Chapter 5

Annie Ernaux’s Diaries of the Outside

Flâneuse, Transfuge de Classe, Sympathetic User

The flâneur is still on the threshold, of the city as of the bourgeois class. Neither has yet engulfed him; in neither is he at home.

—Walter Benjamin, “Baudelaire, or the Streets of Paris”

Well-known for an extended family ethnography evoking the lives of her petit-bourgeois parents from the perspective of the highly educated, successful writer she became, over the course of almost fifteen years Annie Ernaux kept an unusual diary, published as Journal du dehors (1993) and La vie extérieure (1999). Speaking of her urge, after moving to the new town of Cergy-Pontoise, “to transcribe scenes, words, gestures of strangers one never meets again, graffiti no sooner scribbled on walls than erased,” she conceived her project as “an attempt to convey the reality of an epoch—that acute yet indefinable feeling of modernity associated with a new town—through a series of snapshots of everyday life” (JD, 8). This early passage situates her in a long tradition of writers keen on capturing the specificity of modern urban experience: more than a century after Baudelaire, she sees herself no longer as a “painter of modern life,” but as the author of a “photographic writing of the real” from which her subjectivity should be as if evacuated. At first sight, the challenges facing such a project are radically different from similar endeavors a century before: they are not about coping with the intense nervous stimulation of the metropolitan personality, “the maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish.” Rather, if we take for granted the views of Henri Lefebvre or Guy Debord, the villes nouvelles present the inhabitant with the prospect of “unredeemable boredom,” an effect of the pure functionalism that governed their planning: “historicity has disappeared,” notes Lefebvre, “the historic city too only survives as a vague regret, as something quaint and picturesque or as commercialized, organized trade value for sightseers.” Indeed, some early entries in Ernaux’s diary, in which she records the schizophrenic
experience of living without attachments, echo such views: “To find myself in a place suddenly sprung up from nowhere, a place bereft of memories, where the buildings are scattered over a huge area, a place with undefined boundaries, proved to be an overwhelming experience” (JD, 7). The diary is instrumental in mapping out a place with “no density, just shadows and light . . . the white and remote dream of a schizophrenic” (JD, 41), a place that, twelve years after moving in it, eludes her still: “I still don’t know what it looks like. I am unable to describe it, unaware where it begins or ends” (JD, 64). The lack of bearings is compounded by the experience of losing her mother to Alzheimer’s disease, a loss that puts a personal spin on Debord’s claim that in the villes nouvelles, temporality becomes a category of space. During the progressive loss of her connection to the past embodied by her mother, Ernaux directs her attention to the improvised sociality of everyday spaces—the street, the shopping mall, the metro—of which she becomes the attentive observer: a flâneuse.5

Other readers see in Ernaux a female counterpart to the type that Benjamin consecrated in his readings of Baudelaire. Janet Wolff argues that in Baudelaire’s poems, female city dwellers such as the prostitute, the widow, the old lady, the lesbian, the murder victim, and the passing unknown woman do appear, but “none of these women meet the poet as his equal. They are subjects of his gaze, objects of his ‘botanizing.’ ”6 Indeed, a traditional separation of the private and the public that relegates women to the domestic sphere would confirm the category of the flâneur as exclusively male, with some notable exceptions that only reinforce the rule.7 The nearest Baudelaire comes to a direct encounter with a woman who is not either marginal or debased is in the poem “À une passante,” about which Benjamin famously said: “The delight of the city-dweller is love—not at first sight, but at last sight.”8 What is missing, Wolff concludes, is “any account of life outside the public realm, of the experience of ‘the modern’ in its private manifestations, and also of the very different nature of the experience of those women who did appear in the public arena: a poem written by ‘la femme passante’ about her encounter with Baudelaire, perhaps.”9

In Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity, however, Deborah Parsons shows that in the Paris and London of 1880–1940, women’s relationship with the urban space was actually highly diverse, as the work of writers like Virginia Woolf, Amy Levy, Dorothy Richardson, Jean Rhys, Janet Flanner, Djuna Barnes, Anaïs Nin, Rosamond Lehmann, and Elizabeth Bowen suggests; in her postscript, Parsons turns to Doris Lessing’s character Martha Quest, opening up possibilities for postwar women to inhabit, explore, and identify in creative ways with the public spaces of the modern metropolis.10 Responding directly to Wolff, Parsons establishes “that women’s fiction does provide such accounts [of life outside the public realm], and that in the modern city of multiplicity, reflection, and indistinction, la femme passante is herself a flâneuse, just as the ‘man of the crowd’
is also a *flâneur*." Is there any notable difference between the two? Parsons believes so, pointing out that, while the *flâneur* keeps his distance from the crowd, even as he knows himself colored by it (as Benjamin puts it in *Illuminations*), female walkers tend to immerse themselves in the crowd, or in any case have a more porous rapport with it. Virginia Woolf’s essay “Street Haunting” is an illustrative example: her narrator empathizes “to the point of identification with strangers glimpsed in passing in the city, and become[s] ‘an enormous eye’ that can ‘put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others.’”

True to her experience of everyday life, Annie Ernaux does not aestheticize it by turning it into a poem (as in Baudelaire’s “À une passante”), preferring instead uneven diary entries that capture various moments and encounters in their raw reality. Situated in the tradition outlined by Parsons, Ernaux’s work sheds an ironic light on Lefebvre’s claim that women, “because of their position in everyday life—which is specifically part of everyday life and modernity—are incapable of understanding it.” Her diaries reflect a most intimate understanding of the everyday, which she experiences not with the detached, critical distance of a theorist, but with the ambivalence of a self-conscious user. This ambivalence, it bears noting, is an effect of her social position as a *transfuge de classe*. In “Baudelaire, or the Streets of Paris,” Benjamin already insists that “the *flâneur* is still on the threshold, of the city as of the bourgeois class. Neither has yet engulfed him; in neither is he at home. He seeks refuge in the crowd.” Ernaux, then, is in a precarious position vis-à-vis the already marginal figure of the *flâneur*. Living in a *ville nouvelle*, describing what she sees in the metro, RER, and underground stations, she is definitely on the threshold of the city; but she is also someone who moves between social classes and thus has a perspective across a social threshold—the double view afforded by her knowledge of her family’s social class and by her familiarity with the upper middle class, to which she had access through education and marriage. Whereas the *flâneur* feels restless both in the city and among the bourgeois, Ernaux feels uncomfortable in a city that is no longer a historical city, but a *ville nouvelle*, and in a class which she can neither fully embrace nor reject, but which she confronts, within herself, with mental habits and references that characterize her original social milieu—in the terms proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, whose sociological analyses played a major role in Ernaux’s intellectual life, with an *habitus clivé*.

The whole project of the family ethnography, Ernaux has explained in interviews, was “authorized” by the publication of *Distinction*, which validated her experience by providing tools for examining and bringing it to light: indeed, “not just the authorization, more than that, the injunction to write about all that, dare not only think, but dare to write.” This experience of social dislocation, which involves a split self and the negotiation between contradictory experiences and feelings, requires a particular kind of writing that Ernaux calls “une écriture de la distance” (a writing of distance):
Through the analysis of painful sensations, I have come to the certainty that the only viable narrative position was to adopt a “writing of distance” corresponding to my situation: distance from my parents, distance between my old and my current self, distance between the past and the present, between the original culture and the one that enables me to write. This phrase, “writing of distance” designated to my mind both the style, the voice, deprived of affective markers, and the method.18

Distance from self and others; distance both as affective detachment with regard to style, and as a method of approaching her subject; with the hindsight, Ernaux continues, she came close to what she later discovered Bourdieu called in his sociological work an “objectifying distance [la distance objetivante].”19 A passage she borrows from his Méditations pascaliennes could serve as an epigraph (a second one, after the one from Rousseau) to her diaries: “I shall speak very little about myself, the singular self, in any case, that Pascal calls ‘hateful.’ And if I nonetheless never cease to speak about myself, it will be the impersonal self that the most personal confessions pass over in silence, or refuse, on account of its very impersonality.”20 Similar to Adorno in Minima Moralia, the real subject of interest is here that of social substantiality, which Ernaux seeks in her encounters with others. Despite her original intention to be an objective observer, her selection of scenes and incidents, as well as her reactions to them, are clearly determined by her story of social mobility. Diary entries featuring working-class people, beggars, petty humiliations of disempowered individuals, commuters who ignore or avoid looking at the poor, are informed by a solidarity with and sympathy for the less privileged: she is certainly not “dépaysée” (uprooted, alienated) in the metro, as she reports historian Jacques LeGoff as saying (JD, 41), and there is no condescension in her writing, such as she sees in President Jacques Chirac’s formulation “les petites gens” (the little people), broadcast on television (JD, 35).

