Writing Life, Writing Time, Writing the Mother: The Aging Daughter-Mother Relationship in Works of Annie Ernaux

Margery Vibe Skagen

This article focuses on Ernaux's later life memories of a twentieth century daughter-mother relationship, rendered in the light of this era's historical transformations and its tensions between individual freedom and collective "fate," and between pre- and post-1968 conceptions of a fulfilled life. It refers to Ernaux's most monumental work of self-writing, *Les Années* (2008) and this book's links to what she has previously written in remembrance of her mother. The purpose is to investigate how these works seek to come to terms with not only the loss of a mother, but also the narrator's own aging.

Ernaux exemplifies the adult daughter-senescent mother relationship in ways that are characteristic for her generation of women and suggestive of general historical changes in human relationships in Western societies since 1968. Can Ernaux's writing provide, in the terms of Kathleen Woodward, "cultural models of older women as a way of generating alternative futures for ourselves" (1999: 155)? Or does it fail to reconcile the stereotypical binary of female aging as either graceful or awful, conveying tabooed aspects of old age that need to be brought to light, and even more urgently so in a socio-cultural context privileging youthfulness, individualism and uncertain human bonds?

> "Écrire sur sa mère pose forcément le problème de l'écriture" (*« Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit »* 47).
>
> "L'écriture me vient d'elle, qui n'a jamais écrit" (*Écrire la vie* 75).

Annie Ernaux, one of the most internationally read of contemporary French authors, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature 2022 at the age of eighty-

two for her perseverant inquiry into a "life marked by strong disparities regarding gender, language and class" (Nobel Prize, Annie Ernaux Facts). In her Nobel Prize lecture, she spoke as "a woman and an immigrant of the interior" about her commitment to the uncovering and articulation of humiliations, offences and shames experienced by her gender and people:

> In bringing to light the social unspeakable, of those internalized power relations linked to class and/or race, and gender too, felt only by the people who directly experience their impact, the possibility of individual but also collective emancipation emerges. (Nobel Prize, Annie Ernaux Nobel Lecture)

This article aims to show how Ernaux's life-writing also reveals unspoken disparities regarding age and between generations, and how it seeks (or does not seek) to come to terms with aging and old age as objects of "existential revulsion."[1] For this purpose, I will focus on Ernaux's written memories of a twentieth century daughter-mother relationship, as they are determined not only by the daughter's social ascension, but also by this era's historical transformations and its tensions between individual freedom and collective "fate," and between pre- and post-1968 conceptions of a fulfilled life. I will refer to Ernaux's most monumental work of self-writing, *Les Années*, published in 2008 (*The Years* 2017), and this book's interconnections with what she has previously written in remembrance of her mother: the mother whose culture and convictions the young girl broke with to become an author and intellectual; the mother who, in dementia, becomes a disappearing totality that must imperatively be restored through the writing of a "total" book.

Ernaux's works exemplify the adult daughter-senescent mother relationship in ways that are characteristic for her generation of women and suggestive of general historical transformations in human relationships in Western societies since 1968. Can her writing about the aging daughter-mother relationship provide, in the terms of Kathleen Woodward, "cultural models of older women as a way of generating alternative futures for ourselves" (Woodward 155)? Or

[1] Kathleen Woodward uses the expression to characterize Beauvoir's attitude to old age in *La Vieillesse* (Woodward 156).

does it fail to reconcile the stereotypical binary of female aging as either graceful or awful, conveying tabooed aspects of old age that still need to be brought to light, and even more urgently so in a socio-cultural context privileging youthfulness, individualism and uncertain human bonds?

"C'est un peu à cause d'elle que j'écris."

Probably the most important person in Ernaux's life—"It's partly because of her that I write"[2] —the mother is, after her death in 1986, most exclusively portrayed in *Une femme*, published in 1989 (*A Woman's Story*), and the diary *« Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit »* (*"I have not come out of my night"*[3]) published in 1997, relating the mother's dementia and final institutionalized life. But the mother is in some way or other present in almost all Ernaux's books. A quick search among the fourteen digitalized works of this author in the *Frantext* database gives 638 occurrences of *ma mère*. The expression is especially frequent in the early novels (published between 1974 and 1981) and in the non-fictional books about the author's parents, but also reappears intermittently and with force in later works of self-writing in which the mother is not explicitly foregrounded.

The mother is not a prominent figure in Ernaux's most exhaustive work of memory, but under the surface, *The Years* may seem to be all about remembering, losing, and regaining her. Why? Because she was her original, real world, rooted—in Kristeva's terms—both in the preverbal unity with the maternal body and in the mother tongue (the popular speech of rural Normandy); and because the daughter, the class defector, not only had to distance herself from everything the mother's world represented to become a writer, but also needed to write her mother into her acquired "world of words and ideas" to be able to inhabit it:

> My mother, born in a dominated milieu, from which she wanted to

[2] Ernaux's words to Bernard Pivot in "1997: Annie Ernaux : style lapidaire et Alzheimer chez Bernard Pivot."
Translations are my own when a reference to a published version in English is not given.
[3] In this case, my word-for-word translation of the title (the mother's last written sentence) is used instead of the title of the published translation. The English title *"I Remain in Darkness"* seems too literary and assertive for someone who is about to lose her language; it does not reflect the mother's simple but faltering speech style as quoted in this book.

> leave, had to become history, so that I would feel less alone and artificial in the dominating world of words and ideas where, according to her desire, I had passed. (*Une femme* 106)

And finally, the mother underlies everything because the deteriorating person the middle-aged daughter visited at the care home was perceived as representing herself: physically, she foreshadowed the daughter's own decrepitude; emotionally, she was the only living repository of the daughter's existence from before the cradle to the present; and more impersonally, the mother tied her to a generational chain continuing beyond (and limiting) the daughter's life. "She is time for me. She also pushes me toward death" (*« Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit »* 74).

We cannot approach the ageing daughter-mother relationship without also considering the novels Ernaux wrote before her mother became ill and the light they shed on earlier stages of their relationship and on the author's mission as a mediator of the *transfuge de classe* experience. Her first published book, *Les Armoires vides* (1974), is a fictionalized account of the author's childhood and youth, characterized by the alienating gap between the milieu of her parents' *café-épicerie*, with its "filthy" precarity, violence and alcohol abuse, and the 'proper' bourgeois world she was educated into as a pupil and student. The feeling of rejection the first-person narrator develops towards the parents she once accepted unconditionally, culminates with the description of the kitchen table abortion the twenty-three year old student underwent in the hands of a so called 'angel-maker', a traumatic refusal of motherhood which Ernaux comes back to in the autobiographical *L'Événement* in 2000: it was especially this *happening* that tore her away from her mother and threw her into the outside world (*L'Événement* 318).

Her third novel *La Femme gelée* (1981) is based on the author's life as a young mother, married to a man who prioritized his professional career over care of home and children, and the circumstances leading up to the protagonist's divorce in the early 1980s. These biographic and fictionalized events, abortion and divorce,—in stark contrast to the mother's Catholic conception of a respectable life—accentuated the young woman's socio-cultural break with her

working-class background, a rural milieu described as closer to the Middle Ages than to our time, in which 'culture' only meant agriculture and religion was the only framework to explain the world (*« Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit »* 35). The author's painful transition into the highly cultivated sphere where she now belongs to the elite, is also a constant theme of her writing. Ernaux's works—all interrelated and inspired by her own life—show the emotional cost of this class voyage or class betrayal, and at the same time, her immense loyalty to her family origins.

