

Investigative Writing: Self-narrative as History

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In *A History of the Grandparents I Never Had* (2012, English translation 2016) French historian Ivan Jablonka investigates the lost history of his grandparents and reflects on the possibilities and limits of historical knowledge. Researching the lives of Matès and Idesa, Jablonka asks ‘could I not nourish their lives with mine, rather than endlessly dying their death?’ (p. xiv). What was conceived as a family biography became an ‘act of justice and an extension of my work as a historian’ (p. xiv). Two years later, in *History is a Contemporary Literature* (2014, English translation 2018), Jablonka furthers his thinking on investigative writing and endorses ‘the literary consequences’ of the historical method. History, Jablonka writes, ‘is a contemporary literature’. We can create new forms or a ‘social sciences for the twenty-first century’ (Jablonka 2018, p. ix). Jablonka invites us to think about writing as an amalgam of literature, sociology and history, in which a reflection is at stake on how reality ‘is a new idea’. This implies that reality is not outside of the text as something that has to be represented, but reality is created in the writing: ‘writers can express truth as researchers’ (p. 267).

Drawing on and juxtaposing Jablonka, this paper argues that two contemporary women writers, Annie Ernaux and Deborah Levy, perform investigative writing, and in doing this they create historical and sociological knowledge. Writing is an analytical method: researching the self implies understanding social and historical patterns and consequences. First case study is the work of French writer and Nobel Prize 2022 winner Annie Ernaux, who is mentioned by Jablonka as an example of ‘self-inventory’ as a ‘reflexive text’ (p. 185). Ernaux writes a testimony or autobiography aiming to elucidate an itinerary, while navigating between sociology, history and self-analysis. Interesting from a narratological perspective is that Ernaux in *Les Années* (2008) is not writing about the self in the first person (as an I), but refers to a girl, woman, figure on a picture, that is herself while at the same time a historical figure created in the text. There is no I, no mine, the narrator writes, but just a name that will become faceless in time. Photographs lead to memories and stories, and while seeming randomly interconnected they present a perspective on time, history and transformation.

Another case study of investigative writing is the work of Deborah Levy, who in *Real Estate, A Living Autobiography* (2021) negotiates reflections on authorship with the analysis of details from everyday life. In its ‘reality effect’ (cf. Roland Barthes), Levy’s writing becomes singular and historical. Focusing on her particular world, Levy offers us a sociological and historical analysis of the time; she examines the ‘structure of feeling’ (cf. Raymond Williams).

This presentation argues that in the investigative writing of Ernaux and Levy a sociological and historical perspective on reality is offered culminating in a personal positioning in time and place. The literary writing is aimed at understanding history as an individual past, while connecting an epistemological and ontological dimension.