Yet Ernaux, although unambiguously critical, is not a moralist. As Benjamin already noted about the flâneur, his “botanizing on the asphalt” precludes the moralistic stance that Engels, for instance, took on the busy streets of London.21 By contrast, for a Parisian flâneur, Benjamin muses, “to move in this crowd was natural. . . . No matter how great the distance that an individual cared to keep from it, he still was colored by it and, unlike Engels, was not able to view it from without."22 One must amend the last sentence when referring to Ernaux: as a transfuge de classe, she is colored by the others, but, as an educated woman empowered by her reading of Bourdieu, she can also view it from without. Her detailed, insightful view of the variegated forms of experience that characterize urban life in the late 1980s and 1990s23 are often in agreement with Lefebvre’s and Debord’s critique of consumption, manipulation, control, illusions of rationality, separation,
and abstraction. But her awareness of the multitude of ways of living (such as Perec playfully illustrated in *La vie mode d’emploi*), of the ingenuity with which individuals negotiate their identities and lifestyles, does not lead her to celebrate the *inventiveness of the quotidien*, like Benjamin (following certain readings) or de Certeau; the latter’s jubilant “le quotidien s’invente avec mille façons de braconner” (the everyday invents itself in thousands ways of poaching)—echoing Benjamin’s politics of the residual, perhaps the last gesture of a utopian consciousness—speaks to his faith, which she does not share indiscriminately, in the resourcefulness of “users” of systems to find their own original, even subversive, ways of poaching that which is publicly shared. Her aims also differ from those of Lefebvre, who wanted to apply a revolutionary politics to the everyday, and her attitude—from his condescension vis-à-vis (what he saw as) pathetic aspirations toward a bourgeois lifestyle: Ernaux acknowledges, both in herself and in others, the vulnerability, ambiguity of desire, deprivation, insecurity—in other words, the socially marked affects—that tinge the self-presentation, behavior, and decisions made in the sphere of the everyday; also, the occasional cynicism, avoidance of others, or reactions that do not cohere with one’s beliefs.

Ernaux’s unique position as a flâneuse and *transfuge de classe*, which combines a critical awareness and a user’s ambivalence, affords insight into the complex ways in which individuals relate to systems. Departing from both Lefebvre and de Certeau, and echoing Bourdieu, she notices, for instance, how symbolic violence operates in the social sphere, with many of the victims aware of it “like something in [their] flesh and blood [comme une chose de chair et de sang].” By recognizing her own ambivalence and vulnerability, and by acknowledging that other people evoke in her episodes from her past, she intimates a continuum of humanity that links her to the lives of others. “Que faire de notre vulnérabilité?” (What to do about/with our vulnerability?) asks Guillaume le Blanc in a recent book that resonates with Ernaux’s position. As we shall see in what follows, she answers by turning shared vulnerability into a platform for restoring the excluded their humanity; and this can only happen, her diaries suggest, by narrating their lives and thus by looking at them (again) as persons worthy of empathy and consideration.
replaced by a sustained attention to the lives of other people. The project, however, is hardly about measuring herself against them; rather, her position as a flâneuse, *transfuge de classe*, and “user” of the everyday uniquely qualifies her to chronicle other lives sympathetically, yet with a critical eye. Most importantly, she points to the various narratives that frame our everyday experiences, including her own, which often create contradictory impulses, ambivalence, desires, or unresolved confusion. *Distantiality*, then, or that all-too-human tendency to compare one’s life with the lives of others, becomes a more complex affair as soon as, rather than look at the lives of others “from the corner of the eye,” one takes a step back to really look, with that “enormous eye” that Woolf speaks of. A few diary entries convey the many uses to which such distantiality can be put and point us unmistakably to what Ernaux chooses to do in her diary of the outside.

*Journal du dehors*, it bears noting, does include a few entries about Paris, one of which casts light on the figure of the flâneuse. In this fragment, Ernaux engages in a stroll in the footsteps of a mythical figure, Breton’s Nadja, seeking to revive the practice of surrealist *dérive*: “tapping into the unrealized possibilities harboured by the ordinary life we lead rather than rejecting it for another life,” not “losing one’s reason, but wanting what reason made them lose” and therefore rejecting “all fixed canons of taste, logic, and representation,” championing instead “hysteria, dreams, the irrational, chance, ‘amour fou,’ ‘humour noir,’ revolution, and convulsive beauty.”27 How would such ideals fare at the end of the twentieth century? Ernaux’s reenactment of Nadja’s stroll offers an ambiguous answer:

Then I turned into the Boulevard Magenta, looking for number 106, Hôtel de Suède, which used to be called the Sphinx Hôtel. The façade was sheathed in a tarpaulin; the whole of the interior was being demolished. One of the workers leaned out of a window; he looked at me with amusement and said something to the others. I was standing motionless on the opposite sidewalk, gazing up at the hotel (which they may be converting into private apartments). He thought I was returning to a place that held memories for me, as a lover or a whore. In fact I am reliving the memories of another woman, Nadja, the Nadja associated with André Breton, who lived in this hotel around 1927. Displayed in the window where I was standing were outmoded pairs of shoes, of a single color, black, and slippers, also black. It looked like a store for mourning shoes or ecclesiastical footwear. I continued down the Boulevard Magenta and turned into a small alleyway, the Ruelle de la Ferme-Saint-Lazare; it was deserted. A man was sitting on his doorstep. Bloody remains soiled the cobblestones. Then I turned back into the Rue La Fayette and walked on until I got to the café “La Nouvelle France,” with its ancient-looking curtains. Framed in the entrance, a boy was waving to an Eurasian girl on the
Annie Ernaux’s Diaries of the Outside

other side of the street. I continued to follow in Nadja’s footsteps in the sort of daze that gives one the impression of an intense life. (JD, 70–71, translation modified)

Ernaux’s attempt to conjure the memory of Nadja proves more elusive than the woman portrayed in Breton’s novel. Her mystery is irretrievable from the debris of the Sphinx Hotel, a building that appears to be efficiently transformed from a space of lightness, travel, or promiscuity into one of settled routine; the old-fashioned shoes mourn vanished times, the bloody residue adds an uncanny touch to a reality that advertises its novelty (“la Nouvelle France”), in spite of the ancient-looking curtains that frame it. And is the man sitting on his doorstep, in this surrealist film, Benjamin himself? Ernaux plays a double game here: she mimics nostalgically a surrealist engagement with the real, while also denouncing the superficiality and anachronism of her gesture. Why, she asks in a different entry, does she look for the signs of literature in real life? And why cling to the past, in an age no longer committed to the historical?

