CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Annie Ernaux

The Years

Les Années

Presented by: Tomasz Mizerkiewicz

The book is often considered the *opus magnum* of the French Noble Prize winner (2022), who is a feminist activist bound to postwar French revolts. The autosociobiographical prose is based on the novelistic model of *One Life* (*Une Vie*, 1883) by Guy de Maupassant that presents a single woman's life in the vast historical panorama of the 19th century. Ernaux's story starts in 1940 (the writer's date of birth) and ends in the first decade of the new millennium (the volume was published in 2008). The narrator's perspective is depersonalized; the narrator avoids the first person singular and deliberately describes herself as "she".

The Years depicts the protagonist as embedded in a stream of events of different kinds where political occurrences play a significant role. The book recalls the shocking impact of the Second World War, the disgraceful regime under Pétain, the liberation of Normandy, de Gaulle's epoch, the war in Algeria, May 1968, the sexual revolution, leftist Mitterrand's winning of the presidency, Chirac's and Sarkozy's conservative triumphs, the emergence of Le Pen in the French politics, and so on. The narrative moreover focuses on phenomena of everyday life such as fashion, consumerist culture, technological and digital progress, moral and social changes. All of this is punctuated by descriptions of photographs and family movies that depict the author-narrator. As in some of Ernaux's other texts, the book stresses the family's initial affiliation with the petty bourgeoisie, portrays how its everyday life demands strenuous work, and emphasizes the ways the family's life is filled with memories of the grandparents' poor existence as villagers.

The arch of a little Annie's path of life starts in the small town of Yvetot and leads from her career as a school teacher (with no remarks concerning the writer's fame) to her retirement when she occupies a place in the social hierarchy beyond the reach of her ancestors. In spite of the limitations inscribed in her social roles, the main character experiences a radical change in women's position in postwar France: from being situated within prescribed places through acts of disobedience, protests, and revolts, to experiencing the new possibilities of a liberated woman such as having numerous younger lovers after divorce. Paradoxically, the depersonalized way of narration happens to be very useful in conveying the most intimate feelings and fears of the main character, such as the strong bond with her parents and their poor existence, bashful thoughts of a young girl growing up in a small town, doses of hypocrisy accepted during entering adult life and establishing a family, the increasingly desperate need to break up with her husband, the pleasure of new beloved partners, and the discreet observation of her children's families from a grandmother's perspective during Christmas dinners.

The main character appears as a carrier of unique images of her time and place, but also of typical gestures, body postures, and behaviors of her particular classes. This is why the book starts and ends with an enumeration of random views from everyday life, of song lines, peculiar words, and

film images, all of them being material circumstances that are doomed to be extinguished together with their singular, irreplaceable carrier after her death.

Throughout, the story returns the desire to describe and grasp the fate of a woman living in France since 1940. In addition to Maupassant's influence, Marcel Proust's famous novel *In Search of Lost Time* (*À la recherche du temps perdu*, 1913-1927) is being evoked. Like in Proust's novel, the flow of events being a mixture of the personal and the public is shaping the main character who wants to find out how the time "coursed through her." Her goal was to discover what she calls the "common time" that joined her secretly with lots of individuals of her time, but also with ordinary circumstances of her life that are a powerful sensual part of her existence. This political intuition turned The Years into the "instrument of struggle" since her ambition was also to liberate the experience of time from temporal regulations imposed on her by alienating political powers and consumerist strategies. Navigating the intimate and the public, Ernaux asks how the time experience of somebody's existence could again become common and liberating.

Further readings: Guy de Maupassant Une Vie (One Life), Virginia Woolf Years, Annie Ernaux A Man's Place, Didier Eribon Return to Reims.

LANGUAGE: French / Français

CENSORSHIP STATUS:

Article

Perceptions, cartographies, and 'cartographies of time' in the political novel

By: Tomasz Mizerkiewicz

Storytelling

The Political Novel: A Palimpsest

By: Ivana Perica