Modelling age - ageing women writers and their readers (Annie Ernaux, Margaret Drabble)

'We need to create for ourselves cultural models of older women as a way of generating alternative futures for ourselves' (Kathleen Woodward, 1999).[1]

Despite Simone de Beauvoir's trail-blazing treatment of *la vieillesse*, in and well beyond the book of that name, second-wave feminism was slow to address the experience of ageing. Not only was it predominantly a young women's movement, but the reality of ageing bodies conflicted with the pressing political need to envisage the body's meanings as socially constructed and hence open to change. Ageing reminds us of the limits of agency, of the body's insubordination to the subject's will. It was (and is) an uncomfortable subject, but one very relevant for feminism: whilst coming to terms with age and mortality poses a challenge for both sexes, women also face patriarchy's long history of considering the post-reproductive female as at best insignificant or at worst downright abject. It was Beauvoir who identified so vividly the painful disjuncture between the ageing woman's inner sense of identity, and her reflection in the mirror with all its potent connotations of redundancy and diminution: 'ce n'est pas *moi* cette vieille femme dont le miroir me renvoie le reflet'.[2] As the post-war generation of women has reached old age, the experience of ageing has been more extensively written about, reflected on, depicted in fictional and non-fictional forms.[3] In this article I want to ask how ageing is 'modelled' in twenty-first century texts by two well-known, widely read and contemporaneous women writers, the French Annie Ernaux and the English Margaret Drabble, born respectively in 1940 and 1939. Different as they are, these two authors are comparably positioned in the literary fields of their respective countries, for each has charted the life course of women of their generation, from youth to the middle years and, with Ernaux's *Les Années* (2008) and Drabble's *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016), on into old age. My focus will be on what these 'late' texts share, particularly in terms of their address to readers, and on what this reveals about a feminist modelling of age. The comparative approach will also allow me to explore the differences between them, and the extent to which these point to national differences in the construction of female ageing.

Ernaux and Drabble both entered the literary scene with portrayals of young female protagonists, their personal lives enmeshed in the ambivalent context of the post-war decades, at once emancipatory and oppressive for women.[4] Thereafter, both writers' work has broadly

followed the stages of the female life-course (albeit with significant detours, such as Ernaux's depiction of her father in *La Place* [1983] or Drabble's fictionalised exploration of her mother's story in *The Peppered Moth* [2000]), dealing with marriage, divorce, children, careers, friendship, love affairs, ageing parents, always – in both cases - with an acute awareness of the interplay between the personal, intimate life and the changing socio-political contexts that shape consciousness and connect the singular to the collective. Drabble's description of Ernaux as the 'chronicler to a generation' whose 'agenda is feminist' (in her review of the English translation of *Les Années* [*The Years*, 2017]), implicitly acknowledges the similarity between their literary projects. *Les Années* and *The Dark Flood* each carry this project forward by viewing the twenty-first century world, and the memories that shape its perception, from the perspective of a woman born in the mid-twentieth. In this sense both texts correspond to what Marie-Odile André, in her study of literary ageing, has termed a 'totalisation quasi testamentaire'[5]: a writer's if not final at least 'late' reaffirmation, in a 'totalising' work, of the vision, style and literary stance that have made up their singular contribution to the literary field.

Les Années and *The Dark Flood* each deploy the genre characteristic of their author's body of work, the former autobiographical, albeit with so strong a social dimension that one critic at least has preferred the term 'auto-socio-biographie',[6] and the latter a novel. The difference of genre is itself reflective of two different literary cultures. Life-writing has become *a*, if not *the* dominant genre in contemporary French literature: 'De nos jours' wrote Nabila Hassani in 2010, 'l'autobiographie fait figure d'un genre dominant et omniprésent et l'habitude de parler de soi s'est développée d'une manière spectaculaire', an assertion that she evidences with a long list of contemporary French-language authors writing in the first-person mode, ranging from Christine Angot to Michel Houellebecq, from Ananda Devi to Amélie Nothomb.[7] In her previous work Ernaux had charted her life in fragments, focussing on specific people (her father in *La Place*, her mother in *Une femme*), events and experiences (a passionate affair in *Passion simple*, an abortion in *L'Événement*). In *Les Années*, her life is narrated from birth to old age, and the first person singular 'je' is replaced by the third person 'elle', or in other passages merged into the collective 'nous' or 'on', underlining what has always been the 'transpersonal' (to use her own term[8]) significance of her writing. *Les Années* reviews the singularity of one woman's life – her proletarian childhood in Normandy, upward social mobility lived as both emancipation and class betrayal, marriage and divorce,

motherhood and grandmotherhood, passionate affairs with men, successful career as teacher and author – as a way to tell the story of a generation, and of ageing itself.