As Lefebvre put it, in the contemporary age, history can only be a vague regret—or perhaps a parody? Certain entries hint at this possibility, juxtaposing texts or cultural references that enter in a subversive rapport with one another: Ernaux notes, for instance, that on the walls of a classroom at Nanterre University where a professor teaches Proust lingers, ironically, the memory of 1968 slogans:

Unrestricted pleasure
Free sexuality
Free love
Student you’re sleeping
You’re wasting your life
Let’s impose economic equality

(JD, 58, translation modified)

And in a different register, she points out two coexisting modes of belief and of writing, a capitalist one that gambles on rational efficiency, and an archaic one that taps into the irrational:

A free sheet with classifieds is slipped into my mailbox every week. “Professor solo-drama. The great marabout is among us at last. He offers to solve all our problems: unhappy love life, loss of affection, adultery, spells, poor academic results, bad sporting performances, departure of the loved one. If you want to be happy, don’t waste any time: come and see me. Quick, professional service. Results guaranteed. 131B, Avenue de Clichy. 3rd floor. Right-hand door.” (The photograph in the box shows a good-looking African.) In a few
lines, a panorama of man’s desires, a narrative written in the third person, then in the first. A character with a mysterious identity—a sage, maybe a magician—whose name conjures up poetry and drama. Two modes of writing, relying on psychology and marketing respectively. A sample of fiction. (JD, 26–27)

Ernaux’s comment is insightful, if elliptical and seemingly offhand: she traces a connection between the “panorama of man’s desires” and “fiction,” a diagnosis that situates her response within more ambiguous parameters than Lefebvre’s critical reaction to the social aspect foregrounded by the classifieds she quotes here. Here is Lefebvre’s unequivocal unveiling of the paradox of irrationality that thrives in everyday life:

If we probe into the private lives of the members of this society we find that they are, in many cases, fortune-tellers, witches, quacks, star-gazers . . . Indeed, one has only to read the papers; it is as though people had nothing in their daily lives to give them a meaning, a direction, apart from publicity, so they fall back on magic and witchcraft. Perhaps they hope in this roundabout way to adapt their desires, discover and orientate them. Thus the rationality of economism and technicity produces its opposite as their “structural” complement and reveals its limitations as restricted rationalism and irrationalism pervade everyday life, confront and reflect one another.28

Although Ernaux would partially agree with Lefebvre’s critique, she is less dismissive of the desire for meaning, for a direction. A diary entry, for instance, engages the register of superstition, Ernaux looking at herself perform the role of a “featherbrained schoolgirl”: “I bought a copy of Marie-Claire at the station in the New Town. This month’s horoscope: ‘You will meet a wonderful man.’ Throughout the day I wondered several times if the man I was talking to was the one they meant” (JD, 17, translation modified). This passage does not provide any indication of a possibly ironic performance of the role in which the horoscope casts her: there seems to be no critical self-awareness. But the aside that follows, in brackets, draws attention to a gap between an acceptable public stance (a rational, therefore unambiguously critical approach to the everyday, à la Lefebvre) and the more complex ways in which one chooses to experience—in the mode of performance—the everyday:

(By choosing to write in the first person, I am laying myself open to criticism, which would not have been the case had I written “she wondered if the man she was talking to was the one they meant.” The third person—he/she—is always somebody else, free to do whatever they choose. “I” refers to oneself, the reader, and it is inconceivable,
or unthinkable, for me to read my own horoscope and behave like some mushy schoolgirl. “I” shames the reader.) \( JD, 17 \)

By opening a parenthesis in her diary, Ernaux sheds light on a niche in the public discourse that bans the acknowledgment of superstition: as a writer who addresses herself to a reader, she is not “supposed” to confess that she indulged the empty fantasies encouraged by “la presse feminine.”\(^{29}\) But what if, as a “user” of public systems, as de Certeau might put it, the feminine press being one such system, she \textit{chose} to behave like a \textit{midinette}, perhaps because it amuses her, or because it reminds her of a youthful naïveté with which she might have read the horoscope as a schoolgirl, or because she finds it ironic that the possibility of running into “un homme merveilleux” would be an irruption of the miraculous (“le merveilleux,” just as for the surrealists) in her life? Ernaux brings to light here the risks she is aware to be courting by writing such an unusual diary: words like “\textit{je m’expose}” and “\textit{inadmissible}” suggest that a photographic transcription of everyday occurrences, which involve various self-performances, must by necessity relinquish the benefits of the anonymity which protects one in everyday life. The third person of fiction is also the deixis of anonymous public everyday existence, which the use of the first person, one that also interpellates the reader, disrupts. With this aside, she steps out of what might appear as innocuous transcription of random occurrences: the very choice of aspects that she writes about, as well as their juxtaposition, adds to her scattered metacommentaries.

The entry I have just discussed, for instance, follows after the evocation of a shopping experience, or rather, it turns out in the last sentence, the debunking of the fictions and ideologies that determine and shape mass consumption:

\begin{quote}
For ages now, at La Samaritaine, in the Trois-Fontaines shopping mall, we have been hearing a man’s voice urging us to buy up the whole store in various tones: quizzical, merry, threatening, playful: “It will soon be winter; you’ll be needing thick, warm gloves and scarves. Come and see our new range of woolen accessories,” or “Madame, has it ever occurred to you that the virtues of a perfect hostess are reflected in the choice of her tableware? In our china department . . .”

A young, coaxing voice. Today the man belonging to that voice was surrounded by toys, a microphone in one hand. He’s a redhead, half-bald, with huge, thick spectacles and small, greasy hands. \( JD, 16–17, \)
\end{quote}

This entry reads like a nod to Benjamin’s remark that “the department store puts even \textit{flânerie} to use for commodity circulation. The department store is the \textit{flâneur}’s last practical joke.”\(^{30}\) It is the joke of consumer capitalism that Ernaux swiftly spells out in this “temple of frenetic consumption” \( \text{(Debord),} \) in the disconnect between the oracular, chameleonic voice attaching urgency
to the satisfaction of the customers’ presumed needs and the unglamorous person who has become only its function. If in this case Ernaux points to the man’s alienation from his own voice—he has become “l’homme de la voix,” in a preposterous relation of ownership—and to the insidious ways the desires of consumers are made to coincide with “buying the whole store,” by contrast, in other instances she dwells on the subtle ways in which one’s personal history, anxieties, precarious social identity, and deprivations of various sorts determine one’s relationship to things, to the very idea of ownership. “Vague desire for clothes,” she acknowledges at a certain point: “I see myself dressed in a twirling of coats and blouses. . . . I succumb to a strange condition in which I want all sorts of clothes for myself, regardless of shape or color, in which I am seized with an overriding compulsion to buy a coat or a handbag” (JD, 28, 48), only to walk out into the street, relieved that she has left the pressure to get something behind. Yet later she shows understanding for a woman in the metro who admires the things she has just bought: “It’s a common enough scene: happiness at possessing something beautiful, at seeing one’s longing for beauty satisfied. Our relationship to things is so moving” (JD, 77–78).

