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# Comme à la Guerre: War and Memory in France with Particular Reference to Ernaux's *Les Années*

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## Grace Neville

### ***Comme à la guerre: War and Memory in France with particular reference to Annie Ernaux's Les Années***

Between three hundred and three hundred and fifty kilos of gold: this is the total booty that has been retrieved by metal detector enthusiast Alain Cloarec from countless gardens all around France where it had lain buried and forgotten for many years. Cloarec explains that in France, in times of war, people tend to bury family treasure (jewellery, silverware...) in their garden rather than hide it in an attic or cellar which risk being bombed or catching fire. Therefore, he advises that before selling a house, owners would do well to call on the expertise of a metal detector professional like himself. His success rate hovers around 40%. The article that recounts his success story was published in *Le Monde* and may at first seem like some kind of hoax or April Fools' Day tale.<sup>1</sup> However, *Le Monde* does not publish joke articles: Cloarec's story is deadly serious. This very matter-of-fact article underlines the extent to which, well over half a century since the end of the last conflict fought on French soil, war and considerations around war are still omnipresent in France and permeate the private sphere, down to unremarkable, mundane, everyday activities like buying or selling a house and even doing a spot of gardening. It has become part of people's own personal archaeology, part of their bones, of their DNA. Through a close reading of Annie Ernaux's 2008 memoir, *Les Années*, this chapter will focus on how, in France, memory of that most public of events – war - has seeped into the private sphere, into people's hearts and souls where it remains firmly lodged years after the ending of all hostilities.<sup>2</sup>

War and the memory of war are clearly and unapologetically inscribed in the public space in France. The main airport in France is named in honour of France's great war hero, Charles de Gaulle. The names of railway and metro stations in Paris evoke wars fought over time and space (Alésia, Austerlitz, Iéna, Wagram, Stalingrad, Crimée, Bir-Hakeim...) as do street names: le Champ de Mars, avenue de la Grande Armée, la rue du 11 novembre, la place du 8 mai 1945, la place du 19 mars 1962, la place des Combattants en Afrique du Nord. The names, Arc de Triomphe, Arsenal and La Défence, are shrouded in military connotations. Were it not for their direct or indirect involvement in conflicts of various kinds, how well

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Monde*, 7 December 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Annie Ernaux, *Les Années* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008).

would we know the people whose names are similarly given prominence in the public space: Hoche, Louise Michel, Mouton-Duvernet, Foch, Gambetta? There are even plans for une rue Dora Bruder, to commemorate the real life Jewish girl who was deported to her death under Vichy and whom Nobel prize winner, Patrick Modiano, has woven into a haunting 1997 novel. In recent times, especially since the presidency of Jacques Chirac (1995-2007), the names of Jews deported under Vichy have been immortalised on plaques erected on the walls of the schools they attended, as well as on the walls of the Gare de l'Est from whence so many of them were transported to their deaths in the East. More uplifting memories of war are also inscribed in street names: l'allée des Justes salutes the many French people who, at mortal risk to themselves and their families, helped France's Jews in their hour of desperate need. Nor are foreign conflicts forgotten: the Maze hunger striker, Bobby Sands (1954-81), is commemorated in street names in France, for instance in Paris (St Denis) and Saint-Herblain near Nantes. One might argue that the public sphere in other countries also immortalises the memory of conflict, but Heathrow is a place, not a war, and the names of London's main streets (Oxford Street, Regent's Street, Piccadilly) evoke no war memories. Dublin's main thoroughfare is named after a pacifist, Daniel O'Connell, a Kerryman who famously proclaimed that "no political change is worth the shedding of a single drop of human blood", a life-long belief often traced back to his schooldays in France when, at the height of the Terreur, he abandoned his school in Douai and fled France through Calais where he was reputedly revulsed by the sight of a handkerchief soaked in the blood of the recently guillotined king. Many of the *lieux de mémoire* identified and analysed by Pierre Nora in his classic study of the same name are steeped in blood: le Mur des Fédérés, les monuments des morts, le soldat Chauvin, Verdun ....<sup>3</sup>

In recent times, the ongoing debate over whether the European Parliament should continue to decamp from Brussels to Strasbourg for four days every month, despite massive expense and inconvenience, to the annoyance especially of some UK politicians, French politicians from left and right are adamant: it must continue to do so. Strasbourg is "la ville du *plus jamais ça!*" The city straddling the frontier that was the Rhine is a potent reminder of the blood-soaked centuries of Franco-German hostilities. Hence, the location there of the European Parliament for even a few symbolic days every month is a reminder of a past that must never be forgotten, of the fact that peace is precious, and of Paul Valéry's powerful warning that

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<sup>3</sup> Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-92).

