

Investigative Writing

Family Narrative in/with History

In *A History of the Grandparents I Never Had* Ivan Jablonka examines the narrative of his grandparents and reflects on the possibilities and limits of historical knowledge. Two years later, in *History is a Contemporary Literature*, he continues his thinking on 'investigative writing' and endorses 'the fictions of method' inviting his readers to think about writing as an amalgam of literature, sociology and history in which a reflection is at stake on how truth is not something that is represented but is created in writing. This article explores investigative writing as a methodological concept while reading and juxtaposing family narratives of Ivan Jablonka and Annie Ernaux as historical, sociological and literary perspectives on reality culminating in a transpersonal positioning in time and place. Both the historian and the literary author (if these qualifications are still relevant today) by telling their family narrative pursue an understanding of collective history, time, and individual consciousness, while connecting epistemological and ontological dimensions of literature.

1. Introduction

Ivan Jablonka's *A History of the Grandparents I Never Had* (2016 [2012])¹ is an impressive historical narrative of the lives of Polish communist Jews who became migrants in Paris in the late 1930s and were later transported 5 years later via the Drancy internment camp to Auschwitz-Birkenau. It is a comprehensive work, written by the grandson of the main characters, Matès and Idesa Jablonka, which gives the research a personal dimension. "I focus on my family because they symbolize a whole generation", the historian explains, they marched from the shtetl to the West, they were caught between Hitler and Stalin, their life was shattered by the Shoah (Jablonka 2016, 292). To describe what happened to his grandparents, Jablonka explains that he has to combine definition, evidence, deduction, hypothesis, example, conjecture and imagination. His narrative project is not just a historical study, but also literary writing, as we read in the final chapter of the book:

There is no point setting up dichotomies between scientific rigor and personal engagement, between observable facts and the passion of those who record them, between history and the art of storytelling. Emotion drives not from pathos or from amassing superlatives, but from our striving for truth. This is the touchstone of a literature that fulfils the requirements of the historian's method. (291)

Literary writing meets the fundamentals of the historical method. According to Jablonka there should be no separation between academic objectivity and

personal and emotional engagement. What happened in the past can be investigated, understood, and envisioned through a specific writing activity.

Two years later, Jablonka publishes *History is a Contemporary Literature, Manifesto for the Social Sciences* (2018 [2014]) in which he takes a step further in his reflection on what writing can be and do. The central thesis of the manifesto is that today, literature and the social sciences intersect and a new form of post-disciplinarity is developed in which writing and the real world are strongly interconnected. Jablonka pleads for an encompassing way of reasoning which he characterises as “a method within writing” (Jablonka 2018, 7) and argues: “[I]nstead of imitating reality or inventing stories, literature can attempt to express what is true about the world, past and present” (262). Literature is not the novel nor the opposite, non-fiction, it rather is a way of conveying the truth, of explaining facts and establishing an epistemology within writing.

Jablonka defines different types of literary texts such as “anthropologies of everyday life” and “exploration of the human soul” (185–188). What these types have in common is that they articulate conceptions of reality – and thus are not representations. They therefore should be considered “postrealism” (189). Avoiding a fiction-fiction dichotomy, Jablonka underscores a tripartite division of narrative: fiction, faction, and investigation. Fiction is an imaginary narrative whose characters, settings and action do not exist. Faction as a second narrative form is an informative text: annals, chronicle, genealogy, etc. Investigation as the third practice of narrative is driven by a line of reasoning, a cognitive activity. A fact is not what is revealed, but what is sought out by formulating a problem, cross-checking sources, inventing “fictions of method” and insisting and understanding (201).

Hence, in striving for the interconnection of history, sociology and literature, Jablonka underlines a method of writing as a specific practice of investigation. This investigation is a strategy of thinking and writing or thinking *in* writing. It is this investigative writing, as I have argued elsewhere (Heynders 2025; forthcoming), that we can observe in quite some contemporary autobiographical texts that contain family narratives. In this contribution, I adhere to this claim while discussing Annie Ernaux’s *The Years* in the context of Jablonka’s *A History of the Grandparents I Never Had*. I am interested in the point at which history, literature, evidence and conjecture, example and imagination meet and are juxtaposed and I ask how to execute a “literature of reality” or “a writing of the world” (Jablonka 2018, 3) in a family narrative.

In the following, I first offer a close reading of *The Grandparents I Never Had* and analyse how investigative writing can be acknowledged in this text. Then, I will perform a reading of Annie Ernaux’s *The Years*. Different from Jablonka, Ernaux does not start in history using literary tools, rather she starts in autobiography while bringing in numerous historical and sociological details and microstoria. In her family narrative the history of a country, culture and ideology is inscribed. Ernaux writes ‘autosociobiography’ (Twellmann / Lammers 2023) aiming to elucidate an itinerary through class and generations. Autosociobiography and investigative writing, as I will argue, are interrelated. In a final step, I

will confront the reading of Jablonka and Ernaux with a short discussion of work of Dutch / Belgian author Lieve Joris and of Dutch journalist Sheila Sitalsing emphasising that investigative writing is not a solely French phenomenon and is both interconnected and separated from autosociobiography. In the conclusion, I will underscore the epistemological and ontological dimensions of literature as investigative writing and autosociobiography.

