

Reconfigurations of Mourning in Contemporary French Women's Writing

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On the subject of mourning, Jacques Derrida commences *Mémoires pour Paul de Man* by telling us what he cannot in fact tell: “Parler est impossible, mais se taire le serait aussi, ou s’absenter ou refuser de partager sa tristesse. Simplement je vous demande de me pardonner si je n’ai aujourd’hui que la force de quelques mots très simples” (15). This expressive limitation is at the core of his texts of and on mourning, raising fundamental questions about the way we grieve, both in public and in private. How do we capture and express loss, this permanent and yet ineffable state? If the process, as Sigmund Freud infamously argued, is finite, why are we incapable, once we have seemingly traversed the experience, to narratively encompass it? How are we undone by grief and what forms does our self take once shattered by the experience of loss? Starting from these questions and through the lens of contemporary French women’s writing, this article seeks to launch a consideration of how we treat the dead in our contemporary landscape by engaging with the emergent literary genre of the *récit de mort*. Through three literary case studies, this article sets out to prove the vitality of the developing genre.¹

My analysis is rooted in the works of three authors who are members of the pantheon of French autofiction, Marie Nimier, Camille Laurens, and Annie Ernaux. The three authors selected have suffered losses inscribed within structures of kinship which reverberate throughout their works, with the spectral figure of the dead Other recurring in their writing in kaleidoscopic form. Deaths in the family have generated and installed fractures within the corpus of the authors selected, altering their generic choices through significant narratological shifts. Perinatal loss motivated Camille Laurens’s adoption of an autofictional mode of writing under the term *écriture de soi*, while parental loss lead Annie Ernaux to adopt a starker style, her now trademark *écriture plate*. Marie Nimier’s works are traversed by the pivotal experience of paternal loss at a young age which preceded the start of her writing career and which subsequently haunts her work, installing internal fissures. The line of my argument follows a genealogical arc, starting with Nimier’s paternal loss as depicted in the autofictional *récit de mort*, *La Reine du silence* and continues with Camille Laurens’ narrative depiction of her son’s death in the brief *récit Phillippe*. In the final part of this

article, I shift the line of the argument to a prospective rather than retrospective point of view to address Annie Ernaux's relationship to her imminent loss of self through the lens of proleptic self-mourning as explored primarily in the photo-text *L'Usage de la photo*. I begin my discussion by establishing the definitional lines of the emerging thanatological literature in the contemporary French landscape.

The récit de mort

If Romantic poetry is characterized by its death-inspired elegies and the Victorian era is famous for its elaborate and intense expressions of mourning, the contemporary epoch appears to be less equipped with the ritualized means with which to represent grief. Within the distinct realm of contemporary French writing, authors are countering this lack and are seeking to break through the walls of silence which surround death. In her article, "Les traces vivantes de la perte: La poétique du deuil chez Denise Desautels et Laure Adler", Barbara Havercroft comments on this burgeoning narrative development:

Si la production narrative en France et au Québec lors des deux dernières décennies révèle une très grande diversité de thèmes, de genres et de procédés esthétiques, cela n'empêche pas que quelques points de convergence en ressortent, dont la difficile écriture du deuil. Que ce soit la mort de la mère, du père, de l'enfant ou de l'ami proche, bon nombre d'écrivains et d'écrivaines, le plus souvent par le biais du texte autobiographique ou autofictif, se sont adonnés récemment à la rédaction de ces 'récits de mort'. (79)

The term *récit de mort* has become the nomenclature par excellence when discussing texts which recount the experience of loss through death within the French context. The designation has been gaining widespread currency and was first used in an academic context by Gill Rye.² Despite scholarly usage, the terminology was first introduced by writer Jacques Drillon in the *récit Face à face*. The account charts the decay and subsequent death of his stepson Antoine who succumbed to a brain tumor at the age of twenty-five:

Je pensais me borner à retoucher les notes que j'ai prises pendant les trois dernières années de sa vie – tant est forte l'attrance pour les histoires closes : exposition, péripéties, dénouement. Les *récits de mort* sont un genre littéraire, comme l'enquête policière ou le roman d'apprentissage. [...] Ces livres où les choses se replient comme une carte routière. Ces livres dont le personnage principal, devenant corps, sort de lui-même lentement et perd son âme...

Mais non, nous laisserons cela, qui n'est pas notre sujet. Je ne raconterai pas sa mort comme une histoire – du moins tenterai-je d'éviter la chronologie. Je

continuerai de feuilleter mon album sans l'avoir mis en ordre, comme en moi se mêlent le sentiment d'avoir agi comme il le fallait et le regret d'y avoir manqué. (135) [emphasis added]³

Drillon thus gestures towards the recognition of an a priori constituted genre which he identifies under the proposed designation of *récits de mort*. As the term has entered academic vocabulary and can no longer be contained within the initially suggested parameters, I propose an expanded definition. I thus refer to the *récit de mort* as an account in which the events recounted are of a non-fictional nature, written by an author who entertained a close relationship with the deceased – whether of kin or not – and who recounts the direct effects of the death narrated on his identity and life-narrative. The term *récit* positions the texts outside of a purely fictional sphere while offering the possibility to situate itself at the juncture with autofiction. This definition therefore excludes fictional texts such as Marie Darrieussecq's *Tom est mort* – a novel which centers on a mother's mourning, Nathalie Rheims's *Les Fleurs du silence* – a *roman* which imagines the death of the author's father –, or Laurence Tardieu's *Puisque rien ne dure* – the story of a mother who, stricken with cancer and on her deathbed, mourns her disappeared daughter. This definition is not meant to be exhaustive and will undoubtedly be subject to revision as the genre proliferates.

