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Annie Ernaux's phototextual archives: *Ecrire la vie*

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Why would a writer publish a text that seemingly undoes the literary innovation of her life's work? Annie Ernaux has achieved fame by writing short, pithy narratives that recount isolated autobiographical moments. Rather than recounting events and extrapolating their meaning to her life within an autobiographical text, such as Michel de Montaigne falling off a horse, Jean-Jacques Rousseau stealing a ribbon, or André Gide travelling to North Africa, Ernaux chooses a specific incident — a love relationship, an abortion, a scene of domestic violence, for example — and describes this in sparse, unlyrical prose with no discussion of its consequences upon her developing selfhood.¹ These moments instead hang as though suspended in mid-air, forming disjointed snapshots of episodes which invite identification or disidentification from the reader. Likewise, rather than linking these autobiographical moments into a coherent, cogent and complete self that hints at the Lejeunian notion of autobiography as the history of development of personality, Ernaux's texts defy

1 Examples of this style of writing include *Passion simple*, *L'Événement*, *La Honte* and *La Place*. For discussion of Ernaux's unpoetic style, see Warren Motte's work on what he calls her 'minimalist writing': *Small worlds: Minimalism in contemporary French literature* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

linkage; some narrators are identified by different names or not at all, she rejects a chronological approach to life writing, and she plays with temporality.²

So why now publish an anthology of previously published texts in one volume, placing her texts chronologically within her life and seemingly joining the dots between her autobiographical moments? Why invite a reading of 'her' as one, unitary identity that is a process and a product of the moments that she had previously rendered in such an isolated manner? *Ecrire la vie*, published in 2011, presents ten of Ernaux's texts in one volume, organised, according to the author's preface, by her.³ She claims that 'c'est la succession des âges qui organise les textes' (p. 8), since they are not presented according to their order of publication but instead to the time of her life that they depict. Furthermore, she does not comment upon or justify the choice of the ten. Since Ernaux is the author of nearly twenty texts, part of her corpus is absent, which gives rise to questions over concealment, repression and, as Derrida has written with respect to archives, how a narrative of identity may be based on what is discarded rather than on what is included.⁴ Some of her most famous, prize-winning texts, such as *Une Femme* and *La Place*, form part of the anthology. But her writing on writing, and her co-written texts such as *L'Usage de la photo*, are conspicuously absent from this work that she describes in the preface, in contrast to the individual texts, as 'un autre texte, troué, sans clôture, porteur d'une identité différente' (p. 9).

What I want to suggest in this chapter, however, is that the 'new' part of this anthology, the only part that Ernaux has never before shown to the public, is not only innovative by itself, but adds a very different layer to our interpretation of her work thus far. This 'new' part is photographic: printed on the opening pages of the anthology, before the previously published ten texts, are 100 pages of photographs and diary entries which Ernaux selected herself from her personal collection. This author has previously written about photographs in her autobiographical work, and has published photographs within her most recent texts. In *L'Autre Fille*, for example,

2 Philippe Lejeune famously defined autobiography in 1975 as 'un récit rétrospectif en prose que quelqu'un fait sur sa propre existence quand il met l'accent principal sur une vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité'. See *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris, Seuil, 1975), p. 14.

3 A. Ernaux, *Ecrire la vie* (Paris, Gallimard, 2011). All further references to this work will be given in the text.

4 J. Derrida, *Mal d'archive: Une impression freudienne* (Paris, Galilée, 1995).

she uses a photograph of her family home and the sister who died before she was born, and in *L'usage de la photo* she uses photographs as a meditation on her own mortality as she suffers from breast cancer. Both of these texts are primarily concerned with time: imagining a past before her and a future after her.

