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WRITING AGE: ANNIE ERNAUX'S *LES ANNÉES*

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ABSTRACT

A pioneering writer of self-narrative since the 1970s, French author Annie Ernaux has systematically used her own life as the material for her books, turning an objective, auto-ethnographic eye on her intimate experiences and writing 'transpersonally' about subjects such as education and class-migration, marriage, abortion, sexual desire, jealousy and bereavement. In her most recent publications, the phototext *L'usage de la photo* (2005) and the ambitious total autobiography *Les années* (2008), the author has sought innovative forms through which to investigate and expose her own experiences of illness and ageing. This article analyses Ernaux's powerfully-articulated perceptions of what it means to grow old, with a particular focus on *Les années* (2008).

Keywords: French women's writing; life-writing; Ernaux, Annie; ageing; *Les années*

'Old age they say is like this; but it isn't. It's different.'[1]

A PIONEERING WRITER of self-narrative since the 1970s, French author Annie Ernaux has systematically used her own life as the material for her books, turning an objective, auto-ethnographic eye on her intimate experiences and writing 'transpersonally' about subjects such as education and class-migration, marriage, abortion, sexual desire, jealousy and bereavement. In her most recent publications, the phototext *L'usage de la photo* ['Uses of the Photo'][2] and the ambitious total autobiography *Les années* ['The Years'],[3] both written in her sixties, the author has turned to a new area of first-hand experience and sought innovative forms through which to investigate and expose her own embodied perceptions of illness and ageing. With a particular focus on *Les années*, this article examines phenomena which constitute a shift in Ernaux's writing towards a narrative of ageing – her evolving self-perception; her newly expressed obsession with time, memory and death; her fear of dementia – and analyses her powerfully articulated perceptions of what it means to grow old. Ageing gives Ernaux a new subject position and ushers in a period of rich formal experimentation. It is shown to inject an intense urgency into her writing and to engender a split voice: one marked by authority, but also by a new fragility, anxiety and fear. The backdrop to this study of Ernaux's work is the

conspicuous neglect of old women in women's studies, feminist theory and fictional representation. It will be useful first to revisit this gap.

Disappearing women

In any number of ways, old women 'disappear'. In spite of the emergence of an ageing population in Western societies, a development which should sharpen our interest in old age, new critical and creative approaches to women's ageing are slow in arriving. Much has been written about the early and middle stages of women's lives, up to and including menopause, but sustained feminist analyses of experiences such as widowhood, grand-mothering or sexuality in old age have been few and far between, and while the physical and emotional experiences of younger women are dwelt upon, there has been little attentiveness to those of the old. In short, there remains a reluctance to *see* old women. Feminist theorists rehearse the reasons for this low priority, but they do not effectively take us far towards an imaginative re-prioritizing.

Literary representation by and large compounds and intensifies this occlusion. The literary gaze even more than the social gaze glides over and past old women, occasionally conferring upon them character roles, but essentially confirming their lack of interest as viable subjects and highlighting our collective inability to think through all stages of the life course equitably. Indeed, books which emphasize older women's lives are harder to sell and the *Bildung* of the woman in literature seems pre-programmed to stop before the onset of old age. Examining contemporary French discourses around old women in a range of cultural forms from children's stories to media representations, advertising and art, Anne Simon and Christine Détrez confirm that women in third- and fourth-age categories may constitute a new marketing niche but are still, paradoxically, consigned to invisibility and silence.[4] These women arouse ambivalence, are rarely heroines or central to a narrative, and have bodies which are perceived to be unpalatable and in need of curing. The authors predict that as the generation of second-wave feminists and contemporary women writers of *autofiction* grow old, they will not disappear but will remain vocal and create spaces for fuller expression of the range of experiences associated with ageing, including representations of late-life love and sexuality. This development is yet to come.