One can imagine a different situation where Ernaux might wonder why the woman unpacks her purchase in public, the way she notices, at the butcher’s, on the street, in the metro, that certain conversations or gestures are meant for “the gallery”—that is, for the other people present, as a form of what Erving Goffman called “impression management.”31 And yet not all of these entries sound ironic because she sees such behaviors as part of a desire to take the measure of one’s life under the gaze of others, in imaginary relationship to their existences. This brings us back to Heidegger’s distantiality, of which Ernaux offers an eloquent illustration in the following entry:

A man is questioning a young woman on the train to Paris: “How many hours a week do you work?” “What time do you start work?” “Can you choose when you take your vacation?” We all need to assess the advantages and constraints of a profession, the material side of life. Not out of harmless curiosity, or to make polite conversation, but to learn about other people’s lives so that we can learn about our own life or the life we might have chosen. (JD, 49)

Ernaux is no stranger to the selfish reasons or perfunctory politeness that can motivate one’s interest in other people’s lives; and yet she does not see distantiality as the purely negative phenomenon that Heidegger sees as detrimental to being-with-others: on one hand, she understands its necessary dimension (“assessing . . . the material side of life”); on the other, her own focus on other people’s lives shows that one’s reasons and aims can be vastly different. Thus as a transfuge de classe, she tends to look not down on, but down at individuals whose lives she might have had. She could have been, occasionally
she tells herself, the cashier that no one cares about beyond the commercial transaction, in which she is “only a hand that is permitted no mistakes”; had she been very poor, an entry rhetorically pursues, would she have preferred to be a beggar, or a prostitute? This extreme form of identification introduces the aspect where she most disagrees with theorists of everyday life like Benjamin and de Certeau, who emphasize the disruptive, possibly revolutionary, potential of the everyday; Ernaux, for her part, looks at the excluded and sees shared vulnerability, as well as the possibility for us to expand the notion of humanity we live by. It is this larger aim of Ernaux’s writing that qualifies—to the point of contradicting—Heidegger’s view of “distantiality”: asking questions about other people’s lives is not simply about examining one’s relation to a social script (that attaches social and cultural capital, for example, to various activities and accomplishments, establishing hierarchies of what counts as success); it can be an opportunity for comparison (one’s own life with other people’s lives) with the purpose of learning “about our own life or the life we might have chosen”—in other words, a way to realize one’s own highest potential for being: perhaps not exactly in the hard-to-achieve way of Heidegger’s authenticity, but in the sense of a life in which being—with others—is an issue: an examined life.

The “Enormous Eye” of the Transfuge: Disposability, Exclusion, Vulnerability

“Photographers, like painters, can teach us to see specific things, or to see them in a specific way,” writes Alfred Döblin, prefacing a photo album by August Sander. Ernaux’s diaries, with their ambition to be nothing more than “photographic snapshots of reality,” create indeed a specific way of seeing, even when the author contents herself with simply recording or sketching out scenes that she witnesses. As we have just seen, her diaries invite conversation with other well-known observers of everyday life, such as Benjamin, de Certeau, Lefebvre, or Debord; her attitude, however, brings her in close proximity to the insights of a contemporary thinker, Guillaume le Blanc, author of *Vies ordinaires, vies précaires* and *Que faire de notre vulnérabilité?* Le Blanc’s work seems to me a particularly apt companion to Ernaux’s diaries because it helps articulate their contribution to a rethinking of community, which I take to be at stake in her autobiographical experiment.

*Journal du dehors* contains some descriptions of the New Town, in which the “reality of [her] epoch, this modernity impossible to define” appears in images of disintegration or wearing out, of detritus, residue, leftovers, disposable materials and individuals. Previous writers invested in the project of defining modernity hinted at an apparent affinity between the everyday, waste, and creativity: Benjamin’s *Lumpensammler*, Baudelaire’s *chiffonnier*, de Certeau’s every(day) man—all use productively the residues of modernity.
Not so in the landscape of Cergy-Pontoise that Ernaux describes in an early diary entry:

Opposite the rows of neat, tidy suburban houses, pin, cream-coloured, with green shutters . . . , separated from the urbanized area by a street bordered with lawns, starts an area of wasteland, with copses, a few derelict houses and a footpath with potholes filled with water. There are discarded objects everywhere, in the brambles and along the edges of the path. A wrapper of Dutch cookies Spirits, a broken Coca-Cola bottle, cardboard packaging for a six-pack, a copy of the local gazette, a length of iron-piping, flattened plastic bottles and a white substance with blisters—maybe sodden cardboard—suggesting a cluster of Sahara roses. . . . Metamorphoses of all these objects, twice broken, rumpled and flattened—first by those who leave them behind, then by the bad weather. Combining two forms of wear and tear. (*JD*, 24, modified translation)

The layers of litter take the place of a historical sedimentation felt to be missing among the disconnected existences of the new town; but these residues of consumerism and human encounters, or the graffittis exuding youthful defiance, are less unsettling than the social detritus of disposable individuals who make appearance repeatedly in the pages of *Journal du dehors* and *La vie extérieure*: beggars, down-and-outs, tramps, people in retirement homes, working-class individuals whose bodies visibly bear the burden of everyday life.

Just as, in the passage above, “the rows of neat, tidy suburban houses,” where presumably a well-ordered life of plentiful consumption unfolds, contrast with the derelict houses and the discarded objects, a logic of symmetry applies in the social realm: the validation and inclusion of some individuals calls for the exclusion of others. An entry about layoffs at Renault is part of a cluster of notes in the diaries that expose a phenomenon Guillaume le Blanc also discusses extensively in his work, “the production of disposable people”:32

The closing down of the Renault factories at Vilvorde, in Belgium, triggers the first European strike. At the same time, the stocks continue to “soar” (the image itself is charming, light, while the words for the workers weigh down, they are “struck,” “threatened”). Bluntly put, that means that some people are struck off so that others, the share holders, get rich. Ultimately, the death of some might be acceptable so that others can take advantage. We are shown the laid-off workers, never the share-holders, invisible like money. (*LVE*, 89)

In “Reflexionen zur Klassentheorie” (“Reflections on Class Theory,” published posthumously in 1975), Adorno identified the logic illustrated in this
diary entry, pointing out the “immanence of the oppressed to the system.” Le Blanc takes up Adorno’s idea, explaining, in line with Ernaux’s own insight: “Exclusion maintains the excluded within the system, since exclusion is symmetrical, not contrary, to inclusion. ‘Symmetrical’ means here that the inclusion of some calls forth the exclusion of others.” As Ernaux also notes in several of her entries, le Blanc shows that the “accreditation of lives is not complete. Moreover, it can only be established economically, juridically, politically, it seems, on condition that it does not concern everyone, that it leaves aside, like an indeterminate reserve that it will be able to dip into whenever necessary, disqualified lives as superfluous lives.” Illustrative of this principle, Ernaux’s entry about the fired Renault workers is prefaced by a sequence of two others, which put into social, economic, and historical context the impact of unemployment on those affected, as well as the ways in which the system legitimates certain voices while delegitimizing others:

A voice in the RER. “Today I’m not selling newspapers, I would but no one cares anymore.” The man follows up mentioning all these people who took to the streets against the Debré law, but no one marches against unemployment, “we can as well continue to sleep in the street and starve.” Once again, the voice from below speaks the truth. “In 89 they cut off the king’s head, people today would be too scared to do it.” During this time, I grade papers on Dom Juan. The man talking is poorer and unhappier than a peasant in Molière’s time. [She doesn’t give this man anything, but she is moved enough by a musician’s familiar songs to reward him with a coin.] (JD, 85–86)

4 March

On the radio, Alain Madelin was answering the questions of listeners, who were saying: “Salaries go down, my pension goes down, I have no work, Renault has just got rid of jobs.’ To each Madelin responded invariably, “you should create an enterprise!” He pronounced “cre-eate”: you should cre-eate! Cre-eate! With the tone of voice of someone talking to half-wits. Berating triumphantly his interlocutor: “I can hear the fright in your words, sir!” Indeed, one must be the last coward not to create an enterprise when one is unemployed, two rents behind and fearing foreclosure.

At some point, Madelin brandishes his origins, “my father was a skilled worker, I know pay slips.” As if he had been the same as the little boy of long ago, in a working-class town.