In *Ecrire la vie*, time is also the central preoccupation. The photographs that Ernaux includes in this text span 1913 to 2011, and figure on the pages next to extracts from the author's diary. Significantly, these diary entries are from a different time frame to the photographs. The diaries are previously unpublished, so on one level Ernaux juxtaposes ten published 'autobiographies' with a series of unpublished diaries, thereby immediately casting doubt over the narrative of self with which her readers are familiar.⁵ What is particularly interesting in this section of text is that the photographs, rather than the words of the diaries, provide the narrative. The images move forward chronologically and the diary entries that surround them, from different time frames, are chosen because they mention, often very obliquely, something shown in the photograph.

W.J.T. Mitchell, in his work on illustration, cautions against what he calls the 'suturing' of visual and verbal elements of a text, and highlights instead the need to interpret 'resistance' between them.⁶ It is my contention that the images and words in Ernaux's frame stage such a resistance: the photographs move time forward but the diary entries arrest it. What happens when text is added to photography and not the other way round? When photographs come first and text second, what sort of hierarchy does this produce and how does that impact upon autobiographical text in particular? Furthermore, when several different texts from several different time frames are added to photographs, how do they interact and represent a self? In this chapter, I look first at the way in which Ernaux constructs this photojournal as a seemingly conventional family album but juxtaposes photographs and diaries within

5 Ernaux has been an avid diary writer since the age of sixteen. Moreover, she has previously published several of these diaries. Ernaux criticism tends to separate these published diaries into two groups: the *journaux intimes* that she writes daily and which are rarely published, and the *journaux extimes* that are closer to collective records of daily life and that are intended for publication. See, for example, S. Wilson, 'Life, disrupted: Annie Ernaux's *Journal du dehors* and *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 49: 3 (2012), pp. 250-66; and M. Sheringham, *Everyday life: Theories and practices from Surrealism to the present* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006). *Ecrire la vie* is the first of Ernaux's published diaries that incorporates photographs.

6 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture theory* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 289.

it in order to displace the self that it purports to represent. I then examine the specific elements of the photojournal in which Ernaux subverts the chronology to which the rest of the photojournal adheres, pointing to the concealment that the use of photography and autobiography together stages.

Time and the family album

Time has long been a preoccupation of theorists of photography. Although a photograph presents a static moment, a fixed image that is a record of immutability, the logic of the photograph pushes the observer to different time frames. In *La Chambre claire*, Barthes's notion that the photograph is evidence of an existence — 'ça a été' — also marks the temporal shift in photography as it represents something captured from the past.⁷ Yet Barthes also points out photography's propensity to look towards the future. He builds his reflection around the example of a photograph by Alexander Gardner, taken in 1865, of convicted criminal Lewis Payne sitting in his prison cell, awaiting his execution. Barthes argues that the *punctum*, the element of a photograph that hits the viewer and almost wounds her/him, is the dual movement inherent in this image: not just that he has existed — 'cela a été' — but also that his execution is imminent and thus 'il va mourir'. The photograph thus points to both a past disappearance and a future absence, a movement that the viewer will automatically link to her/his own death:

C'est parce qu'il y a toujours en elle ce signe impérieux de ma mort future, que chaque photo, fût-elle apparemment la mieux accrochée au monde excitée des vivants, vient interpeller chacun de nous, un par un, hors de toute généralité.⁸

Barthes encapsulates this propensity of the image thus: '[J]e lis en même temps: cela sera et cela a été; j'observe avec horreur un futur antérieur dont la mort est l'enjeu'.⁹

The photograph, then, refers to what has been, to what will be and to what will have been. Barthes's *La Chambre claire* interwove photography and personal account as it theorised the workings and functions of photography, and thus became the seminal text for the study of the intersections between autobiography and images. In Barthes's previous autobiographical work, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, he had taken care to distance himself in his preface from the identity depicted in the book,