2. Ivan Jablonka: Family History as Investigative Writing

With the narrative of his grandparents, Jablonka positions himself as a historian challenging family history and contemporary memory culture (Reid 2018). The scope of the book is broader than the story of Matès and Idesa, in describing the complex interrelations between Communism, the exclusion of people from society, and the Shoah. Jablonka did research in archives in Poland and France, he analysed family papers, conducted interviews and constructed a “birthing” – giving life to the people that he had not known – as the “opposite of a murder investigation” (Jablonka 2016, xiv). The book can also be characterised as historiography in its extended explanation of how the historian works from the reconstruction of the historical context to imagining individual experiences while giving meaning to the traces he has found of his grandparents’ existence (Reid 2018). Jablonka tells his readers where evidence falls short, what he conjures, and how historical reasoning is informed or distorted. The grandparents, born Russian while later becoming Polish, identified more as Communists than as Jews and Jablonka explains that he also does not identify as born Jewish, he rather considers himself “a historian to repair the world” (292). Being the grandson of a saddler and seamstress persecuted for who they were and what they did, his “assimilated Franco-Jewishness” is different from their “conspicuous Judeo-Bolshevism” (291), although he feels a strong personal commitment. Affectivity is important in the writing, as Nathan Bracher explains:

We take full measure of the limited, suffering, tragic, courageous lives of Matès and Idesa, and of their families in Poland, thanks to the presence of Ivan Jablonka’s twenty-first-century affective, intellectual, and cultural sensibility, as he attempts not only to retrace the many twists and turns of their precarious, obscure, and ultimately tragic itineraries, but also to recapture, or at least re-imagine their vicissitudes as closely and intensely as possible, based on the various archival documents and testimonies. (Bracher 2017, 137)

Jablonka comes as close to Matès as possible, but they are not contemporaneous, there always is the 21st perspective on findings and hypotheses. The distance works as a lens: some elements are observed sharper than others, for some there is evidence, while other elements need imaginary appendage. The final chapter of the work is the most confrontational; Jablonka tries to envision how his grandparents arrived in Auschwitz as young people, how Idesa, probably wounded, was immediately taken to the gas chamber (paradoxically, the lack of information evidences this), and how Matès was put to work in the

Sonderkommando. This special unit, as we learned from Primo Levi, was the grey zone, forcing people to perform the impossible endeavour of moving corpses from the gas chamber to the ovens or mass graves. There is no proof of what exactly happened, the border between speculation and plausibility is fluid, and Jablonka's envisioning of his grandfather as a member of the *Sonderkommando* is based on hypotheses, assumptions, experiences and the stories of other Jews who departed from Paris on the same train on the second of March 1943. History never reproduces the exact facts, Jablonka claims, and becomes literature at the moment at which the researcher gets as close as possible to the truth. Literature as aesthetic form, imagination, polysemy, and singularity, is helpful to think about the truth of what happened. This becomes clear in the scene of the arrest in Paris in which the historian *invents* (milk trucks, street sweepers, sounds) more than he knows from archives:

Matès and Idesa were arrested at 17 Passage d'Eupatoria on 25 February 1943, early in the morning, the hour of milk trucks and street sweepers. I could conjure up the sound of footsteps on the stairs, the loud knock at the door, the rude awakening. But I want my narrative to be incontrovertible, based on evidence or, at least, on hypotheses and deductions. To honor this moral contract, I must embrace these uncertainties as full partners in the complete narrative, while at the same time resisting the lure of pure imagination, however conveniently it serves to fill in the blanks. (211)

The "moral contract" of the historian is based on unquestionable evidence and findings, but the practice is that some things could be added or filled in when information is lacking. While pure imagination has to be resisted, without direct "witnesses or police reports, I find I have to fall back on conjecture" (215), Jablonka writes. Conjecture, obviously, is a precious and ambiguous term implying inference or guesswork or a proposition before it is proved. Conjecture entails assumption and speculation. But guesses are made to come closer to the truth: "We know that Matès was not gassed upon arrival. There is such a thing as truth in history. It exists, I have found it, and I cherish this certainty" (261). Truth thus is something that can be found while imagined, truth is in history and in literature as history, or in history *becoming* literature. The historian does not strive for objectivity, since he is stuck in the present and enclosed within himself, rather they aim at a "radical honesty" as both "rigorous distancing and total investment" (291). There is a duty to make explicit the uncertainties and doubts, the hunches and dead ends. There is the realisation that after "all my gathering, shuffling, comparing and stitching together, I still know nothing" (291). But there also is the drive to repair the world, to give life back to the grandparents because "if we consider only their demise, we are adopting the executioner's point of view" (292).

