

When Individual Memory Represents Collective Memory: A Study of *The Years* by Annie Ernaux

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Introduction

The yarn of memory moves back and forth and criss cross in time, weaving a multidirectional narrative. It is a rare way of storytelling with no chapter divisions and bewilderingly proceeding in a single flow. She uses diverse means- photos, notes, diaries, books, radio, television, headlines and advertising to make a contrasting effect to her personal experiences and trauma. Toying with time she uses multiple narrative voices- personal and impersonal, making reading and analysis slightly slippery. It is also a story of different generations with their unique characteristics, perspectives, interests, preferences and value systems. Her existentialist self-searches and its traumatic epiphanies brush brusquely on the social, cultural, political, historical, and technological transformations in France with a rare ease, insight and magnitude. The question of gender, class, language and sexuality are also addressed in the work. At the same time it becomes a ruthless dissection of the contemporary tendencies of avaricious consumerism, fetishism and obsession with the media.

Annie Ernaux, the most acclaimed memoirist of France places her Nobel- winning novel *The Years* at the intersection of history, sociology and literature. It is widely considered as an autobiography at once personal and collective- a rare hybrid that spans the period from the year of her birth in 1940 to 2006. It turns out to be an unofficial socio-political and cultural history of France as she traces the gradual evolution of time from post war poverty to the consumer revolution of the 1960s, the liberalist and globalist era of the 1990s and the digital revolution thereafter. Written mainly in third person, it explores a wide spectrum

of themes ranging from identity, body, sexuality, class, politics, inequality, religion, war, ageing and crucial changes in her own native country-France- over time. The Nobel committee appreciated the clinical acuity and courage the book exhibits while it uncovers the roots, estrangements and collective restraints of personal memory.

Annie Ernaux ironically begins her multidirectional memoir by quoting Jose Ortega Gasset that all we have is history but unfortunately it constantly evades us and does not belong to us. She is sure that the posterity will put the previous generations so easily into oblivion and no generation is an exception. What seems so serious, significant and extremely important to one generation may simply be waved off as petty by the succeeding generations. So no generation can have absolute measures for what is significant or ridiculous. There is also a possibility that a way of life one generation embraces with much pride and affection may appear strange, inconvenient, and stupid and not even clean enough for the coming generations.

Even the preface has an ironic intro: 'All the images will disappear' (29) - may be from one's own memory or from collective memory. Then she goes on to throw an array of fragmented images from life around and also from literature. She justifies the presentation as images both from real as well as imagined worlds because they follow us all the way to sleep- everyday or eternal. The procession of these haunting fragments of memory never stops. They go on pairing 'the dead with the living, real with imaginary beings and dreams with history' (62).

Purpose of the Narrative

The reason for this type of narrative method is explained towards the end of the book. She begins to fear that as she ages her memory will turn cloudy and silent as it was during her infant years as forgetfulness gradually begins to settle on her. She could not remember certain words, concepts and even the names of her colleagues from her previous institution. She only sees silhouettes and faces but could not name them. She is afraid that one day 'all things and their names will slip out of alignment' (2796) and she may not be able to correlate words to reality.

Just before everything begins to fade from memory she decides to start the book to compensate for her future absence through writing. She has to construct a palimpsest time from thousands of notes she made at different stages of her life. If stripped of learning and memory both the individual and the world may slip into the depths of Alzheimer's unable to notice the passage of time. So she has decided to depict the period of time she existed on the earth in an intuitive way. She feels that she is 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. during the process of which the tiny moment of the past grows and opens into a horizon, at once mobile and uniform in tone, of one or several years.

She finds out that majority of her personal experiences have certain similarity with the vast collectivity outside and she becomes whole only when she reciprocates everything with the collective consciousness. She recognizes this from a 'frozen memory- image' (2809) of herself with other kids on a hospital bed after tonsil surgery, after the war or crossing Paris on a bus in July of '68 and so on. Each individual memory is part of and attached to a greater sense of time, event or experience. Even if she is alone in a car on the highway, she knows that millions like her somewhere in the world feel the same way in similar situations. This collective sharing makes the readers identify themselves with the situations and emotions the author depicts in a text.

Nature of the Narrative

This book becomes a self-conscious narrative that correlates the images from her memory with, specific sense of the times, the years to which the images belong, gradually linking them to others. By skimming off common hopes, fears, beliefs and sense of self, she is trying to reconstitute the progression of a common time from the past to the present and gradually proceed to the future. Her intention is to capture the lived dimension of History 'by retrieving the memory of collective memory in an individual memory' (2821).