Drabble's *The Dark Flood*, on the other hand, belongs within the strong and continuing anglophone tradition of narrative realism, albeit a realism that acknowledges the postmodern era with a knowing awareness of its own fictionality.[9] In a highly accomplished reprise of her characteristic narrative mode, the novel features a wide cast of mainly white, middle-class protagonists, with a clear and critical sense of where these are situated within a diverse social field; the spatially mobile plot moves between London, the Midlands and North of England, and abroad, in this case to the Canary Islands; social and political themes are addressed through personal narratives. The *Dark Flood* has one principal protagonist and focaliser, Fran Stubbs – a 70-something, left-leaning, energetic woman still working as inspector for a care homes charity. From Fran's loose, extensive network of relatives, friends and acquaintances, other key protagonists emerge, all in their seventies: Jo the Adult Education teacher of literature, Teresa, a childhood friend now dying from cancer, Claude, Fran's sybaritic, invalided ex-husband for whom age means sinking into luxurious inactivity, Bennett the distinguished historian of the Spanish Civil War living on Lanzarote with his younger lover Ivor. They are all, as the narrator puts it, cases of 'the varied ways we find of dealing with old age' (83).

Similarities: lucidity and affirmation

Despite their generic differences, *Les Années* and *The Dark Flood* show considerable similarity in their literary 'dealings with old age'. Both texts manage to combine a lucid contemplation of approaching mortality with an affirmation of the value of living a long life. Age unavoidably brings us face to face with the transience of each individual life, with the fact that our own unique consciousness, fashioned over a lifetime, will disappear and the world go on without us: in Beauvoir's words 'toutes ces choses dont j'ai parlé, d'autres dont je n'ai rien dit – nulle part cela ne ressuscitera'.[10] Ernaux echoes this anticipatory mourning for the self: 'Toutes les images disparaîtront' (11), the book begins, and the urgency of inscribing the subject's unique store of words and memories before they fade and die underlies the whole text. 'Tout s'effacera en une seconde. Le dictionnaire accumulé du berceau au dernier lit s'éliminera. […] Ni je ni moi.' (19). In *The Dark Flood* Fran's memory of words uttered by an elderly Italian woman when Fran herself was young: '*la notte e vicina per me'* ('for me the night is drawing in', 16) recur as an occasional refrain shadowing the (in

many ways) buoyant text with a sense of impending death. In a less poetic register, Fran observes that 'old age (…) is a fucking disaster' (218), and the novel bears this out as protagonists come to terms with sickness, reduced mobility, the death of friends, and beyond their privileged circumstances vistas of less affluently comfortable age are glimpsed. An envoi or postscript coolly notes the post-diegetic demise of all the main characters, 'engulfed beneath the rising waves' (325). Yet both books counter the tragic sense of age as imminent annihilation of the self with powerful representations of the undiminished vitality and agency of their old female protagonists, and with an assertion of the quality and significance of experience right up to the moment of death.

Ernaux's narrative voice carries the authority conferred by a long career of recognised literary creativity: far from age as decline into insignificance, her decades of life and writing grant her the right to 'reconstituer un temps commun'(239) for herself and her contemporaries. Her claim that *Les Années* is 'un livre heureux'[11] is borne out by the value it grants to even the most ordinary of experiences and by its demonstration of the richness of the layered memory or 'sensations palimpseste' (204) that acquired experience brings. Pop music, sensations, faits divers, family meals, advertising slogans, news flashes, changing technologies, all are redeemed from banality as language captures the quintessence of how they were lived, always at once part of the social, public world and uniquely, intimately personal. The quotidian texture of living acquires radiance through the 'lumière antérieure' (241) of retrospection; if the book's whole project is to save the ephemeral from oblivion, Ernaux also attributes that saving radiance to everyday oral retellings of the past ('cette lumière qui était déjà là dans les récits des dimanches d'enfance' [241]) and to memory itself. Drabble's Fran is also resiliently, buoyantly alive rather than in death's waiting room, her curiosity and appreciation of life, like Ernaux's, stimulated primarily by 'the real, low-key daily world' (14). In Fran the old woman's sustained agency and creativity takes the form not of writing, but of useful social activities such as improving the lot of her ageing contemporaries, through her work and also by the sharing of food and friendship. Her energy and interest in others' lives is echoed in several of the secondary protagonists who belong equally to what Fran calls the 'dishonourable category' of 'being elderly' (87). Accompanying her friend Jo to the theatre to see Beckett's *Happy Days*, Fran loathes its bitter (if comic) pessimism, going through 'torments of resistance and denial, on her own behalf, on behalf of all the ageing women in the land' (192) at Beckett's monochrome vision of age as only and no more than the imminence of death, as the negation of life's value by its