The most difficult to understand is the end of the life of his grandfather, when and how was there an end if evidence is lacking? This is what Jablonka writes without knowing:

All of these scenarios would make sense, whether murder, typhus, exhaustion, suicide or botched escape, but the truth is that his life and my narrative have no end: Matès ceased to be, his life unravelled like the scraps of flesh that mixed with the earth in the burial pits; he is no longer of this world. In truth, there is no truth,

no place, no deed, only a noman's-land between life and nonlife, a sudden absence, a vanishing that no one realized until the war was over: Matès Jablonka was no longer there. (284)

Combining all the bits and pieces and understanding the historical context, the historian can get close, but the individual life, the everyday history cannot be reconstructed, relived, re-experienced. The investigation executed in writing brings Jablonka to the reality of the destruction in Auschwitz, but not to exact knowledge on what precisely happened and was experienced. The everyday history, so to say, has disappeared in the general and generational historical narrative with its interconnected dynamic patterns. Audacity is needed to imagine the individual life, such as moments in the life of the grandmother,

1922, she goes to Polish school in Parczew
 1935, she is sentenced to five years in prison
 1940, she sings my father to sleep, a real *yiddische mame*
 1943, she hurries back up to her room in Passage d'Eupatoria
 1981, she comes to pick me up after school. (295)

The 1981 timeslot is a fiction, a dream. Fictions, as Jablonka writes in his manifesto, can “prove to be indispensable for the production of knowledge”, since they serve to “pose questions, formulate hypotheses, implement concepts” (175). What if the grandmother would have survived the concentration camp, would the lives of her son and daughter (who grew up in an orphanage) and grandson have developed differently? Such a fictitious (and emotional) image has consequences for the understanding of what happened and what the perspective is on the here and now.

Investigative writing leads to a family narrative that is affective because it displays and imagines how human lives took place and were destroyed. The point is not to represent reality, but to give means to understand reality (Jablonka 2018, 11). Jablonka positions himself in a community of researchers, writers, journalists and publishers “united by a reflection on the social sciences, the forms of research, the writing of the real world, and the necessity of reinventing ourselves” (Jablonka 2018, 10). Post-disciplinarity results in “the reconciliation within a text of different experiments with knowledge and writing” (257).

3. Annie Ernaux: Self-Narrative as Investigative Writing

Experimenting with knowledge and writing certainly characterises the oeuvre of Annie Ernaux (born in 1940 and Nobel Laureat in 2022). She can be placed in the company of Jablonka (born 1973) since her entire work is a self-inventory as reflexive text, as the historian claimed in his manifesto. She writes “in the form of a testimony or autobiography aiming to elucidate an itinerary, to report an experience, to shed light on a very personal relationship, or to get out of oneself” (Jablonka 2018, 185). Over the years, Ernaux created an impressive œuvre consisting of texts that are autobiographical, historical and sociological at the same time. She herself qualified the work explicitly *in-between* literature, sociology and

history: “this isn’t a biography, neither is it a novel” she writes at the end of *A Woman’s Story*, a chronicle of the life of her mother (2025 WS [1987], 68). In *The Years* (2025 TY [2008]) she offers the narrative of her family, that also is an analysis of social mobility, historical and political changes in France after World War II, and a feminist perspective on the emancipation of women in the 20th century. In two portraits, *A Man’s Place* (1992 [1983]) and *A Woman’s Story* (1991 [1988]), she depicts the life of her parents while demonstrating how their working-class existence in Normandie culminated in pursuing for their only daughter an education at secondary school and university. Consequently, as Ève Morsi argues, “the daughter’s socio-cultural codes and practices progressively diverged from those of her parents and their working-class relatives and customers” (Morsi 2024, 5).

Ernaux’s work is private and public, intimate and political at the same time. She writes explicitly about political issues, if we draw on what philosopher Jacques Rancière has elucidated as the political: “deciphering the symptoms of a state of things”, implying revealing the signs of history, delving into the seams and strata in the foundation of a society (Rancière 2010, 161). The political is related to the personal; in *Getting Lost* (2022 [2001]) Ernaux describes the obsessive desire for a much younger married man; in *The Use of Photography* (2024 [2005]), the author, in collaboration with photographer and journalist Marc Marie, explores both their erotic relationship and her experience of breast cancer; in *I Remain in Darkness* (1999 [1997]) she examines the illness of her mother and the transformation of the mother-daughter relationship.

Ernaux also is political *outside* of her literary texts. She performed the role of public intellectual (Heynders 2016) in an open letter² to Emmanuel Macron read out on public radio *France Inter* in March 2020 on the effects of the Corona measures taken by the French president. She publicly favoured Jean-Luc Mélenchon in three presidential elections between 2012 and 2022. And more recently, she supported (with twenty other writers) the *Pause* programme that helps evacuate scholars, artists and writers from Gaza.³ It would, however, be misleading to portray Ernaux as an engaged author in the Sartrean sense, communicating an explicit political message in her work. In putting the focus constantly on a particular consciousness and on memories of things and experiences, she is more concerned about understanding time and transformation than about bringing explicit changes to the outside world via her writing.

