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Paris Framed – Twentieth-Century French Writers Crossing the City

Twentieth-century writers frame Paris as a locus of desire for their characters, whether working in fiction or in the more contemporary ethnographic journaling exemplified by the writing of Annie Ernaux in *La Vie extérieure* (2000) and *Journal du dehors* (1993). This article draws on the critical approaches taken by Christopher Thompson (1992) and Richard Burton (1988) in their respective works on French nineteenth-century literature and uses their critical frameworks as a starting point with which to explore this later work of Ernaux.

Annie Ernaux is better known for her biographical writing on her parents' working-class lives and her own relationship with bourgeois life in France. Her work is studied on undergraduate programmes across the UK and is the subject of at least two book-length studies.¹ She was born at Lillebonne in September 1940 but now lives near Paris. During the 1990s she published two collections of what appear to be diaries of everyday life. They are documents of her daily commuting on the RER and metro from a suburb of Paris, Val d'Oise in Cergy, into the city centre. The two books in this series are *Journal du dehors*,² which is the main focus of this study, and *La Vie extérieure*.³ Both titles suggest an act of framing, written from the point of view of those outside the frame.

Many twentieth-century Paris novels depict a narrator or main character crossing into the city space and thereby establishing a frame around Paris so that their protagonists may be inside or outside the city, the locus of desire. This article will draw on two such texts, both to act

1 See, amongst others, Siobhán McIlvanney, *Annie Ernaux – The Return to Origins* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), and Lyn Thomas, *Annie Ernaux, à la première personne: essai* (Paris: Stock, 2005).

2 Annie Ernaux, *Journal du dehors* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).

3 Annie Ernaux, *La Vie extérieure* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).

as comparisons and to contextualise Ernaux's work; these are *Zazie dans le métro* by Raymond Queneau, and the novel *Le Feu follet* by Pierre Drieu la Rochelle.⁴

Ernaux frames her writing: the avant-propos

Ernaux spells out her relationship to her readers whilst framing her project in an 'avant-propos' to the *Journal du dehors*. In it she describes the new-town where she came to live in the late seventies, about forty kilometres outside Paris, with its facades of pale pink and blue concrete. For the writer, the place she arrived in seems in her own words 'un *no man's land*' (Ernaux, p.7), with all its implications of desertedness as well as liminality; an as-yet unclaimed territory.

Ernaux's documentation of these short journeys and everyday scenes is her attempt to lay claim to this new land by making it the focus of her journals. In the 'avant-propos', she provides an ambiguous message; at first she explains that her project is to develop 'une sorte d'écriture photographique du réel' (p.9), in which she plans to avoid expressing any emotion. She will present the reader with beings who are simply there – no more, no less. This declared strategy, she says, is taken from modernist documentary photography. However, she ultimately puts herself into the text – her obsessions, her memories, and, like the unwitting documentary photographer, she determines what we can read by an unconscious choice of scene and framing. She, the writer, frames what we see of her newly documented land and its peoples:

Et je suis sûre maintenant qu'on se découvre soi-même davantage en se projetant dans le monde extérieur que dans l'introspection du journal intime – lequel né il y a deux siècles, n'est pas forcément éternel. [...] Ce sont les autres [...] qui [...] nous révèlent à nous-mêmes. (p.10)

4 Raymond Queneau, *Zazie dans le métro* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959) and Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, *Le Feu follet* (Paris: Gallimard, 1931).

This belief in the veracity of the journaling process is detected by Gérard Coge in the writing of André Gide.⁵ Coge highlights the writer's compulsion to tell the truth, or, at least his truth. Although journaling ostensibly compels the author to tell the truth, it is inevitably the truth as seen by the author. As a result, the borders of Paris which Ernaux depicts will frame her personal view of Paris as a city, thereby delineating that which she considers to be either inside or outside the frame.

Ernaux's experience of living on a new housing estate was shared by millions of working-class Europeans in the post-war period. Across Europe people were housed as economically as possible, outside the walls of the medieval *cit *. This is one of the meanings of her title 'du dehors' – 'of the outside', representing Ernaux's attempt to find a history for these peoples and document their everyday comings and goings, while her role as the ethnologist moving amongst them and across her frame of Paris will find an echo in the journeys of the characters of the two twentieth-century fictional works under consideration.