She says that the book is not a work of remembrance in the usual sense- aiming to put a life into story, creating an explanation of self. She looks within only to retrieve the world and divulge the memory and imagination of its past. She likes to grasp the changes in ideas, beliefs and sensibility. She also wants to portray the transformation of people, subjects and unnamed sensations. She intends to create a slippery narrative that devours the present in its course that uses an unrelenting continuous tense to create a final image of a life.

The narrative may be interspersed with photos and scenes from films- that capture her body shapes and social positions across time- which act as freeze- frames on memories. They act as the graph of her progression through life and reports on a combination of elements that made her life unique. These incessantly not- she of photos actually corresponds to the she of writing. As it is an impersonal autobiography, there is no 'I', but only 'one' and 'we'.

During her student days she longed, like any literature- loving youth, to do clairvoyance with writing, by magically revealing her innermost self in an exceptionally revelatory way in an exceptionally captivating language. As intensely as she wanted in her childhood to be Scarlett O'Hara one fine morning she wanted to tell about herself to others in the most revelatory way and become a literary legend overnight. But as she stood in crowded classes or pushing a shopping cart in a supermarket or sat on a beach in the public gardens next to a baby carriage, these dreams vanished into thin air. But she has not totally abandoned the idea of writing a masterpiece in inspired language.

When she finally writes her autobiography, it is a collage of 'many different atmospheres and registers, styles and rhythms' (2944) and a close correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm. It progresses at varying paces and is punctuated by scenes of feasting with family and friends on holidays. Their conversation places them in specific periods of time in history. They range from a time shortly after the narrator's birth to her sixty sixth year. During the holiday meals of her childhood, her parents and grandparents talk about war and the hardship in their

early lives. They had a common ground of hunger and fear and everything was told in the 'we'. The years between 1940 and 2007 are presented as if the story was not only hers but also of her generation.

She also intersperses the narrative with descriptions of photos and speculates about what the girl in the photo might be thinking about herself, people around her and also about her own future always in connection with the time period to which the photo belongs. The descriptions about the photos are quite graphic and in precise prose. But the descriptions are written in different styles. 'sinuous as she drifts from one memory to the next or telegraphic as she makes mental list of things seen and lived' (2977).

She had been pondering on writing this book for years and had taken down notes in profusion and had been ruminating on endless styles for its narration. She often visits her former selves in the past and get superimposed one on another. She also alludes to a specific type of sensation which she terms as a palimpsest sensation. She also waits for the correct image to emerge and sometimes the narration that follows may be in meandering sentences that grow into lengthy paragraphs. As her translator says these breathless sentences give the impression that the time is speeding up. "Time in the book slows down, speeds up, sweeps us away, repeats itself, grinds to a halt" (3000). Sometimes it transforms to a deeply entangled interior time. It is usually when she describes the holiday dinner scenes.

The Holiday Meals and the Nature of Family

The family gatherings on holidays are a recurring incident throughout the work. The nature of this microcosm around the table and their conversations are important markers of the passage of time and social change related to it. In the beginning it is an animated working class extended family collective constituted of grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts and cousins but towards the end of the book it shrinks to a bourgeois nuclear family with parents, children and a grandparent and was further modified to a post- nuclear family with a divorced grandparent, sons and their partners and one grandchild. As the narrator matures up her

role at the table also changes- as a kid listening to partially comprehensible adult stories to the shy adolescent partially allowed to participate in the conversations and finally to an authoritative hostess.

The themes of the conversation also trace the passage of time- during the 1940s and 50s it was boisterous adult talk, always harping on the Second World War, during the 60s and 70s it was about flying saucers, people landing on the moon, emergencies and the rising cost of living but always returned to the war times. But something had died with the grandparents who had seen both wars, the full reconstruction of cities, children growing up, furniture in instalments and the general progress. Life has become far better. By 1980s and 90s they simply vanish.

Personal Narrative Overlaps with the Collective One

Ernaux is well aware that family narrative and social narrative are one and the same. The voices around the table during the never- ending holiday meals mapped out territories of youth. It referred to the countryside in its vividness. Farms where men had been hired hands and girls housemaids. Factories where they had met, stepped out together and married. The small business to which the most ambitious had risen. The only personal details in their stories were births, weddings and funerals. Their travel narratives were confined to regiments in distant garrison towns and not to beautiful havens. Their existences were entirely filled with hard labour, harsh conditions and the perils of drink. School appeared as mythical backdrop and the schoolmaster with his iron ruler for rapping the knuckles was its rough god. Poverty, deprivation and the restrictions that long pre- dated the war marked their words. It was a timeless night, a bygone era with its difficulties, pleasures, customs and practical wisdom. Then they went through the albums but the author says that no one could recognise either their parents in wedding dress or themselves as half- naked babies of indistinct sex, an alien creature sitting on a cushion and from a mute and inaccessible time.