This is why it is adequate to apply the concept of investigative writing to Ernaux’s work: she strives to examine, analyse, and interpret political, personal, historical, cultural and sociological transformations and intersections *in* writing. She aims at finding words for what changes in time and in linguistic expressions, she excavates the details of popular culture (songs, films), and studies how ideologies developed. She examines the female self and the regional, Catholicist, *petit bourgeois* culture that made her. And she questions if lost time is something that can be retrieved with words, and if personal and collective memories and truth can be constructed in literature.

Investigative writing in Jablonka's *History of the Grandparents I Never Had* was based on the negotiation of hypotheses, deductions, evidence, conjectures, images and definitions. Jablonka deliberately used the "I" of the researcher to make contact with the narrative of his grandparents, a narrative that has disappeared in the complexity and violence of history. Ernaux's writing, on the other hand, investigates collective and particular memories and cultural details in order to try to keep in writing what once will disappear. In *The Years* she deliberately avoids the "I" narrative perspective to construct a more objective narration. Jablonka "repairs" the world in giving his grandparents a life, and Ernaux in a sense, does the same, she tries to keep a life after it has been lived: what is archived and exposed in language will be there when the author and the family members she portrays are gone. "Everything will be erased in a second" she writes in the beginning of *The Years*, "we will be nothing but a first name, increasingly faceless, until we vanish into the vast anonymity of a distant generation" (18). The point of the book is to curate personal and family details, to conserve time, to "save something from the time where we will never be again" as are the final words of *The Years* (221). In what follows, two works by Ernaux will be further discussed to support my argument that both the historian and the literary author execute investigative writing. First, I will read *Shame* (2025 [1997]) in which a specific family occasion is investigated related to the deep emotion of shame. Subsequently, I will focus on *The Years* examining a broad historical perspective on a family covering six decades in France after World War II.

Shame investigates what happened on 15 June 1952, when Ernaux's father tried to kill her mother. The scene – father with a knife – is depicted immediately on the first page of the text, while the Ernauxian narrator in what follows, tries to find out how this moment separated childhood from the rest of her life and caused an existential shame. It was perhaps "an ordinary incident" (Ernaux 2025 S, 12) in the life of a particular family, but the event stands for more: it is "far more common among families than I had originally thought" (13) while it is related to poverty, a low social class, a house without privacy, a lack of self-esteem (of the father and in consequence of the daughter). The scene is enclosed by two photographs: one from 5 June 1952 on which the young Ernaux is depicted in her Communion dress, the other from the end of August when she is with her father on a trip to Lourdes. It is difficult, as the narrator explains, to relate to the photographs, looking at them does not lead to self-identification: "if I had never seen these pictures before and if I were shown them for the first time, I would never believe that the little girl is me. (Absolute certainty – 'yes, that's me'; total disbelief – 'no, that's not me.')" (18).

Photographs are often implemented in Ernaux's work "to feel the passage of time" (Ernaux 2024, 11), they have to be deciphered with imagination. Looking back on particular photos and personal memories is not enough for the first-person narrator, events can only be understood from within a larger sociological or historical frame: the occupation of the parents, their financial troubles, their working-class background and "the way we generally behaved" (Ernaux 2025, 82). From the moment of the aggression on, shame is everywhere: "I began

living in shame” (69) and “everything in our life is synonymous with shame – the urinal in the courtyard, the shared bedroom (owing to a common rural practice and the lack of space, I slept in my parents’ bed), my mother’s violent behaviour and crude language” (82). Shame becomes a way of life. There are two worlds, the narrator realises, and this family of three is part of the one down below. The chronological bond between facts and events is unstable: “Who can say that an incident following in the wake of another is not lived in the shadow of the first?” (79). How to find words to describe yourself, to name what was normal at that time and in that place, how to describe your previous self: “the woman of 1995 can never go back to being the little girl of 1952, who knew nothing beyond her small town, her family and her convent school, and who had a limited number of words at her disposal. With the immensity of time stretching ahead of her. We have no true memory of ourselves” (25). Whilst investigating shame, the author demonstrates audacity and honesty, what she reveals is oftentimes staggering to read. The need to share private memories with the reading public is therapeutic for the author (Gefen 2024): this is a literature bearing witness and giving access to others in their precarious circumstances.

While *Shame* is an intimate narrative, *The Years* can be considered Ernaux’s *magnum opus* in its expanding perspective on French culture and history from the Second World War to the year 2006. It is, in the words of Jablonka, “social radiography”: a deep analysis of a cultural atmosphere. Cultural habits and phenomena such as photos, books, films, *chansons*, fashion, television and advertisement are depicted from a transpersonal point of view in which autofiction and sociology, private and collective memories are merged. In what follows, I will read and discuss some excerpts, to explore how investigative writing is executed.