“les civilisations sont fragiles”. Inconvenience and money are a small price to pay for this reminder.

It would be well-nigh impossible in a short article to establish exactly why, after all these years, war memories still linger so powerfully and so pervasively in France. Indeed, several decades of cutting-edge scholarship has still not yielded up the definitive answer. One hypothesis is that it is precisely because, in France, war is such unfinished business. Exactly who did what in France during the Second World War is still not fully clear. Mitterrand’s role in Vichy France still poses questions. Ground-breaking films like *Nuit et Brouillard* (1955) and *Le Chagrin et la Pitié* (1971) have questioned and punctured the notion that there were fifty million Résistants in France during the War. On close examination, one realises that part of the problem is establishing who exactly the enemy was. In England, this was never in doubt: the enemy was the Other; the Germans, the Hun, the Bosch. The closest they ever came to setting foot on British soil was on the Channel Islands. In France, on the other hand, the enemy was not even necessarily someone from the other side of the Rhine, but a neighbour, a relative, a version of oneself. Historians stress that the anti-Semitism of the Vichy forces of law and order frequently outstripped anything the Nazis had in mind, citing *inter alia* the insistence of the Vichy authorities that even the children of France’s Jews were to be deported, something that the Nazis themselves did not demand. Without an obvious, easily recognisable enemy - someone who is very different from oneself, someone to blame – closure can be elusive. The magnificent, concluding pages of *La Peste* come to mind: in this glorious parable published just after the War and often seen as an allegory on the death camps (and, indeed, on all subsequent catastrophes), the plague has subsided, the rats have gone away, people are deliriously happy, but the narrator reminds us that the next plague is all around, waiting quietly in papers and personal belongings strewn quietly all around us.<sup>4</sup> In short, the plague is not out there, it is within ourselves. This lack of closure, the suspicion that history is not linear but circular and that the sky may soon fall in again may explain why war memoirs in France continue to be such news. Through the recently popularised writings of concentration camp victims, Irène Nemirovsky (1903-42)<sup>5</sup> and Hélène Berr (1921-45),<sup>6</sup> readers return again and again to the scene of the crime as if – once and for all – to wrest meaning and closure from it.

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<sup>4</sup> Albert Camus, *La Peste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

<sup>5</sup> See especially Irène Nemirovsky, *Suite française* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Hélène Berr, *Hélène Berr Journal 1942-44* (preface by Patrick Modiano) (Paris: Editions Tallandier, 2008).

This contextualisation may be useful in considering Annie Ernaux's work, in particular her memoir, *Les Années*. Annie Ernaux is one of the best known writers in contemporary France. Born into a working class milieu in Normandy in 1940, she made her way into the bourgeoisie via the *ascenseur social* that was her education. She has spent most of her adult life in Paris where she has published over fifteen books in which autobiography and ethnography are interwoven. In the past, she was sometimes dismissed by sections of the Paris literary coterie for being too accessible, too confessional, too independent, too conventional (“une écriture plate”) – a fate long endured by Edna O'Brien. However, for many years now, her star has been firmly in the ascendant: her books garner major prizes and have a huge following in France and abroad. Ultimate mark of quality: she is published by Gallimard, the Francophone world's leading and most esteemed literary publisher. She is a recent collaborator in a publishing initiative focused on depictions of everyday life, directed by historian Pierre Rosanvallon of the prestigious Collège de France.<sup>7</sup>

*Les Années* is a contradiction in terms: an impersonal memoir. It loosely has as its *fil conducteur* the life of an unnamed young girl from a village in Normandy. The lack of a name to distinguish her from her peers means that *Les Années* can be read as a kind of collective memoir (*mémoire fleuve*) of an entire generation. Born just after the War, university students in the 1960s, participants or observers during the Paris student uprising of 1968, young professionals shortly afterwards, they soon became spouses and parents installed in the kind of bourgeois life that they had once vowed to shun. *Les Années* is thus in no way a war memoir: the focus is resolutely on the coming of age of an entire generation. Yet what is fascinating is the way in which the War is unselfconsciously everywhere, like the air all around, like the rumble of traffic in the background.

