

## From singularity to the universal and back

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*If I don't write them down, things have not been completed, they have only been lived (1)*

I was reading Annie Ernaux's latest book 'Le jeune homme' ['The Young Man'] when the news came through that she had been awarded the highest prize in literature: the Nobel Prize, which becomes the main jewel in a crown of 15 French and foreign literary prizes! This can be seen as a universal recognition of the value of this great lady's message to all. And yet it is her singular desire articulated to her singular history and her particular social milieu that makes up the fabric of her work, from 'Les armoires vides' ('The Empty Wardrobes') (her childhood) to 'Le jeune homme' (her late desire in life, both sexual and creative) via 'Une femme' ['A Woman's Story'] (her mother, not a mother nor the mother) and 'La place' ['A Man's Place'] (her father, not a father nor the father) or 'La femme gelée' ['The Frozen Woman'] (the imprisoned desire). It is her own affects and emotions that are analysed in those writings: shame, contempt, love, the great gap between two social milieus, the awakening to sexuality etc... So how can we understand this universal recognition?

No doubt because it is neither through narcissism nor masochism that she makes herself the subject of her blah blah blah, but rather she makes herself the *passant* of her own *hystorisation* by rejecting auto-fiction and by making of it a common good. Her question is "how to say it?" and not only "how to say it to oneself"? It is an ethic that is not that of the hysteric -which could perhaps be defined as 'being the only one'- nor that of the master – an ethic of the 'for-all'- nor of the University – an ethic of the true- but an ethic close to that of the analyst: as it is written in our argument, on the one hand an ethic of desire and of the 'well-saying' of "which remains in spite of everything down to the structure and to the universal"(2) but also what must be called an ethic of singularity that "slips between the particular and the universal, passes through *hystorisation*, thus through original ways, distinctive features sometimes accentuated to excess." (2) There is no trace in Ernaux's work of this 'excess' which undoes social ties, confuses subjective singularity with individualism and makes of particularity a new feature of communitarian identification. In our time, dominated by the alliance between the discourse of capitalism and that of science, the promotion of enjoyment at any or all cost(s) is coupled with the paradox that the promotion of individualism comes at the cost of absolute difference, that of the subject in its relationship to desire, enjoyment and the symptom. The more we 'liberate' the jouissance of gender, the more we enclose the subject in what we must call a slimy identity, based on a trait, often a behaviour. However, for Lacan, the latter is only "handling and use of one's ego" (3) and the ego only a "function of miscognition" [*méconnaissance*] of, fundamentally, the subject of the unconscious, of what makes the singularity of each One. Any clinic based on behaviours, on descriptive categories such as those promoted by the DSM, leads

to this same paradox: on the one hand, more communities but less universality, and on the other, more individuality but less singularity. It is a new obscurantism that impoverishes thinking and comes up against the very thing that the analytic approach attempts to illuminate: in what way can the universal be grasped, not by all, but by each One or, in what way can the 'each One' serve the understanding of the human? It is the same ethical concern that we find in Annie Ernaux when she writes: "This way of writing, which seems to me to go in the direction of truth, helps me to get out of the solitude and obscurity of individual memory, through the discovery of a more general meaning"(4). Let us note, moreover, what this implies about her style: the more she advances in her concern for the 'well-spoken', the more she rejects the novelistic style, the "beautiful" style, for what I would not call 'flat' writing (she defends herself against it), but a clinical writing, a style that slices and cuts, an effort to squeeze as closely as possible, to circumscribe the umbilical cord of the unspeakable. She does not embroider, she does not write a novel. She is in the true love of truth as Lacan speaks of it in *The Other Side*: "What is the love of truth? It is something that mocks the lack-in-being [*manque à être*] of truth" for the reason that he gives a few lines above: ".../...the only way in which to evoke the truth is by indicating that it is only accessible through a half-saying [*mi-dire*], that it cannot be said completely, for the reason that beyond this half, there is nothing to say". (5)

- (1) Ernaux, A. *Le Jeune Homme*, NRF Gallimard, Paris, May 2022
- (2) *The Ethics of Singularity* in : [www.convencioneuropeamadrid-epfcl.com](http://www.convencioneuropeamadrid-epfcl.com)
- (3) Lacan, J. 2019. *The Seminar Book VI*, Desire and its Interpretation, Trans. B. Fink, Polity.
- (4) Ernaux, A. *Une femme*, NRF Gallimard, Paris, 1987, p.52
- (5) Lacan, J. 2007. *The Seminar Book XVII*, The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, Trans. R. Grigg, W.W. Norton & Company, New York London, p.51

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