The Years opens with the sentence “All the images will disappear” (Ernaux 2025 TY, 11) and subsequently many images are brought up that can be taken as both personal impression and elements of collective memory and popular culture. Some of the images are described in other texts by Ernaux as well and as such are establishing a filigree of reminiscence. I quote three images as examples:

the stranger of Termini Station in Rome, who half lowered the blind of his first-class compartment and in profile, hidden from the waist up, dandled his sex in the direction of the young woman in the train on the opposite platform, leaning against the railings, chins in hands. (12)

This particular memory, described in *The Use of Photography* as well, is an erotic scene depicting how a young woman – the protagonist, as the reader will later conclude – observes a man, who perhaps deliberately, perhaps not, confronts her with his sex. Sexuality is an important theme in Ernaux’s work, related to passion, desire and excitement: “the dashing figure of the actor Philippe Lemaire, married to Juliette Greco” (13). Again, the image seems to come up randomly, the actor and the famous *chansonnière* were married from 1953–1956, they were celebrities, attractive figures to identify with, certainly for a young girl growing up in regional North of France “of Elizabeth Drummond, murdered with her parents on a road in Lurs in 1952” (13). This image relates to a story that

kept France in a grip for decades. An English family was cruelly murdered when camping on a riverside. An old farmer was found guilty of the murder and sentenced to execution by guillotine but after a second inquiry, his death sentence was commuted to life with hard labour, while in 1960 he was set free on compassionate grounds by President de Gaulle. In just one sentence, Ernaux evokes and hides a typical news story that kept public attention for years. It is a coincidental story, but in the memory of the then 12-year-old protagonist – this is 1952, the year of the start of the shame –, it is a story of fear and fascination that she kept with her during her life. All the images connect personal and general perceptions, all of them interrelating people, some of whom are still alive and others who have passed but are present in the collective memory and myths of France. This is what the narrator – the speaking “we” – explains about images:

They will all vanish at the same time, like the millions of images that lay behind the foreheads of the grandparents, dead for half a century, and of the parents, also dead. Images in which we appeared as a little girl in the midst of beings who died before we were born, just as in our own memories our small children are next to our parents and schoolmates. (14)

Images will fade away, because the people seeing, creating and experiencing them, are gone. Images, just as the facts of the historian, are not exact but become blurred in memory: older and newer images intermingle, overlap, integrate. Images are recollections kept in a mental archive, but there are also images as the material photographs in which a girl appears who develops in time into a grownup woman (from baby to grandmother). Ernaux organizes *The Years* around several photographs without visually showing them in the text.

Her writing style, as Ernaux explained, is flat (Ernaux 2022):⁴ no embellishment, no emotion, no irony: the narrator chronicles people, habits, events, everyday details, popular words and phrases from songs and advertisements, as well as particular ways of speaking, words belonging to the family and class. The objective style relates to an intriguing transpersonal narrative perspective. In *The Years* the narrator never makes use of the first-person position, keeping distance from herself as an explicit identifying voice by using a “we” (*on* in French) or “she” (*elle*) or “they” (*ils*).⁵ The “we” mostly relates to a generation (“We could not get our fill of jazz” (58); “we were back in the silence of the holidays” (59)), but also addresses the former self: “And we, on the threshold of the 1980s, when we would enter our fortieth year, were suffused with a weary sweetness that came of accomplished tradition, and gazed around the table of faces dark against the light” (125).⁶ The “she” evokes the self but at the same time puts it at a distance, the self is *not me now*: “She cannot know that from 1957 she will remember [...]” (63), or “Next year she will retire. She is already throwing out files and notes on books, getting rid of reference works she once used to write her courses” (187), or “Her husband she hardly ever thinks about, though inside she bears the imprint of their life together and the tastes he imparted, for Bach and sacred music, the morning orange juice, etc.” (162). The husband clearly had a higher cultural capital. The endeavour of investigative writing in Ernaux’s texts lies in finding accurate words for images, events and memories that were part of a

consciousness, a world and a family structure that is not here anymore, while the addressed “we” will disappear in the “vast anonymity of a distant generation” (18).

Photos and family gatherings bring structure to the text. The first photographs that are described are from the war years: “A fat baby with a full, pouty lower lip and brown hair sits half-naked on a cushion in the middle of a carved table . . . In this piece of family archive, which must date from 1941, it is impossible not to read a ritual petit bourgeois staging for the entrance into the world” (21). This is not a presentation of a self, the narrator/protagonist, but an introduction into her social class. This class and its habits are also described in recollections of family dinners at feast-days structuring the life narrative with a certain (seasonal) rhythm. The author’s mission, as Skagen (2024, 4) conveys, is being a mediator of the *transfuge de classe* experience.

During the family meetings stories are told about the war, stories “from a common ground of hunger and fear” (23), but never stories on what they knew but had not seen: “the Jewish children boarding trains for Auschwitz, nor the bodies of starvation victims collected every morning from the Warsaw Ghetto, nor the 10,000-degree fires in Hiroshima”(23). The microstoria of the familiar private sphere – “black market butter, air-raid warnings, and descents to the cellar” (23) – do not relate to the grand narrative of history, although the narrator tries “to capture the reflection that collective history projects upon the screen of individual memory” (51).