In the face of the increased privatization of death, these death texts give the dead materiality and recognize the writer's status as bereaved. As William Watkin comments in *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, “literatures of loss make public the privacy of affect” (199) for “mourning is neither a purely external nor purely internal phenomenon and the literatures of loss gain their power because they negotiate between the private realm of the affect and the public realm of its effects and expression” (151). The emergence of the *récit de mort* contradicts the critical and psychoanalytical frameworks which have established death and mourning as silent, private processes and therefore signals the urgency of the creation of new ways of thinking bereavement. Sandra Gilbert notes – in relation to contemporary poetic expressions – that, “in reaction against [...] the cultural evasions that constrain mourning [...] recent writers have insisted on constructing a defiant poetics of grief that insists on meticulously documenting loss and sorrow” (411), an affirmation which remains equally pertinent when applied to the sphere of prose literature, if indeed, such a sharp delimitation is necessary. In the absence of culturally condoned forms of representation, contemporary death texts confront us with the disorienting effects of loss, tracing in detail the death of a singular individual and the effects it has on the life-narrative of those left behind. The narrative and temporal modalities of the *récit de mort* are diverse as we encounter texts written immediately after the loss occurred or many years after and can either be highly fragmented or constitute a more fluid narrative. The *récits de mort* take us through the death process and its aftermath in detailed accounts,

written with a frankness characteristic of the landscape of contemporary French women's writing.⁴

It would be tempting to conflate the genre with the therapeutic sphere, however in my conceptualization of the *récit* and its reception, I strongly oppose the idea of writing as reparative. The conflation between writing and therapeutic means was most notably developed in the context of women's life-writing through the concept of scriptotherapy as proposed by Suzette Henke in *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing*, in which she defines it as "the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment" (XII). Henke argues that:

The authorial effort to reconstruct a story of psychological debilitation could offer potential for mental healing and begin to alleviate persistent symptoms of numbing, dysphoria, and uncontrollable flashbacks. Autobiography could so effectively mimic the scene of psychoanalysis that life-writing might provide a therapeutic alternative for victims of severe anxiety and, more seriously, of post-traumatic stress disorder. (1998: XII-XIII)

While I do not seek to minimize the palliative component of scriptural acts, I resist the interpretation of creative practices as a universal panacea. As Emma Wilson proposes in the introduction to *Love, Mortality and the Moving Image*, "mourning allows the possibility of a creative act that is not straightforwardly reparative or meaningful, but still offers some management of loss, some pursuit or productivity" (17). I find the idea of self-therapy and the false equivalence of a "writing cure" with a "talking cure" highly problematic since such a view stems from a flawed self-help rhetoric which could be interpreted as a one-size-fits-all solution.

Throughout this article, I underline instead the limitations of expression imposed by the experience of loss. In the face of death, we are typically at a loss for words, for indeed any utterance fails to grasp the void that is left in its wake. The texts are constructed around and by these absences, and I suggest that writing creates a locus of presence – the book itself – for the absent person to reside in. Furthermore, whereas Kathleen Woodward views "the book itself [as] embody[ing] a resistance to mourning, a resistance which entails a kind of willed refusal to relinquish pain" (97), I propose that narrative acts are an expression of mourning which acknowledge their own expressive limitations. Rather than present a coherent, "repaired" self which would be reflected in a similarly seamless narrative, the *récits de mort* exhibit the shattered (self)narratives left in the wake of loss. As Derrida remarks in *Copy, Archive, Signature*, "it is necessary to keep loss as loss" (19), a task the authors fulfil by presenting us their – formally speaking – heavily scarred texts. The three authors selected grapple with the question of inexpressibility to various degrees and in different textual forms.