This discourse, an insult to people and reason, was held by a former minister, without anyone intervening to denounce the disdain and imposture. The listeners couldn’t “insult” him back—the danger that the micro would be cut off—by asking him how much he earned
every month, where he lived, what enterprise he had “cre-eated” himself. Once again, the media legitimized the propositions, however absurd, of an authorized voice. I felt hatred (which is why I am writing these lines). (JD, 86–87)

There is much happening in these two entries, and in their juxtaposition: the laid-off workers express their discontent on the radio, but by listening—or, rather, being forced to listen—to a cynical former minister, they only participate in a symbolic violence that perpetuates itself through the mediatization of his advice, and that Ernaux angrily dismisses as “absurd”: coming from a place of social and economic privilege, it is oblivious of the vulnerability of their position. These workers’ unemployment is on a continuum with the precarious situation of the beggar in the preceding entry, who denounces not only the preposterous compromise of a politics of care—selling useless newspapers—but also the unwillingness of those still “included” to listen to the impoverished. The person addressing himself to the metro passengers—about whose situation Ernaux notes that it is worse than in the seventeenth century, presumably despite contemporary narratives of progress—points out that unemployment is no longer interesting enough to protest against; those whose voices still matter are reacting to a more recent development, the Debré anti-immigration law. The unemployed man’s voice, to put it in le Blanc’s words, “is lost not because it ceases to speak, but because it is no longer heard, and it is no longer heard because it is not considered from a social point of view to fulfill the normative expectations of official channels of listening.”  

By juxtaposing the “voice from below [that] speaks the truth” and the “discourse” smacking of disdain and imposture of the former minister, Ernaux shows, like le Blanc, that “voices are not democratically heard. They are constituted as audible voices by the social labels that give them credit, or, on the contrary, that discredit them.”  

Many of Ernaux’s diary entries invite a sustained reflection on the possibility of representing the excluded, people who fall out of the sanctioned frameworks of social, juridical, political recognition of society and are thus denied, or are about to lose, their right to citizenship.

The question of representation is all the more important since she voices criticism of intellectual pretense, snobbery, and obliviousness, of the smug enjoyment of the “mirage of social interiority.” Those in the system, Ernaux notes, protect themselves not only by othering, but by dehumanizing the disposable individuals maintained on the fringe, outside yet still inside. On a cold November day, for instance, Ernaux writes about the information broadcast on the media that an SDF woman died from the cold in Toulouse and three SDFs died in Paris; this makes her note that to use the term SDF, the French acronym for the homeless (sans domicile fixe), “is to designate a sexless species that wears bags and ragged clothes, whose steps go nowhere, without a past and without a future. That is to say they do not belong to
the category of normal people” \((LVE, 123)\). Le Blanc uses the same words: “To be excluded is to be deprived at the same time of social qualities and of future. That means discovering oneself without a present because one does not have a future. The excluded is therefore potentially nowhere because he has no share in the common world.” \(^{39}\) This situation, Ernaux and le Blanc agree, leads to a loss of humanity:

There are in France thirty million dogs and cats that one would never leave outside in such cold weather. But we do let die men and women on the street, perhaps precisely because they are our fellow human beings, with the same desires and needs as ourselves. It is too difficult to bear this part of ourselves, dirty, dazed by the lack of everything. The Germans who were living close to the concentration camps didn’t believe that the Jews in lousy rags were human. \((LVE, 123)\)

Le Blanc spells out the logic of Ernaux’s last sentence:

The decision to no longer see the excluded as a man or as a woman unravels the figure of exclusion and underlines vigorously that to be excluded is not only to lose one’s place in a class or a particular classifying system, but it is to risk, at the same time, to lose all place, to no longer be anywhere, potentially to become nobody. What does nobody mean here? That one is no longer retained by the slightest reference. \(^{40}\)

This takes us very far from Benjamin’s and de Certeau’s politics of the disposable; every now and then, Ernaux’s entries recall de Certeau’s notion of “poaching the system” only to cast doubt on the efficacy of such forms of subversion. Of the numerous entries that record encounters with beggars, the following one comes closest to acknowledging creativity: “A new form of ‘begging’ over the past few weeks: ‘Would you spare two francs so I can get pissed?’ A young man with an earring. Cynicism has replaced the appeal to pity. Endless creativity of people” \((JD, 77, \text{translation modified})\). Surely, as Ernaux notes, this man does not conform to the social script of humbly asking for money in order to fulfill a basic need; rather, he chooses to imply that such a plea would fall on deaf ears, and performs instead the negative stereotype of beggars as shameless drunkards. But we are not told if such an ironic appropriation disrupts in any way the status quo; most likely, it only reinforces it. The following entry points convincingly to this likelihood: “In a corridor, on the ground, in an area marked out by chalk, someone had scribbled: ‘For food. I have no family.’ But the man or woman who had written that had gone, the chalk circle was empty. People avoided to step in it” \((JD, 20, \text{translation modified})\). Ernaux’s last remark points to the irony of a literal othering through disidentification with the public space appropriated by a beggar, and thus the consolidation of a “distribution of the sensible”
(places and visibility) that works through exclusion. The chalk circle is the visible index of an existence under the sign of deprivation, and its emptiness ominously points to the possibility of its occupant’s disappearance: what starts with unemployment, Ernaux’s juxtaposed entries suggest, is on a continuum with selling newspapers, begging, and more desperate efforts to cling to survival; finally, with disappearance. At the end of the spectrum of precariousness is the fait divers of the death of a person reduced to the anonymity of three letters: SDF.

The diaries do the difficult work of bridging the gap between the social perception and handling of poverty, on one hand, and a more humane understanding of it, on the other. Where one might see creativity or provocation, she sees—to adapt a word used by Simone Weil and Anne Carson—a decration of the social self. This phenomenon, however, is not inevitable:

At the Charles-de-Gaulle-Etoile station, a man in his thirties gets into a subway car and sits down on a folding seat. . . . Later on, he stands up. Leans against the wall, undoes his jacket and lifts his tee-shirt. He scrutinizes his stomach for some time, then pulls down his tee-shirt. Clearly, his actions are not intended to provoke; they are the ultimate manifestation of loneliness—true loneliness—in the midst of the crowd. Beside him, there’s a plastic bag, the trademark of the homeless. When someone loses their home and their job, how long does it take before the presence of other people no longer prevents them from doing in public things that are perfectly normal, but in our culture unacceptable in public? Where starts the indifference to the “good manners” we were once taught at school and at home, over the dining-room table, when we used to fall asleep dreaming of the big bright future? He got off at Auber. (JD, 90, translation modified, my italics)

Unlike other destitute individuals who engage in some way with the other users of public systems, the young man in this entry adopts the same attitude as fellow travelers on the metro who pretend not to see: he acts as if they were not present. Ernaux points out that, once detached from the forms of social accreditation of employment and fixed lodging, he feels exempt from social conventions. The sociality of the metro is to him no “system” that he might use provocatively or creatively—his gesture is a step in unlearning proprieties, the savoir faire acquired as a child, at school, or at home. Striking, in Ernaux’s comments, is the use of the plural pronoun nous as she conjures up a time of youthful hopes in everyone’s life, but at the same time, this we includes her, and her readers, in the contemplation of the varying degrees to which those hopes materialized. And with this, she recasts the episode within the context of a human life, rather than seeing the man merely as the silhouette of “a beggar.” A life is being excluded, le Blanc would say,
that has not always been excluded, and that could have been otherwise. The exclusion happens to a life that has been lived, that existed as a life without exclusion⁴⁶—like ours.⁴⁵ Ernaux is aware of a possible alternative reading that would understand the man’s baring of his belly as a gesture of provocation; and she does not avoid spelling out the significance of such gestures, as for instance in a situation where a clochard exposes not his stomach, but his sex. Stripped of almost all signs of social framing, he exposes the only form of identification left to him: “forme déchirante de la dignité: montrer qu’on est un homme” (a heartbreaking form of dignity: showing that one is a male). Ernaux comments on this mute, but radical, disruption not only of social proprieties, but of the status quo: one cannot give him money, she notes, just pretend not to see him. “It is a gesture that ruins everything—the vanity of women in fur coats, the determined stride of market conquerors, the humbleness of musicians and beggars to whom one gives the odd coin” (JD, 32, modified translation). The gesture does not comfort the status quo, like the submissiveness of beggars who accept the charity of passers-by; it disrupts the comfortable anonymity of a public space, creating an anomalous zone—like the white circle traced with chalk—that everyone avoids to confront. Ernaux would no doubt agree here with le Blanc’s analysis: the rant of the clochard, inaudible as it may be, or postures judged indecent, are disruptions of an unspoken social contract, most often provoked by the loss of social bearings: “the rage that inhabits these postures represents a way of being decidedly turned against society.”⁴⁶

