

[Unpublished paper presented at 'Diversity and Difference in France and the Francophone World' conference, 20th-21st century French and Francophone Studies International Colloquium, April 1-3 2004, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida (Panel: Gender/Genre Difference and the Love Story).]

L'histoire d'amour chez Christine Angot: romance or betrayal?

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The *blurring* of traditional genres is a common feature in the writing of the current generation of French and francophone women authors. This is not to say that this blurring is a new phenomenon. After all, Janice Morgan and Colette Trout have shown how women's writing has *redefined* autobiography throughout the twentieth century; Michael Sheringham, among others, has pointed to autobiography's intrinsic *hybrid* nature; and it was a male writer, of course, Serge Dubrovsky, who forged the new hybrid category of *autofiction* which Hervé Guibert then took into new areas, and which Philippe Forest suggests has become one of the dominant modes of literary expression over the last twenty years (*Le Roman, le je*, p.13). We mustn't forget, though, that some of the life writing of women writers such as Colette and more recently H  l  ne Cixous and Annie Ernaux could also be designated as *autofiction* even though the term is rarely applied to them. Numerous literary studies – especially those from feminist and postcolonial and avant-garde persuasions – have interpreted such disruptions of (canonical) literary genres as subversive or political acts, producing a space from and in which difference can be articulated.

Among the generation of women authors who came to the fore in the 1990s, the controversial Christine Angot has made this interstitial space her own and her self-referential writing is indeed frequently cast as *autofiction*, though many of her texts

bear the label 'roman'. However, Angot's work, with its strong elements of performance, theatricality and echoes of performance art as well as its autobiographical and fictional qualities, goes beyond the hybrid yet essentially binary formulation of *autofiction*. Angot is both working on and pushing against the very boundaries of genre; and it is within this particular Angotian space – in the uncertain interstices of genre – that the love story is considered in my paper.

Angot published her first text *Vu du ciel* (1990) at the age of 31 and has published prolifically since then. The majority of her texts are centred on a writer (Christine Angot) and tell of her marriage, her love affairs, motherhood, relations with her publishers and the media, and, above all, of an incestuous relationship with her father. I will focus on Angot's eleventh text, *Pourquoi le Brésil?* (2002).

The narrative of *Pourquoi le Brésil?* is driven by a love story: 'un roman d'amour! A la première personne'; 'voilà une nouvelle forte et un peu déroutante' announced Jean Marc Jacob on its publication. Indeed, in *Pourquoi le Brésil?*, 'Christine' (as I shall refer to Angot's ambiguous textual persona who at once is and is not Angot herself) tells how she searches for, meets and then lives a tempestuous *histoire d'amour* with the man of her dreams. In order to consider what is at stake in this perhaps rather surprising turn in Angot's work, I shall consider, first, in what ways the characteristics of this *histoire d'amour à la Angot* both draw on and differ from those of the classic love story. Then I shall turn to explore how the love story in this text interacts with some of the main characteristics and principal themes of Angot's work, before proposing some conclusions about the way it functions.

The *histoire d'amour* in *Pourquoi le Brésil?* follows the broad pattern and echoes some of the clichés of classic, popular, heterosexual romantic fiction. From the outset, Christine expresses her desire to find her Mr Right: 'LA personne' or 'lui' as she refers to him: 'Je me sentais prête à aimer, encore fallait-il que je rencontre au

monde LA personne' (p.18). In due course, she meets journalist Pierre Louis Rozynès, who subsequently sends her roses, and they fall in love: 'J'avais l'impression que c'était une espèce de coup de foudre, ou comme disait Pierre une passion évidente' (p. 79). In romantic fiction, sex smoulders away in the background, flaring up from time to time as desire, but is rarely described explicitly, unless heavily metaphorised (though this is changing in recent examples). In Angot's narrative, descriptions of the sexual act are similarly side-lined, though, here, less coyly: 'on a fait l'amour, le sexe, je ne peux pas en parler, je ne saurai pas' (p. 216). In the classic love story genre, the narrative is generally driven by the introduction and subsequent overcoming of a series of obstacles to the happy resolution of romantic bliss, and thus, as suggested by Catherine Belsey in her study of love stories in Western culture (p.39), 'the desire of the reader' is sustained. In Angot's version too, the ups and downs of the relationship, the separations and successive reconciliations of the couple are what sustain the suspense. And, although *Pourquoi le Brésil?* does not itself explicitly close with the classic happy-ever-after resolution of the conventional love story, Angot's next offering *Peau d'âne* (2003), with its fairy-tale-style references to 'Peau d'âne's (read Christine's) 'vrai prince', suggests that the love story portrayed in the preceding text is ongoing.

