

# Memories Written on the Body

Save something from the time where we will never be again.

—Annie Ernaux

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**L**es *Années*, a contemporary memoir by Annie Ernaux, has now come out in English translation, thanks to the careful work of Alison L. Strayer. In *The Years* Ernaux—who has become an established and celebrated writer, with a style that evokes the frank confidence of a close friend—embarks on a new aesthetic journey. She has landed on a narrative form that captures not only the workings of memory (the “thousands of notes” we keep to ourselves) but also the manic mood and mechanics of our digital age, captured in layers of information, images, sayings, national and world events, arranged like overlapping windows on a screen. Ernaux moves through them seamlessly, as though closing them one by one until the last. At the end remain the most essential details, a list to “save,” although their meaning is inaccessible to the reader and susceptible to being lost. The memoir begins in the same way, with a list of images that will disappear, words that will be deleted. How to save them is the question that permeates her thoughts and guides her writing, which moves between photos that capture the author in moments in time and the

sensations she felt at these and other moments, forgotten and rediscovered after her divorce, as she writes:

*Because in her refound solitude she discovers thoughts and feelings that married life had thrown into shadow, the idea has come to her to write ‘a kind of woman’s destiny,’ set between 1940 and 1985. It would be something like Maupassant’s A Life and convey the passage of time inside and outside of herself, in History, a ‘total novel’ that would end with her dispossession of people and things.*

The book goes well into the 2000s (up to 2007, according to the translator’s note), and despite her fear “of losing herself in the profusion of objects,” conveyed in the barrage of almanac-like detail, a self, long elusive to her, emerges from out of family and social history. This Annie in the photos comes through— from the chubby baby to the little girl on the pebble beach, to the teenager unsure of herself and not yet mastering her burgeoning desire, to the unhappy housewife numb to the world, to the middle-aged divorcée posing nude for a lover, to the single mom treating her grown sons and their girlfriends to a seaside

vacation on her teacher's salary, to the now retired grandmother with granddaughter on her lap. Her search for identity is not unique, she argues. At one time, who one was individually was not a topic worthy of reflection. Her parents and grandparents spoke in the collective "we." Yet, through her story of self-discovery, one follows the trajectory of the collective subject—"we," "one" or "people"—but also women living in Western culture through the 1950s, 60s, 70s, 80s, and beyond, after which feminism fell out of fashion. In *The Years*, the subject's face reveals itself through the layers of culture and family memories, recovered and liberated through her words.

changed color before ceasing to flow. It is a life force that roots her in her physical being, her woman's body, and distracts her from the abstraction of books and scholarly ideas.

There is a tension in the book between the material and immaterial, between relationships, on which she barely touches, and the self-discovery that comes with solitude. Marriage was not a foregone conclusion for the university student, who could not reconcile the life of the mind with the toils and consumerist, object-filled life of a housewife. Nevertheless, in addition to encountering her in her mind and her body, the reader senses her desire for human contact, conjured through the

## **At one time, who one was individually was not a topic worthy of reflection. Her parents and grandparents spoke in the collective "we."**

Her story of self-discovery began with the movies: the voluptuous Brigitte Bardot in *And God Created Woman* followed by Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*. Magazine articles instructed on how to achieve personal fulfillment; and women politicians, activists, Simone Weil, Simone de Beauvoir, and boys and girls clad in jeans, a visible sign of their equality, locking arms in a united front against France's male-dominated, conservative government, people her imagination just as they expanded her mind to grasp the possible then. Whether or not she herself had an abortion is not the subject here, but upon its legalization and government subvention she expressly takes us into the doctor's office with its modern tools which replaced the kitchen table and improvised devices. Blood excreted vaginally is a regular leitmotiv. It is a sight that brings relief before birth control became available, and a sign of her feminine vitality when she is in her forties and even into her fifties, when it

oft-returning memory of nestling into the body of her lover or that of leaning against her mother while reading a book as a girl. Her desire for direct knowledge of the world comes through in her youthful exploration in defiance of Church teachings and the expectations of her family that reserved sexual relations for marriage. However, the carefree joy that accompanied her sexual liberation following divorce was short-lived, as the fear of AIDS replaced the earlier fear of becoming pregnant. AIDS did not get her, however. Breast cancer did. Sickness and death, normal and almost banal in the world of her childhood, had become so rare that they are perceived today as an "injustice," she reflects.