Marie Nimier and the Practice of Autofiction as a Literary entre-deux

Out of the three authors discussed in this article, Marie Nimier's practice of the *récit de mort* takes us the furthest out into the terrain of autofiction. Whereas both Laurens and Ernaux sharply veered out of the fictional realm following the experience of loss, Nimier paints her literary universe in fictional nuances. Such a choice presents itself as inevitable, motivated by the young age at which Nimier lost her father and the ambiguous relationship she entertained with him, whereas both Laurens and Ernaux were adults when death interfered in their lives. A high degree of fictionality is inherent in the reconstruction of Nimier's memories, thus supporting autofiction as a generic choice. As the author admitted in a private interview, "mon père est largement inventé. Il est également un personnage dans mon travail et dans ma vie, vu que j'ai très peu de souvenirs de lui et que je ne l'ai vraiment pas connu. Dans un sens, mon père est un être imaginaire pour moi". Thirty-seven-year-old writer Roger Nimier died in a tragic car accident, crashing his Aston Martin into a roadside barrier just outside of Paris in 1962 when Marie was only five years old. A remarkable and influential figure on the literary and social scene as the *chef de file* of the *Hussard* group, the novelist was mostly absent from his young daughter's life as his overriding professional interests and intensely active social life kept him away from the family home. He entertained a short-lived yet fraught relationship with his daughter, characterised by imposed silences and violent undertones. References to the father recur throughout Marie Nimier's corpus through various paternal avatars but it is only in her ninth book, *La Reine du silence*, published almost twenty years after her literary debut that the author directly confronts the figure of the father. *La Reine du Silence* was awarded the prestigious *Prix de Médicis* and was long- and shortlisted for a series of literary prizes, making it the author's most critically successful novel to date.⁵ *La Reine du silence* is a taxonomical exercise which sees the author attempting to classify and filter her often distressing memories whilst bringing them into dialogue with her father's mythical public persona. In this *récit* of a troubled relationship, Nimier tries to give textual flesh to the phantom which haunts her work, the spectre of the father. In *La Reine du silence*, Nimier describes her father as an aporetic and spectral figure, thus encapsulating the presence/absence *flou* which characterized their relationship: "ce père fantôme. Ni vraiment là quand il était présent, ni vraiment absent quand il nous quitta" (37).

Throughout *La Reine du silence*, Nimier's approach is twofold, at once biographical – through her attempt to draw a portrait of her father – and autobiographical – through her attempt to position herself in relation with, as well as against, the father. I thus posit that the *récit de mort* here fulfils a (self)-archaeological function in the author's quest to establish an identity in relation to the father and propose that the scriptural act is a means of negotiating with the dead. In *La Reine du silence*, Nimier briefly adopts the gestures of a biographer and provides a short summary

of her father's life, yet the insertion of the first person distances it from claims of objectivity, furthermore installing a personal vantage point:

Mon père était écrivain. Il est l'auteur du *Hussard bleu*, qui le rendit célèbre à 25 ans. Pour ceux qui n'ont jamais entendu parler de lui, je recopierais la présentation du livre de poche en l'assaisonnant à *ma* façon. [...] Royaliste version d'Artagnan, d'une culture immense, il prend à rebours ce qu'il considère comme le prêt-à-penser de son époque, cette intelligentsia de gauche à laquelle s'opposent ceux que l'on surnommait les Hussards, fiction réunissant autour de Roger Nimier des écrivains comme Antoine Blondin, Jacques Laurent ou Michel Déon. (11-12) [emphasis added]

The author's biographical impetus is oriented by her personal instinct and perspective: "Je ne saurais dire pourquoi, j'ai pensé en lisant ces prénoms que mon récit touchait à sa fin. Je n'avais pas raconté certaines choses qui figureraient en bonne place dans mes dossiers [...]. Ces souvenirs sentaient les fonds de tiroir" (*La Reine du silence* 162). The laborious re-enactment process is reflected in the textual structure of the volume, constituted by unmarked short chapters, at times only one-page long. Such a structure traces the jolting rhythm of memory retrieval and the difficulties of narrative interweaving resulting from the wide-ranging array of resources accessed, as well as their varying informational input. The emerging cadence of the text seeks to underline the difference between traditional biographical writing and Nimier's own project, which is not smooth and chronological, but is punctuated and punctured by *trous de mémoire*. It therefore paradoxically highlights its greater reliability and veridic status since it traces and gives an account of the process itself. Marie not only investigates the archives that others provide on her father, but also her personal repository of memories, trying to discover a representation of a father who is closest to her own subjective memories, and whose ambivalent and fluid nature is confirmed by the multiple points of view she revisits. However, despite the author's in-depth research process and biographical gesturing, *La Reine du Silence* cannot be classified as an all-encompassing account of the complex figure that was Roger Nimier. The text is to be read as a work which is processual in nature. Readers looking for a definitive account of Roger Nimier's figure in his private and public dimensions or a portrait of Marie Nimier as "fille de" will be disappointed. *La Reine du silence* is instead an intricate writing project which presents itself as a dual portrait of both the father and the daughter drawn through aporetic gestures which highlight the unstable character of auto/biographical writing.