7 R. Barthes, *La Chambre claire* (Paris, Cahiers du Cinéma Gallimard Seuil, 1980).

8 Barthes, *La Chambre claire*, p. 1176.

9 Barthes, *La Chambre claire*, p. 866.

stating that 'tout ceci doit être considéré comme dit par un personnage de roman'.¹⁰ In this later work, published shortly before his death, photography is the device that brings him closer to an admission of a narrative of self. For example, Barthes writes of a photograph of his mother in the winter garden, which he chooses not to print in the book. Gazing upon this image, he imagines her past and how it links with his past, but also imagines her death, and links the disappearance of his mother to the eventual disappearance of the photograph itself. Thus Barthes links his theorisation of the image to its effects upon self-narrative; he demonstrates that the propensity of photography to exist beyond time yet also to move the onlooker into several different time frames simultaneously has important implications for autobiography. Celia Lury summarises how the logic of photography has

a distinctive temporality; more specifically, the freezing of time creates a dimension in which the future perfect of the photographic image — this will have been — may be suspended, manipulated and reworked to become the past perfected'.¹¹

Many theorists have taken up Barthes's notion of death in photography. Susan Sontag compared the photograph to a death mask, for example, and Camille Laurens writes of how photographing a face is photographing absence rather than presence: 'Toute photo fait une ovation à la mort, et même elle la provoque, elle la donne: on vise, on appuie, ça tue'.¹² Yet the equation of photography with death is somewhat simplistic in that it does not take into account the temporal movement inherent in the images. The photograph moves backwards and forwards; it pauses at instances; it creates other time frames; it invents memories and it stages events; and it is this movement that alters the framing of Ernaux's autobiographies.

Ernaux's 'photojournal' is set up as a conventional family album, beginning with her ancestors. On the first page of the photodiary, two photographs, one of her father on military service and the other of her parents on their wedding day, are superimposed onto a background of a photo of her father's family. This placement provides a conventional opening in the sense that it heralds a chronological story of selfhood. Simultaneously, as is the case in any family album, it points to both the

10 R. Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris, Seuil, 1975), p. 5.

11 C. Lury, *Prosthetic culture: Photography, memory and identity* (London, Routledge, 1998), p. 3.

12 S. Sontag, *On photography* (London, Penguin, 1979), p. 154; C. Laurens, *Cet absent-là: Figures de Rémi Vinet* (Paris, Éditions Léo Scheer, 2004), p. 35.

past and the future, since the page's autobiographical function is the ending of one person's life and the beginning of another's; the ancestors are part of a line from which Ernaux will issue, as the marriage photo and the anthology hint. Marianne Hirsch, in her work on family albums, suggests that family photographs insist upon identification since all family albums resemble each other.¹³ Ernaux is on familiar terrain here, since she relies heavily upon relationality in her life-writing, writing herself often in relation to other people she happens to observe. As Nancy K. Miller states, '[T]he autobiographer's ego is incomplete without the anonymous individuals who, unbeknownst to them, fill her in, flesh her out'.¹⁴ The album is something that we all recognise, since it is formulaic: as an artefact that most families possess (at least until digital media displaces it), it instils group identity, standardisation, family and civic authority, hierarchy and even the law. The school photos that often figure in these collections further enforce socialisation and the frameworks in which family life develops within culture and society.

Yet Ernaux disrupts this conventional family album and particularly she disrupts it through playing with its representation of time. A layer of complication is added to this opening page by the text that appears in the top left-hand corner. Two separate entries from the author's personal diaries appear: the first entry from 1963, and the second from 1999. Both contain only very oblique references to the content of the photographs; the second, written on 31 December 1999, mentions that her father was two-and-a-half months old a century ago, and refers to her grandparents, whereas the first highlights the bourgeoisie, presumably as a contrast to the poverty of the ancestors in the images. Thus this 'beginning' page contains five different time frames: the three photographs and the two diary entries.

This juxtaposition of words and images from clearly different time frames points to what is absent, from both photography and from autobiography: the experience between what is recounted and what is photographed. The movement in time between these snippets of information points to what the writer does not know about her ancestors and to what we as readers do not know about her. The page hints at the unknown in any life history: who are the other, unnamed people,

13 M. Hirsch, *Family frames: Photography, narrative, and postmemory* (Cambridge and London, Harvard University Press, 1997).