Her studies had estranged her from her working-class background early on. Yet, her political sympathies continue to lie with the workers, whom Socialist President François Mitterrand in the 1980s and later Prime Minister turned presidential contender

Lionel Jospin had betrayed. After conveying the reasons for the people's disillusionment with the political left, she admits their collective guilt for becoming indifferent—an indifference that allowed Jean-Marie Le Pen, a xenophobic, anti-immigrant candidate from the extreme right, to accede to the second round of France's presidential elections in 2002, surpassing Jospin in the first round to come in second behind the mainstream candidate of the right, Jacques Chirac. This was not corrected in time for the following election, and neither of Chirac's contending successors, whether Ségolène Royal or the electoral victor, Nicolas Sarkozy, succeeded in reviving the body politic, far too long neglected and too willing to be led. Ernaux holds back nothing in her criticism of the political class and of their distance from the people, an extension of her own physicality and experience in the world. Geopolitical problems, impacting populations from across the globe, had become too abstract, too far removed from one's basic experience and understanding.

With the same shock and awe she felt in 2002, she relays her reaction to the 9/11 terrorist attack against the World Trade Center, bringing down the twin towers within hours. All of a sudden, these seemingly backward people from far-away lands had proven their technological and strategic prowess against the United States, which since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 had flexed its muscles like a tree's branches spreading across the globe. Its values, however, held up as an example to all the world, only served its own interests and those of its shareholders and corporate sponsors. With the same flare of resentment, she charges French state officials with ineptness before France's socioeconomic disintegration and the conflagration of the public housing neighborhoods in 2005. She adopts a broad "we" in her portrait of French xenophobia

when evoking the politicians' appeal to "the [dyed in the wool] people of France," not inclusive of Muslim immigrants, and of generalized anti-Arab sentiment. The Algerian War figures large in *The Years*. However, Ernaux shares her generation's ignorance of this conflict. Their interests lay with newfound leisure activities and the advances provided by France's booming postwar economy. This war nevertheless shapes the experience of her generation, just as the world wars had done for her parents and the Franco-Prussian War for her grandparents. However, in their case, the war has not ended; the enemy are now the "savages" living within France's borders. They are descendants of colonial France, the same country that now rejects them as foreign bodies and as unwanted competition for dwindling employment opportunities.

A reader of contemporary French history and cultural criticism will recognize the rich philosophical and intellectual heritage given voice in the memoir. Her depiction of the hooded, unemployed, dark-skinned youths living on the outskirts of France's metropolitan centers reflects a whole body of literature and film dedicated to the subject. In this way, she identifies herself with France's intellectual elite. Although the writer's critical eye does not spare this elite group either—accusing France's postwar intellectuals of their generalized complicity with Stalinism—she does pay tribute to France's influential thinkers: in addition to Beauvoir, she cites Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu. Their deaths serve as time markers in her own life and in the life of her generation, and as a reminder of what is lost when writers die: the full cultural weight of their words. Her thoughts on digital media and culture particularly evoke the writings of Jean Baudrillard and Régis Debray. However,

even more than the ceaseless barrage of promotional advertisements and of spectacular images transmitted across the globe through the press, even more than the monthly or weekly crises that suspend our thought processes and the confounding predominance of opinion surveys and mindless statistics, the computer age holds something uniquely menacing but also tantalizing.

Everything on the Web is in the present. The language of this new world of hand-held devices, the internet, and search engines obstructs communication, including with her own sons. She could adapt to the *verlan* slang of the new generation shaped by France's new immigrant population, but what of this new online world, a world where images do not vanish, where slogans, names, and sayings can be saved and reopened to unknowing eyes in the present? Like a data base,

*She will go within herself only to retrieve the world, the memory and imagination of its bygone days, grasp the changes in ideas, beliefs, and sensibility, the transformation of people and the subject that she has seen -- perhaps nothing compared to those her granddaughter will see, as will all beings who are alive in 2070.*

As she states, she will provide the "light from before" to illuminate those faces, those conversations, and the partaking of food, from the past.

With *The Years* Annie Ernaux has done just that. More than an almanac or a time capsule, she has left to her granddaughter's world a treasure trove of expressions (especially in the original French), of impressions, of sensations, and also of history, hers and that of an entire generation. <sup>1</sup>

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