The family defector's return to lost origins

Aiming to show how Ernaux inscribes a particular daughter-mother relationship within its socio-historical circumstances, I will start by situating Ernaux's books about her parents within the French literary context, before turning to a closer reading of *The Years* and other writings dealing with the mother's presence and absence.

With *La Place* (1983), Ernaux's first non-fictional book, and the first to be written in her characteristic "style plat", the author had raised a literary 'tomb' for her father, which was followed by the two forementioned first person accounts dedicated to her mother. Dominique Viart has defined Ernaux's writing about her parents as exemplary models of what he calls "le récit de filiation" (Viart 1996 and 2011). Literature has always been obsessed with family ties, he acknowledges, but the broad historical mutations of socio-cultural and ideological contexts reflected by French literature since the fifties and sixties, strengthened by the changing conjugal morals and practices in the wake of May 1968, contributed to the rise of new forms of "parentage stories". When authors like Doubrovsky (*Fils* 1977), Sarraute (*Enfance* 1983) and Robbe-Grillet (*Le Miroir qui revient* 1985) turned to self-writing, the classical autobiographical form had become obsolete. The twentieth century collapse of humanistic meta-narratives, established in the 1980s as "the post-modern condition" (Lyotard 1979), had also undermined the idea of a meaningful and coherent life-narrative. After decades of theoretical dissolution of the self, a simple return to a pre-Freudian, unified interiority could seem impossible, and life-writers would now

tend to seek insight into the complexity of their selves by exploring the determinisms of their socio-historical and family backgrounds.

The post-war generations, to which Ernaux belongs, experienced the transition from a "parental culture" to a "culture largely invented, initiated and inspired […] by young people" (Heilbronner 577). The distant past of aged or deceased parents—whose voices, experience and authority had been silenced by scientific and technological progress, new lifestyles and the emerging culture of youth—became the great enigma for authors of the 'youth revolution' as they themselves matured and approached older age.

According to Viart, a recurrent feature of "parentage stories" is the investigative, hesitating, fragmentary approach to the past, alternating between now and then, between private and collective fields of inquiry, often in dialogue with sociology, and constantly reflecting on the choice of form. A typical meta-commentary in Ernaux's first book about her mother likewise reads:

> I spend a lot of time asking myself about the order of things to say, the choice and arrangement of words, as if there existed an ideal order, the only one capable of conveying a truth concerning my mother—but I don't know not what it consists of—and nothing else matters to me while I'm writing than discovering this order. (*Une femme* 43-44)

Ernaux exemplifies this new subgenre's unobtrusive attempts to imagine the obscure, singular lives of mothers and fathers—who apparently had had nothing much to transmit to the younger generation—and to commemorate them in the light of larger socio-historical developments. Today, Ernaux's writing continues to inspire *filiation* stories by class defectors of different ages like Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis, showing the particular dynamics of the parentage story that also has class tension at its core.[4]

The loss of continuity with previous generations and their inherited experience, attitudes and behaviors lies at the heart of the genre's desire to reconnect with the past. Ernaux notes for instance how her mother knew all the resource-saving practices of a poor household: "This knowledge, handed

[4] Cf. Édouard Louis, *Combats et métamorphoses d'une femme*, Seuil, 2021, and Didier Eribon, *Vie, vieillesse et mort d'une femme du peuple,* Flammarion 2023.

down from mother to daughter for centuries, ends with me. I am only the archivist" (*Une femme* 26).

Martine Boyer-Weinman situates Ernaux's writing about her mother in the lineage of another French literary subgenre represented among others by Colette and Beauvoir, who

> find themselves, at the age of 50, constructing a literary 'tomb' for their departed mothers, what I call here "the mothers' book". Daughter and mother, whatever their previous relationship, seem set on a late reconciliation and the expression of homage and remorse. (2022: 227)

Referring implicitly to Simone de Beauvoir's *A Very Easy Death* (1964), Ernaux evokes the emotional turmoil of losing the same mother from whom the daughter once so ardently fought to differentiate herself. Beauvoir, who at the start seemed rather indifferent to her mother—"After all, she was of an age to die" (12)—expressed a similar shock towards the end of her account: "Why did my mother's death shake me so deeply?" (*A Very Easy Death* 102).[5]

This is an essential question for our inquiry into Ernaux's writing about her mother. The confrontation with the hospitalized mother, the unanalyzable object of childhood devotion reduced to a helplessly worn and bare body, provokes reactions of refusal as well as fearful identification. Reasonably, for a middle-aged daughter, the mother might be "the last witness to a deep female community of experience, a community of fate" (Boyer-Weinmann 2021: 226). But given the differences between, on one side, the older, religious women's more tradition-bound, role-abiding life and, on the other side, the younger women's constantly renewed projects of transgressive self-realization, what was transmitted from mother to daughter? What insights were born from the painfully symbolic conjunction of the daughter's approaching menopause and the aging mother's Alzheimer and death?

[5] On Beauvoir's relation to her dying mother, see Susan Pickard. "The Red Dressing Gown: Reflections on the Aging of a Dutiful Daughter" and Catherine Monfort. "'La Vieille née': Simone de Beauvoir, *Une mort très douce*, and Annie Ernaux, *Une femme*."

The Years*: a total novel to encompass a total loss*

The Years, Ernaux's most complete and ambitious autobiographical work, and a turning point in her writing, was born out of losing her mother and the prospect of losing her own life. Consequently, the quest for a literary genre capable of encompassing the totality of the loss, is a recurrent topic of *The Years*, which ends in the manner of Proust with the finding of the form of the book the reader is about to finish (250).

Les Années was published in 2008 when Ernaux was sixty-eight but planned since 1983, at the outbreak of her mother's dementia. The mother is mostly an anonymous background character in *The Years*, but she is evoked distinctively after her hospitalization and death, and especially when the narrator/protagonist returns to her musings about how to write the book. Which literary form to sum up the lived life of the writer and, simultaneously, of French society from 1940 to the present, and to render it all in the "light of before" (230), in the light of a past the origins of which are in the lost mother?

This long-term project is mentioned many times in *L'Atelier noir*, Ernaux's journal of ideas since 1983, where it is called, among other names, "R.T. (roman total)", "Passage", "somme" and "*destin de femme*".[6] Notes on "the Total Novel" in *L'Atelier noir* indicate that this project was at one point agglutinated with the mother's biography (*Une femme*). On October 8th, 1985, a visit recorded in the nursing home journal (80) coincides with an entry in the journal of ideas connecting the mother's book with "le grand roman historique". An allusion to "la somme" occurs again in *Se perdre* (812) at the time of the narrator's forty-ninth birthday and the start of the "frightening" fifties with growing concerns about becoming less attractive. In this journal of obsessional passion and loss (to which I will return in the context of eroticism as a means of defying aging) the lover's definitive departure, related at the very beginning, is immediately associated with the departed mother. The planning of what will become *Les Années*—regularly triggered by reminders of the mother's decline and death and

[6] "Par-dessus tout apparaîtra la gestion de ces *Années*, texte envisagé depuis 1983 - *ce serait une sorte de destin de femme* -, désigné sous les appellations successives de 'RT' (roman total), 'Histoire', 'Passage', 'Génération', 'Jours du monde', et que je ne poursuivrai réellement qu'à partir de 2002." (*L'Atelier noir* 17)

of the daughter's own aging—was finally released, it seems, by Ernaux's breast cancer 2002-2003 (related in *L'Usage de la photo*), the news of the tumor growing in her breast coinciding with the news of a coming grandchild (*The Years* 224). All these notes gesture towards the lost mother as inherent to the 'totality' the book was meant to restore.