However, in other ways, the *histoire d'amour* of *Pourquoi le Brésil?* diverges from the conventional love story scenario, in particular in the character of the male love object (Pierre) and in the sexual politics of the couple. If indeed Pierre is Christine's Mr Right as she hopes – 'j'étais presque sûre que c'était lui' (p.109) she reiterates halfway through the text – he is not the tall, strong, virile, passionate yet protective masculine hero of popular romance. Quite the contrary. Pierre is, according to Christine's narrative, not very tall, a solitary man (pp. 103, 150), who 'avait éliminé de sa vie tout romantisme [apart from the roses, of course], toute affectivité, tout

laisser-aller' (p.111) – an effect, apparently, of being in an incubator as a premature baby, and Christine often describes him, not without irony, as still being in his bubble:

Il marchait à un mètre devant moi. Pour affirmer qu'il n'y avait pas que moi sans doute, qu'il était seul. Il se promenait les mains dans les poches, c'était un être indépendant. On n'était pas obligés d'être tout le temps ensemble. Il pouvait aller et venir. Il était dans sa bulle, il ne pouvait même pas sourire. Il ne pouvait pas non plus tendre la main. Il ne pouvait pas prendre ma taille, il ne pouvait rien faire, il était enfermé dans sa sphère. (pp. 153-4)

Pierre is also described variously as a newspaper junkie (p. 150), as a workaholic (p.150) and as being anti-family (p. 144), and there are rumours about his sexuality: for example, 'qu'on ne savait pas bien de quel côté Pierre penchait' (p. 77) or suggestions that he is asexual (p. 80), the latter consequently disproved by Christine.

Christine presents Pierre as something of a victim (of his birth, of his family), with whom it is difficult to sustain a relationship. To a certain extent, then, he is also a mirror of Christine herself, who, living with the fall-out of incest with her father, is also presented (presents herself) as fragile and difficult to live with. Moreover, like Pierre, her own sexuality is not unambiguous, since in Angot's earlier text *L'Inceste* (1999) Christine recounts her experience of a lesbian relationship, and, here, worries that: 'ça [the rumours about Pierre's sexuality] pouvait révéler une sacrée merde, au lieu du coup de foudre. [...] ça [the rumour] sous-entendait que j'étais tombée sur un homosexuel refoulé qui libérait avec moi, qui avais les cheveux courts et une réputation de lesbienne, ce qu'il n'osait pas accomplir au grand jour' (p. 79).

The quasi-androgyny and ambiguous sexuality of both members of this couple do not, however, prevent them from going on to have a heterosexual sexual and love relationship. But this ambiguity carves out an important point of divergence from the classic love story where no such ambiguity exists. So, what kind of sexual politics are played out in Angot's love story and to what extent do they differ from the love story norm? Christine describes right at the beginning the sort of love relationship she is looking for: 'Je me disais que je n'avais aimé, et que je n'avais jamais été aimée. J'avais été chouchoutée, j'avais été choyée, emprisonnée ça oui je l'avais été, utilisée, ça oui, mais une relation d'égal à égal, sans laquelle je ne concevais plus l'amour, je n'en avais jamais eu, c'était ça que je voulais' (p.18). So definitely not looking for a classic Harlequin romance, then! Above all, she makes it clear, she wants an alternative to the power relations of fascination and domination that have characterised both her lesbian love affair and her relationship with her father (pp. 18, 34). As it turns out, the dynamics of Pierre's and Christine's respective neuroses make for a rather stormy relationship, with first one then the other bringing crises to a head because their respective needs aren't being satisfied. To a certain extent, this tension, though exhausting – for the reader as well as for Christine! – enables the relationship to work: 'Oui, à chaque fois, on se retrouve. On sait qu'on doit être ensemble' (p.159). It certainly doesn't make for a calm life, but it puts us in mind of Jessica Benjamin's work on domination and her notion of intersubjectivity in which the tension between the respective needs of those involved and thus a certain amount of conflict is to be valued in order to avoid the domination of the one by the other.