14 N.K. Miller, *But enough about me: Why we read other people's lives* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 114.

both relatives and acquaintances of her father's? Did she even know them, and what impact may they have had on her family history? What exists beyond the frame of the photograph exists beyond the frame of the autobiography, and thus photography and autobiography together highlight the interplay of presence and absence in self-narrative. This juxtaposition of autobiographical text and image thus creates a distance between the narrative of self that each one stages. It shows how many different temporalities come into play in autobiography and points to the concealment that is at work in both photography and autobiography, as well as the revelation that both stage.

As the family album continues, with the photographs providing the chronological narrative and the diary entries problematising this, several pages stand out as significant to this project of playing with time. A page of several photographs depicts Ernaux as a child with her mother, with her father, and standing in front of her childhood home. Another image of her as a child sits atop of a diary entry. The photographs are from 1944 to 1945, which fits with the chronological framework of those that come before and after it, and the diary entry is from 1998. No background photo is used here. What is intriguing about this collection is the content of the diary entry, in which Ernaux describes a moment in which she claims to have seen herself as a child looking at herself as an adult. She describes this as 'des instants brefs où, ainsi, j'ai fait le chemin inverse de la mémoire, non de l'adulte vers l'enfant mais de l'enfant vers l'adulte. Cette vision, plus que jamais, me fait sentir le gouffre entre ce qu'était ma mère et ce que je suis' (p. 20).

The author thus reflects upon an earlier version of herself looking at a 'present' version of herself. Not only does she highlight the difference between the narrated 'I' and the narrating 'I' of autobiography, but she also imagines the narrating 'I' beyond the confines of a text, from the perspective of an earlier self. What would her 'I as child' think of her 'I as adult'? she ponders, underscoring the instability of any 'I' in narrative. The different tenses evident in this journal entry — the perfect, the past conditional, the imperfect and the present — broaden the text to include times that are always beyond the frame of the narrative, drawing the reader's attention to the before and after of this text, and of this life. Moreover, this reflection in turn pushes Ernaux to compare herself to her own mother, as she imagines the little girl that she *was* looking at herself as she is *now* and looking at her mother. Staring back at us as readers, as we read this page, are both of these people — the mother and the girl —

together in the bottom right photo. This is a direct invitation for us to ask what their perspectives were, these ghosts whose Ernaux's text proclaims as dead. Their point of view looks at us as we look at them, and the images around them situate them in relation to other people and places that contributed to their formation.

And this creates an absence: that of the author. Ernaux moves at this point from the centre of the autobiography to its margins, and this movement addresses the reader directly. The reader enters the text explicitly here and highlights the agency of the onlooker in any photograph and in any autobiography. Just as the photographer cannot decide upon how the photograph will be interpreted, the autobiographer cannot decide upon how the self-narrative will be read. These photographs prove that their subjects have existed — in Barthes's formulation that '*ça a été*' — but that there will also be a future and a future anterior: that they will have been. But the photographs also prove that we as readers of an autobiography, and particularly one that contains photographs, are creators of the narrative: that we assure a 'there will be', since the words and image that we read and the interpretation that we create last beyond the author.

Time and tense

As this chronological, seemingly conventional family album progresses, a small number of photographs break the chronological frame of the narrative. Among the photographs of the author as a child are suddenly, with no explanation, a photo of four of her diaries: exercise books with the years that they represent on the front cover, superimposed on handwritten pages, which are presumably excerpts from them. The earliest begins in 1963 and the latest in 1984. The photographs from her adolescence reappear on the following page. Why include these diaries, and why here? Part of the reason must be, as Ernaux states in the accompanying diary entry, which is from 1988, that she began writing a diary in 1957 and that her mother burnt the first six years, which she terms '*les années clés*' (p. 35). This immediately points to the absence — what is not there and what is not retrievable — and reminds us that a photograph or a book can easily be forced to disappear. The text above the photographs is this:

