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Position Paper:

### Collective Memory and Autobiography: Annie Ernaux's *Les Années*

How can autobiography, the writing of self, transmit collective memory? Collective memory enters André Gide's *Si le grain ne meurt* (1926) momentarily when the narrator remembers as a child having seen the Prussian army march through Rouen in 1870. Chronologically, this is impossible as André was too young at the time to have recalled this. So we have an instance of the individual fabulating his witnessing of a Historical event because his memory has been inflected by French collective memory of the Prussian Occupation of 1870-71.<sup>1</sup> (This fabulation could be paralleled to that of the claim of Nicholas Sarkozy on Facebook to have been at the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989.<sup>2</sup>) Collective memory is ushered out of Gide's text through its proximity to false memory, or inauthenticity.

From Augustine to Rousseau to Gide to the present, the autobiographical mode has tended to privilege the individual over the collectivity,<sup>3</sup> and to strive towards what Annie Ernaux in her autobiography *Les Années* describes as 'a

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanette Winterson speaks of this intermingling of fabulation and history: 'I am a fiction writer, and I began by writing a book partly about my own life. What is remembered and what is invented is no longer clear. Was it ever clear? I doubt it' (Rosanna Greenstreet, 'Q&A: Jeanette Winterson', *Guardian*, 5 December 2009, section Weekend).

<sup>2</sup> See Arnaud Leparmentier and Nabil Wakim, 'Nicolas Sarkozy n'a pas assisté à la chute du Mur le soir du 9 novembre 1989', *Le Monde*, 11 November 2009.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, in French Studies, the works and strategies discussed in Angelica Goodden, *The Backward Look: Memory and the Writing Self in France 1580-1920* (Oxford: Legenda, 2000) and Claire Boyle, *Consuming Autobiographies: Reading and Writing the Self in Post-War France* (Oxford: Legenda, 2007).

palimpsest time' (un temps palimpseste),<sup>4</sup> whereby the autobiographer uncovers from forgetting past events from his/her life and endeavours to recreate the sensations experienced at these moments. In *Les Paradis artificiels* (1860), Charles Baudelaire, drawing on Thomas De Quincey's essay, 'The Palimpsest of the Human Brain' (1845), elaborates an analogy between the palimpsest and memory. The palimpsest is a parchment upon which earlier texts are covered up by layers of new writing; De Quincey describes it as 'a membrane or roll cleansed of its manuscript by reiterated successions'.<sup>5</sup> His reference to the brain as 'the deep memorial palimpsest' and mention in a note of the aged concentrating 'the light of their memory upon scenes of early childhood' presage Baudelaire's foregrounding of memory in 'Le Palimpseste'.<sup>6</sup> 'the palimpsest of memory' (le palimpseste de la mémoire) is divine, immense, complicated and indestructible; 'memory' (mémoire) recurs four times.<sup>7</sup> Baudelaire's context is that of the solipsistic, individualistic Romantic, searching to reanimate all memories at once through near-death moments or drug stimulants or force of memory. He cites De Quincey: 'Like the annual leaves of aboriginal forests, or the undissolving snows on the Himalaya, or light falling upon light, the endless strata have covered up each other in forgetfulness' (p. 215); 'everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings have fallen upon your brain as softly as light' (p. 213). Although each layer appears to bury the previous one, embalming it in forgetting, in reality, none perish and all are

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<sup>4</sup> Annie Ernaux, *Les Années* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), p. 237. All translations are my own.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas De Quincey, 'The Palimpsest of the Human Brain', 1845, in Patrick Madden (ed.), *Quotidiana*, <[http://essays.quotidiana.org/dequincey/palimpsest\\_of\\_the\\_human\\_brain/](http://essays.quotidiana.org/dequincey/palimpsest_of_the_human_brain/)> [accessed 20 February 2010].

