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Christine Angot by Christine Angot *et al.*

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I shall be looking at 'le regard de l'autre' in the work of Christine Angot. Angot is one of the 'new generation' of French writers who came to the fore in the 1990s. Her first novel, *Vu du ciel*, was published in 1990 when she was 31, and she has published prolifically since then. Angot's texts are almost exclusively self-referential, and her quasi-autofictional work tells relentlessly of the everyday life of a writer – Angot's ambiguous textual persona – of marriage and love affairs, of motherhood, of relations with publishers and readers, of the difficulties of writing, and, above all, of the father-daughter incest which runs through the entire oeuvre. Angot's work has proved to be highly controversial, and critics have deplored her so-called narcissism and questioned the literary value of her texts. In this discussion of the role of 'le regard de l'autre' in Angot's writing. I want to engage with these criticisms. The paper starts with the opening of Angot's sixth novel *Sujet Angot* (1998):

Fais bien attention à ton corps et à ta santé Christine. Ne crois personne, jamais, même si on te dit 'je n'ai jamais..., j'ai toujours...' Et puis j'espère que tu sais que les maladies sont transmissibles non seulement lors de l'éjaculation mais par la simple pénétration. Pardon d'être aussi cru, mais je voulais te dire ça depuis longtemps. Bon, je vais essayer de me

rendormir un peu.

Je voulais te dire aussi: je ne peux plus te lire. Je
n'en peux plus du sujet Angot. C'est devenu une souffrance.

(*Sujet Angot*, p.9)

Thus begins what is arguably Angot's most well-known title (apart perhaps from *L'Inceste* [1999]). From the very start of *Sujet Angot*, from its very first sentence, then, 'Christine' (as I will refer to Angot's ambiguous textual persona) is placed in the second person – as 'tu' rather than the 'je' that is more usual in her texts. Angot's part autobiographical, part fictional and part *performative* 'sujet Angot' (Christine) is, here, in *Sujet Angot* (the text), both the addressee and the subject (that is the topic) of the text rather than the narrator or *speaking* subject. The narrative 'je' in this text is attributed to Christine's recently estranged husband Claude. This particular narrative technique – 'le regard de l'autre *sur* Christine' – is sustained throughout *Sujet Angot*, the whole text being a sort of stream-of-consciousness letter from Claude to Christine.

If this text is best known for its narrative perspective – experimental autobiography à la Gertrude Stein (and so, here, 'le regard de l'autre' is also an intertextual one) – *Sujet Angot* is certainly not alone in Angot's work in its appropriation of the perspective and voice of the other. Indeed, as David Ruffel has pointed out, *all* of Angot's first-person narratives are in fact plural, incorporating multiple voices and variable perspectives. Rather than being an unusual feature that is particular to *Sujet Angot*, 'le regard de l'autre' is, then, an intrinsic part of Angot's idiosyncratic literary style, which is characterised by a quasi-stream-of-consciousness narrative that strings the narrator's thoughts and feelings together with others' opinions, advice, gossip, intertextual references, etc. My paper focuses on this intriguing narrative style and starts to explore what is at stake in this writing of

‘Christine Angot’ by Christine Angot and others (*et al.*), with necessarily brief reference to three examples, from *Sujet Angot*, the earlier text *Interview* (1995) and the later *Quitter la ville* (2000).

(So, first, to return to) *Sujet Angot*

On the face of it, Claude’s second-person address in ‘cet autoportrait dans le regard de l’autre’, as *Sujet Angot* has been described by one critic (Le Meslé, 1998), is a narrative strategy that Angot employs in order to talk about Christine – this textual figure who at once is and is not Angot herself. Part of Claude’s role is undoubtedly to provide a seductively privileged perspective on the persona of Christine. He is instrumental in confirming the life story and incest story events referred to in previous texts – corroborating and contributing to this ongoing yet non-chronological narrative which is built up in fits and starts, from one Angot text to the next. [I use the term ‘story’ here rather guardedly though, and it needs glossing. There is actually no ‘story’ in the classic, unified sense of the word, but the term is a convenient shorthand to refer to a narrative which has to be pieced together (can indeed be pieced together) in the act of reading. The story I refer to is thus multiple, constructed in the act of interpretation, requiring the active involvement of the reader who has to negotiate the pitfalls of uncertainty that all Angot’s texts contain and indeed engender.]

