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Autosociobiography (Annie Ernaux and the Collective Sensorium)

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If the 'sovereign power of the individual' finds itself progressively worn away in the age of late capitalism, if the individual is less and less capable of serving as a perspective onto the social reality within which it is embedded, then this will surely have implications for any practice of writing that continues to hold the individual as its organizing principle. This, in short, is the guiding idea of a short text authored by Siegfried Kracauer in 1930, 'The Biography as an Art form of the New Bourgeoisie.' 'In the most recent past,' he writes there, 'people have been forced to experience their own insignificance - as well as that of others - all too persistently for them to still believe in the sovereign power of any one individual. It is precisely this sovereign power, however, which is the premise of the bourgeois literature produced during the years preceding the war. The unified structure of the traditional novel form reflects the supposed unity of character, and its problematic is always an individual one. Today the creative artist has once and for all lost faith in the objective meaning of any one individual system of reference. But when this fixed coordinate grid disappears, all curves plotted on it lose their pictorial form as well.'¹ In the wake of this tendency, the work that continues to devote itself to recounting the life of the individual is increasingly prone to dissimulation, at the level of both content and form. Explicitly or otherwise, it remains dependent on a schema that no longer has a correlate in reality, and it is with these circumstances in mind that Kracauer goes on to insist that, at least in its current manifestation, 'biography is a sign of *escape* or, to be more precise, of evasion.'² And yet this need not be the final verdict passed on the genre. Kracauer concludes his article by envisaging a different configuration of the biographical vocation, one for which 'the description of the life of the historical individual is not a means to evade an understanding of our situation; rather, it serves only to reveal that situation.' How would one go about achieving this? By endeavoring to show that the individual is something which 'does not... have a reality of its own but becomes real only through its transparency with regard to reality.'³

Now this is precisely the stratagem taken up by Annie Ernaux in *The Years*, as she sets out to recover the course of a life, her own, in full recognition of the fact that the conditions of possibility for doing so may no longer be in place, once the individual no longer provides a framework for the elucidation of historical experience because estrangement from the social

¹ Siegfried Kracauer, 'The Biography as an Art form of the New Bourgeoisie,' in *The Mass Ornament* (Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 102.

² Ibid. p. 104. Two decades later Adorno will make much the same point: 'The narrator's implicit claim that the course of the world is still essentially one of individuation, that the individual with his impulses and his feelings is still the equal of fate, that the inner person is still directly capable of something, is ideological in itself; the cheap biographical literature one finds everywhere is a byproduct of the disintegration of the novel form itself.' See 'The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel,' in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1 (Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 31.

³ Kracauer, p. 105.

has become its constitutive feature. 'Between what happens in the world and what happens to her,' the narrator says of herself, 'there is no point of convergence. They are two parallel series: one abstract, all information no sooner received than forgotten, the other all static shots.'⁴ Of course the sequence of episodes she recounts here come together to form a personal history, a story of the self, told through the self. But at the same time there is no facet of experience recovered that does not bear the imprint of the social totality to which it is tied, to the extent that the standpoint of individuation, treated as a prism for the distilling of various social tendencies, is rendered peculiarly impersonal. As the narrative draws to a close, the narrator makes clear the methodological principle that has shaped the exercise in remembrance undertaken:

"So her book's form can only emerge from her complete immersion in the images from her memory in order to identify, with relative certainty, the specific signs of the times, the years to which the images belong, gradually linking them to others; to try to hear the words people spoke, what they said about events and things, skim it off the mass of floating speech, that *hubbub* that tirelessly ferries the wordings and rewordings of what we are and what we must be, think, believe, fear, and hope. All that the world has impressed upon her and her contemporaries she will use to reconstitute a common time... By retrieving the memory of collective memory in an individual memory, she will capture the lived dimension of History... There is no 'I' in what she views as a sort of impersonal autobiography. There is only 'one' and 'we'..."⁵

The political reach of the work is thus drawn out of its form. By ensuring that the narrative voice is inscribed within this idiosyncratic position –individual *and* collective, singular *and* generic, closed *and* open, a term in a series *and* the series itself – this work of what she elsewhere refers to as 'autosociobiography' is able to register a plurality of social forces as they intersect with lived experience, points of intersection that would otherwise tend to remain indiscernible.

What is it, then, that this technique brings into focus? For one thing, it enables Ernaux to reconstruct the changing forms of sensibility over the post-war period, the various distribution of values that underwrite them, and the expressions of the social imaginary that they sustain. As such the work makes a significant contribution to Alain Corbin's call for a 'historical anthropology of the senses,' the political imperative of which is tied to tracing 'the habitus which determines the frontier between the perceived and the unperceived, and even more, of the norms which decree what is spoken and what is left unspoken... the historian must strive, at the very least, to identify what it is that conditions this frontier...'⁶

⁴ Annie Ernaux, *The Years* (Fitzcarraldo, 2018 [2008]), p. 97.

⁵ Ernaux, pp. 224-25.

⁶ See his *Time, Desire and Horror: Towards a History of the Senses* (Polity, 1995), pp. 189; 190.

Throughout Ernaux's reconstruction of the span of historical time in question it becomes clear, for instance, that the collective sensorium of a given period is never homogenous but something differentiated in itself, partitioned by variations in sex, race, class and generation. (In the terms laid out by Stuart Hall in his 'The Meaning of New Times,' at stake here is the necessity of recognising "the 'pluralisation' of social life," "the diversification of social worlds in which men and women now operate," and thus the "positional" form that political practice must take.⁷) Consider, by way of example, the specific regulatory regimes, the forms of self-management required of the young woman (undertaken in isolation and outside the recognized perimeters of the social field) in a period when abortion remains illegal and contraception unavailable or stigmatized. "So, like sick people, three weeks out of four girls took their temperatures to calculate the risks, and lived in two different times. One was everybody's time, with class presentations and holidays; the other, fickle and treacherous, liable to stop at any moment, was the deadly time ruled by their blood."⁸ Consider too the increasing valorization of pleasure that Ernaux charts over the post-war period (a valorization common to both commodity culture and the various forms of resistance the latter has met with). Pleasure as socially sanctioned obligation: "The discourse of pleasure reigned supreme. You had to feel pleasure while reading, writing, taking a bath, defecating. It was the alpha and the omega of human activities."⁹ Pleasure as the viewpoint through which all of the subject's inner dispositions and outer interactions are appraised: "We exchanged the words of current morality for others that measured actions, behaviours and feelings in terms of pleasure, 'frustration' and 'gratification.'"¹⁰ Have we fully understood the range of somatic models that this tendency has given rise to? Have the social functions and networks linked to pleasure's ubiquity been fully codified? And if it is indeed the case that pleasure has acquired and continues to hold this status, as the principle subsuming all other principles, has the time not come to submit it to a genealogical critique in Nietzsche's sense, to establish both the 'origin' of this tendency as well as where precisely it is carrying us? *The Years* is notable not only for provoking such questions, but for cultivating a technique of its own through which to answer them. What it renders legible, through the "vast collective sensation" on which it focuses its attention, is that phenomenon referred to by Hall as a "generalisation of 'politics' to spheres which hitherto the left assumed to be apolitical: a politics of the family, of health, of food, of sexuality, of the body." He continues: "What we lack is any overall map of how these power relations connect and of their resistances."¹¹ *The Years* gives us the means of tracing the lineaments of this terrain.

⁷ 'The Meaning of New Times,' in *Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays* (Duke University Press, 2017) p. 261.

⁸ Ernaux, p. 80.

⁹ Ibid. p. 106.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 119.

¹¹ Hall, p. 261.