If on a personal level, the reaction to poverty is avoidance or mercy delivered in the form of small change, the bureaucratic response to it is, in Ernaux’s fragmentary account, a politics of care that others, controls and humiliates the impoverished. In an entry dated June 9, 1998, she visits the office of social welfare of the City of Paris in the Tenth Arrondissement, where she is struck by the attitude of an assistant “who barks at everybody.” She looks at the small separated desks where people are called to talk about their circumstances—Ernaux calls the place “the confessional of the poor”—and takes note of the assistant’s eagerness to make the newcomers “feel his power and their indignity” (LVE, 110). She concludes: “This is a place where only the impoverished come, where the possibility of the presence of other people is not considered” (110). This last remark aptly summarizes a host of phenomena: the prompt labeling of anyone who enters such an office as lacking financial means, hence power, autonomy, and the right to privacy; soliciting support equals loss of dignity, a diminished condition that warrants diminished (or no) respect. The assistant’s attitude corroborates a suggestion that remains implicit in Ernaux’s diaries, that exclusion affects not only those excluded, but also those who accept its logic; in other words, the dehumanization affects everyone involved—the excluded because they are deprived of their life, of their voice; the included because they deny the others their humanity, which entitles them to behave in inhumane ways.
The danger of a politics of care is to silence completely the persons affected and to recast them in alienating scenarios, while the system pats itself on the back. Ernaux’s entry about the Maison de Nanterre, an institution for the homeless and the retired, is mediated by a television documentary in which a man is shown collecting the stones in the courtyard and disposing them meticulously around the trees. “He says it’s bad to leave the stones lying around. It’s the last image of the film, accompanied by a voice-over: ‘This may be seen as a metaphor for the Maison de Nanterre—an establishment where order reigns supreme, where order is preserved’” (JD, 42). The man’s futile gesture might be reminiscent for Samuel Beckett’s readers of the eponymous character in the novel Molloy, who, not yet confined but equally humble, collects pebbles and tries to find the best possible way to distribute them among his pockets; but unlike Molloy, who decides to throw his pebbles up in the air, unable to find a satisfying solution to his conundrum, the man here participates in the mechanisms of his social containment, offering a convenient aesthetic gesture that comforts the viewers. He is no “schizo out for a stroll” subverting the system, as Deleuze and Guattari describe Molloy, but a well-disciplined individual whose existence is reduced to the rituals of order.47 Ernaux’s comment insists again on the erasure of the real life in this process, as well as on the erasure of the possibility of using one’s imagination to bring it back into focus: “To find a fitting conclusion, they single out the gestures of one man—a chunk of his existence—and turn these into a symbol, a stylistic device. It stops you wondering why that man is there” (JD, 42, my italics).

How to bridge this “emotional distance” that takes the form of the proposition “That is not me” that Ernaux notices prevails in most situations of exposure to destitution and social exclusion?48 How to amend the official script that is often superimposed and substituted for the stories of the excluded, like in the case of the man at the Maison de Nanterre? The diaries are remarkable through a quality—or one had better say, with Pierre Zaoui, a practice—of discretion: Ernaux removes herself from the scene of encounter, letting the others be, live, express themselves, react, interact, without any intervention. Many of the entries are simple notations, “photographic snapshots of reality,” as the author calls them, without as much as a caption. This affective absence or minimalism, which solicits the reader’s emotion, is most interesting when considered in relation to the sequence of entries, and the effects—of contrast, elaboration, echo, or imagined relation—that the different scenes produce. In yet other cases, Ernaux fails to remain a silent photographer, commenting on an incident by articulating that which the destitute fail to see or express, the violence done to them, the mechanisms of exclusion. The reader’s experience thus oscillates between shock or surprise, sympathy (“I feel what the other is feeling”) and volunteered passion (the text produces “a blank spot where the reader . . . [steps] in to supply the missing fear, grief, shame or anger”).49 Most importantly, Ernaux prompts the reader to supply an imaginative dimension typically withheld in the encounter with
Annie Ernaux’s Diaries of the Outside

189

the destitute, and this by repeatedly suturing the continuum of humanity as one of vulnerability. In the following sequence of four entries, for instance, she zooms in on different kinds of vulnerability, and in each she supplies the missing context, deplores its obliteration, or gestures toward the oblivion that can engulf victims who remain anonymous. Given the randomness of the violence, however, they could be anyone:

**Early July . . .**

First mayoral decree forbidding begging and the “lying position” of certain persons in public places. One saw this one coming. Let us finally hide these beings who expose their slouching bodies . . . that offend the view of tourists sitting on café terraces.

The “lying position,” that of love, of sleep, and of death. Of abandonment and of arrested time. A vision that negates civilization and progress. Temptation.

The Serbs have taken back Srebrenica, Zepa. Since no one is capable of imagining a real war any longer, or actual concentration camps, everyone shows revolt and doesn’t give a dime.

**26 July**

Yesterday a bomb exploded in the RER at the Saint-Michel station. It was half past five in the evening. Seven dead, several wounded whose legs were blown up . . . We do not know yet all the names of those who died at Saint-Michel. In a week, in a month, waiting on this platform where bodies were pulverized as if nothing had happened. *(LVE, 66–67, italics in the original)*

In this succession of entries, a concatenation of forms of suffering, the intervention of Ernaux diminishes progressively. In the first one, she supplies the meaning of the “position allongée” denied to beggars in public spaces, after ironically feigning to adhere to the official justification for the decree. The cryptic enumeration of love, sleep and death, abandonment, and “arrested time” circumscribes an experience of human vulnerability usually cherished as private, the withdrawal of which from the public is usually perceived as the very index of civilized life. The disruption of this narrative of progress by the poor who lie down in public is what justifies the official decree, Ernaux seems to concede. Yet by supplying these very contexts—love, sleep, death—that define a shared humanity, Ernaux also surreptitiously makes a point about the violence of depriving people of a private life where such basic human experiences can be had; having to supply these reminders, which are obliterated from the public discourse that defends the right to leisure of the tourists and the comfort of grand narratives of progress is a reminder of
the cost of preserving the latter intact. The second entry, about the war in Yugoslavia, spells out the capacity that diminishes in the modern world to “imagine” the real, even as a display of emotion offers reassurance as to the capacity for empathy. It does not make a difference if the war victims are geographically distant, or, as in the last entry, if the dead and wounded in a bomb explosion could be any of the underground passengers: this sequence of entries situates on a continuum the oblivion to the humanity of beggars, the erasure of the suffering of war, and the forgetting of victims, that is—potentially—of ourselves as singular human beings.

One of the most remarkable fragments in *Journal du dehors*, the record of a conversation between two clochards, brings us even closer to articulating Ernaux’s position. On the one hand, like the man who collects stones at the Nanterre retirement home, this entry might remind readers of Beckett’s characters. More generally, the recurrent images of disposable objects, texts, and people in *Journal du dehors* register with Beckett’s representation of the human condition as regulated by waste, the decreative acts she records align with the disintegrating bodies in Beckett’s novels and plays, with Molloy’s unlearning proprieties, his regression to the fetus, and then to the egg, by the third volume of the trilogy, *The Unnamable*. Decreation in Ernaux’s *Journal du dehors* echoes Beckett’s “experiment in diminution,” both sketching out, one in the mode of reportage, the other in the aesthetic of minimalist drama, the stages and details of a dehumanization that, in Beckett’s work at least, is never done ending. One must acknowledge, however, that by entertaining the comparison with Beckett’s characters, one risks aestheticizing the clochards in Ernaux’s diary, thus doing them an injustice. But then, inspired by le Blanc, another possibility presents itself: isn’t, rather, their capacity to speak like characters in a play, referring to the stories they imagine about their own lives, their frustrated ambitions, their missed opportunities, precisely that which could steer us to look at them differently, to see in them something other than just clochards?

