique, le signe venu de l'au-delà, cette frayeur, ce bonheur aussitôt. Quand je décroche, la peur atroce que ce soit un faux signe, une erreur du même destin. C'est lui. Pour demain, seize heures. Et c'est le ravageur bonheur, l'effacement instantané d'une angoisse qui, ce soir, était au paroxysme... (*SP*, p. 55)

Both of these sequences are structurally reminiscent of various passages in the external diaries; their formal independence from the narrative, as lists, suggests an objectivity which associates them with Ernaux's view of photography. At times this quality of detachment results in a certain black humour:

Déceptions aujourd'hui :

- 1) il ne m'a toujours pas dit les mots tendres attendus
- 2) après la rencontre à France-URSS, il est reparti avec les filles de l'ambassade sans me raccompagner à Cergy.
- 3) Et je m'aperçois que mon article sur la Révolution est d'une nullité glaçante. (*SP*, p. 53)

Another narrative mode frequently employed by Ernaux in her diary is the brief description, which she refers to as 'scènes'; these are verbal 'snapshots' of her memories or inner states, distinctly photographic or cinematographic in character. The beginning of the affair in Leningrad is introduced retrospectively in this mode:

Trois scènes se détachent. Le soir (dimanche) dans sa chambre, lorsque nous étions assis l'un près de l'autre [...] Puis les autres s'en vont (Marie R., Irène, R.V.P.) mais F. s'incrute, il m'attend pour partir aussi. [...]

Second moment, lundi après-midi. Quand j'ai fini de faire ma valise, il frappe à la porte de ma chambre. Dans l'entrée, nous nous caressons. [...]

Dernier moment, dans le train de nuit, pour Moscou. Nous nous embrassons au bout du wagon, ma tête près d'un extincteur. (*SP*, pp. 17–18)

Told in the present tense, these scenes are presented as three snapshots, as 'evidence' of the key moments summarising the start of the affair.

As mentioned earlier, both the lists and photograph-like scenes ignore, by their very nature, the presence of the diarist: they are offered as material from her real experience, and not woven into a sense-making narrative.¹¹ Although patently emanating from a single consciousness, there is nothing in *Se perdre* that indicates the presence of an extradiegetic narrator. Told in a mix of the present, passé composé and occasionally the future tenses, the entries fully occupy the narrator's present, with little or no perspective on the narratorial future. Quite frequently there are references to memories from the past – 'revu avec lui *César et Rosalie*, que j'avais été voir avec Philippe à Genève, l'été 72' (*SP*, p. 89) – but these usually point out repetitions, rather than

developments, in her behaviour. The overall effect creates for the reader an overwhelming sense of living in, experiencing, Ernaux's present.

Because it is a diary, *Se perdre* does not – cannot, by definition – offer hindsight or perspective; what it does offer is a wealth of raw material which Ernaux appears to be collecting – at times consciously – for later use. In *Journal du dehors*, Ernaux wrote that

il y deux démarches possibles face aux faits réels. Ou bien les relater avec précision, dans leur brutalité, leur caractère instantané, hors de tout récit, ou les mettre de côté pour les faire (éventuellement) 'servir', entrer dans un ensemble (roman par exemple)' (*JD*, p. 85).

Here in *Se perdre*, Ernaux is carrying out the first of her 'démarches', collecting material for her auto-ethnological project. The ethnologist-diarist's position, if s/he is conscientious, should be that of a collector of material who is unable (as yet) to organise it into a story ('dans un ensemble'). This is why there is no extradiegetic narrator here, no overarching vision guiding Ernaux's choice of material.

There are just a few self-reflexive moments in *Se perdre* which indicate Ernaux's awareness of her *lack* of awareness. At one point she muses that it would be better if her diary had two columns, 'l'un pour l'écriture immédiate, l'autre pour l'interprétation, quelques semaines après' (*SP*, p. 88). At other times, Ernaux redescribes the diarist's lack of perspective as an inability to write. She is of course writing, in her diary, but what she means is that she is unable to write a book for the public. On two consecutive days in 1989, she explains why she needs to, but cannot, write such a book:

Samedi 8

Je ne sais pas ce que je vais commencer d'écrire, ni si même j'écrirai. [...] Nuit où le désir de mort était si fort [...] La raison n'en est pas vraiment S. – la lucidité étant maintenant un peu plus acquise sur notre relation – mais la *nécessité absolue d'écrire*, que je distingue mal de la douleur de vivre apparue depuis la fin avril. C'est-à-dire que je suis dans le creux où fusionnent mort,

écriture, sexe, voyant leur relation mais ne pouvant la surmonter. La dévider en *un livre*. (*SP*, p. 166)

The kind of writing she is unable to do at this stage involves the telling of truth, the kind of truth which can only come from perspective ('la surmonter'). But at this stage in her affair, Ernaux cannot do this. Even if she has acquired some lucidity, as she says above, she still does not know the *truth*, as she explains to herself the next day:

Dimanche 9

Il fallait que la vérité se fasse pour que j'écrive. Mais il n'y a pas plus de vérité qu'avant, simplement un changement de croyances. (*SP*, p. 167)

In her current state, truth is out of her reach; even when she feels lucid, she is aware that it may simply be 'un changement de croyances'. The only thing about which she is certain is that her lack of knowledge stops her from writing. In other words, Ernaux's need to write *is* her need for perspective, for an 'afterwards', which by definition is impossible to come by in the present. And she knows that becoming able to write in this 'truth-telling' way, understanding her experience in a language that others will understand, will mean that her affair will have to be over. This is evident from the entry of 9th November, in which she tentatively envisages such a project:

Livre qui pourrait commencer par: 'Du tant au tant j'ai vécu une passion', etc. La décrire minutieusement. C'est alors renoncer à revoir S., définitivement [...]. Le désespoir, je l'entrevois. C'est de croire qu'il n'y aura aucun livre capable de m'aider à comprendre ce que je vis. Et surtout de croire que je ne pourrai, moi, écrire un tel livre. (*SP*, p. 234-35)

'C'est alors renoncer à revoir S., définitivement' may sound like a superstitious thought (especially because S. had told her, at one point, that she must not write a book about him), but it is also, proleptically, an acknowledgement that the affair will have to be over for her to become able to write 'truthfully' about it.

The book that she eventually does write, *Passion simple*, is much more structured than *Se perdre*. The object of the work is not to tell a *story* – ‘je ne fais pas le récit d’une liaison, je ne raconte pas une histoire [...] avec une chronologie précise’¹² – but to describe her passion for her lover A., a state which certainly had a beginning and an end, but during which she had no sense of chronology: ‘je ne connaissais que la présence ou l’absence’. The way in which she decides to evoke this state is by offering the reader material signs of it:

Je ne fais pas le récit d’une liaison, je ne raconte pas une histoire [...]. J’accumule seulement les signes d’une passion, oscillant sans cesse entre ‘toujours’ et ‘un jour’, comme si cet inventaire allait me permettre d’atteindre la réalité de cette passion. [...]

Je ne veux pas expliquer ma passion [...] mais simplement l’exposer. (*PS*, pp. 31–2)

Through these signs, she aims to recreate the reality of her passion.¹³ At the same time, her use here of the verb ‘exposer’ creates a link with photography which allows us to imagine the whole of this book as a photographic image of her passion, the opposite of a narrative (‘je ne raconte pas une histoire’); a metaphor which gains in validity when we begin to read the book and discover in it an absence of chronological development.

In *Passion simple*, Ernaux recounts the things she used to do during the period of her passion in the imperfect tense, with occasional list-like sections inserted into the narrative, as was the case in *Se perdre*:

J’allais au supermarché, au cinéma, je portais des vêtements au pressing, je lisais, je corrigeais des copies, j’agissais exactement comme avant, mais sans une longue accoutumance de ces actes, cela m’aurait été impossible [...].

Les seules actions où j’engageais ma volonté, mon désir et quelque chose qui doit être l’intelligence humaine (prévoir, évaluer le pour et le contre, les conséquences) avaient toutes un lien avec cet homme:

lire dans le journal les articles sur son pays (il était étranger)

choisir des toilettes et des maquillages

lui écrire des lettres

changer les draps du lit et mettre des fleurs dans la chambre [...]. (*PS*, pp. 13–14)