<sup>6</sup> De Quincey's use of 'membrane' and '*membrana*' as synonyms for parchment or vellum may also have influenced Baudelaire's focus on memory, although according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the two words are etymologically distinct.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'Le Palimpseste', in *Les Paradis artificiels*, 1860, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Le Club du meilleur livre, 1961), pp. 213-15, p. 215.

recoverable. An example of the autobiographical palimpsest is when the narrator of Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography *Speak, Memory* recalls vividly a snowscape from the country house outside St Petersburg of his childhood in the early twentieth-century, and then zooms out or is transported to the distant place and future time of remembering (1950s America):

Very lovely, very lonesome. But what am I doing in this stereoscopic dreamland? How did I get here? Somehow, the two sleighs have slipped away, leaving behind a passportless spy standing on the blue-white road in his New England snowboots and stormcoat. The vibration in my ears is no longer their receding bells, but only my old blood singing. All is still, spellbound, enthralled by the moon, fancy's rear-vision mirror. The snow is real, though, and as I bend to it and scoop up a handful, sixty years crumble to glittering frost-dust between my fingers.<sup>8</sup>

We readers are invited to spy on this poignant moment of loss following recreation of a memory by this 'very lonesome' narrator in exile; the 'passportless spy', dwelling for an instant on a past world few people other than his siblings witnessed, is occupying a rare position.

But rendering collective memory is by definition to focus on a less solitary, less individualistic experience. In Annie Ernaux's autobiography, *Les Années*, published in 2008, there is a section at the end, which is ferociously intimate and yet quite impersonal (p. 237-41). An acute sense of mortality is conveyed through an autobiographical book project which mainly details literary strategies. The book project seem to be for the book we are just finishing reading. The effect is to sensitise the reader to the future anterior mode that so haunts the autobiographical persona and

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<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, 1967 (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 78.

has been driving her to write. She, we are told in the future tense and the third person, has lost her sense of the future and feels impelled to ‘give *forme* [...] to her future absence’ (mettre en *forme* [...] son absence future) (p. 236-37). She will set out to write ‘a kind of impersonal autobiography’ (une sorte d’autobiographie impersonnelle) counter to that of the palimpsest model (p. 240). Rather than recreate moments of her past, she will reconstruct the collective memory from the period she lived through: how did she record the time that traversed her? What ideologies, politics, films, music, customs, social mores, news bulletins and so on shaped her time and herself? She describes her place in history as being like the sensation of driving alone on a motorway, contained in the totality of others present to her, be they close by or far away (p. 239). Despite individual consciousness, her movements are governed by the stream of the cars and road networks surrounding her.<sup>9</sup> Rather than re-write events of her life according to the vagaries of memory of herself as an individual, she will accept that her life and those of others of her time and place are being written on by History. The work will be written with the urgency of a person who wishes to commentate on their times – *les années* –, not their self:

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Agnès Varda’s autobiopic, *Les Plages d’Agnès* (2008), in which she re-presents scenes from her documentary, *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000), where she herself is being transported along the motorway networks that carry the filming team from the North to the South of France. In the front passenger seat, she whiles away the time by filming with a hand-held camera her other hand playing at ‘capturing lorries’ (‘attraper des camions’) (*Les Plages d’Agnès*, dir. by Agnès Varda [Ciné Tamaris, 2008], 67:31-67:48; *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, dir. by Agnès Varda [Ciné Tamaris, 2000], 41:12-42:00). The grafting of documentary onto autobiopic, of the the impersonal, generic, opaque lorries onto the personal hand ‘capturing’ them chimes with Ernaux’s project of the ‘impersonal autobiography’ and its semi-subjective focus on elements that flow through the lives of many people.

She will only look into herself to find others, memory and the imaginary of the past of others, to seize the changing of ideas, beliefs and sensibilities, the transformation of people and of subjects she has known. (p. 239)<sup>10</sup>

She will articulate moments of her life where she felt herself to be ‘melting into an indistinct totality’ (se fondre dans une totalité indistincte) (p. 238), where she is entirely consumed by ‘a kind of vast collective sensation’ (une sorte de vaste sensation collective); she wishes to capture comments on events and objects lifted from the ‘the mass of floating discussions’ (la masse des discours flottants) (p. 239), the background noise that shapes our thoughts, beliefs, fears and hopes. The ‘I’ (je) will be substituted with ‘one / we’ (on) and ‘we’ (nous), so that the impersonal autobiography read almost like a fictional narrative (p. 240).<sup>11</sup> But unlike the ‘visionary’ (voyante) she took herself for as a student, she will refrain from reinventing language and instead write from within common experience and language, which is, after all, her own. Through individual memory she will re-find the memory of collective memory, render the lived dimension of History, and thereby reconstruct not ‘a palimpsest time’ but ‘a common time’ (un temps commun). The reader recognises aspects of the work s/he has just been reading.