The War is an unbridgeable abyss: there is the time before and the time after. Even non-war related events are categorised as happening before or after the War: “après la guerre,”<sup>8</sup> “les années qui la séparent de la Libération”<sup>9</sup>. The narrator evokes the ruins of Yvetot after the War as a backdrop for a fleeting memory that has nothing to do with the War<sup>10</sup>. Visual memories similarly use the War as a marker: “l'arrivée dans la ville de décombres”<sup>11</sup>. Even

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<sup>7</sup> Annie Ernaux, *Regarde les lumières, mon amour* (Paris: Seuil, 2014). This is the sixth volume in a series edited by Pierre Rosanvallon at Seuil, *Raconter la vie*.

<sup>8</sup> *Les Années*, p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> *Les Années*, p.35.

<sup>10</sup> *Les Années*, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Les Années*, p.35.

mundane, everyday objects are shrouded in the reality that was the War: "tout ce qui se trouvait dans les maisons avait été acheté avant la guerre"<sup>12</sup>.

A six-page section<sup>13</sup> in *Les Années* brings together a host of war-related themes, not just in this book but in French society in general. Here, Ernaux depicts "les jours de fete après la guerre" and, in particular, the lingering after-dinner conversations between adults that filled those long, alcohol-fuelled afternoons. The young, unnamed narrator is probably the person eavesdropping, remembering. These were people who did not have a heroic war: they were the "ordinary" people, *le petit peuple* who worked hard in cafés and on farms throughout the conflict. Their greatest victory was arguably simply surviving, keeping their heads down and getting on with their lives. However, on those free afternoons, on the all too few "jours de fete" to which they would have been entitled,<sup>14</sup> their conversations inevitably come back again and again to the same topic: the War and their experiences of it. It was a kind of bonding exercise, the main experience they had in common, cemented by activities like singing, eating and drinking. Despite the ordinariness of their war, it clearly was for them a period of heightened consciousness, when colours were brighter, the light was sharper, and simply being alive was an exhilarating experience. Similar memories are recounted by Londoners from the time of the Blitz: despite the constant danger of death and the pulverising of London all around them under the onslaught of German bombs, they would say that they never again felt as alive, as happy or as free. Likewise, the adults on whom the young narrator eavesdrops in *Les Années* seem to suggest that their post-War lives were dull, grey, uneventful, despite the fact that – unlike millions less fortunate - they had survived and were now busily immersed in the life-giving task of bringing up the next generation, people like Ernaux herself. One senses that, if they had a chance, they would swop their current circumstances for the excitement of the War years. The term "jouissance"<sup>15</sup> implies that the War and memories of that period go so far as to procure a kind of sexual thrill for them.

Their shared memories of shared experiences, taken out and dusted down on these occasions, form a kind of stream of consciousness list<sup>16</sup>: these include material realities like awful food, black market butter, the cold winter of 1942, the frenetic dashes down to the cellars for protection, the sound of V2 bombers overhead. The first time they saw the Germans and,

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<sup>12</sup> *Les Années*, p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> *Les Années*, pp. 22-27.

<sup>14</sup> In 1936, the Troisième République introduced a law giving paid holidays to workers.

<sup>15</sup> *Les Années*, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> *Les Années*, p. 23.

indeed the last time they saw them (fleeing back across the Seine in nearby Caudebec on clapped out horses): all this is remembered with the same precision that people of a later generation remember where they were and what they were doing when they heard that President Kennedy had been killed.