transience.[12] Unlike Beckett's Winnie, filling the long empty hours with trivialities until the sands of time engulf her, age in both Drabble and Ernaux means accumulation rather than depletion. Fran's friend Jo observes of a woman in her late eighties that her 'old age shines with the aura of a lived life' (122).

Neither text is sentimental about the process of getting old. Death's proximity is rarely forgotten, and Drabble's Fran acknowledges that 'You have to hand it to Beckett, it's a bloody good image, a bloody good metaphor, that pile of sand.' (282). Yet, in both books, the tragic sense of age as simply decline towards extinction is countered by a model of time that transcends chronology, dilating and complicating the linear narrative of each text, as of the individual life course. Rather than disappear behind us, the past continues to exist, suffusing experience of the present.[13] As Ernaux puts it 'le présent et le passé se superposent sans se confondre' (204), so that the last of a series of festive family meals recorded in *Les Années* - this one with Ernaux herself now the elder, the grandparent, the 'plus ancien pilier' (232) – contains within it the family dinners of her childhood and all the intervening gatherings round the table: 'Une fois de plus se construisait la réalité immatérielle des repas de fête' (231). The plot of *The Dark Flood* extends over no more than a few months, but the past informs, shapes and constantly re-surfaces in the present of each ageing character. Fran and her rediscovered childhood friend Teresa enjoy each other's company because together they can explore and piece together early memories: 'the seam of memory is richly loaded, and they explore it, in meeting after meeting, in the time that is left' (148). In both texts, ageing brings an intensified sense of the layered nature of time, and this has implications too for the time beyond the individual lifespan. The children and grandchildren of Ernaux's festive dinner will carry forward the traces of this shared experience, enriched as it is by the texture of long-gone gatherings of which they can have no direct memory, but which form part of the 'durée sans aiguille des repas de fête' (231). The small granddaughter in particular, captured in a photograph as she sits on Ernaux's lap, recalls the narrator herself as a child in the book's early pages, and evokes the chain of transmission carrying forward into the future. Drabble's character Teresa, dying, admires the strength and beauty of her son and is comforted by his vigorous presence in an ongoing present: 'He is in the prime of life. His bodily solidity is a comfort to her. It will carry her along.' (271).

The palimpsestic model of time thus shifts the focus from the painful transience of the individual to the self as one element in a collective, ongoing chain of existence. *Les Années* and *The Dark Flood* share a sense of engaged presence in the realities of the contemporary

world, and thus by extension in the future that will take place after the writers' deaths. In its inclusion of the sunny resorts of the Canary Islands, *The Dark Flood* depicts the privileged mobility of the white Western middle classes but sets this against the desperate travels of refugees, 'would-be immigrants' (65) from Africa, in flight from poverty, oppression and war, left to drown by an increasingly fortified Europe in the hope that the more people drown 'the more immigrants will be discouraged, and the fewer mouths to feed in Europe' (276). Fran's daughter is a militant ecologist, and the flood which, in one of the novel's episodes, blocks the roads and leaves Fran stranded is suspected of being caused by climate change. If the 'fucking disaster' of old age can give Fran moments of despair, she nonetheless 'can't help but be a little interested in what is going on out there (…) It's part of her and she's part of it' (320). Ernaux's project in *Les Années* is to capture 'le passage du temps en elle et hors d'elle' (158), and the external time she chronicles continues into and beyond the writer's present, as the ever shifting technologies of her lifetime mutate into the internet and its 'présent infini', as the bitter legacies of Empire evolve into new forms of racism and oppositional politics, and the consumerism of the 'trente glorieuses' takes on ever more sophisticated forms. Time flows, and the end of the individual is not the end of time.