This use of the imperfect, which she describes later in the book in a metanarrative aside as ‘celui d’une durée que je ne voulais pas finie, celui de “en ce temps-là la vie était plus belle”, d’une répétition éternelle’ (*PS*, p. 61), creates – together with the infinitive tense for the listed activities – an impression of timelessness; that is, a sense that nothing progresses or develops during this circumscribed period of time, just the continuation of the affair in an ever-present state of passion. The effect is very much that of a photograph, a static image about which we learn more as the pages accumulate, but only because it takes us (and her) some time to describe its surface area. In *Se perdre*, the ebb and flow of her jealousy, for instance, is more clearly chronicled, as is the apparent diminishing of the lover’s interest and his visits from spring 1989 onwards, but in *Passion simple* this latter development, for instance, is described simply, and as an almost static state: ‘au printemps, mon attente est devenue continue’ (*PS*, p. 43).

After the narrative has recounted the fact of A.’s departure from France in November 1989, the time of the narrative slowly catches up with the time of the narration, until they meet in the present: ‘maintenant, c’est avril’ (*PS*, p. 66). In a footnote, Ernaux notices the change from imperfect to present tense, assigns the former to the time of her passion and the latter to the time after it, before reminding us again that all she can do in this text is to ‘m’arrêter sur des images, isoler des signes d’une réalité’ (*PS*, p. 67). Like the objects she keeps as signs of his now past existence in her life, such as the bathrobe he used to put on after making love, the images and signs collected in her text might be said to resemble the photographic writing of her diaries. But there is a crucial difference between the ‘raw material’ in *Se perdre* and *Passion simple*; their arrangement, or rather, their framing. In *Se perdre* every entry is an image, a snapshot of Ernaux’s inner state or an event in her present, with no context or frame except for a date and/or time; whereas in *Passion simple*, the single ‘photograph’ of her passion is framed by the narrative of her writing project, her self-conscious attempt to record her actions, rearranged as single

enunciations of iterative gestures ('choisir des toilettes et des maquillages') repeated over a period of time which is now in the past. The extradiegetic presence of the narrator, although she is clearly still very close to her past story, creates a distance which both generalises and fictionalises the experience of the 'raw material' for the reader.

The coda-like account of A.'s brief return to Paris in January 1991 also adds perspective to the overall presentation of her passion in this book, as Ernaux herself acknowledges:

J'ai l'impression que ce retour n'a pas eu lieu. Il n'est nulle part dans le temps de notre histoire, juste une date, 20 janvier. [...] Pourtant, c'est ce retour, irréel, presque inexistant, qui donne à ma passion tout son sens, qui est de ne pas en avoir, d'avoir été pendant deux ans la réalité la plus violente qui soit et la moins explicable. (*PS*, pp. 74–5)

It is simply – but powerfully – the existence of an 'afterwards', the passage of time which allows her to think of her passion as past that differentiates the two works: although they contain the same material, one remains purely photographic, containing 'quelque chose de cru et de noir, sans *salut*' (*PS*, p. 14, my emphasis), whereas in the other, Ernaux is *saved* through writing. If redemption can be achieved through time, the writing of it as well as its simple passage, *Passion simple* achieves such redemption, whereas the lack of redemption in *Se perdre* comes from the writer's ignorance of the future, her imprisonment in the present. As Lejeune points out, 'ce qui a été écrit en 1988–90 l'a été, chaque jour, dans l'ignorance (et l'attente !) du lendemain, et dans l'ignorance du récit qui en serait fait.'¹⁴

And this is precisely what the diary entry shares with photography; an inability to know the future. In *La Chambre claire*, Barthes's account of this characteristic of photography is presented as a frightening experience because it is described from the viewer's perspective, and focuses on the imminence of death in the future of the photograph;

devant la photo de ma mère enfant, je me dis : elle va mourir : je frémis, tel le psychotique de Winnicott, *d'une catastrophe qui a déjà eu lieu*. Que le sujet soit déjà mort ou non, toute photographie est cette catastrophe.¹⁵

Reading *Se perdre* and *Passion simple*, the reader can experience the perspectives of both the photographed subject and the later viewer's perspective, and the effects are different from those described by Barthes. The ignorance of the future in *Se perdre* – its subject's imprisonment in the present – is what makes it so difficult, although also so gripping, to read; whereas for the reader of *Passion simple*, the photograph-like raw material of Ernaux's passion is placed within the context of an 'afterwards' which is not death (unlike in Barthes's example) but life beyond passion. *Se perdre* shows us what it would be like to live inside a photograph; *Passion simple* shows us what it is like to look at one, knowing that its subject has survived the experience depicted therein.