Ce journal que j'écris depuis 1957 ... me donne l'impression d'une faible durée, au fond je pourrais placer — j'imagine à tort? — un passage de 78 dans

67, un de 63 dans 88, y aurait-il une grande différence, une distorsion? Rien ne rend autant la permanence du moi que le journal, il ne fait pas histoire. (p. 35)

Thus Ernaux claims that the 'I' of the diary is immutable, unchanging, permanent; and that hints that what *has been* is what *is*, to her. So what about her autobiographical writing, little of which corresponds to the genre of the diary? Are we to believe that the 'I' of the rest of the anthology is temporary and mutable? This section not only points to another way of writing time, but also questions the autobiographical enterprise that has formed her career and that forms the rest of this anthology. Ernaux in these stand-out pages may be read as cautioning us: much of 'me' is out there, she hints, but not all of it, and not the most permanent parts. In this way, as soon as the reader/viewer thinks that s/he 'knows' something of Ernaux and understands her autobiography, the author underscores that s/he really does not. Instead, this photojournal constructs the autobiography with a certain direction, a certain chronology, which builds on things that are known about her — and then reverses that gesture.

In addition to the interruption staged by this photograph of the diaries, several photographs stand out as breaking the chronological narrative. One of the most significant of these is a full-page photograph of the author's mother in 1956. The photographs have moved steadily throughout Ernaux's life until 1971, but then this photograph from fifteen years previously suddenly appears (p. 75). Ernaux leaves this interruption unexplained, as the caption simply reads '[M]a mère, 1956'. The previous pages show her mother in the late 1960s and early 1970s as an older lady with white hair, spectacles and a slight stoop as she looks at her young grandchildren. The text of the diary entries positioned next to the photographs on these pages discusses Ernaux's writing and career. Specifically, one lengthy quotation from the diary entry of October 1998 discusses how the author is discarding her notes as she is approaching retirement; the notes and lessons that she has kept from her student days through her teaching career 'ne me serviront plus ... ne m'auront guère servi' (p. 73). Her awareness of her ageing and her preparation for later life are underscored by her memory of discarding papers when she was eighteen, since she was 'tendue vers l'avenir' (p. 73), and her contrasting emotion of discarding now 'ce qui a été l'emballage, le cocon de ma vie' (p. 73).

Set in the context of her awareness of her own ageing, the photograph of the mother from a different time frame takes on a different meaning. The early photograph

not only arrests the passage of time but pushes it back, as we view the mother as an old lady with her grandchildren, and then as a strikingly younger woman on the following page. Ernaux's play with temporality thus emphasises the past life of the older woman and the fact that, since ageing is common to all of us, Ernaux herself is now having to recognise the process that she observed in her mother. The diary entries that accompany the photograph add a further nuance to this time play. Spanning 1970 to 1996, the four entries all present the author's feelings towards her mother in different instances. On one hand, Ernaux quotes her less charitable moments, remembering her 'agacement insurmontable', but on the other hand she juxtaposes this with comments such as her acknowledgement that this 'modèle maternel' was one of the women who formed her, that she understands her mother better through having mothered herself, through her recollections of her mother's funeral and her realisation that 'l'écriture me vient d'elle, qui n'a jamais écrit' (p. 74).

Clearly, Ernaux is testifying to her changing feelings towards her mother over time and to the way in which her own ageing has produced a mellowing and a greater understanding of the old lady that the mother was and that she herself is becoming. There is a clear mirroring of the process of coming to terms with one's mortality, as is evidenced by the fact that this text is a survival story — that of the battle with cancer that Ernaux overcame — as well as a look backwards to her writing career so far. Significantly, a full-page photograph of Ernaux appears on the following page in a very similar pose: seated in a dark cardigan and looking in the same direction, although the backgrounds are different (the mother is sitting in front of a blurred field and the daughter in a blurred library). The chronology of the photographs is restored by this, from 1974, and continues to move forward as before.