Representation of the self as part of a collectivity, passing through life as one link in a chain that is both horizontal (connection to contemporaries) and vertical (connection to preceding and following generations) is not the sole prerogative of feminist writers. But feminism has been central to the disputation of that Enlightenment image of Man that casts the human being as a singular, transcendent individual - an image supposedly universal but in fact deeply gendered and racialised – and the resulting dramatization of individual mortality as tragic and absurd. In a fine passage of her book on posthumanism, feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti writes of 'Making friends with the impersonal necessity of death [as] an ethical way of installing oneself in life as a transient, slightly wounded visitor'.[14] The sense of time that the reader experiences in reading both *Les Années* and *The Dark Flood* acknowledges the 'wounding' of knowing we are transient, but counters this with a representation of the self that is powerfully, and in Braidotti's sense ethically, embedded in the collective time of history, across subjects and across generations.

Writing for readers

Relationship is central to both texts, and one vital element of this is the relationship between author/narrator and reader. As I have already suggested, Ernaux and Drabble both enjoy

popular as well as critical success, their work read and appreciated by a large and mainly female public.[15] Their awareness of their readership is evident extra-textually, in interviews and correspondence, but is also distinctly present within the texts themselves. Not only do both offer compellingly counter-normative models of older women, grounded in the commonplace realities of female lives - what Élise Hugueny-Léger terms in Ernaux a 'poétique du quotidien'[16] – but, in both, the narrative voice creates a sense of the author herself addressing the reader. Though few readers will be unaware of the careful construction that produces even the most autobiographical of published texts, Ernaux writes of her life with what certainly seems to be scrupulous honesty, and a tone of sincerity that encourages readerly identification with the 'on' and 'nous' of her narration - as for example in her rendering of the (commonly felt) sense of immortality she felt in her twenties: 'et l'on ne vieillirait pas' (118). Drabble's narrative voice is third-person, and moves between internal focalisation, including the use of *style indirect libre*, and the external perspective of a narrator who directly addresses her readers ('Imagine Claude Stubbs. Imagine him released from Fran's controlling vision of him, if we can' [32], she exhorts us). The sense of being addressed by the author is heightened in both texts by a recurring note of self-reflexivity. Ernaux reflects on the lengthy gestation of the 'roman total' (158) that became *Les Années*, imagined and puzzled over periodically across two decades ('Son souci principal est le choix entre "je" et "elle"' [179]) but only now, impelled by the urgency of advancing age, finally undertaken: 'C'est maintenant qu'elle doit mettre en *forme* par l'écriture son absence future' (237). The reader, already interpellated by the 'on' and 'vous' that make the singular story collective, is also privy to the way the text has come into being. The *Dark Flood* too is intensely self-referential, as Drabble's characteristically interventionist narrator (whose voice she is happy to claim as the author's own: 'they are me, they are not unreliable' she once said of her narrators[17]) comments directly on the manipulations of the plot, sometimes granting her fictional world a reality status that aligns narrator and reader in the same position of incomplete knowledge:

> We don't want to be privy to Ivor's thought about this phenomenon.
>
> Fran Stubbs doesn't mind our looking into her head, indeed she insists that we do so. She's keen on the confessional mode, (…) Ivor is not. (83)

The Dark Flood also reflects on its own project through a mildly tongue-in-cheek *mise-en-abyme* of the novel's quest to reach an informed, pragmatically liveable way of thinking

about age. Josephine teaches a course on poetry and the novel entitled 'On old age and the concept of late style' (101), and Fran's hostile response to Beckett's *Happy Days* ('He'd lived to a good old age, hadn't he. So what had he been on about?' [192]) is another form of intradiegetic reflexion on the book's own enterprise. The reader of Drabble's text, as of Ernaux's, is offered a sense of complicity in the shared endeavour, at once existential and political, of coming to terms with age.

For both Ernaux and Drabble write in a way that acknowledges what Woodward's exhortation implies: that the author, or at least the feminist author, not only writes as a creative artist giving linguistic form to her singular vision of the world, but also writes *to* and *for* readers, providing something that has use-value for others. Recalling the appearance of the determinedly intransitive *nouveau roman* during her student days ('moins l'écriture d'une aventure que l'aventure d'une écriture'[18] according to one of its main theorists), Ernaux recalls a frustrated desire to appreciate this innovative new form: 'on voulait l'aimer', she writes, 'mais on ne trouvait pas en lui assez de secours pour vivre' (*Les Années,* 83). Her own writing, like that of Drabble, recognises that in reading most readers seek not only aesthetic pleasure but also what can be summed up as a 'secours pour vivre'. This communicative, dialogical dimension of the author's role is particularly prominent in women's writing, in many cases sustained over long literary careers. There is a considerable history of long-lived women writers from the late nineteenth century to the present day who, through their fiction, life-writing and regular presence in accessible, widely consumed media, have charted the female life-course on into old age, and carried their readers along with them. Doris Lessing, Elizabeth Taylor, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker are among the many examples in twentieth-century anglophone writing; in France Colette, Beauvoir, Benoîte Groult, Nancy Huston are among those who correspond to this model. The majority of their readers, it is safe to say, are women: research consistently shows that women read a lot more than men, and form a substantial majority of the readership for women authors.[19] Women are also disproportionately responsible for the collective, interactive book culture that surrounds and supports reading: 'live' and online book clubs, literary festivals, correspondence with writers. Thus women are more likely than men to form virtual (or indeed real) relationships with authors, notably women authors, which often persist through the ageing process. Indeed the role of 'chronicler of a generation' (as Drabble described Ernaux), the sense of responsibility to and complicity with readers is an important element of each writer's '*posture*', to employ