Tonight, at les Halles, just as the RER doors were about to snap shut, two tramps entered noisily and sat down on opposite seats. Two shaggy, unkempt men in tattered clothes. The younger of the two, aged between thirty and forty, lays an empty bottle down on the floor and opens Libération. The other one, around fifty, maybe younger, starts to bawl the French national anthem. He spits into a rag and says: “Who cares about the army? Look at that gob of spittle, you won’t see another one like that, not even in the army.” Then, trying to engage his companion in conversation, he asks: “Why d’you look like a fag?” The other ignores the trite insult, delivered with friendly intent, and exclaims: “You’ve got the Serbs! You’ve got the Croats! It’s a good thing we got newspapers, otherwise I’d be stupid.” He rustles the paper. “See that? Some people make it to Gabon and we
Annie Ernaux’s Diaries of the Outside

only end up in Sartrouville.” A short silence. “It’s just not fair.” Then: “I want to go back into my egg, it was nice and cozy.”

The man reading *Libération* goes on muttering “it’s just not fair,” while taking an interest in this imaginary subject: “Did you have a shell over your head?”

— No, it was skin. I may not be a gynecologist, but I’m not a moron!

— I don’t want to leave! It’s a great squat—real warm!

— I wanted to stay so badly my mom had to have a Caesarian.

— At the time, they used chainsaws to do Caesarians.

— She suffered a lot. That’s why she never acknowledged me.

— Mine didn’t either. *(JD, 92–93)*

Ernaux refrains from commenting on the humor of the clochards’ exchanges, and does not draw attention to the symbolic dimension of the older man’s desire to return to “his egg.” The scene is fit for a play in the theater of the absurd, and there is nothing for Ernaux to add, except to remind the readers that this is *not* a stage performance, and that before becoming characters in her diary, the two clochards performed themselves—in theatrical fashion, indeed, the only one they know in a society that refuses to hear them otherwise. The clochards expose the negative truth of the everyday, and their theatricality paradoxically conveys the absurd authenticity of their existence. If one chooses to listen to their conversation (rather than overhear it)—and by writing it down, Ernaux compels the reader to pay attention—one is struck by the aspects in these individuals’ lives that do not conform to the stereotypical silhouettes of beggars, meager not only in their physical appearance but also through the absence of a life story that would maintain them in the sphere of humanity. “Toutes les allures de vie de l’exclu ne se ramènent pas à l’exclusion. Plus encore, parmi ces allures de vie de l’exclu, certaines sont des contestations explicites de l’exclusion elle-même” (All the contours of the life of the reject do not come down to exclusion. Moreover, among these aspects of the reject’s life, some are explicit contestations of exclusion itself). They are not simply destitute people and nothing else: they read newspapers, interested in events from remote parts of the world; quip ironically about the negative identities imposed on them (“Why do you look like a fag?”); imagine themselves in other situations; ponder the affecting episodes of their lives; articulate the sense of injustice that pervades their experience of the world. And these are the very aspects, as Cora Diamond and Guillaume le Blanc emphasize, that constitute the human quality of a life:

What constitutes the human quality of a life is the possibility to see imaginatively its variables: a life might be excluded, but it is retained as a fully human life as long as “I” notice under the features of the clochard in rags the silhouette of a young woman and I imagine her
for example when she was a child or even baby pushed by her mother in a stroller. It is when this capacity to imagine is lacking that a reject becomes a life excluded from humanity, a dehumanized life, because it is then considered unhinged from our life and even from the group of humans to which we feel we legitimately belong. Then it is because this dehumanization that begins with the refusal to imagine the other life as fully human is completed in the dismissal of the other’s imagination . . . [that] we refuse to consider [the other] as a fully imaginative subject, capable of constructing a fiction of their life, of their life and of the life of others. These two refusals are linked.\textsuperscript{53}

The double refusal that le Blanc elaborates on—that of imagining the lives of others as human, and that of taking the others for humans endowed with an imagination that makes their life meaningful—can only be understood and challenged if the frameworks through which the lives of the destitute are apprehended change; le Blanc emphasizes that the social sciences, literature, philosophy, and cinema, among others, can contribute to this change. How? By following, he suggests, an imperative of nonclosure; by broadening our notion of “humanity” through the recognition of the link that exists between all lives, not only, as Judith Butler suggests, because we share the world with the excluded, but because we might ourselves become excluded.

Some of the entries in Ernaux’s diaries intimate that such an ethical stance is easier imagined than adopted in everyday life. On the eve of Christmas 1995, for instance, she notes that on her way back from grocery shopping, she gave a ten-franc bill to a man who was sitting by some trash bags. “A face ravaged by poverty and alcohol. He smelled very badly” (LVE, 67). No sooner does she reciprocate his wishes of “Merry Christmas” with the perfunctory “You, too” than she realizes the symbolic violence in which both of them participate with this exchange: “Then I feel so disgusted that, to efface shame, I feel like rolling in his coat, kiss his hands, smell his breath” (68). Three years later, again around Christmas time, she registers a similar empathetic reaction, this time trying to imagine what it feels like to be a beggar or a prostitute: “Sitting on the concrete floor of the metro [station], lowering one’s head and putting out one’s hand. Hearing steps, seeing legs walk by, those that slow down, the hope. What would I prefer, that or prostitution, the public or the private shame?” (LVE, 124). Differently put: what is more affecting, the experience of humiliation witnessed by other people, or the solitary one? “The need to imagine myself in the most extreme forms of dereliction, as if in the name of a truth otherwise inaccessible” (LVE, 125). But what would this truth be? Through the fragmentary record of other people’s lives, by imagining what they must feel like, by echoing words usually no sooner spoken than ignored, so they have a new power to reach others, Ernaux includes herself (and her readers) in a collective “we” whose shared condition, she emphasizes, is vulnerability. In this context, writing about
other people’s lives becomes speaking in their name, which means, as le Blanc puts it, not “speaking for others” or “in their place” but, rather, participating in a “we” generated by the conjoining of vulnerability and subalternity.\textsuperscript{54}

\section*{The World in Me: Toward a Community of Transpersonal Selves}

“I don’t speak to them. I only watch them and listen to them. Yet the emotions they arouse in me are real,” Ernaux writes, self-consciously spelling out the guiding principle of her practice (\textit{JD}, 32). These brief notations also read like a definition of discretion, that Pierre Zaoui dwells on at some length in \textit{La discrétion, ou l’art de disparaître}: “discretely enjoying the presence or the existence of others, that is, literally enjoying separately their apparition without having to show up oneself and maintain a posture.”\textsuperscript{55} Depersonalization, withdrawal from the “game of perpetual projections and introjections that usually link us to others” (extricating oneself from distantlyality): this is an ethical stance to which Zaoui attaches political value in a world of visibility and surveillance.\textsuperscript{56} To Warhol’s “fifteen minutes of fame” would correspond, in this scenario, fifteen minutes of (desirable) anonymity.