Nimier proves to be a striking and unusual example of an auto/biographer for she leans toward a fluid narrative and a novelistic form. The author herself supports such a reading of her corpus as "une longue phrase qui raconterait l'histoire de l'émergence d'un corps, de sa réunification" (*La Reine du silence* 145). The stakes of life-writing are not to separate the strands of fiction and objective truth. The tensions between fictional

elements and truth value exhibited through the fragmented nature of text and memory in *La Reine du silence* are congruent with the “creative fissures and fractures at work in autofiction”, as Shirley Jordan notes (“État présent” 77), therefore clearly inscribing the volume within the sphere of “écrits de soi”. The crevices which traverse the psychic landscape are exhibited in the punctured narrative and textual fabric. The choice of autofiction thus proves to be favorable to a project which tests the unreliability of memory and calls into question the reliability of external, objective sources, challenging the emergence of a coherent, stable truth. The author here subtly questions the reliability of the sources with wit and irony. Nimier’s stylistic choices textually mark that she is putting the remarks on her father’s character “entre parenthèses”: “j’ai bien connu votre père (c’est fou ce que mon père avait comme amis) [...] je l’ai même vu le jour de l’accident (c’est fou le nombre de gens que mon père a rencontrés le jour de l’accident)” (*La Reine du silence* 80). The text’s meta-quality and constant interrogation renders explicit the process of life-writing narratives which in Kathryn Robson’s understanding are “explicitly produced out of lived experience, yet do not simply narrate that experience as such; instead they foreground the very question of how such experience can be narrated” (15). Nimier draws attention to the modes of writing as well as to the difficulties encountered during the narrative process rather than focusing on the factual aspects. *La Reine du silence* thus bears within it the traces of its very construction, – a meta-discursive element common to the works of Laurens and Ernaux as well – with Nimier persistently signaling the moments of vacillation inherent in her process of writing which are rooted in the unreliability of her own memories. In Laurens’s work, the meta-textual dimension and fragmentation follows the traumatic structure of her perinatal loss, with the text being marked by the incomprehension of the event.

Camille Laurens and the Inexpressibility of Loss

In 1994, Camille Laurens was the expectant mother of a baby boy who would be named Philippe. The happy event quickly turned into a life-altering tragedy, when the child died just two hours after his birth due to medical negligence.⁶ One year later, Laurens published *Philippe*, a poignant account of the tragic experience. Factual in its delivery, the book is a brief and concise *récit* which textually echoes the brevity of Philippe’s life. The slim volume,⁷ written in an autobiographical mode inaugurated a new writing style for Laurens, foreshadowing her subsequent turn towards autofiction, a label which she however dismisses, preferring her own chosen terminology of *écriture de soi*:⁸ “Au mot *autofiction*, je préfère ‘écriture du soi’ (et non pas du ‘moi’, qui fait pencher du côté du narcissisme). Le ‘soi’ transcende le ‘moi’ et doit pouvoir rejoindre quelque chose chez le lecteur” (“Toute écriture de vérité déclenche les passions”). This generic shift is motivated by the impossibility for Laurens to continue writing in a purely fictional

mode.⁹ As the author confessed: “Après ce récit où j’avais touché le réel, l’intime, il me devenait difficile de revenir à de la pure fiction. Je pense que la fonction de la littérature est de donner de soi” (“Camille Laurens et les femmes de sa famille”).

Through the publication of *Philippe*, the intimate experience of loss is voiced in the public sphere, attaining literary and socio-cultural significance whilst being a memorial addressed to the child in an attempt to save him from oblivion. As Hannah Kilduff remarks, “despite its intensely personal nature, *Philippe* is also a public work, functioning as a politicized critique of the medical treatment that Laurens and her son received” (371). This is particularly poignant in Laurens’s case as the purpose is clearly stated on the *quatrième de couverture*: “On écrit pour faire vivre les morts, et aussi, peut-être, comme lorsqu’on était petit, pour faire mourir les traîtres. On poursuit un rêve d’enfant: rendre justice”. Furthermore, in the absence of the child, Elaine Tuttle Hansen describes “storytelling as a nonprocreative maternal practice” (224), envisaging writing as “nonprocreative motherhood” (38). In *Philippe*, Laurens equates writing with maternal practices, positioning herself “chaque jour devant le papier blanc comme penchée sur le bébé mort” (*Philippe* 17). For the bereaved mother then, writing not only fulfils a memorial function, but is a (pro)creative act accomplished through narration, a means for her to maintain her maternal identity: “Ce qu’aucune réalité ne pourra jamais faire, les mots le peuvent. Philippe est mort, vive Philippe” (*Philippe* 72). Paying tribute is central to the bereavement process in order to ensure the “continuing bonds” (Klass) with the departed child. Whilst sociological studies observe that grieving parents regularly visit the cemetery or make the child part of the family through rituals such as the crafting of various material items (i.e. dolls, small statuettes, house and Christmas decorations, etc.) or the planting of trees in memory of their dead children, by virtue of her profession Laurens continues the bond by placing references to Philippe throughout her literary works following the baby’s death. Writing becomes a way to weave Philippe’s existence into the social and family fabric through its inscription in a material culture, since the text is ultimately a material artefact. The etymological root of the word “text” from the Latin *texere* – meaning “to weave” – characterizes writing as a material practice which would inscribe the child’s presence and subsequent absence in the world. Laurens suffers from a pronounced scarcity of mementos due to the short life Phillippe had and she therefore textually constructs a volume which fulfils the double role of being at once a memory and a memorial, therefore having a retrospective function as well as providing a means of projecting the dead into the future.