A small number of purposeful imaginings of women's old age do exist. For instance, the voices which come together in Kathleen Woodward's *Figuring Age*[5] tackle head-on the construction of older women in Western culture, as does Nancy K. Miller's powerful essay 'The Marks of Time';[6] Simone de Beauvoir's seminal but gloomy study *La vieillesse* [*Old Age*] remains a reference point;[7] age is also addressed intensively at second-hand by women who describe the latter stages of their mothers' lives: Beauvoir, Marguerite Yourcenar, Noëlle Châtelet, Pierrette Fleutiaux, Hélène Cixous and Ernaux have all provided notable examples. In terms of first-hand accounts, unsparing representation of old age

has been produced in Anglo-American literature by authors such as Barbara Pym, Penelope Lively, Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing. Diana Athill's Costa Prize-winning *Somewhere Towards the End*, published when she was ninety-one, is a rare account of extreme old age which, while it acknowledges age's indignities, nevertheless presents an aspirational image of an articulate woman who still enjoys life greatly.[8] French cinema's *grande dame* Agnès Varda has recently produced interesting documentary work on the neglected social category of widows, along with a rich seam of late autobiographical films foregrounding her own ageing and creating spaces for old women which partially fracture existing perceptions. Varda comes to terms with the idea of the old woman by displaying and performing age, by creative clowning – an image springs to mind from her autobiographical *Les plages d'Agnès* ['Agnès's Beaches'] (2009) of the filmmaker demonstrating against old age on the streets of Paris, carrying a placard which reads 'J'ai mal partout' ['I hurt all over'] – and by alternately defying and conforming to stereotype. The lingering digital camerawork through which she explores with us the texture of her skin and the white roots of her dyed-dark hair in *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* [*The Gleaners and I*] (2000) affords a rare example of insistence on the physical visibility of old women and invites us to *touch*, challenging ideas that it is indiscreet, uninteresting or undignified to focus on an old woman's body. Varda's late and extraordinarily inventive works create a model for ageing which is both candid and robust and which confronts head-on the unresolved question of what is to be done with the figure of the old woman.

Ernaux might well be expected to tackle ageing at first-hand. In 'resolutely pushing forward the boundaries of life-writing as enquiry and testimony',[9] she has persistently attended to categories of people and experience that are peripheral, unvoiced, taboo or shameful. In so doing she has drawn attention to and countered their negative construction. She has been an example, though never an exemplar, of what it meant in a given period and social context to experience family shame, to have a termination, an unsuccessful marriage, a passionate love affair, or breast cancer. Writing about her own old age now presents her with a distinctive personal and formal challenge. Can we read her treatment of ageing as part of her ongoing battle to bring to centre stage what is elided and to present critical and creative arguments for changes in perception? We will see that the tension in women's ageing between visibility and invisibility is interestingly played out in Ernaux's latest work, and that ageing presents a stumbling block in her otherwise combative project.

Les années

An extraordinarily detailed evocation of everyday life over seven decades, *Les années* charts both social and personal change from the France of the immediate post-war years to the present day, giving a strong, lived sense of the passage of time. Critics have stressed the work's socio-historical dimension, noting a shift

away from the intimate and the subjective through which Ernaux habitually explores social phenomena. Unusually, in this 'autobiographie impersonnelle' ['impersonal autobiography'] (*LA*, 240) the author eschews the first person, referring to herself throughout as 'elle' ['she'], preferring to create a greater distance from the self and providing a strong new example of the de-centring of the 'I' which Linda Anderson locates as a feature of women's autobiography.[10] This 'she' is connected to the author's sense of ageing, which is the context and the precondition for, although not always the most obvious subject of, the book. It asks Ernaux's readers to refocus on her voice as differently authoritative, foregrounding its collective reach as she demonstrates her sharpened appetite for recording, remembering and saving the past, and serving as a conduit of History. There are, however, places where the pronoun is differently weighted. The book's opening and closing pages are marked by frank expression of the author's preoccupation with memory, mortality and ageing, and here the 'she' feels more intimate, perhaps more heuristic, having less to do with authority and more to do with trying to imagine, or get to grips with, a new subject position. It is in its focus on ageing, then, that *Les années* maintains both Ernaux's habitual intimacy and her tactic of bringing to literature states of vulnerability, or 'unspeakable' matters.