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Elle ne regardera en elle-même que pour y retrouver le monde, la mémoire et l’imaginaire des jours passés du monde, saisir le changement des idées, des croyances et de la sensibilité, la transformation des personnes et du sujet, qu’elle a connus.’

<sup>11</sup> The merging of autobiography, fiction and history / sociology is also – sporadically – the autobiographical strategy in Frédéric Beigbeder’s *Un Roman français* (winner of the Prix Renaudot 2009): chapters are entitled ‘Divorce à la française’ and ‘Le rêve français’, and the autobiographical narrator describes his book as eight different *histoires* (tales / histories), including the *histoire* ‘of an Emma Bovary of the 1970s’ (d’une Emma Bovary des seventies), ‘of the death of the cultivated bourgeoisie from outside Paris’ (de la mort de la grande bourgeoisie cultivée de province), ‘of a country that managed to lose two wars while convincing people it had won them’ (d’un pays qui a réussi à perdre deux guerres en faisant croire qu’il les avait gagnées); he concludes that his life’s experience is ‘a French novel’ (un roman français) (Beigbeder, *Un Roman français* [Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2009], pp. 256-57).

Despite this rejection of the palimpsest model, Ernaux nevertheless retains in *Les Années* two key interlinked aspects of De Quincey's and Baudelaire's notion of the palimpsest of memory, namely the importance of images and light in relation to memory (the palimpsest is formed by 'innumerable layers of images',<sup>12</sup> and these layers constitute 'light falling upon light'). Ernaux employs images and light to collective ends, to reveal the multiplicity of her own identities, to capture the collective memory of family and friends, and to record group memories of other compatriots of her times in this era of visual culture, mass reproduction and mass diffusion, so different to Baudelaire's. The 'planned autobiography' is to be punctuated by still and moving images and consequently will convey her ever-changing selves. It will be:

a flow held in suspension [...] at regular intervals by photos and film sequences that will capture the successive corporeal forms and social positions of her being [...]. To that "always other" of the photos will correspond, in mirror image, the 'she' of writing (p. 240).<sup>13</sup>

Light is desired above all, and here evokes memories from the collective histories of families and other close relationships:

more than anything, now, she would like to seize the light that bathes the faces which have already become invisible, the tablecloths covered in food since vanished, that light that was already there during stories on Sundays in her childhood and which has not stopped leaving itself on things just lived, an anterior light. (p. 241)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Baudelaire translates De Quincey's 'everlasting layers [...] of images' as 'des couches innombrables [...] d'images' (p. 213).

<sup>13</sup> 'Une coulée suspendue [...] à intervalles réguliers par des photos et des séquences de films qui saisiront les formes corporelles et les positions sociales successives de son être [...]. A cette "sans cesse autre" des photos correspondra, en miroir, le 'elle' de l'écriture.'

<sup>14</sup> 'plus que tout, maintenant, elle voudrait saisir la lumière qui baigne des visages désormais invisibles, des nappes chargées de nourritures évanouies, cette lumière qui

More broadly, Ernaux conveys social and cultural memory through media of light – family photographs, television or newspaper images, films – which form points of crystallization for the collectivity.

Notably, even when describing the self, Ernaux is describing the collectivity. In keeping with the autobiographical project at the end, the flow of narrative in the work as a whole, mostly in the imperfect, is punctuated by photographic stills, not reproduced but described ekphrastically, as though the narrator were going through a collection of old photographs. These moments are not primarily pretexts for personal reminiscence: the narrator's suppositions about what the girl-child in the photo (whom we take to be the child, 'Annie Ernaux') is thinking are always tentative, prefaced with 'perhaps' (peut-être) or 'no doubt' (sans doute); the girl on the beach could just as well be any girl from that time, in that place, dressed in that way; she is the self and a series of Others. This sensation is magnified when we pass first through a home-cinema film of family life in a garden in the early 1970s – a very personal yet very common home cinema subject – into popular film references. The narrator relates films of the early 1960s that 'we went to see' (on allait voir): *Cléo de cinq à sept*, *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, Bergman, Buñuel and Italian cinema (p. 81); she (the impersonal autobiographical protagonist) relates also films banned under De Gaulle and Pompidou, such as Jacques Rivette's *La Religieuse*; a stream of films 'that everybody had seen' (que tout le monde avait vu) in the 1970s, such as *La Grande Bouffe* (p. 135). Films of 1980 she has seen or plans to see form seams of fiction in her being in which she searches for her own life, and consults to see her future (p. 142); they must have this function for others too. 'Her various egos' (ses "moi")