The importance of the name is paramount to the creation of *Philippe*. By carrying the dead child’s name, the *récit* ensures Philippe’s prolonged existence, even if in name only. As the author has noted, “je voulais que son nom soit là un peu comme sur une tombe. Sur sa tombe, il y a une petite dalle de marbre avec son prénom, Philippe. Tous les autres titres auraient été trop compliqués. La simplicité s’est imposée. En plus, c’était un petit livre, comme lui était petit” (private interview). Through *Philippe*,

Laurens produces a textual tomb and tombstone, whilst also attributing to it a life-affirming function. On the last page of the *récit*, Laurens states the text's life-giving purpose alongside its funereal quality: "j'écris pour que tu vives. Ci-gît Philippe Mézières" (*Philippe* 73).¹⁰ Derrida emphasizes the importance of the name in its memorial function which he attributes to its very first utterance, implying that the one who is named – singularly by those fulfilling a parental function and performatively by anyone s/he encounters thereafter – anticipates mourning:

Ce qui signifie encore que tout nom, toute fonction nominale, est 'en mémoire' de, dès le premier 'présent' de son apparition, et finalement en mémoire virtuellement endeuillé du vivant même de son porteur. Un appel appelle toujours (par) le nom, et le nom surgit avec la possibilité de *rappeler*, même si une personne n'est là pour répondre ou rien pour être montré. (*Mémoires* 67) [original emphasis]

The onomastic coincidence is an act of reparation from the mother-writer, who wants to save Philippe from oblivion and thus (re)affirm his existence in response to those who failed to utter his name, condemning him to repeatedly die and therefore contributing to his ontological effacement:

Il était venu au monde, et le monde n'avait de cesse de l'oublier, de l'annuler, de n'en pas même garder la trace, tel un nom sur une tombe, dans une minute de conversation, dans l'hommage d'une phrase. Les semaines qui ont suivi sa naissance, chaque fois qu'on m'a parlé *d'autre chose*, il est mort à nouveau. (*Philippe* 64) [original emphasis]

The volume is *in memory of* and *a memory of* Philippe, capturing the child's brief life from his existence in his mother's womb to his short stay in the world. The name thus imposes itself as "un signe ou un symbole, un monument, épitaphe, stèle ou tombeau, un mémorandum, un aide-mémoire, un *memento*, l'auxiliaire extérieur érigé 'en mémoire de'" (Derrida, *Mémoires* 63).

The writing in *Philippe* is synchronous with the experience of loss, aligned to its incoherence and cacophony, unlike Nimier's and Ernaux's *récits de mort*. *Philippe* is a *texte d'absence*, captured discursively by Laurens who underlines in the text the void left in the wake of her loss, as well as structurally through the blanks which puncture the text at a visual level. The blanks capture the unrepresentable character of loss and the subsequent impossibility of its expression, for words only graze the surface of such a profound loss. Fragmentation is a typical feature of death narratives in contemporary French literature, signaling at once the broken life narrative and the absence which is at the heart of the texts, echoed visually through the blanks of the page where the "non-dits" also reside, "giving a rather raw, staccato tone to the account" (Rye 45). The text's

morcellement invokes the ruptures in Laurens's maternal identity, together with the obliteration of her imagined future. The spaces inserted within the sparse writing evoke a deep feeling of loneliness and despondency, marking the lack of development of a life narrative with the child who was gone too soon. As Rye remarks, "in this way, the narrative conveys something of the pain of loss, although it cannot actually express that pain [and] the reader can only attempt to interpret it through the gaps and silences of the text" (45). The empty interstices of the texts are a visual echo of the blanks that neither life nor narrative will fill. The impossibility of expressing the pain of the absence, the unbridgeable gap between "les mots et les choses", subtends the text: "on peut bien dire qu'on est malheureux, mais on ne peut pas dire le malheur. [...] Le malheur est toujours un secret" (*Philippe* 18). Through the structure of the text, however, Laurens reveals the essential truth that resides at its core: that a mother, without a child, is a fragmented being.

Annie Ernaux's Mourning of the Self

For Ernaux, as for Laurens, death in the family provoked a rupture between the writer's craft and the domain of fiction. *La Place, a récit de mort* focused on her father's death, inaugurated the author's signature writing style, the self-entitled *écriture plate*, defined by linguistic starkness and a quest for objectivity.¹¹ As Ernaux has described it, this change of stylistic direction constituted a means of coming closer to the language of her *classe d'origine* by simplifying the language she employs: "*l'écriture plate* me vient naturellement, celle-là même que j'utilisais en écrivant autrefois à mes parents pour leur dire les nouvelles essentielles" (*La Place* 24). Ernaux thus abandons syntactically and lexically complex phrases, additionally rejecting the verbal form of the *passé simple* which marks high literary language. Instead she adopts a stripped-down lexicon which she mobilizes in short sentences, akin to an ethnographic approach. The turn to what I term Ernaux's "auto-objectivity" is generated by the difficulty she encountered in writing about a personal loss in a fictional mode, a change which finds a direct echo in Laurens's trajectory.¹² Death has remained a predominant theme in Ernaux's works as the author later engaged with the loss of her mother in *Une femme* and by extension *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*, and most recently, *L'Autre fille* in which she addresses for the first time in extended narrative form the death of her sister before her own birth, works which have been the object of extensive scholarly attention.