How does Ernaux approach ageing in this work? She recaps on shared and personal senses of age relative to each stage of the life course, charting what amounts to an endemic resistance to ageing. This ranges from the early conviction that 'on ne vieillirait pas' ['we would not grow old'] (*LA*, 118), to the condescension and arrogance with which she approached older and menopausal women in her thirties ('Qu'elle en devienne une était très improbable' ['It was most improbable that she would become one'] (*LA*, 122–23)), to a moment of barely suppressed hysteria linked to fear of her own menopause on the cusp of her fortieth birthday (*LA*, 136–37), then an awakening to mortality in the summer of 1980 when the true meaning of the phrase '*je n'ai qu'une vie*' ['*I have only one life*'] struck home (*LA*, 142; Ernaux's italics). Eventually, the habit of denial stands in conflict with the fact of the author's age. Ernaux makes some changes to accommodate the new reality. For instance, in previous writings she focused on her relationships with her own parents or with lovers and said little about the family in which she is a mother. Here she opens her text to her extended family, re-contextualising herself within the generations as mother, grandmother and the family's 'plus ancien pilier' ['oldest pillar'] (*LA*, 232), guarantor of its rituals and responsible for the transmission of the past. This new authority might be thought to lend a positive gloss to the experience that comes with age, an experience that is clearly demonstrated – perhaps even tacitly celebrated – by *Les années*.

Other facets of ageing are less welcome. Ernaux records a painful sense of exclusion from the community of younger women, women of forty-five or fifty, with whom she still identifies yet who cannot identify with her, perceiving her as 'old' (*LA*, 233). She describes her distress upon discovering that a daughter was

taking shape in the womb of her elder son's partner – as if nature were replacing her – at a time when her own mortality was being sharply felt, her hair falling out as a result of chemotherapy (*LA*, 235). Her encounters with her changing body provide noteworthy examples of the self-protective 'splitting' that Woodward, following Melanie Klein, detects in the self-perception of the old.[11] Ernaux's entire work is punctuated with descriptions of photographs, which she uses as (questionable) autobiographical evidence. She tracks her age through these in *Les années* finding, as usual, that far from the self being recoverable in them, a distancing is produced: the image reflects back 'une créature' ['a creature'] (*LA*, 30), 'cette autre' ['this other woman'] (*LA*, 37), and the author needs to jolt herself into recognition even for recent photos: 'c'est elle la femme avec du blush' ['the woman wearing blusher is her'] (*LA*, 201). There is never continuity between the gazing and the photographed self in Ernaux. The difference in *Les années*, however, is that the author becomes *afraid* of no longer recognizing what she has come to understand as her self. This is consistent with ideas explored by Hepworth and Featherstone concerning the way in which the sense of self characteristically lags behind the physical transformation of ageing bodies, and changing physical appearance in later life is felt to 'mask' the self.[12] A single photograph, taken in December 2006, stands out in as much as it does induce self-recognition. It is possible to own this self, Ernaux tells us, because it shows no new signs of ageing with which she has yet to come to terms:

> Elle est cette femme de la photo et peut, quand elle la regarde, dire avec un degré élevé de certitude, dans la mesure où ce visage et le présent ne sont pas disjoints de façon perceptible, où rien n'a été encore davantage perdu, de ce qui le sera inévitablement (mais quand, comment, elle préfère ne pas y songer): c'est moi = je n'ai pas de signes supplémentaires de vieillissement. (*LA*, 233)
>
> [She is that woman in the photo and can, when she looks at her, say with a high degree of certainty, inasmuch as that face and the present are not perceptibly split, and no more has been lost of what inevitably will be lost (but when and how she prefers not to think): it is me = I have no extra signs of ageing.]

The photograph in question shows the author in her study, presenting her small granddaughter to the camera, confirming her new position within a family that will in due course relegate her to its ancestry. It foregrounds her large hands, with their knotty joints, on which she casts the same quality of interrogative gaze as that of Varda exposing to the camera the signs of her own ageing.