In addition to playing with the time of memory and ageing, Ernaux introduces another important technique into this framing section: that of repetition. In two instances, she juxtaposes on the same page photographs of herself from the same/similar places, alongside text that alludes to these from yet another time frame. The most striking example of this is the author's depiction of herself in Venice, a city that she has frequently visited and which figures regularly in her work. Displayed one above the other are two photographs of the writer smiling at a camera on a bridge with water behind her; one is from 1982 and the other is from 2004. The same pose in almost the same place in almost the same clothing in the same composition is striking and clearly invites comparison; the reader/viewer will naturally notice the

ageing that is the main element distinguishing the two images, a process that Ernaux depicts consciously and candidly.

Moreover, the act of revisiting is inherent to both photography and autobiography. The subject of the two photographs is the same but different, and photography and self-narrative operate in the same way. Between the two photographs, time has moved forward and created change in the photographed subject, in the same way as time has moved between lived experience and a writer's written record of this. The juxtaposition of photography and autobiography thus points up the multiple reference points involved in both, as the visual image aids the process of memory but highlights the changes brought about on the autobiographer by time. The two juxtaposed photographs remind the reader/viewer of the changing author and invite us to think that we recognise her image, her identity and her autobiography. Yet, as this chapter contends, the movement is quite the opposite.

Further to the comparison that Ernaux invites by showing herself in the same position in different time frames, and by her linkage between photography and autobiography, the diary entries add another level of interpretation to this juxtaposition. The first entry, from 1986, is an excerpt from her record of being in this area, walking around and viewing the surroundings. It also mentions how she thought back to having been there twenty-three years earlier, thus introducing a reference to yet another time frame: 'Je marche aujourd'hui et rien n'est perdu. Je n'ai pas eu moins que ce que je désirais et je suis toujours *moi*' (p. 92, emphasis in the original). The photographs go forward yet the text goes backwards, imagining a previous time further back in the past when she was in this city. Nevertheless, the text insists on the constant nature of her self — 'je suis toujours moi' — although the photographs suggest the exact opposite. The images insist upon change, while the text insists upon sameness, and the resistance that these two opposing movements produce is the crux of my reading of this photojournal. By using photographs to supplement her diary and indeed her anthology, Ernaux subtly undercuts any interpretation of a stable, coherent self that unites her self-narrative. Her photojournal thus becomes a push and pull between knowing and not knowing this author, as she simultaneously displays herself in images, yet through the diary entries casts doubt upon the veracity of the identity that the images stage.

The photographs continue chronologically until 2011, when Ernaux simply stares out at us, opposite a picture of her holding a grandchild, an image of the

future. Michèle Bacholle-Bošković views this image as symbolic of Barthes's notion of 'le temps écrasé', and comments that 'sa dernière photo est porteuse de la mort que l'écrivaine septuagénaire voit poindre'.¹⁵ This is certainly true, yet Ernaux's self-narrative is complicated by the diary entry that appears above the photograph: '[L]es choses qui m'arrivent, au moment où je les vis, s'écrivent toujours déjà à l'imparfait' (p. 101). 'What has been', says the text; and 'What will be?' and 'What will have been?' ask the images. And Ernaux, looking directly at the reader, again explicitly invites us into the text, recognising the creative agency of the reader in determining 'what will be'. The play with verb tenses in this final entry is a technique with which Ernaux has previously experimented. Most notable in this regard is her polemical 1991 work *Passion simple*, which is included in the anthology and to which several diary entries refer; Ernaux also published a different version of this text as *Se perdre* in 2001 and, crucially, in the format of a diary that was supposedly closer to the 'real' events.¹⁶ The events in question were related to an affair with a married man for whom the narrator lived a passion that she willed to be permanent but that was predictably curtailed. The word play of the title is indicative of the text's literary innovation; nowhere does the author employ the *passé simple* tense, as she renders the tale in the imperfect and future tenses. More than a subversion of French literary norms, this narrative technique enables the author to subvert the finality of a tense that insists upon completed actions and thus to envisage the episode as an ongoing action, via the imperfect tense, or as a continuing probability, via the future tense.