While I do not seek to minimize the impact the parental deaths have had on Ernaux's writing, in my discussion of loss in Ernaux's works I wish to open new lines of inquiry and steer away from experiences which I qualify as external – her parents' and her sister's death – and investigate an internal(ized) experience of loss, the author's own future demise. Whereas the two previous sections in this article dealt with a loss that was closely and directly intertwined with instances of mourning, this final section has at its

core the loss of self and subsequently the difficulties of addressing one's future death. I thus identify the author's breast cancer diagnosis as an existential *tourmant*, as she is faced with the terms of her own mortality and the possibility of her impending absence. Ernaux's struggle with the illness and the grueling treatment she underwent was recounted in *L'Usage de la photo*, a photo-text she wrote with her then lover, Marc Marie. Her cancer diagnosis prompted self-reflexive musings and we find Ernaux contemplating her passing into non-being:

J'ai imaginé mon nom à la place, sur la pierre. Je le voyais très bien mais ce n'était pas réel. Quand je regarde nos photos, c'est la disparition de mon corps que je vois. [...] Comment penser *ma* mort. Sous la forme physique du cadavre, du froid glacial, du silence, plus tard de la décomposition, cela m'est indifférent, inutile et certain: c'est ainsi que cela se passe. Je l'ai vu. (146-7)
[original emphasis]

The volume brings together photographs depicting details of rooms in which the author and her lover engaged in sexual intercourse and that were taken after the act itself with no bodies depicted in them. These visual artefacts which serve as the basis for the lovers' two parallel narratives have as focal points their affair and the ontological threat the cancer poses. By materially recording and showing us the traces she leaves behind, Ernaux stages the disappearance of her body in a manner she can control. To be both subject and archivist of the sexual acts and the traces her body leaves is an attempt on the author's part to reconcile an impossibility: despite her efforts, the absence of her body in death is not an event she will be able to record. The subject of her own death represents a largely unexplored narrative topic for Ernaux. Despite her advanced age, neither the process of ageing nor her mortality plays an explicitly addressed role in her writings, yet it is present in subtler forms.¹³ As she recounts in various interviews, her cancer diagnosis also provided an impetus for the author to finish her long-gestating work *Les Années*, a retrospective fresco-like narrative of life in France spanning seven decades, from the post-war years to the present. In the author's self-describing terms present in the text, *Les Années* is constructed as an "autobiographie impersonnelle" (240) in which she blends historical and sociological observations of the everyday life with her own experience of lived time, all the while maintaining the usage of the third person (Ernaux refers to herself as "elle" throughout). Even though her cancer diagnosis triggers a reflection on her death, like much of her work *L'Usage de la photo* is characterized by a preoccupation with her sexual status and desirability in the face of ageing. The affirmation of her sexual self is an attempt to counteract, even if futilely and fleetingly, the future absence of her own self in the world as potentially precipitated by cancer.

L'Usage de la photo marks a milestone in the Ernaussian corpus as it represents an affirmation of the close relationship between photography and writing present in the author's work, rendered visible by the material insertion of photographic artefacts. Although *L'Usage de la photo* signals a photographic overture since it is the first text penned by the author where photographs are reproduced, it is worth noting that no bodies are visible, just the traces of the lovers' lovemaking in the form of crumpled sheets and clothes. As Ernaux – together with Marie – positions herself behind the camera, capturing the material traces of their sexual encounters, photography comes to occupy an ever more prominent role in her writing. It is this manipulation of the photographic lens and the self-archiving act it represents which paves the way for Ernaux to let us in on other aspects of her life through visual, material means, even though such artefacts are sparse in her works. For Ernaux, “la photo a partie liée avec la mort, c'est la vie envisagée du côté de la mort, du jamais plus, puisque ce qu'elle fixe est déjà enfoui” (private correspondence).

L'Usage stages the disappearance of the body, showing us the discarded clothes as arranged on an empty set with absent players, a scene which foreshadows Ernaux's impending absence. Despite Ernaux's claim to the photographs being mere proof of the aftermath of her sexual encounter, a Barthesian “ça-a-été”, the photographs betray a studied character. The arrangement of the clothes on different surfaces strive to show us a disordered order as proof of Ernaux's sexual vitality. To be alive, Ernaux seems to be telling us, is to be a sexual being. Furthermore, the spatial cartography of the photographs strives for transgression, contradicting Ernaux's *effet de réel*, as the lovers' encounters reject traditional heteronormative, conjugal norms, rarely taking place in the bedroom – with the exception of hotel rooms. By showing us pictures of crumpled clothes in the hallway, the *salon* or the kitchen, Ernaux thus brings forward the intensely sexual character of their relationship and its unrelenting spontaneity, although the effect is contrary to the author's intent. The spatial variations betray instead a *mise-en-scène* with Ernaux as its architect, arrangements which are a manifestation of the author's overtly controlling and narcissistic nature. Since she cannot control her future absence, nor dictate the terms of her own death, she stages her absence in life. As Jordan comments, “[Ernaux is] paradoxically, intensely present yet evacuated from her work” (“Writing Age” 144). By not showing us her – undoubtedly failing – body, but only the traces of her lovemaking, she seeks to signal to the reader/viewer that it is still a desiring and, most importantly for Ernaux, a desirable body. It is thus through absence that Ernaux affirms her sexual appeal as a means of fighting against her approaching demise.