The Years crystallizes more than half a century of memories and reflections and represents the culmination of Ernaux's particular form of self-writing – "a sort of impersonal autobiography" (129), intimately self-revealing and at the same time sociologically and historically illuminating. Her characteristic "flat style" and "transpersonal" approach were first tried out with a first-person narrator in the father's book (*La Place*) and in the mother's story (*Une femme*), attempting to transcend the "solitude and obscurity of individual memory" in search of a more general and truer meaning (*Une femme* 52). But *The Years* has a much larger scope. Working on individual and collective memory fragments, family photos, snatches of songs, multifarious common references from the post war period to the present, Ernaux provokes instant recognition of forgotten daily life trivia as well as remembrance of historical events, and makes the reader (especially French readers of a certain age) feel the rush of lived time. Towards the end of *The Years*, the narrator notes in another characteristic meta-commentary:

> This will not be a work of remembrance in the usual sense, aimed at putting a life into story, creating an explanation of self. She will go within herself only to retrieve the world […] grasp the changes in ideas, beliefs, and sensibility, the transformation of people and the subject that she has seen […] (228)

In *The Years*, neither narrating nor narrated subject are designated by the first-person singular pronoun. In this way, Ernaux's—after all, subjective—perspectives produce a paradoxical blend of detachment and sensual closeness to recent history. Her writing displays both the continuity and the contingency of things, practices, discourses, norms, and everyday gestures, reminding us of a past which is steadily fading. Her memories testify to a certain permanence of self, but according to the author, *she* is not the main character of this "auto-

socio-biography": it is all about time.

The Years reveals, as many critics have observed, a both anxious and fascinated preoccupation with time and memory, a concern that comes with the sense of an ending, recognition of finitude and approaching death. *The Years* has some explicit affinities with Proust's *In search of lost time* in its totalizing will to regain the past and save it from disappearing. The opening and the end of the book present apparently unorganized lists of memories, reminding of Proust's opening pages with the insomniac protagonist's incoherent impressions, as he drifts between dream and waking.

Some of these memory scraps, filling *The Years'* first and last pages, may also suggest looseness of cognitive control: the wandering mind of the dementia-afflicted mother with whom the daughter identifies so strongly in the nursing home diary. The realization that "All images will disappear" as the opening phrase of *The Years* affirms, is a threat that becomes increasingly significant as the reader proceeds through six decades. The final line of the book is: "Save something from the time when we will never be again."

Structuring the years: photos and family gatherings

The opening and closing memory fragments may seem chaotic, but the main body of *The Years* is a chronologically organized account of the personal and collective history the narrator has lived through, structured by the rhythm of some significant repetitions. One structuring principle is the recurrent descriptions of old photos and home movies where the narrator evaluates the changes brought to her life and looks: as a baby, a little girl, an adolescent, a student, a young mother and teacher. On the later images she is accompanied by her sons as boys, young men and adults, and on the last photo she is portrayed with her granddaughter. These photos, which are only represented verbally, mark thresholds in the author's life and changing social and generational contexts. Jean Duffy reminds us that the photograph "has figured at the heart of twentieth- and twenty-first-century secular ritual activities and […] has played a hugely important role in the reinforcement of kinship and community bonds" (259). The photos described in *The Years* document the life-

stages of the daughter, mother and grandmother, but they are also "tragic" reminders of discontinuity (*L'Usage de la photo* 102). The narrator's comments on the images of herself do not primarily convey a sense of belonging to a community or generational chain, they underscore the breach between the detached narrating voice of the present and the narrated "she" of the past. Signs of age are especially detailed in the last images of the single, mature woman. Reflecting on the final contemporary photo of herself at the age of sixty-six, she "feels no age difference with women of forty-five or fifty" but understands that they see her "in the way she herself sees a woman of eighty, i.e., old" (222).

Simone de Beauvoir notes how the fundamental discrepancy between the person you are for yourself and the one you are in the eyes of others (or for your own self-objectifying gaze) is aggravated with aging: "It is the other in me who is aged" (*La Vieillesse* 400). The incongruity between the narrator's subjective perception of age and the signs of age exhibited by the photos, points to the tension between, on one hand, the "archeological" search for signs of permanence and desire to reconnect with the self of the past, and on the other hand, the ruptures between different 'selves' caused by aging, and also by self-re-construction through new circumstances, new projects and new relationships.

Another structuring rhythm is marked by the return of family gatherings experienced first as child, adolescent, and young adult at her parents' table, later as mother in the couple's home, then, after the divorce, as a kind of sister to her adolescent sons sharing TV dinners and, later again, on special occasions when she re-enacts the role of maternal tradition-keeper and nurturer of children and grandchildren. The changes in dining habits and topics of conversation always point at transformations on a larger anthropological scale, especially regarding the perception of past, present and future.

While the family meals suggest a cyclic temporality of seasonal celebrations, the photos accentuate more strongly the protagonist's irreversible development from early childhood to old age. As Ernaux claims in *L'Usage de la photo*:

> No photo can render duration. It confines within the moment. The song is expansion of the past, the photo finitude. The song is the

> happy feeling of time, the photo its tragedy. I have often thought that one could tell one's whole life with only songs and photos. (102)

Unlike the photos, which often leave an impression of estrangement, the memories of festive meals are marked by togetherness (songs and conversations). If the photos point to the passage of time and aging as irremediable loss, the meals provide a stable although precarious pattern of enduring intergenerational relationships.

Structuring the past: the two axes of the self

A third structuring feature in *The Years* is the returning account of an experience (unlike the self-estrangement associated with the photos) of profound self-recognition connected to the mother. It is what the narrating voice calls the "palimpsest sensation" of a many-layered self, experienced while nestling close to a lover and recalling how she in childhood used to read in bed beside her sleeping mother on Sunday afternoons (*The Years* 150, 193-194, 226-228). "It is a time in which past and present overlap, without bleeding into each other, and where, it seems, she flickers in and out of all the shapes of being she has been" (194). This embodied memory of intimate warmth and repose, already evoked in *Une femme* (50) and *« Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit »* (107), is described for the first time in *Les Années* when the biographical chronology intersects with the daughter's visits to the hospitalized mother, as related in the nursing home diary:

> The important moments of her current existence are the meetings with her lover at a hotel on rue Danielle-Casanova, and the visits to her mother at the hospital in long-term care. For her, these meetings and visits are so very intertwined they sometimes seem to revolve around a single being. As if caressing the skin and hair of her lost mother were the same kind of touch as the erotic gestures of her afternoons with her lover. After love, she nestles into his massive body; there is traffic noise in the background, and she recalls other times she has curled up this way in the daytime: on Sundays in Yvetot as a child, as she read against her mother's back […] (*The Years* 150)

Commenting on this last passage, the narrator/protagonist imagines her life along two axes: "one horizontal, which charts everything that has happened to her […] and the other vertical, with only a few images clinging to it, spiraling down in the darkness" (150). It is at this point of *The Years* that the question of the "total novel" is raised; and it seems clear that the vertical pillar of the project is the timeless presence of the mother. A presence that is also absence and a reminder of neglect which the total novel is meant to compensate. "What is very deep in me, is the mother, because of the guilt" (*L'Atelier noir* p. 45). The question is if the fleeting sensation of this vertical *palimpsest* dimension of the self can lead to a revelation similar to the one triggered by Proust's *madeleine*: the experience of the past regained and thus the writing of *The Years*.