What of the issue of desire? What happens to this in the author's latest work? Ernaux's sense of the centrality of sexual pleasure to her life and writing has always been intense. She describes orgasm as the still point of the turning world, one of the few things that are unchanging for a woman throughout her life course and, for her, 'le fondement de l'identité' ['the foundation of identity'].[13] But what spaces may be found for the expression of sexuality beyond that point of middle age where, as Russell puts it, 'women cease to be

"relevant" as women and start instead simply to be old'?[14] This perceived tension between sex and ageing is interestingly played out in Ernaux's recent writing. It is especially highlighted in *L'usage de la photo* where a voracious eroticism, expressed through photographs of hastily abandoned clothing, competes with Ernaux's cancer: 'C'est banalité de le dire, mais le sexe lutte contre la mort' ['It's banal to say it, but sex struggles against death'].[15] Abruptly, the author's body is mapped out as a site of medical, not erotic, interest, and she is forced into radically new ways of conceiving of it. She imagines herself as a washing machine on a rinse cycle as a catheter drips chemotherapy drugs into her veins. She is hairless, a mermaid, a pre-pubescent girl or a doll, the latter images stirring the discomfort caused by any eroticization of the old or the sick, while also recalling our tendency to infantilize them. Nevertheless, there is a powerful affirmation here that it is possible to be desirable and the centre of an erotic literary work as an older woman, even in the face of illness. This text constitutes a plea for the eroticism of *other* bodies, including those of women who have had a mastectomy and whom the author urges to dare to bring their bodies into the open.

One might argue, however, that Ernaux makes her body invisible in *L'usage de la photo*, or at least sets up a culturally revealing dialogue between the body that the text quite fleetingly describes (one that struggles with a wig and undergoes various medical treatments) and the one to which its photographic images allude (a body adorned in lacy underwear and high-heeled shoes and eager for sex). Everything in this work speaks of a self straining to be defined as other than ageing. This raises a paradox. From one point of view, it is refreshing that the author does not feel age-bound; that in her sixties she displays to the reader without scruple and as something unquestionable the signs of her active sex life. From another point of view, the phototext also communicates to us that Ernaux is not *interested* in herself as old; that she does not want *us* to be interested in her age; that true to the social construction of older women as irrelevant, she cannot see ageing as anything but a falling-off. While *L'usage de la photo* is in many ways a rich, courageous and innovative work, Ernaux nevertheless evacuates from it much of what were doubtless the real physical, material and emotional difficulties of this period. The new strategy of co-authorship draws into the creative mix a younger man, Marc Marie, one of whose functions, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is surely to act as guarantor of the author's desirability in spite of her age and illness. Finally, Ernaux's intensive meditation on nothingness and death in this work leaves no space for any contemplation of ageing itself.

In contrast to *L'usage de la photo*, detailed emphasis on Ernaux's sexual life plays no part whatsoever in *Les années*. Specific intimate experiences which are fleshed out elsewhere in the author's corpus – the 'passion violente' ['violent passion'] felt for a Russian man (*LA*, 176); the 'hasard miraculeux' ['miraculous chance'] of her meeting with Marc Marie (*LA*, 235) – are cursorily dispatched with a rapid note. A number of other brief comments are confined to

observations on general changes in sexual mores. It is clear, then, that the tension between sex and ageing is played out in Ernaux not just within but also between texts: where *L'usage de la photo* enacts an almost excessive grasping at sex, *Les années* all but abandons it. The intimate dimension of this latest work is connected to a quite different terrain: it is decline, not desire, which drives the project.

I have alluded to our sense in *L'usage de la photo* that the author is, paradoxically, intensely present yet evacuated from her work. This sense is also conveyed, albeit differently, by *Les années*. Here a new stage of splitting is reached as the author continues to prepare herself for a future in which she will play no part except through the traces she has left. There is also, at last, a new focus on what it means for her to grow old, although this focus remains a morbid one as she continues to recoil from her older self. In the remaining part of my argument, I want to concentrate on *Les années* as a work whose depiction of old age amounts to an exercise in proleptic self-mourning.