Let us now consider this love story in the wider frame of Angot's work. One of the principal effects of Angot's writing, as it operates in the interstices of genres and at and on their borders, is uncertainty, undecidability, to the extent that the reader can never know what exactly it is that s/he is reading. The use in Angot's work of real

events and named people is paradoxically implicated in this undecidability. And indeed, the male love object of Angot's *Pourquoi le Brésil?* – Pierre Louis Rozynès, a journalist for *Livres Hebdo* – is a verifiable person in real life (the *Livres Hebdo* entry on the FNPS website lists Pierre-Louis Rozynès [P-L spelt with a hyphen here not used in Angot's text] as 'responsable de la rédaction'). If this text, like the rest of Angot's oeuvre, inscribes in literature the events and experiences of the writer's life, what, then, exactly is going on here? While Pierre is, on the one hand, 'LA personne', the man Christine has been looking for; on the other, he is no idealised hero; rather, he is portrayed warts and all, his weaknesses and shortcomings (according to Christine's monologue, that is) placed centre stage. For her, he is 'un malade [...] un inadapté, bien pire que moi' (p. 116). She relates intimate quarrels – what they say to each other in anger – and she tells how he wakes her in the middle of the night to prove to her that she is taking up too much of the bed (even when she isn't)! Towards the end of the text, Christine even accuses Pierre of rape, for waking her during a siesta, arousing her, despite her initial refusal, and continuing until they both attain orgasm. She also tells how, in an ensuing row, he physically attacks her and draws blood. So, given that Pierre-Louis Rozynès really exists, and that Angot and Rozynès were listed among a number of 'famous couples' in *Le Point* of December 2002, what do we have here? Romance... or betrayal?

It should be remembered, though, that Pierre is a journalist, and several of Angot's texts, including *Pourquoi le Brésil?* itself damn the French literary scene and particularly the mediatisation of writers and publishers, of which Angot herself is nonetheless a part. Before Christine actually meets him, Pierre is described, on the one hand, as highly critical of her work – ('il faisait partie de ceux [...] que j'énervais' (pp.26-7) – and, on the other, as beginning to like what she writes ('il avait aimé *Quitter la ville*' a text which, incidentally, focuses on the media activity that followed

the publication of *L'Inceste* the year before). This initial presentation of Pierre, however, only reinforces his ambiguous status within the text once he has become a main protagonist and Christine's lover/partner. Is the real Pierre-Louis Rozynès complicit with his textual portrayal? Is it all just a media hype? Or could this love story also be an instrument of revenge, in the way that Angot's earlier text *Interview* (1995) could likewise be construed as revenge against the intrusive questioning of a journalist from the popular press? Following *Quitter la ville*, there is certainly a sense that everyone is fair game and could end up in Angot's books.

Like many of Angot's texts, *Pourquoi le Brésil?* is itself about writing – the long, tortuous process of writing – and here it is figured as being particularly difficult. For most of the text, Christine is apparently unable to write successfully, and here again her relationship with Pierre is implicated; the ups and downs of their conflicts parallel her attempts to write and indeed are deemed, on the one hand, to be part of the reason for her failure, and yet, on the other, especially when things get really bad, precisely the impetus of writing. She tries to conquer her writer's block in a number of different ways, including – at Pierre's suggestion ironically – writing their *histoire d'amour*. In the end, however, the narrative of *Pourquoi le Brésil?* momentarily coincides with itself temporally and Christine is able to finish the book she has apparently actually been writing.