In this photojournal, the final diary entry performs a similar movement. Ernaux at once points to how her lived reality immediately becomes narration, as 'les choses qui m'arrivent' transform themselves into written material. Furthermore, her assertion that they become written material in the imperfect tense adds an ironic twist to this ending. The imperfect insists upon fluidity and ongoing, descriptive or habitual actions as opposed to the *passé simple* or *passé composé*, which imply finality and an ensuing change of state. Ernaux's final comment thus resists ending and instead presages an ongoing self-narrative. The image is also at odds with this, again staging a resistance as the photography refers to the future while the text refers to the past. As

15 M. Bacholle-Bošković, 'Ph-auto*bio*graphie: Ecrire la vie par des photos', *Women in French Studies*, 21 (2013), pp. 79-93.

16 A. Ernaux, *Se perdre* (Paris, Gallimard, 2001).

we have seen from Barthes's theorisation, the crucial tense at work in photography is also the future anterior, which, as Jérôme Thélot identifies, 'donne le photographiable comme en train de disparaître, qui donne le moment de photographier comme décisif, et le photographié comme disparu'.¹⁷ Ernaux's mortality is all the more in evidence, as the inclusion of a photograph is testament to the fact that the image itself, the book, and the author will all one day disappear. Far from a simple frame for the anthology to follow, therefore, this photojournal insists upon the dual movement, backwards and forwards, and upon the instability of the evolving identity that is its subject — or subjects.

Overall, then, this anthology may appear to be a step backwards, an undoing of Ernaux's work thus far, but the way in which she frames it, with these unpublished diary entries and photographs, shows a renewed commitment to the questioning of the genre of autobiography. By moving the reader into different time frames, she reminds us of how little we know about her, and of the fact that the anthology is far from a complete rendition of a life. The autobiographical enterprise in which she has been engaged, playing on concealment and revelation alongside identification and disidentification, is alive and well, and is furthered by the use of photography. The photo/diary entries set up a different approach to time that then pushes us to read the texts from within a different temporality.

Ernaux is thus not using photography in a banal, unoriginal way. French autobiography took a significantly visual turn in the 1990s, with writers such as Raymond Depardon, Leila Sebbar and Marie NDiaye publishing life narrative with photographs or other visual support.¹⁸ By contrast, as I have shown in this chapter, Ernaux uses photography as an innovative device to frame her self-narrative across different time periods and, since this is the frame of an anthology, to take her previously published work in a new direction. By allowing photography to form the narrative and positioning words as secondary, she explores another approach that points up absence and displacement in self-narrative. By playing with time, specifically by constantly altering the time frame of the narration, she displaces her 'self' and places herself constantly beyond the reader's understanding. The photographs are evidence

17 J. Thélot, *Critique de la raison photographique* (Paris, Belles Lettres, 2009), p. 11.

18 See, for example, R. Depardon, *Errance* (Paris, Seuil, 2000); M. NDiaye, *Autoportrait en vert* (Paris, Mercure de France, 2005); and L. Sebbar, *Mes Algéries en France* (Saint Pourçain-sur-Sioule, Bleu Autour, 2004).

of her existence but her way of undercutting their status shows the reader that we cannot possibly 'know' her. Ironically, the album of evidence continually prevents any coherent and cogent reading of self-narrative. So the anthology invites linkage, but the frame with the photographs hanging as though suspended in mid-air warns us against believing her story. Ernaux wrote in *L'Occupation* in 2002 that 'écrire, c'est d'abord ne pas être vu'.¹⁹ In this reading, she uses photography and text together to perform the questioning of the genre of autobiography and ultimately to make sure that she is not seen.

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