5 Gérard Coge, *Les Ecrivains voyageurs au XX^e si cle* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

Thomson's thematic critical framework: energy & renewal

From a methodological point of view, the initial examination of these texts will use the model suggested by Christopher Thompson.⁶ He compares three works in order 'to bring out common features which are obscured by the more usual study of these texts, either just for what they tell us about their particular authors or as evidence of changing fashions among visitors to the relevant country' (p.307). He takes as his point of entry the concept of energy. His approach is to explore how energy is understood by Romantic authors, thereby linking the social and emotional energy that is the goal of the quest in the three books to the physical energy sources that were being exploited in the nineteenth century. Allying literature to technological developments in this manner informs historical research, but here Thompson links energy to literary research through a discussion of how the sublime can be conveyed using intense, lucid and energetic expression. The quest for energy in this period, Thompson demonstrates, is the force which actually creates these sophisticated works of fiction. He puts forward his case not only by close-reading but by drawing out comparable themes, for example the energies of the Rhine and the Nile. Thompson's discovery of thematic patterns can tell us much about the motivation of the writers during the period between 1820 and 1850.

This article develops an approach that is parallel to Thompson's by drawing out common themes in Ernaux's *Journal du dehors*, Drieu la Rochelle's *Le Feu follet* and Queneau's *Zazie dans le métro*. Firstly, the protagonist of each text, the hero, heroine or narrator, is driven by a similar quest, that is, to return to the centre of Paris, or rather *a* centre of Paris. Each book's framing of Paris is slightly different, in the same way that Thompson's river names are different. The Rhine and the Nile may be different rivers, but both appear as powerful sources of energy to his chosen group of nineteenth-century writers: in this study, we can analyse crossing the border which frames Paris as an act of renewal in each of the three twentieth-century texts. The following section will

6 Christopher Thompson, 'French Romantic Travel and the Quest for Energy', in *The Modern Language Review* 87, 2 (1992), 307-19.

compare these works in more detail, focusing particularly on the ways in which the crossing of the frame of the city explores the themes inside/outside in different, but related ways.

In *Journal du dehors*, the title and the textual fragments show a working writer gathering data, indeed two meanings for the title might be ‘the outside world’ as opposed to ‘the home, the indoors’ on the one hand, and the sense of existing beyond the economic margins of the city, on the other. Many of the fragments refer to people commuting for economic reasons. In fact forty-six of the one hundred and twenty-eight diary entries take place on the train or on station platforms. The journey is nearly always from the suburb, over the bridges of the river Oise, into the frame of central Paris, where cultural activities and social interactions take place. As readers we are never told explicitly why the writer must forever cross the suburbs and return to the city centre; the narrator arrives at Nanterre, site of the University of Paris-X, or at the shopping malls of Les Halles. However, the activity that comes from this imperative to return to the centre sets in motion the documenting work, which is the source of the published text. Ernaux transcribes for her readers what she has seen and heard, breaking free of the indoor life of the home to become an explorer of the outdoors. Her first journal entry for 1988 highlights the importance she attaches to the notion of the woman out in the world:

Allez, rentre à la maison ! L’homme dit cela au chien, tête basse, rasant le sol, coupable. La phrase millénaire pour les enfants, les femmes et les chiens.
(p.69)

Man forever orders women, dogs and children to go back indoors. The same scene is played out in Queneau’s novel, *Zazie*: on this occasion, it is a child that escapes from the house; the thirteen year-old heroine breaks away from her uncle, whilst he is sleeping, to try to discover central Paris for herself, and in particular the metro. The over-ground trains do not satisfy her curiosity, she needs to penetrate the city’s surface, to access the core of the city. For *Zazie*, the overhead railway lines of Paris are only the edge of the frame, even the road and street-level metro stations are not far enough into Paris. She must go deeper still. *Zazie* is a provincial girl visiting the metropolis, her

frustration in her enforced role as a tourist is emphasised by the chapters where she is forced to join a coach party touring the capital. Whenever she seems to have escaped to sample Paris first-hand she is thwarted and returned to the adults in charge of her, their main aim being to return her indoors.

In *Le Feu follet* the drug-addicted hero, Alain, makes three journeys from the suburbs into the city centre. He is living indoors, in the apparent safety of a dreary clinic in Saint-Germain, where he is unsuccessfully tackling his addiction. His 'indoor' status renders him dependent; outside the frame of active life. The first time he enters the urban frame of Paris is to make love with Lydia who is visiting from New York; the second journey into the city centre is in a quest to understand the meaning of a contented life. His final journey is out into the dark November streets to the bars and clubs of Montmartre. Each journey into the city is a transgression since he should be concentrating on his recovery at the suburban clinic. To commence his second transgression of the city frame, he asks a pair of delivery drivers for a lift into the city centre; the verb of movement used by the character shows the irresistible magnetic pull of the city whilst echoing the verb in Ernaux's opening diary entry for 1988, 'Vous rentrez à Paris?' (p.72). For Drieu la Rochelle's hero, Alain, these returns to *his* city centre are the activities that keep him alive.