A space between deaths

Les années is the first text wherein Ernaux creates space to consider openly and in some detail what her own deep old age might bring. Prior to this, the issue was visited only through the figure of her mother in two painful works, *Une femme* [*A Woman's Story*] (1989) and *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* ['I have not emerged from my darkness'] (1997), which record the *latter's* ageing, dementia and death and which may be read as a rehearsal of the author's own possible late-life experience. In confronting and representing the mother's declining and dying body, Ernaux internalizes and feels symptoms in her own body, producing a new level of proleptic identification. As Pierre-Louis Fort notes, the mother's death opens up a difficult ontological space for daughters, a space between deaths.[16] It is a space which Ernaux tentatively prods in *Une femme* as, tracing her own anticipated decline, she 'becomes' her mother, sitting awaiting her dinner at some point in the 2000s, pointlessly folding and unfolding her serviette.[17] It is also in this space between deaths that Ernaux now very clearly writes. One of her key figures of identification in this period is the paralysed and dumb old woman whom she 'recognized' in Carlos Saura's film *Cría cuervos* – a woman who sits weeping as she looks at old photographs and listens to the same old songs (*LA*, 142). A similar voiding of the present and a growing fear of senility are the aspects of late-life experience which are most strongly and consistently expressed by the author here. In *Les années*, then, a focus on managing her responses to her mother's late life takes a back seat as the author situates herself on the page for the first time and in detail *as* the remaining mother, approaching her own ageing and death as pressing – and defining – issues. With this shift come difficult and paradoxical questions: how does one make text of one's fear of encroaching senility and ultimate demise? How does one consign oneself to memory for others? How does one say goodbye to the self?

Ernaux's rising sense of vulnerability in this work is played out on several levels. One of these is a frenetic compulsion to save, archive and store her life even as she confirms its 'pastness'. A fresh anxiety and urgency thus attach to her life-writing here, reflecting the shift in temporal awareness that is a major part of her new subject position: 'Ce qui a le plus changé en elle, c'est sa perception du temps' ['The biggest change within her is her perception of time'] (*LA*, 236). In the work's final pages a revised sense of past, present and future is interestingly interwoven with Ernaux's responses to the hegemonic reach of the new technologies which race ahead even as she ages, defying her to keep pace. The author's concern about the impact of technology dominates the last part of her autobiography as it dominates the latest decade of her life. It has become, she remarks, a determining element in how society sees advancing age: medical science and cosmetic surgery can prolong life and erase the marks of time, while keeping up with the latest software, social networking or other leisure technologies is a new imperative for the 'young in spirit': 'Ne plus passer, c'était accepter de vieillir' ['Not passing from one technology to the next meant accepting to grow old'] (*LA*, 220).

Ernaux gives a sustained account of the impact upon her as she ages of all that is virtual and instant, that militates against the materiality of human traces on which she feels deep memory depends, and that she perceives as ontologically threatening. She marvels at the disorientating superfluity of data; the networks and technologies which make people accessible to each other in new, ethically unstable spaces; the photographic frenzy attendant on digital technology – a frenzy in which she participates, but which has changed everything she valued about photographic self-narrative as emanation and residue. The fundamental modes of recording, registering and representing the self which have been her tools are being replaced by alienating devices that dramatically transform the means of self-narration and self-archiving. While technological advancement offers much of value, such as the internet's vast data bank or the faint possibility, tantalizing for a life-writer, that it might one day be possible to see within the brain every detail of a human being's life (*LA*, 221), Ernaux's sense of disquiet is clear. She argues that the technological revolution has created disarray in people's sensations, ideas, hopes, memories and thought patterns. Notably, she senses a disruptive insistence on the present and a blurring of our links with the past (*LA*, 135). The depth of time and what we might call material (as opposed to virtual) memory are lost to 'un présent infini' ['an infinite present'] (*LA*, 223), which is indiscriminately recorded and instantly viewed: 'Avec le numérique on épuisait la réalité' ['With digital technology we exhausted reality'] (*LA*, 223). A new kind of past, 'à faible teneur de souvenirs réels' ['with a weak component of real memories'] (*LA*, 224), is being invented.