Journal du dehors and L'Atelier noir

There are only a few pages dating from 1989 in *Journal du dehors*, and in none of them is there even a hint of a reference to Ernaux's affair with A. (or S.). Instead, most of the entries are observations of human behaviour in public spaces, snapshots like the one below: 'Une jeune fille déballe ses achats dans le RER, un chemisier, des boucles d'oreilles. Elles les regarde, les touche. Scène fréquente. Bonheur de posséder quelque chose de beau, désir de beauté réalisé' (*JD*, p. 87).

There is one long entry made in Florence, and if we cross-reference the dates with those in *Se perdre* and *Passion simple* we realise that it must have been written on the occasion of an anguished trip during which she wandered through the streets and museums wishing she was back in France with her lover, but the entry in *Journal du dehors* is all about the middle-aged male attendant who supervises the ladies' toilets in the Palazzo Vecchio (see *JD*, pp. 88–9). The

week spent in Florence is chronicled in great detail in *Se perdre*, which lists all the places Ernaux visits, and describes how she is accompanied everywhere by the thought of S.; the one place name that is not mentioned is the Palazzo Vecchio. This absence would seem to be a consequence of Ernaux's conscious decision, mentioned in the introductory section of this essay, to avoid inserting personal thoughts and feelings into these external diaries. Certainly at first and even second glance, the overall impression is that she has succeeded in doing so.

However, in the preface added afterwards to *Journal du dehors*, Ernaux admits that it has been impossible to keep herself entirely out of her writing: 'Mais, finalement, j'ai mis de moi-même beaucoup plus que prévu dans ces textes : obsessions, souvenirs, déterminant inconsciemment le choix de la parole, de la scène à fixer' (*JD*, pp. 9–10). I have discussed in more detail elsewhere how the image of Ernaux's self which results from these details – her obsessions and memories which dictate the choice of her words and scenes – is similar to the shadow in a photograph cast by the photographer, a mark of the self left from its attempts to record scenes from the outside.¹⁶ This 'mark' might be said to denote a structural position, in the sense that the photographer's shadow – to continue with the analogy – reveals his position vis-à-vis his material, the angle of his camera, his choice of light source, and so on: in narrative terms, the image would correspond roughly to Genette's description of the narrator, whom he breaks down into point of view and narrative voice.¹⁷ Ernaux's own description of her 'je' in an essay matches this view of the narrator as a position rather than a person: 'le je que j'utilise me semble une forme impersonnelle'.¹⁸

But Ernaux is not only the shadowy photographer of the external diaries; she is also the photosensitive surface on which the images are recorded. I have suggested elsewhere that Genette's division of the narrator into voice and point of view, in *Figures III*, leads him to neglect the existence of the narrating consciousness, the space of the narrator's self-awareness.¹⁹

It is this space Ernaux is referring to when, in her description of her transpersonal ‘je’, she speaks of ‘un moyen [...] de saisir, *dans mon expérience*, les signes d’une réalité familiale, sociale ou passionnelle’.²⁰ In Ernaux’s external diaries, her consciousness is the space in which the everyday scenes from her urban life are brought into existence, and across which they are free to trample. Unsurprisingly, it is an invasive experience, as she describes it: ‘je suis traversée par les gens, leur existence, comme une putain’ (*JD*, p. 69).

In both of these ways – both as the photographer’s shadow which leaves a mark on her snapshot of the city, and as the photosensitive surface on which all these other existences can be played out – Ernaux’s self is present in her external diaries. And it is in these ways also that she sees herself as existing not just within her own body, but in the bodies of others, dispersed throughout the city as we go about our business in the same urban space. At the very end of *Journal du dehors*, Ernaux describes how a random woman she notices on the RER reminds her of her own mother, then comments: ‘c’est donc au-dehors, dans les passagers du métro ou du RER, [...] qu’est déposée mon existence passée [...], dans des individus anonymes qui ne soupçonnent pas qu’ils détiennent une part de mon histoire’ (*JD*, pp. 106–7).²¹ And the last entry of 1989 brings a flash of self-recognition:

Dans le métro, un garçon et une fille se parlent avec violence et se caressent, alternativement, comme s’il n’y avait personne autour d’eux. Mais c’est faux : de temps en temps ils regardent les voyageurs avec défi. Impression terrible. Je me dis que la littérature est cela pour moi. (*JD*, p. 91)

The shadow of the photographer in this snapshot is particularly interesting because it is a *double* shadow: of Ernaux the passionate lover, constantly preoccupied with S. and therefore quick to notice lovers everywhere, but also of Ernaux the professional writer who recognises, in the suburban adolescents, her own desire to expose her most intimate self in her writings. It is a moment in which one feature in the composite photograph suddenly gains in clarity, through the

alignment of that feature in all of the verbal snapshots; the image of Ernaux the writer of intimacy surfaces through the layers of *Se perdre*, *Passion simple* and *Journal du dehors*, as it will do again in *L'Atelier noir*.

One might have thought that writing about her tumultuous love life in *Se perdre*, and ‘photographing’ the external world (and the self in it) in *Journal du dehors* would have been enough diary-writing for Ernaux in 1989: but we now know that she also kept a third diary. *L'Atelier noir* is a transcription of her notes on various writing projects, taken from a separate record that she has kept since 1982. The title is suggestive of the darkroom, and indeed the book contains the thoughts and ideas with which Ernaux experiments prior to their ‘development’, so to speak, into what she considers to be publishable writing, or to their metaphorical ‘exposure’ to the outside world. It is not exactly a ‘journal d’écriture’, as it does not contain her drafts or plans: it is a *pre-writing* diary, inasmuch as it stops each time she starts writing a book. Correspondingly, the entries for 1989, during which she did not write a book, are quite numerous. And in these entries it is possible to see glimpses of her affair, but the references to ‘S.’ in this diary are, without exception, completely professional. It is as material for her work – even during her affair – that her feelings about S. are being regarded, in spite of all the genuine heartache and crises of jealousy recorded in *Se perdre*: these are very clearly snapshots of her self as writing machine, not as passionate woman. It is not even the case, I believe, that writing about her affair in this clinical way is an attempt at distancing herself from her feelings, at self-protection: the situation seems rather to be the other way round, that she sees her own suffering as an opportunity to observe new patterns of behaviour in action. This is Ernaux at her auto-ethnological best, poised to gather raw material for her professional self from her personal one.²²

So although *L'Atelier noir* reveals that in 1989 Ernaux considered writing, at various points, a book on the relationship between writing and sex, an erotic novel, the beauty of the male body and a book on the Soviet Union, these are all 'work' thoughts. Just once, she complains that 'actuellement, je "cherche" mais dans un tel état de douleur affective (à cause de S.) que je ne suis pas sûre de chercher réellement' (*AN*, p. 58). But even this observation develops into a thought, by the end of the paragraph, about the advantages of the third-person pronoun: 'Est-ce que la solution, la libération, ne serait pas choisir "elle", la mise à distance ? "Elle" qui, suivant Genette, permet plus que le "je"' (*AN*, p. 58).

There are numerous entries in 1989 about her long-term project, the book which would eventually be published as *Les Années*; indeed, if one had not read *Se perdre*, one might be forgiven for thinking that this book project was her chief obsession during this year. For instance, in the 23rd July entry of *L'Atelier noir*, Ernaux sounds utterly absorbed by her structural problems: she complains that 'je sens que je manque de repères, cadres (savoir ce que je veux démontrer indirectement, c'est-à-dire le cadre idéologiquement conscient' (*AN*, p. 61). But her *Se perdre* entry of the same day, by contrast, shows her observing a depressing – or comforting? – continuity between her past and present selves, in an almost stereotypical posture of the languishing lover unable to concentrate on anything else: 'relu agenda 63, l'attente de Ph., à Rome. [...] le moi d'hier, à Rome, était celui d'aujourd'hui, et les deux hommes une ombre unique, celle de S. plus longue et plus douce' (*SP*, pp. 173-74).

Similarly, on the same date that the earlier quotation from *Se perdre* was written, 9th July 1989, and in which she analyses her acute emotional suffering, Ernaux is jotting down – in her *L'Atelier noir* notebook – completely professional thoughts about the structure of *Les Années*:

9 juillet

Il faut, en premier lieu, évidemment, déterminer le projet global: qui oscille entre la ‘somme romanesque’, objective, ‘établie’ avec ‘personnages’ et la quête, encore que les 2 ne soient pas incompatibles, Autant en emporte le vent et Proust (‘je’?).