But the quest of lost time, in this book, is not resolved by the Proustian sensation of being a series of remembered, superposed selves existing along a vertical axis in different times and spaces at the same time, but rather by the expansive sensation of belonging "horizontally" to

> an indistinct whole whose parts she manages to pull free, one at a time, through an effort of critical consciousness: elements of herself, customs, gestures, words etc. The tiny moment of the past grows and opens onto a horizon, at once mobile and uniform in tone, of one or several years. Then, in a state of dazzling satisfaction, she finds something that the image from personal memory doesn't give her on its own: a kind of vast collective sensation that takes her consciousness, her entire being, into itself. She has the same feeling, alone in the car on the highway, of being taken into the indefinable whole of the world of now, from the closest to the most remote of things. (227-228)

The Years is both in its broadness and depth a total work; its method combines critical analyses and contextualization of precise memory instants with half-dreamt sensorial states at the confines of consciousness. Together with the other writings on her lost mother, it inscribes the mother into the daughter's immaterial world of words, ideas and narratives, in a wide historical space as deep as a mythical origin. The longer than a lifetime continuity of her primary relationship, an unchosen fate, is nevertheless downplayed when compared to

the creative and exploratory potential of every lived moment's openings to the outside world, the previously described feeling of being—within a broadening horizon—part of a mass of traffic on a highway, moving on with everyone else and yet with a free grip on the steering wheel.

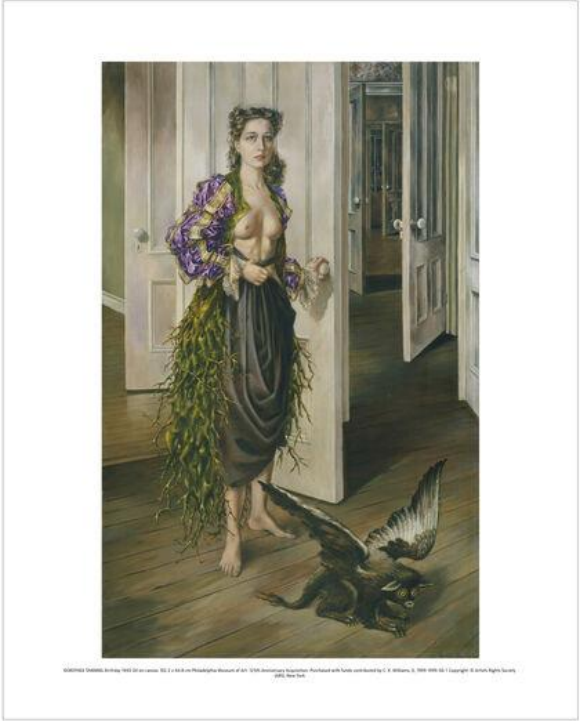
The vertical and horizontal axes may recall the opposition between immanence and transcendence in the view of Simone de Beauvoir, Ernaux's intellectual mother. The greatest existential value is placed on transcendence implying free outward action, inventive and engaged projects that achieve more than the mere persistence of the same, while immanence designates a more passive, immersive and automatic maintenance of life in its basic conditions: 'inferior' and subordinating activities that include traditional female functions like giving birth, nurturing and housekeeping (*Le Deuxième sexe*). The horizontal outward reach from the private sphere and into the changing world is likewise prioritized by Ernaux over the time- and wordless vertical identification with immanent motherhood.

Birthday

Dorothea Tanning's self-portrait *Birthday* (1942)[7] is yet another leit-motif, which occurs not only in *The Years* (94, 194) but also in the nursing home journal (49-50), the journal of ideas (51-52) and *Le Cahier de l'Herne* (142). Ernaux, who saw the painting for the first time shortly after her illegal abortion in 1964, describes it more than forty years later as "l'icône de ma vie" ("Anniversaire" 142). Significantly, the date of the abortion is also qualified as an *anniversaire*; the young woman felt as if the "angel maker" gave birth to her by interrupting her pregnancy, and the narrator adds: "I killed my mother in me at the same moment" (*L'Événement* 302). As previously mentioned, this *happening* represented an absolute beginning, a rupture with childhood, adolescence, religion and the mother, but it was also the first time the daughter felt that she was part of "a chain of women that generations passed through" (314). The different versions of the two fundamental experiences decisive for the daughter's relation to her mother (the abortion and the mother's decline)

[7] https://www.dorotheatanning.org/life-and-work/view/63/

associate her—realistically and figuratively—with the "fateful" acts of giving birth and death. I understand Ernaux's identification with the painting in connection with the vertical and horizontal axis illustrating a life-long tension between "maternal fate" and individual freedom.



In my Ernaux-inspired reading, the standing woman in the middle of Tanning's picture incorporates the vertical axis descending to the depths of the sea, to life's origin and dissolution (la *mère/mer*). Her lower body appears to be draped in seaweed which at a closer glance reveals itself to be miniature female figures entwined. This ambiguous tangle, of viscid, wiggly, proliferating alga reminds me of what William Miller in *The Anatomy of Disgust* defines as the "the life soup" of primitive fecundity (Miller 38-59). In contrast to the equivocal material covering the woman's lower body, her torso is clad in a refined, silk and gold garment, and her reflective gaze turned slightly upward. Verticality is also accentuated by the dark "ill-fated" ("Anniversaire" 142), dog-like chimaera at the woman's bare feet, powerfully winged but with a downward gaze, feet, claws and tail grounded, perhaps alluding to subterranean as well as (inaccessible?) higher realms. Horizontality is clearly marked by the series of

porcelain doorknobs to the left and right of the central figure's lace cuffed hands. The lines of the floor running towards the half-open doors suggest countless possible entries towards other horizons, for the beautiful young woman to choose. While one hand is attached to the dark skirt falling from her waist, the other is already opening a first white door.

The vertical *palimpseste* feeling that reminds *The Years*' protagonist of her mother's calm presence and their shared love of immersive reading cannot alone provide the form for her total book. It pulls her "away from words and all language, back to her first years, bereft of memory, the rosy warmth of the cradle, through a series of abymes—those of *Birthday*, the painting by Dorothea Tanning" (*The Years* 194).

A few pages before the narration of *The Years* dissolves into the final list of evanescent images, the "palimpsest sensation"

> prefigures if not death, then the state she'll be in one day, sinking, as the very old do, into the contemplation of trees, sons and grandchildren (her view of them quite blurred due to "age-related macular degeneration"), stripped of learning and history, her own and that of the world, or afflicted with Alzheimer's, unable to name the day, month, or season. (*The Years* 227)

Originating in a wordless unity with the maternal body, the palimpsest reverie allows the daughter, when approaching the end of her *Years,* to imagine, soberly, if not without fright, her future return to the mother's wordless night.