It is not only the author's sense of her relationship to the past that is destabilized: the open future, conceptualized during her early years as 'un grand escalier rouge' ['a big red staircase'] (*LA*, 88), and in her middle years as 'un champ d'action' ['a field of action'] (*LA*, 121), has closed down: 'Elle a perdu son

sentiment d'avenir' ['She has lost her feel for the future'] (*LA*, 236). In the self-portrait by Dorothea Tanning entitled *Birthday* which provides Ernaux with a powerfully expressed spatial perception of her life, as well as a template for this book (*LA*, 204), the sequence of open doors that the artist represents is situated *behind* the woman who stands in the foreground. What lies ahead is unclear. Ernaux's feel for the future is replaced by 'un sentiment d'urgence qui [. . .] la ravage' ['a feeling of urgency which [. . .] devours her'] (*LA*, 237). This space between deaths which concludes *Les années* is, then, a space of little comfort.

Ageing and formal strategies

Ernaux's late period has ushered in some remarkable formal experimentation. The introduction of photographs and a co-author in *L'usage de la photo* and the ambitious total autobiography that is *Les années* show that she has seized both ageing and illness as new writing challenges requiring specific formal solutions. The metatextual commentary in both works is sustained and each creates new spaces within which to think later life. In *Les années* the author concludes her twenty-year-long quest, first mentioned in *L'usage de la photo*, for 'une forme littéraire qui tiendrait toute ma vie' ['a literary form which would hold my entire life'] (*UP*, 27). The form which eventually fits the bill is double: a sustained chronological narrative with a bold scope, and also a fragile, fragmenting text which lets in disorientation. While lucidity governs its central part, rigorously holding together a lifetime's impressions, the opening and closing sections are allowed to fall apart and fray. There is a paradox here. The supremely controlled organizing consciousness that draws together 'cette mémoire accumulée [. . .] de milliers de journées' ['this accumulated memory [. . .] of thousands of days'] (*LA*, 158–59) is that of a writer at the height of her mature powers. Decidedly there is no decline here, no falling-off. There is a disjuncture, though, between this mature power and the fragile sense of self that ageing has started to bring. In this final section of my article, I want to argue that in *Les années* Ernaux not only builds her life narrative, but in a simultaneous counter-movement writes herself out of it. This she does not only by conceding the ultimate insignificance of the 'I' and allowing it to be swallowed up by History, time and other selves (through, for example, her use of the third person and her emphasis on collective experience), but also by rehearsing mental decline through the disturbing device of the text's dissolve. It is on this latter feature that I shall now concentrate.

At the end of her late-life autobiography, Diana Athill concludes: 'There are no lessons to be learnt, no discoveries to be made, no solutions to offer. I find myself left with nothing but a few random thoughts.'[18] Similarly, it is with a handful of random images that *Les années* begins and fades away. Ernaux's prelude to her chronicle begins with the surfacing from memory of unconnected images relating to different periods in her life, as if her mind were left to wander without authorial supervision. This is followed by an affirmation of the

inconceivable: at some point in the near future, 'Tout s'effacera en une seconde' ['Everything will be wiped out in one second'] (*LA*, 19). The extraordinary data bank that is her mind will close down. The distinctive personal dictionary, accumulated from the cradle to the death bed, all those words which organized the world, which served to 'fai[re] battre le cœur et mouiller le sexe' ['make the heart beat and the sex moisten'] (*LA*, 15), will be lost. 'De la bouche ouverte il ne sortira rien' ['From my open mouth nothing will come out'] (*LA*, 19). And when the author can no longer say 'I', when she disappears into 'la masse anonyme d'une lointaine génération' ['the anonymous mass of a distant generation'] (*LA*, 19), who will speak her? The characteristic interweaving in Ernaux's writing of self and other takes on a new dimension here: for the first time the author acknowledges that her story will soon literally belong to others; that she will no longer write her memories but will *be* a memory.