Ernaux starts her chronicle in the 1940s and ends in the early 2000s. She investigates the life of a lower-class girl growing up in the province, moving through her education to another social level and then becoming an author who contemplates about the various styles and aims of writing. She has an eye for details and minor and major changes: prosperity after the war came with “plastics and Formica, antibiotics and social security benefits, running water and mains drainage, summer camps, ongoing education, and the atom” (41). Specific and general observations lead to an understanding of how times change, how the family developed into a new one. Skagen (2024, 13) underscores the “method” of Ernaux: she combines critical analyses and contextualization of precise memory instants with half dreamt sensorial states at the confines of consciousness. We could clearly relate this to the investigative writing method.

Alternating between ‘we’ and ‘she’, between the collective generation and the individual woman, the narrator brings in a feminist perspective. From early on the girl struggles with the double expectations of her mother and society, expectations aimed at education and motherhood, autonomy and submission, social norms and individual freedom. But at fifty-eight she finds herself free to experience a sexual affair with a married Russian diplomat of twenty-nine, with no sense of wrongdoing. She escaped the family ties. (This experience was with fascinating honesty described in a diary (*Getting Lost* 2022 [2001]) as well as in a novella (*Simple Passion* 1993 [1991])). The narrator explains that the aim of writing is understanding the connection between the transformative identities of a female human being during the years: “It is a time in which past and present

overlap, without bleeding into each other, and where, it seems, she flickers in and out of all the shapes of being she has been. It is a sensation she's had before, from time to time. She has given it a name, "the palimpsest sensation" (186).

The palimpsest sensation is, I argue, inherently related to investigative writing. In the palimpsest the original writing is scratched out to make room for later writing. Text is replaced by text, words are substituted by other words. Ernaux explains this further: "She sees it as a potential instrument of knowledge that is not only for herself, but general, almost scientific, though a knowledge of what, she does not know" (186). Important for investigative writing is that it results in knowledge, in a form of curating, archiving, collecting sources without hierarchy but as close as possible to truth. Ernaux continues: "in her book she would like to save everything that has continually been around her. She wants to save her *circumstance*" (186). This indeed can be acknowledged as investigative writing: trying out words for what disappears in time, building knowledge, almost scientifically, on how times are kept in images and memories and fade away when people and family bonds pass.

The Years manages to be both an intimate and grand history being the chronicle and testimony of an entire generation told through the subjectivity of one woman's body and mind (Cosslett 2022). Ernaux merges individual consciousness into a unified collectivism. This merging of individual and collective memory is an outcome of investigative writing: it is social radiography established in a plain style that registers and collects examples, discourses and ideas, while narrating without an explicit identifying voice. The only ordering principles are the years, the cycles of family dinners, and the collection of photographs. In portraying her own growing up the author relates to the experiences of many women of her generation who sought liberation through education, submission and creativity.

4. Investigative Writing and Autosociobiography Interconnected

Investigative writing connects Jablonka and Ernaux to other contemporary French authors such as Didier Éribon (*Returning to Reims* (2013 [2009])) and Édouard Louis (*The End of Eddy* 2017 [2014]), examining social and historical changes in French society from the focus of a particular family. Autosociobiography is the concept that is often related to these authors. Although there is a strong French emphasis here, the genre of autosociobiography is also traceable in Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain and elsewhere on the globe, as is claimed in *Autosociobiography, A Literary Phenomenon and its Global Entanglements* (Bundschuh – van Duikeren et al. 2025). Class transgression functions as the main category in prototypical autosociobiographical works, but of relevance as well is the role of the author-figure as an authority turned public intellectual due to their personal experience and analytical insights. Eva Blome characterises

autosociobiographies as narratives of return: the protagonists visit their former home (village, region) instigating a reflection on intergenerational relations and class dynamics (Blome 2020, 548–52).

My argument here is that investigative writing is condensed in but also can be distinguished from autosociobiography, since investigative writing is just like autosociobiography executed at the intersection of sociology, history and literature, while the self as authentic protagonist is less prominent. Jablonka positions himself in *The History of the Grandparents I Never Had*, but the main narrative is not about him but about them. In *History is a Contemporary Literature*, Jablonka mentioned various types of texts where literature and the social sciences interconnect: self-inventory as reflexive text (Ernaux, Éribon and Knausgård), social radiography (Riis, Orwell), anthropologies of everyday life (Mailer, Barthes, Didion), the book of the world / travel narrative (Kapuściński, Vollmann) and the exploration of the human soul (Capote, Carrère) (Jablonka 2018, 185–187). The fluidity of these types emphasises that investigation as searching for knowledge *in* writing is a process that can lead to various generic outcomes.