As the preceding sections have sought to demonstrate, the lost mother—apparently underemphasized in *The Years*—not only motivates the writing of this *œuvre totale* but is also transfigured into the formal structure of the book. Her almost immaterial presence makes itself known as a fundamental dimension of memory, the only place where "things really are" (*Le Vrai lieu* 16). But, as we saw, the life of the author is remembered along two complementary lines in this book. While the childhood feeling of dreamy repose behind the mother's back is at the basis of the vertical stem of memory, the horizontal dimension of memory writing is defined by the urge to transcend personal images and capture their shared historical circumstances: a feeling associated

with driving on the highway and perhaps with the adolescent's dream of conquering the world: "the automobile, synonymous with freedom, a total mastery of space, and, in a certain way, the world" (*The Years* 64). If the vertical remembrance is a return to the mother figure (of life and death), the horizontal memory work is a willed movement away from her. The tension between immanence and transcendence is thus centered around the mother figure: on one hand the urge to identify and repeat her traditional role, on the other hand the struggle to break with it. This conflict between regaining and "killing" the mother within, also reflects the aging historian's paradoxical quest for continuity through the charting of biographical and historical change: the prestige of renewal carrying with it the fear of finitude.

The *poisseux* and the pure

I will now take a step back from *The Years* and turn to earlier works of Ernaux with more explicit depictions of the mother in contexts revealing not the warm acceptance of the *palimpseste* sensation, but refusal in the form of disgust. In this section, after first considering the young daughter's rejection of her mother's social class and sexual morality in the early novels, I will examine the middle-aged daughter's reactions to her mother's dementia in the nursing home journal. In this way, we will see *The Years*' more detached conceptualization of the aging daughter-mother relationship in the light of earlier accounts of physical rejection. Reading Ernaux's works, possibly against her intention, more as the expression of a continuous unresolved tension than as a reconciliation story, I continue to look for elements that seem to play, over the years, a structuring role in her written universe with special relevance for the daughter-mother relationship and for the representation of old age.

In Ernaux's first novel, *Les Armoires vides* / *Cleaned out*, the contrast between *le poisseux* (the filthy, sticky) and *le pur* (the pure and clean) is an important motif that reoccurs also in later works and in relation to the mother. *Poisseux* (from *poix*: pitch) denotes the blackness and viscosity of the residue of tar, and in a figurative sense, things disgusting, gluish and vile. The young narrator/protagonist of this slightly fictionalized abortion narrative dwells on

the repulsive aspects of her childhood home. Like Ernaux's background, it is both a home and a family business, invaded by "disgusting old men" (107), drinking in the café, urinating and vomiting in the courtyard, and on the female side, precarious "simplettes" gossiping with her mother around the grocery counter about other neighborhood women's depravity. The family's private space is described as hardly more than a bedroom where impressions of intimate sounds, the night bucket, dirty fingernails and coarse language are shared with the reader. The mother incorporates the "bad" manners of the lower class: violent, noisy, indiscreet—"My mother is dirty, mad, they are pigs!" (169)—and is constantly compared to the other girls' light, elegant and eloquent mothers in their private homes with modern and hygienic kitchens and bathrooms.

In *Cleaned out*, the young Dénise's feeling of "stickiness" is associated with what she constructs as lower-class corporeality, with sexuality and the mother's obsession with sex as sin. At the private Catholic school, the protagonist is sensitive to the social gap between her and the other girls: "Je me sentais lourde, poisseuse, face à leur aisance, à leur facilité" (61) ("I felt heavy, sticky, faced with their ease, their facility"); "Quelque chose de poisseux et d'impur m'entoure définitivement, lié à mes differences, à mon milieu" (67) ("Something sticky and impure surrounds me, definitely, linked to my differences, to my environment"). In preparation for the first confession, the school mistress had instructed Dénise and her classmates to make lists of their sins; in the confession box, the priest interrogates her about touching 'impure' parts of the body, warning her against the devilish "beast" that lives between her legs. She had eagerly anticipated absolution of all her faults (stealing sugar, disrespecting her parents etc.) but leaves feeling "dirty and alone" (139). As she grows up, lack of bodily restraint, of manners and education becomes associated with everything bad and ugly, inescapable burdens and determinisms. Arriving at the University for the first time means "burning the bridges" to her parents and entering the higher social class of material and spiritual freedom; she notes the "pure happiness of being alone," "all stickiness and ugliness gone" (164).

The young narrator's description of her parents in *Cleaned out* is much more negative than in the later, explicitly autobiographical books dedicated to them. Gisèle Sapiro affirms that the disgust towards the proletarian milieu expressed in the early novels, exemplifies how the "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu) of the dominating classes towards the dominated is interiorized by the victim of contempt. This same violence is analyzed and objectified in the father's and the mother's books (*La Place* and *Une femme*) with Ernaux's neutral, detached, "flat style," purified of the dominating class values that demeaned her people's lives (Sapiro 244-247).

In *The Frozen Woman*, based on Ernaux's married life as a young mother, Frantext documents two occurrences of *poisseuse*, now related to children: the baby's mouth, "sticky with milk," that the husband could clean just as carefully as the wife (*La Femme gelée* 145); and a children's canteen "howling and sticky" at a vacation resort they visit with their toddler (174). A significant passage earlier in the same book relates the protagonist's feelings about mothering before she becomes one herself: "I look with amazement at girls barely older than me clinging to prams, absolute disgust for kids, grubby and viscous." The following passage relates a walk with the mother through "kilometers" of household equipment exposed at a trade fair: "What am I doing here?" (102).

Le poisseux epitomizes the daughter's fear of falling into the confining, stifling obligations of a rural, lower-class mother of the1950s and 60s, always under moral supervision and risk of public shaming. The daughter's aversion for a lifestyle falsely grounded in religion and social conventions found philosophical justification in existentialism. Sartre's *La Nausée* is mentioned, in the early novels as well as in *The Years,* as a revelation. "We were overcome with nausea and a feeling of the absurd. The sticky body of adolescence met the *être en trop* of existentialism" (57). Identification with her spiritual mother Beauvoir who devalues the traditional mother's occupations as inauthentic, stagnating "immanence," was for the young girl a means of emancipation; repulsion became a sign of intellectual superiority (*Les Armoires vides* 193-194).

The experience of May 1968, described in *The Years* as a complete reversal of all earlier norms, has a special importance in the light of the social and sexual

prejudices that marked the young daughter's concerns about the pure and the impure. Before May 1968: "For girls, shame lay in wait at every turn" (*The Years* 68); after 1968: "The shames of yesteryear were no longer valid [...]. All that had been forbidden, unspeakable, was now recommended." The moral vocabulary of shame and honor was replaced by words like *frustration*, *satisfaction*; the new ethos was *relaxed*. Shame was on those who didn't feel pleasure, who were uptight and had a *complex* (103).

> In the erotic works Ernaux published several decades later, *Passion simple* (1992), *Se perdre* (2001), *L'Occupation* (2002), *L'Usage de la photo* (2005), *Le Jeune homme* (2022), sexual shame is no longer a topic, and "purity" is strongly associated with the beauty of passion and writing (*Se perdre* 862). In one relationship, recounted in a short text published in 1996, the viscous traces of sexual intercourse are celebrated as "something similar to a work of art": We made love on a Sunday in October, I was lying on a piece of drawing paper spread out on the bed. He wanted to know what kind of picture the mixture of his sperm and my menstrual blood would make.
>
> [...] The next day he framed the picture and hung it on the wall of his room. ("Fragments autour de Philippe V." 25-26)

The bodily unease – "le poisseux" – sums up what the daughter left behind to free herself from sexual and class shame and from her mother. The repulsive "stickiness" linked to a certain class of bodies and behaviors was overcome and neutralized in the detached writing about her background in *La Place* and *Une femme*. But it reappears in the direct and unprocessed account of her confrontation with the mother's advanced stage of dementia in the care home diary.