More problematic memories surface too. The War redrew relationships: such and such a neighbour was in the Resistance but there were collaborators too: such and such a girl whom they remembered had her head shaved at the Libération. None of this concerns close relationships: the speakers come across as spectators in someone else's war. There is never any discussion of the rights and wrongs of the War or of its more abstract or philosophical aspects. Everything remembered is immediate, first-hand and recorded at surface level. Their more profound experiences remain unspoken:

Mais ils ne parlaient que de ce qu'ils avaient vu, qui pouvait se revivre en mangeant et buvant. Ils n'avaient pas assez de talent ou de conviction pour parler de ce qu'ils savaient mais qu'ils n'avaient pas vu. Donc ni les enfants juifs montant dans des trains pour Auschwitz, ni des morts de faim ramassés au matin dans le ghetto de Varsovie, ni des 10 000 degrés à Hiroshima. D'où cette impression que les cours d'histoire, les documentaires et les films, plus tard, ne dissiperaient pas : ni les fours crématoires ni la bombe atomique ne se situaient dans la même époque que le beurre au marché noir, les alertes et les descentes à la cave<sup>17</sup>.

Perhaps they were never taught how to process or to verbalise experiences other than immediate, surface-level ones – hence, their silence, their apparent disconnection and alienation from world-shattering events all around them. Perhaps they were simply never led to believe that their deeper experiences or opinions could be of any interest or importance to anyone. At all events, Ernaux records the silences that would punctuate these conversations: one imagines people lost in shared thoughts that were too difficult or too problematic to express. They even share memories of events not actually experienced by them but by their ancestors: “Ils remontaient en des temps où eux-mêmes n'étaient pas encore, la guerre de Crimée, celle de 70, les Prussiens qui avaient mangé des rats”<sup>18</sup>. In other words, they know how to talk about the past but not about the present, about others but not about themselves. The evocative title of Terence Davies' 1988 classic film set in a not dissimilar social milieu -

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<sup>17</sup> *Les Années*, p. 24.

<sup>18</sup> *Les Années*, p. 25.

Catholic, working-class Liverpool in the 1940s and early 1950s - comes to mind: *Distant Voices, Still Lives*.

Ironically, the Second World War is contrasted in negative terms with the Great War which seems far more real and tangible than the ensuing conflict: the Great War was a “man’s” war (with the women around the table relegated to the role of silent listeners by men who had not taken part in the Great War but who were nonetheless anxious to somehow glean credit for it). There is also implicit criticism of French combatants in the later war: the Great War soldiers were “real” heroes because they actually won the war, something soldiers in the subsequent War looked for a long time unlikely to achieve: the latter had it “easy” unlike their compatriots a generation earlier:

Ils embrayaient par comparaison sur la guerre d’avant, la Grande, celle de 14, gagnée, elle, dans le sang et la gloire, une guerre d’hommes que les femmes de la table écoutaient avec respect. Ils parlaient du Chemin des Dames et de Verdun, des gazés, des cloches du 11 novembre 1918. Ils nommaient des villages dont pas un enfant parti au front n’était revenu. Ils opposaient les soldats dans la boue des tranchées aux prisonniers de 40, au chaud et à l’abri pendant cinq ans, qui n’avaient même pas reçu de bombes sur la tête. Ils se disputaient l’héroïsme et le malheur<sup>19</sup>.

War thus seems reduced to little more than one further source of irritation and envy, fuelling resentment among people who themselves had so very little: it is almost as if, from the vantage point of their own meagre lives, the speakers feel aggrieved by the alleged comfort enjoyed by their fellow citizens, and downplay the reality that they were captured and locked up in enemy prisoner of war camps for five long years. In a world in which nothing was given for free, in which every *sou* was earned with sweat and spent with care, the detainees are resented for violating unspoken rules by somehow deliberately engineering a snug sinecure for themselves without even having the “decency” to earn it first by submitting themselves to the onslaught of enemy bombs!

All wars seem ultimately to reinforce each other and to blend into one long war. These experiences, etched in their bones and in their silent memories, form one long endless war in which their own experiences and memories and those of their ancestors merge into one. Significantly, the earliest date mentioned in *Les Années* is 1870: in the dark aeons before that

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<sup>19</sup> *Les Années*, p. 24.