In each of the examples analysed above, the characters cross a boundary which has been imposed on them, transgressing this frame to travel to the centre. Of course this centre is each writer's conception of what is most important in the city. From the deep centre that Zazie craves to the economic centre of Ernaux's narrator, each centre is only clearly understood by and within the character. The need to return to the centre suggests that it does not exist spatially, a notion already noted in Roland Barthes' writing on movement.⁷ It cannot be found geographically but, since it is contained within the writer, the aim becomes a quest to find the writer's own centre through transgression of the frame.

7 Charlie Mansfield, 'Lire *L'Empire des signes* de Barthes comme écriture de voyage' in Yoichi Kaniike *et al*, *Barthes – Résonances des sens* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo, 2004), 151-7, [<http://hdl.handle.net/1842/651>].

Burton's use of historical context as a critical framework

Richard Burton analyses French urban writing of the period 1815-60.⁸ Burton works with a range of literary and non-fiction writing within this period to link the myth of the unseen seer to the changing character of movement in the French capital during the Restoration and bourgeois monarchies, 'to bring out their underlying structural similarity' (p.51). Burton constantly acknowledges the socio-political context of the period to give an insight into the changing role of the novelist in the 1840s, claiming that 'the concept of the 'Protean' novelist and poet [...] came into being at much the same time [1830-1850]' (pp.61-2). He also draws on non-fictional texts of the period, to account historically for the characteristics of the novels. Finally, to link his findings in a causal way to events in metropolitan France at the time, he associates city-dwellers' feelings of moral panic with an urban population unnerved by the rapid modernization of the Second Empire. This study will now attempt to use Burton's approach by examining the three literary texts in relation to the socio-political mood of their time.

All three of the texts examined suggest that the streets of Paris are simultaneously dangerous and attractive; being out on the city streets offers each main character the opportunity for sexual encounters, for exciting sights and for access to craved-for substances, yet the streets of Paris present each character with a danger. For Zazie, the danger is the prowling Satyr, whilst for Alain it is alcohol and drugs. However, Ernaux's work speaks most clearly of the fears of the working Parisian at the close of the twentieth century. Ernaux's narrator spells out many encounters in her sketches of everyday life with people in economic distress. Again, her journaling project initially recalls the way in which western, male documentary photographers have framed their powerless subjects, who are exposed outdoors because of their poverty and

8 Richard Burton, 'The Unseen Seer, or Proteus in the City: Aspects of a Nineteenth-Century Parisian Myth' in *French Studies*, 42 (1988), 50-68.

homelessness, whilst remaining static enough to be photographed because they are not working. Ernaux sees and records these same powerless people; her project to record the plight of the 'underclass' is provided with a rich resource in this period.

The narrator of *Journal du dehors* never appears intimidated by the others she observes. She seems protected, at least physically. At first glance she could simply be acting as a 'Protean novelist', after Burton (Burton, p.50-68), i.e. being everywhere, seeing everything and mutating in order to blend in. Yet her own presence does not appear to threaten her subjects. They continue with their everyday activities and conversations on the train, careless of any audience. The public in the modern metropolis has had one hundred and fifty years to acclimatise to rapid transit, to huge crowds and to continual surveillance, and no longer feels the moral panic of the nineteenth century, at least in Ernaux's journals. Life towards the end of the twentieth century in Paris is rooted in the everyday necessity of commuting, shopping and work, the fear of others having been removed during peak periods.

If we now contextualise Ernaux's writings by reference to the social conditions during which she was writing, following Burton's methodology, certain particularities of her journal writing emerge. The socio-political climate during the period of Ernaux's journal, that is, from 1985 to 1992, opens with the socialist presidency of François Mitterrand. He came to power in May 1981 and, according to Maurice Larkin's analysis, 'He could see that there was no mounting ground swell of popular demand for major changes in the structure of society or the economy'.⁹ However this did not mean that the socialists were without a sense of excitement at the possibility for social emancipation under a socialist president and prime minister. Premier Pierre Mauroy was also a former schoolteacher, with a party who wanted to widen participation for working-class people in universities. This is the public sector where Ernaux works. Meanwhile, in Ernaux's other area of activity, writing and literature, Jack Lang launched ambitious projects to improve reading, libraries and book retailing in France (Larkin, p.370).

9 Maurice Larkin, *France since the Popular Front: Government and People 1936 – 1996* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), p.356.