La structure de ‘géométrie variable’ en fonction du projet, de la possibilité d’ajouter des choses extérieures (journal d’écriture, etc.). (*AN*, p. 60)

On 15th November 1989, Ernaux writes that one of her main aims is to achieve ‘le réalisme le plus extrême, le moins de différence entre la vie et la littérature’ (*AN*, p. 63). From then on into December of that year, that is to say immediately following the departure of S. from France, we see a few more entries in this ‘writing diary’ reminiscent of the ones from her actual diary: that is, entries in which she seems to be expressing her feelings for him. But on closer inspection it becomes clear that they are attempts to turn her life almost directly into writing, perhaps to achieve the ‘extreme realism’ she was aiming at in November. The following are instances of such life-into-writing entries:

19 novembre

Je pense à ma façon d’aimer S.: ‘Aimer, c’est passer le doigt sur cette courbe des hanches’, etc. Elle ne peut que s’inscrire dans une histoire, mon histoire et l’Histoire.

[...]

Toutes les nuits, je refais son corps, etc.

‘J’ai cessé d’écrire au mois de... De toute façon ce n’était pas fameux, absence de nécessité. Il faisait chaud.’ (*AN*, pp. 64–5)

At first glance these may seem to be evocations of longing, descriptions of how she is missing S.; and in a sense, of course, they are, except that she is – by using quotation marks, and the abrupt and self-aware ‘etc’ – immediately channelling her emotion into an act of creation, fuelling her writing. ‘Je pense à ma façon d’aimer S.’ might, arguably, be the ‘real’ Ernaux thinking back to her time with her lover, but what follows is put into quotation marks, and thereby transferred into the world of writing: “‘Aimer, c’est passer le doigt sur cette courbe des hanches”, etc.’ The ‘etc.’ is particularly effective as a demystifying device, reminding us (and herself) that her ‘façon

d'aimer S.' is now reserved purely for narrative use: 'Elle ne peut que s'inscrire dans une histoire, mon histoire et l'Histoire.'

The second part of the quotation occupies an even more beguiling position between lived memory and writing, partly because it seems to describe something she is doing in the present, and partly because of the subtle use of quotation marks. 'Toutes les nuits, je refais son corps' sounds like something she is 'really' doing, and indeed it may be that she is. However, the quiet 'etc' added to the end of the sentence inserts the possibility of self-reflexivity; is she writing about something she is doing, a Proustian iterative, or is she trying the sentence out for her book? Is it an intra- or extradiegetic sentence? "'J'ai cessé d'écrire au mois de...'" is clearly an incipit, with the ellipsis indicating a date to be filled in, but the self-reflexive-sounding "'De toute façon ce n'était pas fameux, absence de nécessité. Il faisait chaud'" casts some doubt on its status. Is the whole sentence a trial incipit for her book? Or is the 'de toute façon ce n'était pas fameux' a metanarrative aside?

I want to call these attempts by Ernaux to work on her own feelings even as she is still feeling them – to create a story out of her living emotions – attempts at self-vivisection: a writer first and foremost, she dissects herself in her diary entries, but in her 'writing' diary the process is at its most complicated and dangerous. These attempts to work on her living flesh, so to speak, give us these fascinating moments in which Ernaux is both observer and observed, writing as an objective and subjective self at the same time. They encapsulate the uneasy mix of private and public life, personal conviction and public truth that characterize Ernaux's best work: her aim, as she has said in various books, is to 'écrire dangereusement' (*AN*, p. 57),²³ to carry out in writing what the adolescent couple, 'photographed' in 1989 in *Journal du dehors*, were doing on the métro.

My attempt in this essay to create a ‘portrait of Ernaux in 1989’ by bringing together fragmented images from various sources may not be what Ernaux would wish her readers to do, given that these sources are dispersed throughout her œuvre, and published at different times. Yet all of these works, apart from *L’Atelier noir* which was published in the same year, are collected in *Écrire la vie*. Any ‘œuvres complètes’ project must (by definition) unite an author’s separate works, but in the case of an auto-ethnological writer like Ernaux, such a bringing together of self-writings – especially with the prefatory collection of photographs and diary entries – both challenges the notion of the completeness of each individual work and reconstructs a blurred but fascinating vision of multiple images of the same person. Like a cubist portrait which defies the laws of perspective to show different and irreconcilable aspects of the same person at the same time, or a moving portrait that shows the painter at work at the same time as the painter as sitter, Ernaux’s diaries track her self in and through her writing, which both divides and unites her, makes her both subject and object, adding ever more layers to her composite photograph.