(nonetheless recent!) war, nothing existed... except war and famine: “Dans le temps d’avant raconté, il n’y avait que des guerres et la faim”<sup>20</sup>.

If the War emerges as a period of heightened consciousness, then its ending was even more epic. For a short-lived period, time was redrawn and people lived resolutely in the present, partying as if there was no tomorrow, engaged in cathartic exercises to blot out the recent past. Time was filled with excessive partying, praying and endless bus trips to the sea-side - always a communal activity in which people seemed somewhat out of control (“frénésie”). Social niceties and the veneer of “civilisation” and respectability are discarded as the partying borders on tumult, the praying on hallucination, and the bus trips on death-defying escapades. Even the dogs are momentarily out of control.<sup>21</sup>

Once the War is over, however, life soon settles back into drab monotony, the kind of greyness coincidentally depicted by Sartre in the 1938 novel that propelled him to fame, *La Nausée*, which was based on the time he had spent as a young teacher in nearby Le Havre. All around, the traces left by the War were uniformly boring; for the children, all that remained were orders restraining them or forbidding them from doing something. Everything seems flat and emotionless: in a few words, Ernaux records the post-War deaths of young boys blown to bits when playing with forgotten mines<sup>22</sup>. This tragedy is somehow placed on the same level and thus given the same importance as other banal realities with which it is juxtaposed in the same paragraph: examples of the reawakening of local trade, the names of traditional games that children played on Sunday afternoons.

Listening to their elders’ memories of different, more exhilarating times gave the young listeners the strong impression that they were born too late, that through no fault of their own they had missed out on literally more brilliant times (“l’épopée flamboyante”, “jours dorés”). The War as recounted by their elders seems like some holiday camp which the children dream of experiencing some day for themselves:

A coté du temps fabuleux – dont ils n’ordonneraient pas avant longtemps les épisodes, la Débauche, l’Exode, l’Occupation, le Débarquement, la Victoire – ils trouvaient terne celui, sans nom, où ils grandissaient. Ils regrettaient de ne pas avoir été nés, ou à peine, quand il fallait partir en cohorte sur les routes et

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<sup>20</sup> *Les Années*, p. 25.

<sup>21</sup> See an interestingly parallel description of post-traumatic activity in *La Peste*: after the plague disappears, the inhabitants of Oran embark on a frenzy of partying and carousing.

<sup>22</sup> *Les Années*, p. 26.

dormir sur la paille comme des bohémiens. De ce temps non vécu ils garderaient le regret tenace. La mémoire des autres leur refilait une nostalgie secrète pour cette époque qu'ils avaient manquée de si peu et l'espérance de la vivre un jour<sup>23</sup>.

As the next generation, they feel doomed, condemned by sheer bad luck and the absence of war to a life more ordinary.

War as depicted in *Les Années* brings to mind the magnificent painting by Brueghel that depicts Icarus plunging to his death in the sea while, nearby, a peasant is tilling the land, utterly oblivious to the drama that is unfolding close by. Icarus is just a small detail, literally a footnote: all we glimpse of him is his foot as he plunges headlong into the sea. The main activity depicted is the *éternel retour* of the peasant's work as he tills the land, just as his forefathers had done at this period every year and as his descendants would continue to do. The madness of Icarus's doomed plans contrasts with the literal solidity of the more terrestrial ones of the peasant who, unnamed and indistinguishable from any of Brueghel's other peasants - just as Ernaux's characters often seem free of any features that would distinguish them as individuals - nonetheless, in his quiet, unremarkable way, assures the survival of his community, at least until the next harvest. Similarly, in *Les Années*, Annie Ernaux depicts a world in which, in the distance, mad ideas, visionaries and revolutionaries are triggering dramatic events: war, deaths, mass destruction, invasions, the carving up of countries, the redrawing of borders and boundaries; meantime, in the foreground, *le petit peuple* are trying to make a living, trying to survive from day to day, from war to war, to live a life no different from the life they would leave to their children and to their grandchildren.

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<sup>23</sup> *Les Années*, p. 25.