These political changes may have provided the economic backdrop for Ernaux to write and publish with confidence, they may even have prompted her to keep her diary, which later became the source material for this book, but the excitement of the era for writers and artists certainly does not come through in *Journal du dehors*. Instead she makes only two clear references to the government; once when she sees a sign for the 'Chambre des députés' defaced to read 'Chambre des putes' (p.71), and in an entry for 1986 when she notes the President's reference to the little people, *petites gens*, (pp.39-40). It may be that in the period of her journal, 1985 to 1992, the strength of both the economy and the socialist majority has largely evaporated. Indeed in the elections of 16 March 1986, President Mitterrand was forced to choose the conservative, Jacques Chirac, as prime minister and begin a two-year period of 'cohabitation'.

However, the socio-economic themes of the journal entries, do align themselves with the successive governments' key concerns through this eight-year period, namely the relationship of the French economy to consumer-spending and the growing rate of unemployment. With Chirac as premier (Larkin, p.391), privatisation took place, and unemployment reached 10.5 per cent. In France at that time, those unemployed for over two years found themselves outside the normal benefit system (Larkin, p.392). On 23 December 1986, a housing law was repealed, freeing landlords to evict tenants more easily. In that same month, the Chirac government was also dealing with massive student protests against proposed increases to university fees. This malaise permeates Ernaux's journal, as her narrator often encounters begging on the transport network. Unemployment forces itself into the face of the consuming public during their forays into the shopping centres of the capital. A political analysis of the time which shows the delicate balancing act between consumer-spending and full employment is brought into focus throughout the entire journal since Ernaux's characters are always documented in the shopping malls or on train journeys to and from work.

Framing and observation

Let us turn finally to the theme of observation in Ernaux' journals, and thus, her framing of the other in a documentary fashion. Observing other people in their daily transactions with one another, whilst not affecting their actions, has a sense of the scientific. The observer, or writer, can watch them and hear them speak to each other without interfering with the experiment playing out before their eyes and ears. Ernaux often structures her journal entries in this way. Forty-six of the entries – over a third of the total – are in transit, the railway carriage of the late twentieth-century commuter train providing a perfect observation opportunity, since commuters have become almost immune to observation. She deploys a narrative style using both the imperfect tense and considerable dialogue, which removes her, the observer, completely from the scene (Ernaux, 1993, pp.12-3); she also foregrounds the theatricality of the scenes on trains (pp.104-5). When she watches a homeless man in his thirties checking his legs and stomach in the carriage, oblivious to the other passengers, she re-asserts the image of the unnoticed observer (pp.99-100), since she is watching him without affecting his very private behaviour. Other passengers also remain unaffected and she describes his acts as 'simplement l'expression extrême de la solitude' (p.100). However, this extreme solitariness also extends to the writer as scientist. Just two entries later, Ernaux switches to the first person to recount a physical encounter, as a young man tries to steal her handbag. She is denied the opportunity to observe, she cannot see or hear him with her 'observational' faculties, only the haptic sense, the sense of touch, connects her with him 'frôlement, le long de la hanche' (p.101). In this entry, she breaks the silence of why she is entering the frame of the city by completing the story of when she alights. She gives us for the first time some indication of why she has travelled into the city:

Je marche boulevard Haussmann, puis dans les travées du Printemps, troublée, sans parvenir à fixer mon attention et mon désir sur les choses de mode exposées. (Ernaux, 1993, p.102)

In drawing a conclusion, at least on Ernaux's work, the notion of a journal of the outside is worked through by her in the lives of the women she observes, who are attempting to move into the world, outside the home. Many of the women she encounters are at work, or at least are driven by the economics of the day when they enter the frame of the city, since they are shopping, often for food for others. As a woman outdoors herself, Ernaux has found a way of working as a writer even as she travels, thus making her part of the commuting group who move outdoors out of economic necessity.

The key theme in all three works is that crossing the frame into the centre of Paris is life-affirming in the sense of providing ongoing work. For the writer, describing movement towards some central place, with its journaling, acts as a proof of existence as well as a *raison d'être*. This gives identity to the writer; acting as a writer is an attempt to re-integrate oneself into a society from which one feels excluded.

The two critical approaches, drawn from work on nineteenth-century French literature of movement, both prove to be valuable tools in opening up the texts under study. In particular, Burton's approach applied to Ernaux's journal writing is very productive in terms of providing a methodological framework against which to understand the lives that Ernaux records. This approach allows us to see the economic and political decisions taken at government-level being played out in the lives of working people.

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