"Food, urine, shit"

Une femme, finished a year after the mother's death, includes her last years with Alzheimer's disease, living with her daughter and grandsons in the beginning, and finally institutionalized in a long-term geriatric ward until 1986. A much rawer and more subjective account of her illness is given in the journal notes from this period, published as *« Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit »* in 1997.

As in *The Years*, the family meal ritual is also in this journal a structuring

principle, but in the very reduced and un-festive setting of the mother's sickroom where the daughter brings offerings of cake or chocolate. During her regular visits, the daughter usually does not take part in the meal, only observes her mother eating avidly and with difficulty, hands and face smeared with sticky substances. The kind of sweets brought to the mother are meticulously mentioned: "strawberry tart" (24), "apricot mousse" (61), "beignets" (63), "sablé" (65), "flan" (81), "éclair" (86), "almond brioche" (95); perhaps they are reminders of childhood treats, but probably also of the disgust the narrator in *Cleaned out* describes watching her parents eat (169). In the journal, this culinary preciseness only adds to the "horror" of the nursing home atmosphere: "Food, urine, shit, the combination of smells hits one as soon as one comes out of the elevator" (*« Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit »* 36). The mother's eating is here often described in connection to digestive functions (44): the toilet is mentioned in the same context as the dining room (56, 62); the daughter feeds her mother while sensing that she needs to have her diapers changed (84, 89), cannot change her, sprays her with eau de cologne (87). The toilet floor is "sticky" with urine (56, 86); someone has defecated on the sickroom floor (44). The daughter opens the mother's night drawer to see if she has any biscuits left and finds a human turd (42). The mother's mouth tends to fall open; her teeth and denture are gone; the daughter is horrified to see other intimate parts of her naked body, her loss of *pudeur* (24).

Nursing scientist and gerontologist Runar Bakken has described the anthropological distinction between the pure and impure in connection to common prejudice against older people in care homes (Bakken 110-113). According to Mary Douglas's classical study, *Purity and Danger*, the impure is that which cannot be contained within a category, for instance matter out of place or things that transgress their given borders, provoking feelings of disgust, fear or contempt. Human waste, signs of illness or death, usually concealed, provoke all the stronger reactions as they remind us of our own corporality and finitude and thus threaten the boundaries of our fragile identity as living human beings (Kristeva 11-12). Bakken reminds us of how 'civilized' human behavior is governed by strictly defined rules for distinguishing between the outside and

the inside of the body. Well-mannered people shut their mouth while chewing food. They do not expose their bodily openings. The inability to control what comes in and out of the body, whether it is food and drink, excrement, urine, saliva, or incongruent words, 'justifies' the association of very old age with infancy. In Ernaux's nursing home journal, the mother is compared to a baby on several occasions (83, 87-88, 95), and to something not human.

Ernaux's notes from her visits to the geriatric ward testify deep attachment but also horror and disgust towards the manifestations of the 'impure' that rob her mother of her "humanity." The daughter attempts to 'purify' her: making her look less "savage," cleaning her hands, cutting her nails, brushing her hair. A recurring and somewhat troubling ritual is the repeated shaving of the mother's face. "Je dois la raser à chaque visite" (40). The reader may assume that the mother would have disliked being exposed to a public readership not only as "demented," but as a woman needing frequent shaving. A hairy female face would for her be a typical example of the "impure," of body hair shamefully out of place. Some humanizing attempts are not exempt from cruelty, as the daughter acknowledges: "mon sadisme" (28).

The daughter's conflict between independence and commitment towards her mother, breaks out most painfully when the mother becomes like a baby craving the daughter's unconditional love and care. The diary accentuates the daughter's deep identification with the cognitively and physically impaired mother: "Terrible impression of being double. I am me and her" (23); "she is me in old age and I can see the deterioration of her body threatening to take hold of me—the wrinkles on her legs, the creases in her neck" (36). The daughter is around forty-five, approaching menopause, just as the mother was when she lost her mother (57), repeating roles of female fate. The childhood mother is also recalled in gestures, expressions and sudden meaningful phrases. But the daughter refuses to be her mother's mother. "The horror of this reversal mother/child" (83). "Je ne PEUX être sa mère" (29).

The visceral reactions to class difference in the first novels are reflected on with analytical detachment in later texts, in understanding with Bourdieu's sociological analyses of "good" and "bad" taste. But the reader is left with the

disgusted impressions of the care home diary, disturbingly, as if disgust were a justified reason for the social exclusion and control of dependent elders. *Une femme,* written after the immediate notes of *« Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit »*, purifies the, at times, almost obscenely corporeal mother of the nursing home diary by writing her into a more objective and respectful story of a woman—seemingly detached, and yet, vibrant with contained emotion: "She is the only woman who really counted for me" (22). While the narrator of the care home journal refuses to become her dementia-affected mother's mother, the narrator of *Une femme* feels as if she "is giving birth to [her] mother" by telling her whole story (43). Surprisingly, the original notes from the care home were published nine years *after* the more sanitized account of the mother's ending, as if the raw feelings were still active. Producing reactions of shock and abjection in the reader, *« Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit »* does not show us a way out of the darkness. The many details the daughter notices, indicating that the mother is 'still there', makes it difficult to say that the disgust is not directed towards the mother's person but to a body that is no longer hers. Consequently, the journal appears as a reminder of Beauvoir's view of old age as an *irréalisable*—"the one we consciously and unconsciously have the most reluctance to assume" (*La Vieillesse* 412)—and death as "an unjustifiable violation" (*Une mort très douce* 106).

New cultural models of coming to terms with aging?

The repugnance suggested by the descriptions of the mother's body in *« Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit »* reflects the daughter's expressed fear of aging. Driving away from the nursing home, she notes her reactions:

> Every time I return from seeing her, I need to listen to music on my car radio, very loud, while driving on the highway. Today, with intense pleasure and despair, *C'est extra* with Léo Ferré. I need eroticism because of my mother's body, because of her life. (*« Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit »* 58)

A short text referring to the same period, written in 1998, returns to the daughter's need of purification from the "contaminating" impressions of old age by means of passionate relationships: "It seems that I needed the orgasm

to bear the image of her shrunken body, her soiled underwear" ("Hôtel Casanova" 483). Sexual passion is used to conjure the fear of aging and to overcome abjection. A similar strategy is noticeable in later writings relating love affairs with younger men: "It's true that a young man in one's bed makes one forget aging and time" (*Se Perdre* 710). The idea of mirroring her *vieillissement* in the marked face of a lover her own age is not so appealing (*Le Jeune homme* 27).