Jérôme Meizoz's influential term, in other words their 'manière singulière d'occuper une "position" dans le champ littéraire'.[20]

Meizoz argues, convincingly, that the construction of a public image has become an unavoidable part of a literary career: 'à l'ère du marketing de l'image, tout individu jeté dans l'espace public est poussé à construire et maîtriser l'image qu'il donne de lui'.[21] Marie-Odile André takes up the concept of 'posture' in relation to ageing, examining the choices of the ageing writer faced with asserting their continuing creativity against the stereotype of ageing as decline and *radotage*, some making their late works a resounding affirmation of the literary project that has driven their careers (a 'totalisation quasi testamentaire'), others innovating, setting off on new formal or thematic paths that demonstrate their undiminished literary vigour. However neither Meizoz nor André pay much attention to the difference made to *posture* by the writer's sex. The concept of *posture* tends to assume a combative stance on the part of ageing authors anxious to maintain their singular place in the literary landscape, but in the case of many women authors this is arguably less central than the reaffirmation of their role in readers' lives, as annalists of an era, as interpreters of often occluded female experience, including that of ageing, and as dialogic voices active in the creation of 'new cultural models' of womanhood. As Ernaux once put it in an interview: 'la vraie reconnaissance (…) est dans ce que ça fait aux lecteurs, ce que leur apporte en connaissances ce que j'écris'.[22]

Differences: authorial *posture*

There are marked similarities, then, between the *postures* of these two widely-read authors, in terms of their literary projects as feminist chroniclers of their age and their interlocutory stance in relation to readers. *Les Années* and *The Dark Flood* confirm this resemblance, and share too an unromantic yet affirmative vision of the experience of ageing and the perception of time and mortality that it allows. There are, nonetheless, distinct contrasts between the two texts and the *postures* they imply, some of which point towards cultural attitudes to female ageing that are particularly strong in France.

The first striking contrast is that of tone, evident from the opening pages. Ernaux's tone is elegiac and intense: 'Toutes les images disparaitront (11) […] Tout s'effacera en une seconde' (19). Drabble's, by contrast, is self-mocking, down-to-earth: 'She has often suspected that her last words to herself and in this world will prove to be "You bloody old fool" or perhaps, depending on the mood of the day or the time of the night, "You fucking

idiot"'. (1) - though *The Dark Flood* can also be soberly lyrical, as when Fran looks out on the flooded plain surrounding her daughter's house and 'feels a great tearfulness rising up in her, a grief for all things' (227). Drabble's perspective on ageing encompasses both a serious sadness at life's transience, and a wryly amused acknowledgement of the minor indignities of old age, forgetfulness and the 'bunions and arthritis, moles and blebs, weakening wrists, incipient but not yet treatable cataracts and encroaching weariness' (1). Ernaux, on the other hand, omits the less dignified elements of bodily decline, focusing in her descriptions of the self changed by time on her hands ('aux articulations marquées, presque noueuses' [232]) or the slight emaciation of facial features. Drabble's self-deprecating humour about the physical changes wrought by age is quite absent from Ernaux's representation of later life.