To put these cases in a bigger context, I could mention as exemplary of investigative writing two authors from the Dutch and Flemish literary field, Lieve Joris *Back to the Congo* (1987 [1992]) en *Terug naar Neerpelt* [Back to Neerpelt] (2018) and Sheila Sitalsing, *Waar ik me voor schaam* (2025). [*What I Am Ashamed Of*]. The work of Joris (b. 1953) is held together by the theme of ‘returning’ – years before Éribon used this title – which is made explicit in the title *Back to the Congo* framing a journey to the former Belgian colony. The ‘returning to’ theme accentuates the practice of investigative writing: the reasoning, speculation and imagination needed to re/construct and understand. *Back to the Congo* can be read as a search for a relative, a great-uncle who worked as a missionary in Belgian Congo from 1923 to 1970. Joris, in the 1980s still a young author, travels in his footsteps to gain a better understanding of how the colony functioned at the time, what the Catholic mission system entailed and how political changes took place in the post-colonial era. ‘Back to’ the Congo has no literal connotation, as the young female traveller-narrator had never actually been there herself, but rather a metaphorical one linked to the desire and the felt duty to understand the imperialist history of the country in which she grew up. Colonial history permeated the family and province that she belonged to, almost everyone at the time had an uncle in the Congo. Investigating what colonial history was like, what existed then and still is traceable today, evokes contrasting feelings.

Decades later, Joris published *Terug naar Neerpelt* (2018) [Back to Neerpelt, not translated in English] in which the narrator returns to the village of her youth in the province of Belgian Limburg to record her family narrative, with a central role for her wayward brother Fonny. Interwoven with this return to Flanders – the author now lives in Amsterdam – is a description of her up-and-coming writing career and the choices Joris made to distance herself from her family. As the middle daughter in a family of nine, Joris, from an early age on, sought a place in her grandmother’s house, in search of independence and detachment.

Éribon showed in *Returning to Reims* that returning to one's former family, to the circumstances of one's youth, implies rediscovering something of one's former self: returning is a way of gaining insight: "when you return to the environment from which you came – which you left behind – you are somehow turning back upon yourself, returning to yourself, rediscovering an earlier self that has been both preserved and denied" (Éribon 2013, 18). In *Terug naar Neerpelt*, Joris undertakes a self-inventory that is both a sociological portrait of a *petit bourgeois* Belgian family and a psychological analysis, in which her honesty reflects what decisions have been made in life and where autonomy and empathy have conflicted. This text, indeed investigative writing and autosociobiography, can be characterised as a navigation between sociology and self-analysis in which the observing narrator takes the centre stage.

In *Terug naar Neerpelt* interestingly, two moments are described in which there is deliberately no decision of 'returning'. At the moment when her brother dies, Joris is in southern Congo, where she is witnessing the power takeover and political changes following 32 years of the Mobutu regime. Kabila is the new leader and proves to be no more democratic. Joris is swept up in the revolution and does not return to Belgium when her brother is buried. Whilst comforting her father when he calls her with the news of his son's death, she realises that this is a moment in their family narrative that she ought to be part of. But she can't just leave; writing demands something else of her than returning home. The detailed book on the complex political situation in Congo, which she is writing at that moment, will be published in 2001 under the title *Dance of the Leopard*. And there is another moment of *not* returning: the moment her grandmother passes away. When the beloved grandmother dies, Joris is in Washington and does not return to Belgium. It is the deliberate decision to pursue a new life, that of a writer. *Terug naar Neerpelt* is a sociological portrait of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and above all it is a self-examination in which pride and regret resonate side by side. Keeping one's distance from the family, breaking away, implies finding a new home in writing.

In *Waar ik me voor schaam* [*What I Am Ashamed Of*], journalist Sheila Sitalsing (b. 1968) investigates the National Socialist past of her maternal grandparents. The essay is the account of a remarkable quest that begins with asking questions following the death of the journalist's mother and continues with the search for facts and the attempt to piece those facts into a coherent narrative. How is it understandable that her grandparents had National Socialist sympathies? While the question is serious, the essay's form is playful and engaging; we read an eleven-step 'self-help guide' that repeatedly culminates in a dialogue with the narrator's teenage daughters of colour, who view their great-grandfather's National Socialist activities with engaging irony. The essay is a family narrative, and it also reveals the broader perspective of current political developments (right-wing populism) in the Netherlands. This connection between family and the nation's past and present underscores that the essay aligns with Jablonka's investigation practice: someone's origin is not static or self-evident. From a historical perspective, right and wrong are often different from what we think, even when

we believe that people in the past made the wrong choices. Sitalsing's essay is an audacious contribution to current debates on nationalism, racism and inclusivity. It is particularly powerful that the theme of 'shame' holds up a mirror: how can we come to terms with the past, with and without embarrassment?