In addition to Claude’s role in the construction of Christine’s ‘story’, there is another dimension to his narrative. He is also Christine’s first reader, literary fan and critic, and in *Sujet Angot* he is reading and offering comments on the manuscript of a text called... *Sujet Angot*. In this *mise en abyme* of reading, Claude can be construed as the *alter ego* of the external reader, in turn, praising, criticising and perplexed by Christine’s writing. However, here, as elsewhere in Angot’s work, the status of the narrative is ambiguous and uncertain. It is impossible for us to tell what is

autobiographical and what is fictional. Thus the appropriation of ‘le regard de l’autre’ – i.e. Claude’s narrative – is itself open to question. Is it a purely fictional device? Or could these really be Claude’s words (if indeed he actually exists)? Throughout the text, Claude’s first-person narrative includes quotes from Angot’s previously published texts and from press reviews. It also includes quotations from *Sujet Angot* – the manuscript of which he is supposedly reading. It is clear very quickly, however, that Claude’s *Sujet Angot* is not the same as ours. And the status of his narrative becomes even more complex as Claude gives Christine suggestions for material to use in her writing. For example: ‘Et si je peux t’aider, je ne demande qu’à y contribuer. Je le répète. Le sujet Angot, tu sais, je peux en parler des heures. J’y pense toute la nuit et toute la journée, alors je peux en parler des heures. Si ça peut t’aider’ (p.14); and ‘Là, ce soir, je suis bien. Je lis un bouquin qui m’intéresse [...] Ce que j’ai lu a fait écho. Je t’en cite des passages. Dont je pense, tu pourrais te servir, non? C’est le genre de truc qui pourrait te provoquer des déclics. Je t’en cite des passages, tu veux bien?’ (p.18); and, again, ‘Je vais ressortir le petit cahier italien où j’avais noté des phrases [de Léonore]. Ce serait bien que tu t’en serves’ (p.58). And... perhaps she does use them here – after all, the earlier *Léonore, toujours* (1994), which is in the form of a diary written by Christine, also integrates what are supposedly extracts from Claude’s private diary.

Now, the already complex and ambiguous narrative situation in *Sujet Angot* becomes even more bewildering when, in Angot’s next text, *L’Inceste*, the narrator (Christine) blatantly contradicts the story previously constructed in *Sujet Angot*, stating unequivocally: ‘Claude n’a pas lu *Sujet Angot* non plus’ (p. 98). Now, it could be that here Angot is simply asserting the fictionality of the previous text. Or, it could be that she is asking us to differentiate between different textual worlds. Or, it could be that – within the world of the text or even outside it – Claude didn’t read the

published version of *Sujet Angot* because, ultimately, his words and comments on an earlier version have actually become the text itself. Or... The more you go on finding alternative readings, the more you have to recognise the always ambiguous status of the narrative in Angot's work.

Interview

Interview (1995) is a text that contrasts Christine's narrative of an idyllic period spent in Sicily with husband Claude and small daughter Léonore with that of the very negative experience of an interview with a popular journalist. The stark contrast within the narrative at the level of both content and style throws into relief the journalist's aggressive questioning ('presque un viol', one critic calls it (La Meslée, 1995)), as the journalist interrogates Christine about the incestuous relationship with her father mentioned in her texts. Angot's technique here is to string the journalist's questions together for pages without including the answers. The effect is like machine-gun fire:

Vous aviez quel âge? Ça a duré combien de temps? De quand à quand exactement? Y a-t-il eu des reprises? Étiez-vous surprise? A-t-on des traces? De quel type? Vous faites allusion à quelle partie du corps exactement? [...] Votre mère ne s'est-elle rendu compte de rien? Était-ce possible? Quelqu'un se doutait-il? Sa femme le sait-elle? Ses collègues le savent-ils? Ses enfants? Vous aimeriez? Comment avez-vous fait pour vous en sortir? Combien de temps cette analyse a-t-elle duré? [...] Comment s'est passée la toute première rencontre? Comment s'est passée le tout premier attouchement? Comment avez-vous réagi? Lui avez-vous demandé quelquefois d'arrêter? Depuis combien de temps ne le voyez-vous

plus? Et définitivement? (pp.11-13)