The contrast is between two comparable but also quite different authors, writing in different genres and styles – Ernaux with her autobiographical focus and spare, intense 'écriture plate',[23] Drabble with her multi-tonal, expansive narrative realism. Though, as I argued above, each writer's chosen genre reflects the dominant literary trend of their respective nations, it would be excessive to make each stand for their national culture. Nonetheless, their contrasting treatments of the ageing female body are interesting in the light of broader differences between France and Britain. Ernaux's *posture*, both within and beyond this text, is that of a proudly sexual woman, whose erotic and romantic relationships weave throughout the story of her life, the series of lovers culminating in the one present at the end of *Les Années* who has passed from the 'statut d'amant caché à celui de compagnon stable, admissible dans les réunions familiales' [228]. The lovers act, as Shirley Jordan puts it, as 'guarantor(s) of her desirability',[24] and to be desired is essential to her sense of identity and irreplaceable by other types of emotional bond: 'L'insuffisance du lien maternel, la nécessité pour elle d'avoir un amant, une intimité avec quelqu'un, que réalise l'acte sexuel' (202). Some marks of age (the 'bunions and arthritis, moles and blebs') are hard to assimilate into the culturally potent image of the desirable female body. Drabble's women, on the other hand, may remember their sexual careers fondly, valuing the continuity of identity between puberty and old age - Fran feels herself to be 'still the same woman, she who had once been a bleeding girl' (20) - but they do so without regret or desire. Sex has little place in their lives or in the novel, as it has little place in the *posture* of the older Drabble, whereas Ernaux remains a woman who writes explicitly, passionately about female sexuality and who, for a much wider general public than that reached by Drabble, embodies the elegant, sexually assured older woman.

The two authors' contrasting treatment of sexuality – in Ernaux, central to identity throughout the life course, in Drabble warmly remembered but of marginal interest in old age – to some extent reflects a broad difference in national cultures: the erotic dimension of experience is still treated more openly and valued more highly in France than in more puritanical Britain. French writers are also likely to be more aware of the public image they project because literature and writers continue, at least so far, to hold a more prominent place in French culture than British: the existence of the State sponsored *Conseil National du Livre*, the greater resilience of independent bookshops, the weekly book programme *La Grande Librairie* on prime time television, all attest to this. Writers in France are more in the public eye hence more aware of their *posture*, whereas in Britain they are less present in mainstream media, hence less groomed by agents and publishers to produce a distinctive and appealing *posture*, with – especially in the case of women – the attendant emphasis on appearance and style. But beyond broad cultural differences in the importance attributed to sex and to literature, there is a pertinent (albeit relative rather than absolute) difference in normative gender coding between the two national cultures. As the French wing of the #MeToo movement has recently emphasised and challenged, French culture carries a strong attachment to the notion of heterosexual difference and seduction as central to the quality of human relations: in the case of women writers there seems to be a powerful imperative to perform femininity to the end in a way that acknowledges the codes of desire and seduction. The premium placed on being desirably 'feminine' as one ages is (arguably) greater in France than in Britain.[25]

Ernaux's assertion of the sexuality of older women, her refusal to go gentle into postmenopausal invisibility, has long been a part of her brave and combative literary project, through *Passion simple* (1992), *L'Usage de la photo* (2005), and on to *Le Jeune Homme* (published in 2022 though dated 1998-2000), each of which foregrounds a middle-aged woman's intensely erotic passion for a younger man.[26] *Les Années* confirms the powerful image of the sexual, desiring older woman who 'triomphe de la mort par l'amour et l'érotisme' (235). Ernaux's modelling of age challenges pervasive and normative assumptions about the de-sexualised nature of older women (as opposed to similarly aged men), and offers her readers an empowering affirmation of their sexual identity. However, Ernaux's sustained emphasis on ageing women as the subjects and objects of desire also excludes dimensions of the ageing process that emerge in Drabble's book as positive and indeed enriching. In *The Dark Flood*, the ebbing of the heterosexual bond – all the main

female protagonists are single, widowed or divorced – enables the expansion of other types of relationship, notably friendship, between women but also between women and men. Friendship is largely absent from *Les Années* which asserts, rather, the centrality of heterosexual love and desire to identity, even to the end of life. Drabble's Fran finds that as she ages bonds with her own, adult children and with children more generally become a source of intense interest and sometimes joy, whereas for Ernaux's 'elle', maternal love is mingled with incredulity that she can be the mother of adult men ('Comment se fait-il que ces hommes soient ses enfants? [202]) and disbelief at finding herself in a role so incompatible with her sense of self: 'ne parvenant pas à réaliser qu'on était grand-parent' (230). As well as finding that age enhances her pleasure in friendship and in children, Fran enjoys the relative invisibility conferred by age, and the shifting of inwardly focused subjectivity towards observation and appreciation of the lives of others - for example watching her fellow diners in the Premier Inn and 'tak(ing) in and honour(ing) the energy and care and love that have gone into this holiday meal' (322). By contrast, despite the emphasis on the self as 'transpersonal', the embodied, singular person of the author asserts its presence and visibility throughout *Les Années,* not least through the device of describing a photo from each stage of her life. The sustained sexuality of Ernaux's older woman challenges the stereotypes of age, but also casts erotic appeal and agency as inseparable from a female sense of self. It is hard in most cultures to imagine female identity outside the parameters of heterosexual desire; it is perhaps (still) particularly hard in France.