In Ernaux's latest book, *Le Jeune homme* (2022), the thirty years younger boyfriend is less interesting as an individual than as an incarnation of the different men she has slept with since the age of eighteen (14). He allows her "for a last time" to relive her youth and enjoy "the sweetness of my own *durée* and the identity of my desire" (25). In this book, the first-person narrator sees herself as the dominating part of the affair with the young man who—as a representative of the social class, language, habits and gestures she has left behind—transforms her life into a "strange and continuous palimpsest" (26) allowing her to magically duplicate it into a higher form of reality. Memories both of her childhood closeness to the mother and of her abortion are evoked also in this book, triggered by coincidences or "signs" suggesting that the unconventional relationship is predestinated, and bringing up, once again, the double urge towards freedom and fate. She sees herself with the eyes of her mother, walking hand in hand with the much younger lover, as if she were eighteen: "It seemed that I was once again the same scandalous girl. But this time without any shame, with a feeling of triumph" (31).

Eroticism can thus be a precarious means of overcoming the ravages of time, but the sense of precarity also serves to enhance desire. Love stories in Ernaux's writing are always ended, as if long-term relations necessarily implied "désillusion" and "diminution du désir" (*Se perdre* 727). In this journal of lost love, the fear of losing a youthful body accompanies the fear of appearing "collante": "clingy and old (clingy because old)" (709).

For many readers, Ernaux's writings over the last three decades about romantic relationships with younger men and these relationships' endings (*Passion simple*, *Se perdre*, *L'Occupation*, *L'Usage de la photo*, *Le Jeune homme*) are

examples of ageing with art, passion and continuous self-renewal. Returning to one of my initial questions—if Ernaux offers "cultural models of older women as a way of generating alternative futures for ourselves"—one can say that as a role model she encourages women to stay active, productive and desirable. In accordance with current, hedonistic ideals of an emancipated life, she demonstrates how older women have the same right as men to have much younger partners, but also suggests that *older men* are generally less desirable. Some would say that she fails to question aesthetic prejudice against the age-marked body and Beauvoir's claim that "instant repulsion" is a natural reaction to "decrepitude, ugliness and ill health" (*La Vieillesse* 60).

Toward the end of *The Years*, the digital era's tendency toward social "abstraction," i.e. the accumulation of intersubjective connections within widespread virtual networks, is mentioned as significant for our apprehension of time, aging and death. The internet turns everything into discourse, notes Ernaux. Short and intense affairs with disembodied subjects develop and dissolve:

> devoid of odor or gesture; they didn't get under our skin.
> […]
> Consciousness stretched across the total space of the planet toward other galaxies. The infinite ceased to be imaginary. That is why it seemed inconceivable that one day we would die. (*The Years* 212-214)

The "purity" of virtual affairs or affairs that are not allowed to age may often depend on the detachment that sociologist Eva Illouz (*The End of Love*) analyses in the prevalent choice she sees today, of "negative relations" rather than long-term commitment. The logic of capitalism, consumerism and sexual freedom has invaded the general understanding and construction of social bonds, she argues, privileging short-term and restrained emotional investments from which one can easily withdraw. In her generally lucid description of late capitalist culture, Ernaux does not seem to see the decline of love as a problem. In my view, the tendency to avoid long-term relationships, with risk of "sticky" interdependency, freedom-limiting responsibilities and self-sacrifice, cannot be a model for any age. The ideal of "free" relationships (so far from the 'bond of

destiny' of Ernaux's daughter-mother relationship) may easily strengthen the delusionary perception of individuals we engage with as infinitely replaceable and thus less worthy of compassion and care, a tendency to which people with less capital on the social and sexual marked are particularly vulnerable.

People who "get under our skin" help us understand finitude. But compassion with our human condition and acknowledgment of human limits can also develop through literary friendships. Diana Holmes highlights how Ernaux, as an extremely earnest narrator of her life, creates strong virtual bonds with her readers, continuing "a lifetime's project of writing to and for readers, exploring and modelling the female life course through the later twentieth and early twenty-first century, and now [...], modelling how ageing can be thought and lived" (570).

A hesitant conclusion

As an "impersonal autobiography," *The Years* does not convey strong feelings of attraction or repulsion. It does not represent aging and old age as "impure" but rather in terms of individual and collective denial, increasingly so after the "youth revolution"—"May 1968 was the first year of the world" (102) —with its rejection of parents, "les vieux": "We took their opinions and advice as pure information. And we would not grow old" (121). Approaching thirty the protagonist

> does not feel any particular age, though certainly feels a young woman's arrogance vis-à-vis older women, a condescension toward the menopausal. It is unlikely she will ever be one of them herself. She is unperturbed when someone predicts that she will die at fifty-two. It seems to her an acceptable age at which to die. (115)

In her forties:

> As if marriage had only been an interlude, she feels she's picked up the thread of her adolescence where she'd left it off, returning to the same kind of expectancy, the same breathless way of running to appointments in high heels (149)

In her fifties:

> We wore jeans, leggings, and T-shirts like girls of fifteen. Like them we said 'my boyfriend' when referring to our regular lover. As we

> aged, we ceased to have an age. When we heard *Only you* or *Capri c'est fini* on Radio Nostalgie, the sweetness of youth washed over us. The present swelled and carried us back to our twenties. Compared to our mothers, strained and perspiring throughout menopause, we felt as if we had outsmarted time. (165)

Approaching sixty towards the end of the 20th century, it's the same refrain: "And we did not age" (188). Finally, at the end of *The Years*: "she […] generally lives in denial—not of her age which is sixty-six, but of what it represents for the very young" (222).

Shirley Jordan claims that Ernaux in *The Years* expresses the same "enduring incredulity at her own ageing" as Beauvoir did, and that she in her dread of deep old age "reproduces the 'cultural devaluation of old women'" (148). But, as Jordan also points out, denial of aging is not only an individual characteristic, it is inherent to the mentality of our age and thus an important aspect of *The Years*' exploration of time.

Ernaux highlights important changes in our culture that are not always to the advantage of older people. Our era's denial of aging and its illusion of infinite mastery, reflect, in my view, an unbalanced ideal for a good life, compulsively self-transcending, in constant pursuit of new possibilities and projects. In this perspective, aging is primarily a threat to individual self-realization, while it could also be seen as a chance to revalue the patient maintenance of life, our long relations to the past and to the people around us. The dynamic of immanence and transcendence in Ernaux's works invites the idea of a conjunction of opposites, generating higher forms of relating to oneself and one's others. In her non-fictional writing, Ernaux underscores how her mother went beyond what was expected of a woman of her class, but also how fulfilled she was as a devoted grandmother. The author's attempted conciliation with the mother as object of love and aversion through different forms of writing, allows us to imagine a life where loyalty to the generational chain can enhance rather than hinder self-realization. Ernaux's most ambitious project was realized by reflecting on, repeating and retaining the past. Its working title *Passages* can refer to both active self-transcendence and passive immanence: her intention

was to write a woman's passage through time and also time's passage through her.

What was then the lesson to learn for old age from the daughter who thought she would never age? One is the hard lesson of dependency, all the more poignant as independence from mother and control of motherhood have been so important in the lives of daughters of Ernaux's generation. As illustrated by her identification with Tanning's portrait "Birthday," Ernaux's life-writing is deeply anchored in a timeless connection with the mother, cut across by choices opposed to the mother's norms, but inscribing both daughter and mother into the "chain of women that generations passed through" (*L'Événement* 302).