¹ Annie Ernaux, *Écrire la vie*, p. 37.

² See Peter Hamilton and Roger Hargreaves, *The Beautiful and The Damned: The Creation of Identity in Nineteenth Century Photography* (London: Lund Humphries/National Portrait Gallery, 2001), pp. 63-75.

³ ‘Entretien d’Annie Ernaux avec Philippe Lejeune’, in *Annie Ernaux: une œuvre de l’entre-deux*, ed. by Fabrice Thumerel (Arras: Artois Presses Université, 2004), pp. 253-58 (p. 255).

⁴ Hervé Guibert, *L’Image fantôme* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1981), p. 74.

⁵ In *Journal du dehors*, ‘the subjective component in the event’ is never made explicit, and can only be inferred. Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 321–2.

⁶ Annie Ernaux, *Journal du dehors* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), p. 9. The reference to Paul Strand seems to confirm that her ideal photographer is one who practises straight photography, who sees him/herself not so much as an artist as a recorder of reality.

⁷ Annie Ernaux, *Se perdre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p. 88.

⁸ Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie, *L’Usage de la photo* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 74.

⁹ See Shirley Jordan, ‘Improper exposure: *L’Usage de la Photo* by Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie’, *Journal of Romance Studies*, 7:2 (2007), 123–41 (p. 134); Philippe Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse* (Paris: Grasset, 2005), pp. 56–7. See also Annie Ernaux, ‘Fragments autour de Philippe V.’, *L’Infini* 56 (1996), pp. 25–6.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: note sur la photographie* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma / Gallimard / Seuil, 1980), p. 120.

¹¹ Of course, photographs presented as having a documentary function nevertheless contain the potential to create a reality rather than illustrate it, and Ernaux, as we will see, is aware of the biased status of her photographic ‘evidence’. For a discussion of this issue see Johnnie Gratton, ‘Illustration Revisited: Phototextual Exchange and Resistance in Sophie Calle’s *Suite vénitienne*’, in *Textual and Visual Selves: Photography Film and Comic Art in French Autobiography*, ed. by Natalie Edwards, Amy L. Hubbell and Ann Miller (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), pp. 139–66.

¹² Annie Ernaux, *Passion simple* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 31.

¹³ Ernaux’s goal, as a writer, of ‘atteindre la réalité de cette passion’ will return in *L’Usage de la photo* (p. 13).

¹⁴ ‘Entretien d’Annie Ernaux avec Philippe Lejeune’, p. 255.

¹⁵ Barthes, *La Chambre claire*, p. 150.

¹⁶ Akane Kawakami, *Photobiography: Photographic Self-Writing in Proust, Guibert, Ernaux and Macé* (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), ch. 3.

¹⁷ See Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 203–24.

¹⁸ Ernaux, ‘Vers un je transpersonnel’, in *Autofictions et Cie*, ed. by Serge Doubrovsky, Jacques Lecarme and Philippe Lejeune (Paris: Université Paris X, RITM, 1993), pp. 219–21 (p. 221).

¹⁹ ‘The narrator’s world is the fictional world that the narrator inhabits, as distinct from the world of the story that he/she creates: it [...] is crucial to the organisation of the narrative.’ Akane Kawakami, *A Self-Conscious Art: Patrick Modiano’s Postmodern Fictions* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), p. 9.

²⁰ Ernaux, ‘Vers un je transpersonnel’, p. 221 (my emphasis).

²¹ This conclusion harks back to the book’s epigraph: ‘Notre *vrai* moi n’est pas tout entier en nous (Rousseau)’.

²² This is similar to what Hervé Guibert does in *Cytomégalo*virus, his hospital diary: for an extensive discussion see Kawakami, *Photobiography*, ch. 2.

²³ See also Annie Ernaux, *L’Écriture comme un couteau. Entretien avec Frédéric-Yves Jeannet* (Paris: Stock, 2002).