The laughter and joy of the holiday meals come out of the fear that their time will soon come and better enjoy the time they have at hand in the present. As they commemorate their ancestors through conversations

they will also be remembered by their predecessors. It is through other people's memories that one lives even after one's death. But with real insight the author adds that memories are transmitted not only through stories but through "the ways of walking, sitting, talking, laughing, eating, hailing someone, grabbing hold of objects, it passed from body to body" (249). This repertoire of habits and gestures pass from body to body and over years spread to wherever they migrate. It becomes an unseen inheritance photos alone cannot exhibit.

But the memory of generations also change and progress incrementally. For example the memory of parents show the progression of seasons through their different activities like planting colza, shaking apple from trees or collecting deadwood that too by absenting themselves from schools. But for the author's generation, the school calendar had replaced the cycle of seasons and the years were piled one top of each other in terms of school years, space- times that opened in October and closed in July. They remember folding blue paper covers over the used books handed over to them by students a grade ahead. A generation studied the works of same authors, memorised the poems of same poets thus making these elements of personal memory the common components of a generation's collective memory.

But at that time she was unaware of the war in Indonesia, Marcel Cerdan, boxing champion of the world and Besnard the arsenic poisoner. What she remembers are tiny incidents at school and her grades. She remembers the details of the day she visited the beech and the amazing postcard send by her cousin doing his military service in Tunisia. Her generation might have complained to their parents that they go nowhere beautiful. But they replied that they had everything at their time and place and asked where else did they wanted to go.

Then she looks around her and found out that they lived in a scarcity of everything- of objects, images, diversions, explanations of self and the world, whose sources were confined to the catechism. Every object in the houses had been bought before the war- the saucepans were blackened and missing their handles, the bowl's enamel worn away and

holes in the jugs were plugged with metal pellets. Coats were revamped, shirt collars were turned inside out and Sunday clothes were extended to everyday. Everything were mended and used for maximum duration. Nothing was thrown away. Kitchen garbage was used as garden fertilizer, dung of passing horses collected for potted plants and newspapers were used for wrapping different objects and even for wiping bottoms in the lavatories. People travelled on foot or by bicycles. The 'background was silence and the bicycle measured the speed of life' (555).

There were dead children in every family as they were affected by chicken pox, whooping cough, mumps, measles, bronchitis, ear infections, tuberculosis and meningitis. The author has a dad sister namely Ginette. She was only six when she died in 1938. She is remembered as a little girl in another photo. Children became safe only after they were fifteen. There were war children who were peaky and anaemic with spotted nails. They were forced to swallow cod liver oil and deworming syrup and chew Jessel tablets. They were weighed now and then on chemist's scale, bundled themselves in mufflers to avoid chills, eat soup for growing up. But the new borns were then beginning to get vaccinated. Here, as in many other pages, her narrative surpasses the individual realm and becomes unofficial social history.

Religion

Religion provided the official framework of life and governed Time. They shunned meat on Fridays. Sunday masses meant time to wear different clothes, put on hats and gloves, and carry a purse. It was also a time to see others and to get noticed. The church monopolised morality. It made them believe in afterlife and distinguish between good and evil.

School

It imparted immutable knowledge in silence and order. It inculcated a respect for hierarchy and absolute submission. To be bound by strict rules were even considered as a privilege. The curriculum never changed. Knowledge was imparted to a minority whose intelligence

and superiority was tested and asserted every year. But the strict observance of class can be seen in these institutions. The students of the upper class never even looked at the poor outside the school. She always hung out with girls from poor families as they seemed to share similar social backgrounds.

Politics

The French presidents of different time periods and how they appealed to the masses and classes of France are referred to in the book. Charles de Gaulle, Alain Pohe, Georges Pompidou, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, François Mitterrand, Jacques Chirac, Nicolas Sarkozy, François Hollande and Emmanuel Macron appear in vivid colours and shades. The period of civil unrest which lasted for seven weeks and marked by general strikes, demonstrations and occupations of the universities and finally resulted in Gaulle fleeing from the country are alluded to in the course of the book.

Conclusion

Using her clinically sharp flat narrative she provides a close intersection of the post second world war France through her personal memoir. It is not a detailed and graphic description of her life and events in linear progression but rather in fragments demanding reader's intervention-sort of a prose- Eliot challenging the reader's easy comprehension. She dives deep into her memories and picks up shimmering images which at once reflects the individual and the collective affect at once. Photographs and newspaper cuttings overlap with her diary entries to weave a rare palimpsest of emotions and experiences. In her own opinion she was carrying out an ethnological study of herself which in turn proves to be that of the society too.

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