When the institutionalized mother calls the daughter by her name, "Annie!", the voice sounds as in deep childhood: "Take me with you!"; and the conflict of dependency versus long fought for independence is brutally laid bare. The daughter was lovingly dependent on her mother as a child. Maybe the mother's dependency on the daughter, as the older woman becomes as helpless as a baby, produces a new understanding of the human condition as dependent, something *The Years* also conveys by the focus on the historical, sociological determinisms that shape and limit our selves. As you age, you learn to recognize yourself, not only in your mother but also in your *time*.

"My mother's illness and death revealed to me the force of our need for others" (*Se perdre* 26).

Works Cited

"1997: Annie Ernaux : Style lapidaire et Alzheimer chez Bernard Pivot." Youtube, uploaded by Ina Culture, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEsW_IYDhF4.

"Annie Ernaux Facts." The Nobel Prize, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2022/ernaux/facts/.

"Annie Ernaux Nobel Lecture." The Nobel Prize, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2022/ernaux/lecture/.

Bakken, Runar. *Alle vil leve lenge, men ingen vil bli gamle*. Fagbokforlaget, 2019.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *Le Deuxième sexe*. Gallimard, 1949.

—. *La Vieillesse*. Gallimard, 1970.

—. *A Very Easy Death*. Translated by Patrick O'Brian, Pantheon Books, 1965.

Best, Francine, Bruno Blanckeman, Francine Dugast-Portes (editors). *Annie Ernaux : Le temps et la mémoire*. Colloque de Cérisy avec participation d'Annie Ernaux, Stock, 2014.

Boyer-Weinman, Martine. *Vieillir dit-elle : une anthropologie de l'âge*. Champ Vallon, 2013.

—. "French Female Literary Milestones in the History of Ageing." *Cultural Histories of Ageing: Myths, Plots and Metaphors of the Senescent Self*. Edited by Margery Vibe Skagen, Routledge, 2022, pp. 223-240.

Duffy, Jean. *Thresholds of Meaning: Passage, Ritual and Liminality in Contemporary French Narrative*. Liverpool UP, 2011.

Ernaux, Annie. *Les Armoires vides*. (1974) *Écrire la vie*, pp. 103-2009, Gallimard, Quarto, 2011.

—. *La Femme gelée*. (1981) *Écrire la vie*, pp. 323-43, Gallimard, Quarto, 2011.

—. *La Place*. Gallimard, 1983.

—. *Une Femme*. Gallimard, 1987.

—. *Passion simple*. (1991) *Écrire la vie*, pp. 657-695, Gallimard, Quarto, 2011.

—. « *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* ». Gallimard, 1997.

—. *"I remain in darkness"*. Trans. Tanya Leslie, Seven Stories Press, 1999.

—. *L'Événement*. (2000) *Écrire la vie,* pp. 269-321, Gallimard, Quarto, 2011.

—. *Se perdre*. (2001) *Écrire la vie,* pp. 697-875, Gallimard, Quarto, 2011.

—. *L'Occupation* (2002) *Écrire la vie*, pp. 877-910, Gallimard, Quarto, 2011.

—. *L'Écriture comme un couteau*. Entretien avec Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, Stock, 2003.

—. *L'Usage de la photo*. Avec Marc Marie, Gallimard, 2005.

—. *Les Années*. Gallimard, 2008.

—. *Le Vrai lieu : Entretiens avec Michelle Porte*. Gallimard , 2014.

—. *The Years*. Trans. Alison L. Strayer, Seven Stories Press, 2017.

—. *L'Atelier noir*. Gallimard, 2022.

—. "Hôtel Casanova." (1998) *Écrire la vie*, Gallimard, Quarto, 2011, p. 481.

—. *Le Jeune homme*. Gallimard, 2022.

—. "Fragments autour de Philippe V." *L'Infini* 56 (hiver 1996), pp. 25-26.

—. "Anniversaire." *Cahier de l'Herne Annie Ernaux*. Edited by Pierre-Louis Fort, L'Herne, 2022, p. 142.

Heilbronner, Oded. "From a Culture *for* Youth to a Culture *of* Youth: Recent Trends in the Historiography of Western Youth Cultures." *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Nov., 2008), pp. 575-591 https://www.jstor.org/stable/40542581?seq=3

Holmes, Diana. "Modelling Age: Ageing Women Writers and Their Readers (Annie Ernaux, Margaret Drabble)." *French Studies*, Volume 77, Issue 4, October 2023, pp. 558–571, https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/knad159

Illouz, Eva. *The End of Love: A Sociology of Negative Relations*. Oxford UP, 2018.

Jordan, Shirley. "Writing age: Annie Ernaux's *Les Années*." *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 47; No. 2, April 2011, pp.138-149.

Kristeva, Julia. *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. Éditions du Seuil, 1980.

Lazar, Liliane. "À la recherche de la mère: Simone de Beauvoir et Annie Ernaux." *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, Vol. 16, Simone de Beauvoir Studies: Moving into a New Century (1999-2000), pp. 123-134.

Miller, William. *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Harvard UP, 1998.

Monfort, Catherine R. "'La Vieille née': Simone de Beauvoir, *Une mort très douce*, and Annie Ernaux, *Une femme*." *French Forum*, Vol. 21, No. 3, September 1996, pp. 349-364.

Pickard, Susan. "The Red Dressing Gown: Reflections on the Aging of a Dutiful Daughter." *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, Brill, online publication 21 December 2023. https://brill.com/view/journals/sdbs/33/2/article-p230_3.xml

Sapiro, Gisèle. "Une ethnographie de la violence symbolique." *L'Herne : Ernaux*. Edited by Pierre-Louis Fort, Éditions de l'Herne, 2022, p. 244-247.

Tanning, Dorothea. Birthday. 1942, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia. https://www.dorotheatanning.org/life-and-work/view/63/

Vartanian, Lenny R.; Tayla B. McCutcheon and Sarah A. Rubenstein. "Disgust, Prejudice and Stigma". *The Handbook of Disgust Research* edited by P.A. Powell and N.S. Consedine. Consedine, N.S. Springer, Cham., 2021, pp. 173-190. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84486-8_10.

Viart, Dominique. "Filiations littéraires". Dominique Viart (éd.), *Écritures contemporaines 2*, "*États du roman contemporain"*, Paris-Caen, Minard Lettres Modernes, 1999, pp. 115-140.

—, "Le récit de filiation : 'Éthique de la restitution' contre 'devoir de mémoire' dans la littérature contemporaine." *Héritage, filiation, transmission : Configurations littéraires (XVIII^e^-XX^e^ siècles)*. Edited by Christian Chelebourg; David Martens; Myriam Watthee-Delmotte, Presses universitaires de Louvain, 2011, pp. 199-212. https://books.openedition.org/pucl/4197

Woodward, Kathleen. "Instant Repulsion: Decrepitude, the Mirror Stage and the Literary Imagination". *The Kenyon Review*, Autumn, 1983, New Series, Vol. 5, No. 4, pp. 43-66.

—. "Inventing Generational Models: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Literature." *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, ed. by Kathleen Woodward, Indiana UP, 1999, pp.149-70.

Margery Vibe Skagen is Professor of French Literature at the University of Bergen. She has published extensively on Baudelaire and co-edited several anthologies in the fields of Literature and Science and Literature and Ageing. She led the interdisciplinary project *Historicizing the Ageing Self*, funded by the Norwegian Research Council, 2016 - 2021. She is currently working on the topic of ageing in French contemporary literature, notably Annie Ernaux and Michel Houellebecq.