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était déjà là dans les récits des dimanches d'enfance et n'a cessé de se déposer sur les choses aussitôt vécues, une lumière antérieure'.



she finds as much through “palimpsest sensation” (“sensation palimpseste”) – that is, searching back to events buried beneath forgetting – as through book and film characters with whom she, like many others, identifies (p. 204-5).<sup>15</sup> We are given instances of the individual ‘melting into an indistinct totality’.

A major facilitating factor for Ernaux in her project of creating an impersonal autobiography that reconstructs ‘a common time’ (un temps commun) is that she operating amongst various strong group cultures. One group is constituted by the popular culture media of film and TV. Film shapes the identities and aspirations of ‘Ernaux’, and those of countless other cinema-goers living in France at the same time, through their identification with fictional characters and scenarios. The mention of films that ‘everybody’ (tout le monde) had seen and those that ‘we went to see’ (on allait voir) implies that there is a coherent group about which the narrator can be representative. The senses of self and nation of the community of television-viewers – more unified before the advent of multiple cable channels – are inflected by the representations of events deemed important to the group, be that in news bulletins, game shows, documentaries etc. In *Les Années*, the most important group culture is the nation, namely Metropolitan Republican France of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Even if they are always contestable, numerous *lieux de mémoire* act to forge French national identity through common memory, as Pierre Nora has shown,<sup>16</sup> and it is unlikely that a more polyglot, more recently formed, less

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<sup>15</sup> Jean-Luc Godard’s *A bout de souffle* (1960) stages the importance of cinema in identity formation through the character of Michel, who strives to imitate through gesture and action the various film personae of Humphrey Bogart.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Nora (ed.) *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-92). ‘S/he who says *lieu de mémoire* says symbolical conflict and valorisation of symbols; moreover, each person tries to seize these symbols for themselves’ (Qui dit lieu de mémoire dit dispute symbolique et mise en valeur de symboles; or, chacun cherche à s’emparer de ce symboles). Pierre Nora, ‘Qu’est-ce qu’être français aujourd’hui?’,

politically stable, less centralised and/or less officially secular nation would be as amenable a setting for this project of impersonal autobiography.

At the end of *Les Années*, the individual, ‘Ernaux’, and her future disappearance – as narrator, as historical person – is in ascension over the collectivities she will leave. Images of the collectivity have been transmitted to us through ‘Ernaux’, and they are menaced by her future passing. Despite the references to enduring photos and films, an elegiacal tone hangs over the work. In opposition to the palimpsest model, whereby ‘not one’ of the ‘everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings’ on the brain ‘has been extinguished’ (De Quincey), Ernaux’s book opens with the words: ‘All images will disappear’ (Toutes les images disparaîtront) (p. 11). At the end of the introductory section, the narrator imagines how the image of herself, dead, will diminish to a first name around the family dinner table, with an ever-vaguer face until even that disappears into the anonymous mass of a distant generation (p. 19). At the text’s close, single images are described and shown to be threatened, paragraphs having fragmented into lines of prose separated by a space, unpunctuated for a page and a half until a final full stop. From this effort of collective memory our awareness of collective forgetting is omnipresent; it is as though the tide is advancing on the images ‘Ernaux’ can retain – she has already evoked macular degeneration and Alzheimer’s which might befall her. Remembering is presented as a life-force, as in Agnès Varda’s autobiopic of the same year, *Les Plages d’Agnès*, which closes on the director’s words: ‘I remember as long as I live’ (Je me souviens pendant que je vis).<sup>17</sup> Just as Ernaux displaces the individual from the centre of autobiography, making way for collectivities commuted through the individual, she also displaces the centrality of

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Interview with Pierre Nora and Paul Thibaud, in Alain Finkielkraut (ed.) *Qu’est-ce que la France* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), p. 270.

<sup>17</sup> Varda 2008: 105:29.

the alive individual, by contemplating the world beyond her own passing. Whereas De Quincey and Baudelaire elide our mortality when they compare the human brain and memory to the palimpsest, Ernaux recognises that, unlike vellum, humans die, and memory – individual and collective – with them.