In the final pages, as she approaches the challenge of writing *present* experience, Ernaux brings together thoughts on ageing and metatextual observations on her work's structure, before finally wrenching open its fabric to admit a space which conveys her sense of the tenuousness of memory, reason, and life itself. The text ultimately dissolves into disconnected, a-chronological flashes belonging not to its horizontal axis but to what she refers to as its vertical axis, 'plongeant vers la nuit' ['plunging towards darkness'] (*LA*, 158). These images have an especially poignant intimacy. Ernaux's resolute desire to salvage her memories, to 'save' her life ('sauver' is a verb to which she persistently returns here) is clear, but the project in these final moments is allowed to lose its bearings. The list of memories here is on the way to disappearance, fulfilling the prophecy with which *Les années* began: 'Toutes les images disparaîtront' ['All images will disappear'] (*LA*, 11). They have a randomness, as if plucked out willy-nilly from a jumbled archive. Here, Ernaux conspicuously renounces the teleological connective tissue that is characteristic of late-life autobiographies, evoking rapidly and elliptically a village dance, a hotel room, a woman in a red coat supporting a drunken man, a house at the bottom of a garden, a torn poster, a film, a literary quotation (*LA*, 241–42). On the page, each evocation floats separately. The possibility of effective sharing, of communication, falls away: the images are out of context, unelucidated by narrative and profoundly the author's own. Ernaux knows that the same sense of a feverish but unfocused will to hold on to experience characterizes the disjointed ramblings of the very old whose memories surface and sink back, and these pages introduce between writer and reader the same distancing as Ernaux earlier described experiencing when her mother's Alzheimer's began to manifest itself. Not only is *Les années* an astounding feat of organization then, it also rehearses urgently the elision of its organizing consciousness: 'C'est maintenant qu'elle doit mettre en *forme* par l'écriture son absence future' ['It is now that she must give *form*, through writing, to her future absence'] (*LA*, 237). This autobiographical tour de force is a remarkable ontological exercise not so much in consolidating the self at the end of a successful life of writing, but in evacuating the self and consigning it to memory.

Closing remarks

At the age of sixty, Ernaux notes that she identifies with Beauvoir's sense of the 'douceur' ['sweetness'] of having a long life behind her.[19] It is, however, a bleaker sense of enduring incredulity at her own ageing, also shared with Beauvoir, that is the dominant note in *Les années*. While the work maps a trajectory with whose staple elements many women over sixty will identify, its overriding expression of ageing is rooted in loss and decline. None of Doris Lessing's 'delightful surprises'[20] of ageing or of Barbara Pym's late sense of 'infinite possibilities for change'[21] are to be found here, and none of Varda's playful sense of having tapped into a new seam of creativity. Instead, Ernaux's self-presentation as an old woman amounts to a sombre rehearsal of the worst. Unable to counter the negative construction of old age or to imagine a case for the possibility of a self-determining, fulfilled late life, she does not shake off but reproduces the 'cultural devaluation of old women'[22] which remains the default position in the West.

Les années, then, is an autobiography of great poignancy wherein, in spite of Ernaux's resolution to sustain an impersonal voice, she reveals the vulnerability and fear experienced at the time of writing perhaps more starkly than in any other of her works. There is a new and dominant sense here of the racing of time; of insufficient distance between the experience of ageing and the writing of it, so that the author's personal anxiety gets in the way of any investigation of age as a social phenomenon. Although Ernaux determines that her total autobiography, consistent with her entire life-writing project, will be 'un instrument de lutte' ['an instrument of struggle'] (*LA*, 241), this uneasy text provides scant evidence of struggle against stereotypical configurations of ageing. It is possible that Ernaux may yet follow Eleanor, Virginia Woolf's septuagenarian heroine of *The Years* cited at the start of this article, in depicting old age outside of its commonplaces. Followers of the author's ongoing life-writing must wait to see whether further articulations of what it means to be an old woman are produced in her late period.

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NOTES

[1] V. Woolf, *The Years* (New York: The Hogarth Press, 1937), p. 383.

[2] A. Ernaux and M. Marie, *L'usage de la photo* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005). Quotations are referenced in the text as *UP* followed by the page number. Translations are my own.

[3] A. Ernaux, *Les années* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008). Quotations are referenced in the text as *LA* followed by the page number. Translations are my own.

[4] C. Détrez and A. Simon, *A leur corps défendant* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), pp. 121–43.

[5] K. Woodward (ed.), *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

[6] In N. K. Miller, *But Enough about Me* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 73–110.

[7] S. de Beauvoir, *La vieillesse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

[8] D. Athill, *Somewhere Towards the End* (New York: Granta Books, 2009).

[9] L. Day, '"Entraîner les lecteurs dans l'effarement du reel": Interview with Annie Ernaux', *Romance Studies* 23:3 (2005), 223–36 (p. 225).

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