The expressed fear of each current project being her final one as she is nearing her eighties has proven to be a driving force as she proceeds to excavate losses from her past, although it has not prompted extensive reflections on the process of ageing itself, but solely punctual references to existential finitude. In *Mémoire de fille*, her latest text

in which she delves far into the past to recount her first sexual experiences in the summer of '58, she bitterly reflects on the time she has left: "Le temps devant moi se raccourcit. Il y aura forcément un dernier livre, comme il y a un dernier amour, un dernier printemps, mais aucun signe pour le savoir. [...]. Un jour il n'y aura plus personne pour se souvenir" (18). Since her cancer diagnosis, this sense of finality and loss has gained force and taken on greater prominence. The impetus for a retrospective return is equally made explicit with the titles of her later works, notably with *Retour à Yvetot*, which marks the return to her childhood town as a celebrated writer. The slim volume is the transcript of an address she gave at Yvetot, the first invitation of its kind that she positively responded to. Ernaux's acceptance to spatially return to the place of her childhood has the qualities of an end-of-life pilgrimage. Moreover, the presence of the noun *filles* – a linguistic marker of a younger self – in the title of two of her later texts *L'Autre fille* and *Mémoire de filles* further signals the retrospective character of these recent works.¹⁴ The paramount importance of her early years has been noted by Siobhán McIlvanney in her comprehensive study of Ernaux's works, *The Return to Origins*, where she proposes that "the formative influences of childhood shape the many themes and concerns which make up Ernaux's corpus" (17). Despite the recurrent use of the word *filles* in Ernaux's *œuvre* since her earliest published texts, its presence in the titles nonetheless indicates the prominence of her childhood and youth in her later works. As the author comes closer to the moment of her death, and since she remains the only guardian of her memories, Ernaux seeks to save her earliest memories from oblivion. Although she cannot control the moment of her death, Ernaux at least ensures the continuity of her memories by giving them material form as published works, once more attempting to exert control over her legacy.

Beyond death

Hybridity emerged as one of the most salient characteristics of the *révélés de mort* examined in this article. Meta-textual commentary was present in the three authors' works, signaling the difficulties of negotiating an identity and subsequently a narratorial position, as well as of adopting an appropriate discourse following bereavement. The hesitations apparent in the works of Marie Nimier, Camille Laurens and Annie Ernaux do not solely underline the varied responses to death encountered in the discourses of everyday life but also the common element of silence which has shaped their understanding of the experience of loss. Loss breaks down language, bringing to the fore both the expressive limitations imposed by the event and the fact there is not one single coherent story to tell. Stories of loss often combine a multiplicity of sources and viewpoints which often fail to clear up details or enrich the narrative, but further confuse the bereaved in their literary process.

I wish to conclude this article by gesturing towards possible avenues of research situated at the crossroads between literary and death studies, as inspired by the final case study in this article, Annie Ernaux's works. The current critical interest on women's corporeality and the effervescent development of "body studies" could open up productive lines of inquiry by investigating the role the corporeal plays in women's narratives of loss, whether written, visual or cinematic and I here include potential intersections with processes of ageing and proleptic self-mourning. If a scarcity of such narratives is to be observed, this could be discussed in relation to the larger obscurantist cultural and social politics surrounding death as well as within the framework of feminism, ageing and invisibility, and female death. If this article has analyzed the ways in which women write *about* and *with* the dead, future reflections could look at how we give narrative form to *our* own future corporeal degeneration and death.