Conclusion

Selfhood, as we pass through the stages of life, is constituted in a multiplicity of ways, but one of these is certainly representation in literature and other media, which provide what Jean-Marie Schaeffer calls 'des scénarios d'action, des constellations émotives et éthiques (...) susceptibles d'être intériorisés par immersion'.[27] For many women in particular, in contemporary France and Britain, reading offers one source for imagining and shaping identity: it can provide, in Ernaux's words, a 'secours pour vivre'. *Les Années* and *The Dark Flood* are very different books in terms of genre, tone and the extent to which they make heterosexual bonds central to the identity of their ageing female protagonists – differences that are both a part of each writer's individual *posture*, and are shaped by the distinct cultural contexts of their respective countries. Setting the two books together, though, reveals marked similarities in the way that each deals with ageing. In these texts, both Ernaux and Drabble continue a lifetime's project of writing to and for readers, exploring and modelling the female

life-course through the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and now, in these late works, modelling how ageing can be thought and lived. Each embeds in the text itself an address to readers that acknowledges complicity in the shared project of dealing with age. Each maintains a tension between lament for the approaching end of life, and robust refutation of restrictive images of the old woman as obsolete or degraded, asserting performatively the authors' own undiminished creativity and affirming the value of a life fully lived to the end. And in a way that aligns both books with a recurring theme in women writers (George Sand, Colette, Alice Walker, Nancy Huston – to name only a few), and opposes a predominantly masculine philosophy that Drabble evokes through Beckett's plays in *The Dark Flood*, and Nancy Huston sums up as 'une certaine conception philosophique, hautaine et solitaire, de l'individu',[28] both texts counter the pain of knowing that our life will soon end with a model of time as a layered continuum, and of identity as inextricably entwined, horizontally and vertically, with the lives of others.

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[1] Kathleen Woodward, 'Inventing Generational Models. Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Literature', in *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p.155.

[2] Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: Gallimard1976), II, p. 462.

[3] See for example, in France, Benoîte Groult's 2006 novel *La Touche étoile* (Paris: Grasset) and the later sections of her 2008 autobiography *Mon évasion* (Paris: Grasset); Martine Boyer-Weinmann's *Vieillir, dit-elle. Une anthropologie littéraire de l'âge* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2013). English language writing offers a considerable body of recent feminist writing on age, including for example Lynne Segal's *Out of Time: the Pleasures and Perils of Ageing* (London: Verso, 2013). French Studies has also seen some recent analysis of ageing in women's writing, including my discussion of Colette and other writers in 'Dealing with what is dealt: feminists and ageing' in *Women, Genre and Circumstance: essays in memory of Elizabeth Fallaize,* ed. by Margaret Atack, Diana Holmes, Diana Knight and Judith Still (London: Legenda 2012), pp. 123-37 and '"The open sea but not the wilderness": Light and Clarity in the Late Work of Colette and Agnes Varda', in *Lucidity – Essays in Honour of Alison Finch,* ed. by Ian James and Emma Wilson (London: Legenda 2016), pp. 169-180. See

too Shirley Jordan's 'Writing age: Annie Ernaux's *Les Années*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 47, Issue 2, 1 April 2011, pp.138–149.

[4] Ernaux's first publication was a novel *Les Armoires vides* (Paris: Gallimard,1974); Drabble preceded her by a decade, publishing *A Summer Birdcage* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson) in 1963. The decades preceding the emergence of Second Wave feminism saw some advances for women in both France and Britain, but these were countered by a powerfully conservative ideology of gender that the Women's Liberation movement would identify and challenge.

[5] Marie-Odile André, *Pour une sociopoétique du vieillissement littéraire Figures du vieil escargot* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2015), p.12.

[6] Fabrice Thumurel, *Annie Ernaux. Une oeuvre de l'entre-deux* (Arras: Arras Presses Université), p.18.

[7] Nabila Hassani, 'L'écriture autobiographique dans Fritna de Gisèle Halimi: L'intime et l'extime', *Synergies* Algérie n° 11 – 2010, pp. 179-189, p. 180.