The title of the text, *Pourquoi le Brésil?*, however, holds yet another clue – or is it a red herring? – to the role played by the love story, since the phrase 'Pourquoi le Brésil?' is cited within the text (and on the back cover and on the book jacket – and in the epigraph!) as part of a quote from a letter from Pierre Angot, Christine's incestuous – and recently deceased – father. The coincidence that Christine's lover and father share the same first name is confronted by Christine herself as she writes a love letter to Pierre and signs it 'Je t'aime Pierre' (p. 186): 'je me suis dit: tu es en

train de dire à ton père que tu l'aimes [...] J'ai toujours rêvé de rencontrer quelqu'un qui s'appelait Pierre, c'est inespéré' (p.187). However, in precisely addressing that possibility, which Christine then refutes immediately afterwards, the text here also problematises any simple equation between the two Pierres. Thus it pre-empts – and, to some extent, also defrays – the interpretation that the later romance is simply a palimpsest or a screen for the earlier one – incest with the father, to which the ending of the text incidentally returns us and Christine – and thus Angot plays here with psychoanalytical interpretations of the romance narrative (Radway).

So... romance or betrayal, revenge or media hype? To what extent is the love affair in *Pourquoi le Brésil?* real or fictional? Ultimately, of course, it doesn't really matter, at least in literary terms. More important – more interesting – is to emphasise the multiple ways in which this love story operates in the text and, indeed, as part of its very textuality. On one level, then, Angot's tortuous love story narrative or monologue may be seen as a trope for the writing process which it mirrors. On another level, in making use of a real person as the male love interest, the love story itself maintains the momentum of uncertainty on which all Angot's work hinges. At the same time, it is governed by that very same uncertainty. In this way, it is a key factor in what is, perhaps, the real point of Angot's writing – that is, the indefinability of the relationship between inside and outside (of the text and of the self), between a writer and her private life, between text and reality, between the real-life author Christine Angot and Christine, the 'sujet Angot' of her texts. These relations are constantly foregrounded and, at the same time, called into question, as Angot implicates herself as much as she implicates real others in her texts, and as her work pushes at the boundaries of what constitutes literature.

However, as we have seen, there is another aspect to the love story in *Pourquoi le Brésil?* which it is impossible to ignore, and that is its relationship with the father-daughter incest which is at the heart of Angot's oeuvre. With this text, the status of the incest narrative in Angot's work becomes clearer – or perhaps I should say it is gradually being moved on. The stormy love story between Pierre and Christine in *Pourquoi le Brésil?* develops further what is arguably the role of the lesbian affair which opens *L'Inceste*: namely, to explore the power relations involved in love relationships in which fascination, domination, coercion *and* consensuality play their part. Here, the episode in which Christine interprets Pierre's arousal of her as rape is crucial. The parallels with the power relations of paternal incest are made manifest as Christine feels the effects: 'Je ressentais un ennui comme ça ne m'était plus arrivé depuis des années et des années' (p.194); and, as Pierre despairs: 'Que ce n'était pas la peine de faire quinze ans d'analyse pour en arriver là et que je ne m'en sortirais jamais' (p. 196). In *Pourquoi le Brésil*, then, as indeed elsewhere in Angot's work, we are being asked not to interpret the incest narrative in a reductive way, either by receiving it as what Angot calls elsewhere 'une merde de témoignage' (*L'Inceste*, p. 197) or by passing over it and 'not wanting to know', which Mary Hamer defines as the most frequent social response to incest. Rather, in *Pourquoi le Brésil?*, as elsewhere in Angot's work, we are asked to consider this 'narrative of extremity' (Frost, p.221) in its complexity and thus to accept that it may include both abuse and mutual pleasure. And, most disturbingly of all, perhaps, we ourselves are potentially implicated, for *Pourquoi le Brésil?* reminds us that such combinations of abuse and pleasure are not restricted to incestuous relations, or to sadomasochistic couplings, but may indeed be part of the everyday love story between equal partners – and it makes us look at ourselves....

Let me now come back to the terms of my title, one final time. Angot's self-conscious, double-edged *histoire d'amour* articulates – or rather dramatises – its difference from the classic romance genre, in its disruption of literary genre, in its blurring of gender and sexual identity and in its portrayal of sexual politics. In doing so, it also assumes the mantle of one of the principal roles of contemporary art and literature, as it confronts us – and implicates us – in important issues of our time (here, specifically the politics of love and desire). And, finally, it allows me to hazard one response to the question I have posed throughout: romance or betrayal? Perhaps the key to that question ultimately lies in the hyphen, that little mark, which, in the text, is missing between Pierre and Louis but which makes all the difference and marks what Angot calls 'le mur' ('en pierre' we might add) between text and life.

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