5. Conclusive Remarks

This article explored family narratives based on investigative writing as a methodological concept while reading and juxtaposing the work of Ivan Jablonka and Annie Ernaux. Both authors interconnect historical and sociological perspectives on reality culminating in a positioning in time and place and the creation of truth in literature. Both the historian and the literary author, while their roles are fluid, pursue an understanding of collective and individual history through the practice of investigative writing. Investigative writing was comprehended as the examination, analysis and interpretation of historical, cultural and sociological transformations in family narratives and personal memories. Investigative writing can be connected to autosociobiography and clearly has an epistemological base: it is about finding words for what disappears in time, building awareness on how times, generations and gender roles are encapsulated in images and recollections. Literature, as Jablonka argued, is not fiction nor non-fiction, it rather is a way of conveying truth, of explaining facts and establishing knowledge of the world. Both Jablonka, the historian, and Ernaux, the literary author, are aware of the intricacies of writing, of meticulously finding out what happens in the process of writing. Investigative writing can be acknowledged in family narratives that are affective because they display and imagine how human lives took place, what happened in a certain past and what was experienced individually. For both writers, the point is not to represent reality, but to give means to a comprehension of reality.

Investigative writing has next to an epistemological also an ontological dimension, which comes to the fore in the repair-argument that Jablonka used, and that we find as well in work of other scholars, such as in Alexandre Gefen's *Repair the World* (2024). For Jablonka, the crucial aim in *A History of the Grandparents I Never Had* is to "repair the world", giving life back to the grandparents considering not just their downfall but also their ideals and love (Jablonka 2016, 292). Gefen in talking about repairing the world, builds a broader argument about contemporary French literature as therapeutic, a call for empathy, a narrative of transmission, recollection and testimony. Literature today has come to serve as a tool of self-construction and moral reflection, while commemorating the dead, sharing difficult experiences and inventing possible futures (Gefen 2024, 2). The distinction between 'high literature' and writing workshops disappears, while writers leave the ivory tower and amateurs are empowered. Contemporary authors are concerned about ethics while reintroducing forms of consciousness of the world (10). Gefen suggests that we should keep away from an

opposition between “writing projects that take on a question, a subject, or a problem and aim to be direct performances or at least cognitive operations” and “a ‘literary’ tradition where the formal ambition is supposed to primarily hold the reader’s attention and be the ultimate subject of knowledge” (12).

I hope to have made clear in this article that this opposition is indeed unproductive and that both Jablonka and Ernaux implement a writing method that has consequences for the epistemological and ontological base of literature; literature concerns examination and knowledge, as well as form and (flat) style or poetics as a reflection on what decisions are taken during the writing. Literature as aesthetic form, imagination, polysemy and singularity is beneficial to think about the truth of what happened, just as the typical steps the historian brings in are accommodating truth: combining definition, evidence, deduction, hypothesis, example, conjecture and imagination. Post-disciplinarity goes beyond history or literature, knowledge or aesthetic form, and faction or fiction.

Investigative writing is a specific method of narration that leads away from the particularity of the author as a self and of the narrative of just one family. This was explained clearly by Ernaux (2022, 4–5) in her Nobel Prize speech:

The prerequisite of sensation has for me become both the guide and guarantee of the authenticity of my research. But to what end? Not to tell the story of my life nor free myself of its secrets but to decipher a lived situation, an event, a romantic relationship, and thereby reveal something that only writing can bring into being and perhaps pass on to the consciousness and memories of others.

Deciphering a lived situation and revealing cipher in writing seem simultaneous practices executed by both Ernaux and Jablonka, leading to a literature that is not so much therapeutic as inviting us to think. To think about postcards sent from Drancy to children and about a father using violence out of impotence.

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¹ The original dates of publication in French are given in square brackets after the year of publication of the English translation.

² “[...] since you have governed France, you have remained deaf to the warnings from the health-care field, and the words we read on a banner in a demonstration last November – ‘The State counts its money, we will count the dead’ – tragically resonate today. You preferred to listen to those who advocate the withdrawal of the State, the optimization of resources, flow regulation – all that technocratic jargon, devoid of substance, which muddied the waters of reality [...] And the people you called ‘nothing’ not so long ago are now everything, those who continue to empty the rubbish bins, scan products at the checkout counters, deliver pizzas, all to guarantee the physical side of life, as essential as the intellectual side.” (Ernaux 2020, n.pag.)

³ “Sally Rooney, Deborah Levy, Nobel laureate Annie Ernaux and Pulitzer winner Viet Thanh Nguyen are among 20 authors urging French president Emmanuel Macron to resume a ‘lifeline’ programme for evacuating Palestinian writers, scholars and artists from Gaza. The Pause programme for writers and artists in emergency situations, as well as a student evacuation programme, were abruptly suspended by the French government at the beginning of August over a Palestinian student’s allegedly antisemitic online remarks, a decision that the letter-writing authors said amounted to a ‘collective punishment.’” (Oltermann 2025, n.pag.)

⁴ Ernaux in her Nobel Prize speech: “[...] starting with my fourth book, I adopted a neutral, objective kind of writing, ‘flat’ in the sense that it contained neither metaphors nor signs of emotion.”

⁵ In the English translation all these nuances are encapsulated in the general ‘we.’

⁶ In the Dutch translation ‘we’ is alternated with ‘you’ (the apostrophe of the self as ‘other’ – in the English translation there only is ‘we.’)