Notes

¹ Although the genre of the *récit de mort* has been vigorously expanding on the French literary scene in the last two to three decades, certain texts pre-date this effervescent moment, most notably Simone de Beauvoir's *Une mort très douce* (Gallimard, 1964) and Roland Barthes's posthumously published *Journal de deuil* (Gallimard, 2009), texts which address the passing of the authors' respective mothers. The *récit de mort* is most saliently inscribed within structures of kinship. Texts on child death – perhaps the most taboo of deaths, if we were to draw such a distinction – are perhaps predominant, among which we count: Bernard Chambaz's *Martin cet été* (Julliard, 1994), Hélène Cixous's *Le jour où je n'étais pas là* (Éditions Galilée, 2000), Laure Adler's *À ce soir* (Gallimard, 2001), Sophie Daulle's *Camille, mon envolée* (Philippe Rey, 2015), as well as Philippe Forest's texts on the death of his daughter, *L'enfant éternel* (Gallimard, 1997), *Toute la nuit* (Gallimard, 1999) and *Tous les enfants sauf un* (Gallimard, 2007), to name but a few. Furthermore, in terms of predominance we also find narratives of parental death, thus situating the *récit de mort* at both ends of the linear genealogical strand, as is the case with Linda Lê's *Lettre morte* (Christian Bourgeois Éditeur, 1999), Clémence Bouloque's *Mort d'un silence* (Gallimard, 2003) or Anne Goscinny's *Le Bruit des clefs* (NiL Éditions, 2012). Similarly, but with much less frequency, the *récits de mort* address the death of the sibling as is the case with Annie Ernaux's *L'Autre fille* (NiL Éditions, 2011) or Daniel Pennac's *Mon frère* (Gallimard, 2018). The death of a partner or a spouse are at the center of Christian Bobin's *La plus que vive* (Gallimard, 1999), Jean-Louis Fournier's *Veuf* (Stock, 2011), Antoine Leiris's *Vous n'aurez pas ma haine* (Fayard, 2016) and Serge Toubiana's *Les Bouées jaunes* (Paris: Stock, 2018). This list provides but a brief survey of existing *récits de mort* and is not intended to be exhaustive nor to provide strict categorizations.

² Rye first introduced the term in a talk entitled "Family Tragedies: The Death of a Child in Recent French Literature" which she gave as part of the "La famille en éclats" conference

(Durham, March 2004). The paper was extended and published as a chapter, “Child Death: Family Tragedies in Recent French Literature” in *Affaires de famille: The Family in Contemporary French Culture and Theory*, eds. Marie-Claire Barnet and Edward Welch (Rodopi, 2007).

³ The quotations are from the Folio edition (Gallimard, 2005). The original text was published by Gallimard in 2003.

⁴ Contemporary French women’s writing has frequently challenged the pillars of literary convention and, as scholarly work has amply noted, post-1968 writing exhibits a tendency to discuss trauma and taboos, with texts depicting incest (Christine Angot), family homicide and suicide (Chloé Delaume), abortion (Lorette Nobécourt), alongside a graphic, brutal(ised) sexuality (Virginie Despentes; Catherine Millet), to name but a few of the subjects which have received narrative treatment.

⁵ The novel was longlisted for the *Prix Femina* and shortlisted for the *Prix Renaudot* as well as the *Grand Prix du roman de l’Académie Française* 2004. *La Reine du silence* was among the last three novels competing for the Goncourt which was attributed to Laurent Gaudé for his novel *Le Soleil des Scorta* (2004).

⁶ Born at 1:10 pm, the infant was declared dead at 3:20 pm (see *Philippe* 14). The diagnosis established following the autopsy and a specialist’s report identified an untreated foeto-maternal infection which degenerated into pulmonary and cardiac complications for the baby, whose manifestations included tachycardia, bradycardia and pneumonia.

⁷ The original edition of *Philippe*, published by P.O.L., is 72 pages long.

⁸ Laurens refers to the preferred nomenclature as both *écriture du soi* and *écriture de soi*, terms which I therefore use interchangeably.

⁹ Before the loss of her son, Laurens was an established fiction writer, and she had already published three novels as part of a tetralogy, with the fourth one, *L’Avenir* (1998) published three years after *Philippe*.

¹⁰ *Les Travaux d’Hercule* (1994), Laurens’s third novel, was published the year of Philippe’s death. Dedicated to ‘Yves et Philippe Mézières’, this marks the only other public inscription of his name besides his tombstone. By placing the child’s name in the second position so both name and surname appear together, Laurens affirms the family’s lineage and acknowledges the child’s existence and civic identity.

¹¹ The text received the *Prix Renaudot* in 1984 and cemented Ernaux’s literary reputation. Its canonical status has been recognized through its inclusion in the curriculum for the *secondaire* in France (the equivalent of year 11 in the United Kingdom or the 10th grade in the United States).

¹² Like Laurens, Ernaux had equally published three novels before she renounced fiction, *Les Armoires vides* (1974), *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* (1977), *La Femme gelée* (1981).

¹³ Gender-specific issues related to her advancement in age, such as menopause or the loss of desirability brought on by ageing in a contemporary Western society, remain equally absent in Ernaux's narratives.

¹⁴ Ernaux's nostalgic impetus is further evidenced through photographic means. The cover of the Folio edition (the equivalent of a US or UK paperback edition) of *Mémoire de fille* (2018) features a sepia-toned photo featuring a young Ernaux wearing a two-piece bathing suit and sunglasses while squinting in the sun. This photo features a rare photographic excursion in Ernaux's personal memento vault, as most Folio editions of her work feature neutral and illustrative, stock-like photos with no personal connection. The incessant return to distant events in her life will undoubtedly be poignant elements in discussions on the author's relative lack of narrative involvement with her present process of ageing.

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