Zaoui’s reflection resonates with Ernaux’s project, all the more so since Benjamin’s flâneur is the provider of the conditions of the material and political possibility of such an experience of discretion. Zaoui identifies five such conditions that account for the secularization of discretion, an experience that he originally traces to a religious disposition. First of all, because the city is the condition of discretion, the flâneur gives a different meaning to Gracián’s ideal of an “homme du monde,” since the world here is not a small circle where everyone knows everyone else (which is also the sociability of rural communities, where discretion is impossible); rather, it is someone “who goes into the world as in a realm to traverse, not as in new territory to conquer.”\textsuperscript{57} The city is also the place where the flâneur develops his love of the crowds, in the middle of which a “populated solitude \textit{[une solitude peuplée]}” is possible: “a dissymmetrical state of communication in which one sees without seeing and is seen without seeing: only the crowd, the undifferentiated mass for the one who cannot see and unbelievably differentiated for the one who can, is the community of those without community to which one can alternately give oneself and refuse oneself.”\textsuperscript{58} From this derives the third condition of discretion, the “passion of anonymity,” the “love of the incognito” of the one who “is self-sufficient and does not seek approval,” as Baudelaire says of Constantin Guys. “The passion of no longer being someone, just a mere electron without a name thrown at top speed into the immense crowd.”\textsuperscript{59} And then there is the flânerie itself, both always available and always in movement, the very image of the circulation of commodities in capitalism; as Baudelaire puts it, the experience of a free perambulation among the reified forms of life. Finally, concludes Zaoui, there is, in discretion, “the more subtle
political exigency not to yield to the reification of all life and to invent new forms of subjectivity, visible or sublime.” The second and fifth conditions articulate the stakes of discretion that are most relevant to Ernaux’s diaries: the elaboration of a new form of subjectivity and, through it, the intimation of a new understanding of community. Let us unpack these intertwined threads.

As we have seen, Ernaux starts from the premise of a neutral, “photographic” writing, a mere collection of “snapshots of reality” from which her subjectivity would be evacuated. As such, she would conform entirely to Zaoui’s description of discretion: entering in this mode is unlike “entering religion or a monastery, but rather like when one enters furtively into other people’s houses, people we do not know, not out of curiosity or to break in, but simply in order to see how they live and to let oneself be moved by the neutral beauty of things, that is, without a personal subject and without a specific object.” Presumably, the absence of a personal subject would leave her in a social, or even presocial state of being, but Ernaux readily acknowledges the impossibility, in the end, to separate the “profound self [le moi profond]” from the social self; both, as the diaries suggest, because the people, behaviors, and interactions she is most likely to notice are determined by her own experiences, by the configuration of distances within herself, and because the people she looks at bring her back to herself. Such, for instance, is the case with an early scene she records in Journal du dehors, in which a woman scolds her teenage daughter vehemently, concluding: “I won’t always be there! You’re going to have to manage all by yourself in life” (JD, 88). She is struck by this interaction because she was once in the teenager’s shoes: “I can still hear my father or mother saying: ‘We won’t always be there!’ Their intonation. I see the severe expression on their face again . . . It was a threat from living people; now they’re both dead. ‘You’ll see when we’re not there anymore!’ The sentence alone remains, absurd, atrocious, when said by others” (JD, 88, suspension points in the original). It is only now—in a present contemporary with her mother’s recent passing—that she can measure the raw force of the parental warning: paradoxically, the sentence has to be uttered by a foreigner for its lesson of tough love and vulnerability to become an intimate knowledge. A lesson about not being at home in the world, yet having to make the world one’s home—occasionally, Ernaux wonders about it:

Why do I describe and detail this particular scene, like many others in the book? What is it I am desperately seeking in reality? Is it meaning? This may, sometimes, though not always, be true since I have acquired the mental habit not only of experiencing emotions but of “getting them into perspective.” Also, committing to paper the movements, postures and words of the people I meet gives me the illusion that I am close to them. I don’t speak to them, I only watch them and
Annie Ernaux’s Diaries of the Outside

listen to them. Yet the emotions they arouse in me are real. I may also
be trying to discover something about myself through them, their
attitudes and their conversations. (Sitting opposite someone in a sub-
way car, I often ask myself, “why am I not that woman?”) (JD, 32)

The epigraph to Journal du dehors, borrowed from Rousseau juge de Jean-
Jacques—“Notre vrai moi n’est pas tout entier en nous” (Our real self is not
entirely within ourselves)—turns on its head the postulation of traditional
autobiography (ironically, modeled on Rousseau’s Confessions, to which,
according to Michael Sheringham, Western autobiography is only footnotes)
that the authenticity of the self has its sources in introspection.63 The “out-
side” offers countless opportunities for the revelation of what Annie Ernaux
has called in an essay about her family ethnography a “transpersonal I,” all
the more so given that these later diaries transcend the setting of the fam-
ily and focus on anonymous strangers: such a self seeks not “to bolster an
identity but to grasp, in the field of [Ernaux’s] own experience, the signs of a
wider collective reality.”64 Strikingly, by opening the autobiographical space
to the outside, various moments of her past—or occasionally her future—are
accessed in recollection or anticipation. The historicity missing from the ville
nouvelle becomes accessible through responsive immersion in the experience
of the everyday, in the existences of others:

Both . . . the young man and the little boy take me back to moments
in my life. On other occasions, a woman waiting at a check-out desk
would remind me of my mother because of the way she moved or
spoke. So it is outside my own life that my past existence lies: in pas-
sengers commuting on the subway or the RER; in shoppers glimpsed
on escalators at Auchan or in the Galleries Lafayette; in complete
strangers who cannot know that they possess part of my story; in
faces and bodies that I shall never see again. In the same way, I myself,
among the bustling crowds on streets and in department
stores, must secretly play a role in the lives of others. (JD, 95)

“Porteuse de la vie des autres”: the first volume of the diary concludes
on the reciprocity of a relationship of partly overlapping life-stories. This
amends Iris Murdoch’s reflection that “the others are, to an extent one can
never cease discovering, different from ourselves” by emphasizing that the
others may also reveal to us differences, or distances within ourselves, about
which we forgot they existed. And these have a transformative potential: “Si
je poursuivais une telle expérience ma vision du monde et moi-même s’en
trouveraient radicalement changée. Peut-être n’aurais-je plus de moi” (If I
pursued such an experience [this form of observation and diary writing] my
vision of the world and I myself would alter radically. Perhaps I would no
longer have a self) (LVE, 26).
The transpersonal self that emerges from Ernaux’s diaries, open to the currents that other people “send rippling through us” in the form of interest, anger, or shame (JD, 7), confirms Zaoui’s intuition that the practice of discretion “surreptitiously slid[es] from beings and things towards the relationships they produce.” These new relationships, captured in her formulation “le monde en moi” (the world in me), suggest a new sense of community, one that precedes, like in Heidegger’s Mitsein or Nancy’s com-pearance, a sense of self.

My Century, to which I will now turn, reads like the answer offered by a German novelist to Ernaux’s entry dated August 5, 1997, in which she puzzles over the meaning of an unchronicled life:

The 122-year old woman, dean of humanity, Jeanne Calment, has died. Almost national mourning. She leaves behind no testimony susceptible to be passed on universally, not even a diary. Her only work [œuvre] is a life continued beyond all hope. Jeanne Calment was just time, the very embodiment of time.

The time we have not lived. Her existence reached where memory—our own, that of our parents or grand-parents—cannot go. Her eyes saw a world henceforth beyond representation. She was ten during Victor Hugo’s burial, twenty during the Dreyfus affair, and a mature woman when soldiers of the Great War left [la fleur au fusil]. As they say, she could have known Maupassant, Verlaine, Zola and Proust, Colette, Ravel, Modigliani, all younger than herself, and dead a while ago. One could walk the figure of this little woman without history—all the more easily because she was without history—like a marker on all the pages of the century she had traversed. Unscathed, almost without memories, since the person credited with all the century’s memory only remembered the assassination of the tsar’s family in 1917. She was pure biological time, delivered of all the horrors and upheavals. (LVE, 92–93)