[8] Annie Ernaux, «Vers un je transpersonnel » in *Recherches Interdisciplinaires sur les Textes Modernes* (R.I.T.M.), Cahier nº 6, Université de Nanterre, 1993, pp. 219-22.

[9] Contemporary examples of what could be called postmodern narrative realism in Britain include the fiction of Kate Atkinson, Bernadine Evaristo, Ian McEwan, Zadie Smith.

[10] Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force des choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p.686.

[11] Interview (unattributed) 'Annie Ernaux une femme déplacée', *Le Matricule des anges*, November 2014, p.27.

[12] Nancy Huston, whilst acknowledging her 'faible pour Sam Beckett', includes him as one of her 'professeurs de désespoir' whose tragic pessimism arises from an inability to see each human being as anything other than an 'entité inamovible et close', or to recognise in life 'la circulation, les liens mouvants, l'échange, la transmission' (*Professeurs de désespoir* [Paris: Actes Sud, 2004], p.90). Her 'take' on Beckett is very close to Drabble's.

[13] In her late writing, in contrast to the horror of encroaching age she had expressed in *La Force de l'Âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), Beauvoir registers a similar awareness of present experience enriched by layers of accrued memory: 'le passé m'investit', she writes in *Tout Compte fait* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972, p.49), and she notes the pleasure this brings – 'Revoir: au sourire de la nouveauté, mêler la douceur fanée du souvenir; dans le passé ressuscité, sertir l'éclat doré des découvertes' (p.294).

[14] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (London: Polity Press, 2013), p.132.

[15] Both writers are of course read by male as well as female readers, but it is well established that (a) women make up the majority of novel readers (b) women show a marked preference for books by women authors (see for example the 2014 Goodreads survey https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/25/readers-prefer-authors-own-sex-goodreads-survey) and (c) it is mainly women who correspond with these authors and discuss their work in bookclubs. See Helen Taylor's 2019 *Why Women Read Fiction. The Stories of our Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). Lyn Thomas's work on Ernaux (*Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer and her Audience* [Oxford: Berg, 1999]) examines her extensive correspondence with readers. See also note 19 below.

[16] Élise Hugueny-Léger, *Annie Ernaux, une poétique de la transgression* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), p.82.

[17] Interview cited in Glenda Leeming, *Margaret Drabble* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), p.15.

[18] Jean Ricardou, *Problèmes du nouveau roman* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1967), p. 111).

[19] Statistics show this clearly: see https://centrenationaldulivre.fr/donnees-cles/les-francais-et-la-lecture-en-2019 for France; Helen Taylor in *Why Women Read Fiction* reports that overall sales for fiction and e-books in the UK are 63% female to 37% male. Despite the slow progress towards diversity in publishing (for the UK see https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Larger-font-Writing-the-Future-Black-and-Asian-Writers-and-Publishers-in-the-UK-Market-Place.pdf), this seems to hold broadly true across class and ethnicity.

[20]Jérôme Meizoz**,** *Postures littéraires. Mises en scène modernes de l'auteur* (Paris: Éditions Slatkine, 2007), p. 18.

[21] Meizoz**.,** p. 15.

[22] 'Annie Ernaux une femme déplacée', *Le Matricule des anges*, November 2014, p.24.

[23] Often used to describe Ernaux's characteristic style, the term was first coined by Ernaux herself in *La Place* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), p.24.

[24] Shirley Jordan, writing on *L'Usage de la photo* in 'Writing Age', p. 143.

[25] Perhaps in part due to the relative non-visibility of writers in British culture, it is easy to think of women authors whose *posture* is distinctly feminine but non-sexualised, for example Hilary Mantel, Bernadine Evaristo, Maggie O'Farrell. There are also examples of French authors who resist a sexualised image (Amélie Nothomb, Virginie Despentes) but this resistance to the norm tends to be a deliberate part of their *posture* and thus to acknowledge the strength of normative expectations.

[26] Though the dates given on the final page situate the affair recounted in the final years of the twentieth century, Ernaux's publication of this text in 2022 re-affirms the centrality of sexuality to the author's life, persona and creativity. 'Souvent j'ai fait l'amour pour m'obliger à écrire' (*Le Jeune Homme* [Paris : Gallimard, 2022], p.11). 'Il me semblait que je ne m'étais jamais levée d'un lit, le même depuis mes dix-huit ans, mais dans des lieux différents, avec des hommes différents et indiscernables les uns des autres' (p.14).

[27] Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction?* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), p.47.

[28] Nancy Huston, *Professeurs de désespoir*, p.166.