This style very effectively transmits the invasiveness of the journalist's questioning. Yet, of course, it is precisely this style that *renders* the interview so violent. In giving voice to the journalist alone, Angot, on the one hand, portrays Christine as victim, in an acute satire of popular media practices. In doing so, however, she also reverses the power relations of the interrogation: by presenting the interview from the writer's perspective (although via 'le regard de l'autre' – the journalist's questioning), she – or at least Christine, the writer within the text – takes her revenge and regains control. On the other hand, though, the journalist is, potentially at least, an *alter ego* of the reader, who also wants to *know*, and the questions are designed to stimulate the readers' curiosity. Although Christine's answers are not given, the way the questions follow on from one another does nonetheless allow the readers to orientate themselves somewhat and to glean some information about Christine's 'incest story', since this is the major topic of interrogation, although, at the same time, many details are withheld. For example, in the last lines of the extract quoted, we can infer that Christine survived this incestuous relationship with the help of psychoanalysis; but we can't tell how long it is since she has seen her father (veiling/unveiling – disclosure/concealment).

This tension between disclosure and concealment is maintained throughout the text, which ends with readers ironically being confronted with the extent of their own curiosity and thus with their identification with the journalist whom they have been led throughout the text to judge so negatively. Like many of Angot's texts, the book has a double-ending; the final section introduced as 'Pour les curieux, dix pages [...], très autobiographiques' (which are actually 8 pp in my edition), containing a brief narrative of Christine's 'incest story', from the age of 13 or so, culminating in the

disclosure that Christine had sex with her father again, in adulthood, after her analysis. The answers to many of the journalist's questions are here, but, of course, for us, for the curious, as for the journalist, they only engender others.

Quitter la ville

Quitter la ville was published in 2000 a year after *L'Inceste*, and is (partly) about the controversy surrounding the publication of that text. It charts the book's success, sales figures and reception. As in *Sujet Angot* the narrator (here Christine herself) quotes from externally verifiable book reviews. The narrative also includes extracts of readers' letters (not so easily verifiable). And, in addition, it incorporates Christine's conversations with Angot's publisher at Stock, Jean-Marc Roberts, and with other well-known names from the French literary scene. In *L'Inceste*, Christine tells how she is prevented from using real names, even citing the text of what is apparently a threatening lawyer's letter on the subject, but in *Quitter la ville* she names names shamelessly – recklessly, perhaps. However, here, the voice of the (verifiable) other doesn't mean that the narrative becomes any the less ambiguous. On the contrary.

By incorporating into her narrative the whole media activity surrounding the publication of *L'Inceste*, on the one hand, Angot presents from the inside, from the point of view of Christine, the thrills and the flattery, the pressures and, what she calls, 'la vie d'enfer' (p. 18) of becoming a best-selling author. Above all, she presents a Parisian literary scene rife with rivalries and jealousy, the personnel of the rival publishing house, Grasset, greeting her arrival in the 'l'hôtel des Saints-Pères' where they have a drink after work with the sniffy, snooty 'on n'est plus chez nous' (p.85). As Nathalie Cornelius in her review of the text in *French Review* states, *Quitter la ville* is, in part at least, 'an indictment of the literary market and its

followers' (p. 381), of which, it has to be said, Angot herself is nonetheless a part, a performer.

On the other hand, the inclusion of well-known, verifiable figures may work to lull Angot's readers into a false sense of security as to the veracity of the account. For example, Christine refers to a lunch with author Philippe Sollers: 'Ma force il m'a dit c'est votre enfant, cet or. Vous pourriez écrire n'importe quel délire, s'il n'y avait pas cet enfant, ça ne dérangerait personne, ça ne dérangerait pas' (p.129-30). The passage serves to analyse with some degree of authority (since Sollers is a literary critic and editor of note as well as an avant garde writer himself) adverse criticisms of Angot's work, pointing to the problematical coexistence in her texts of episodes about her young daughter with explicit descriptions of (incestuous) sex with her father. Now, Sollers may well have actually said this or something along these lines but Angot's readers have no way of really knowing. While the passage may confirm and illuminate their own reading, it is impossible for them/us to evaluate the fictional extent of the conversation. The use of the words or the perspective of real, named people here and elsewhere in Angot's work (and this technique is put to use again in *Pourquoi le Brésil?* (2002)) doesn't mean that the status of the narrative is any less ambiguous or uncertain than elsewhere in her oeuvre.

Conclusion

In all three of these examples and throughout her work, 'le regard de l'autre' is part of the very fabric of Angot's texts, and it contributes to – and yet is also governed by – the clever sustaining of uncertainty in her writing. In this way, it is intrinsic to one of the key characteristics – and to what is, arguably, the real point – of Angot's oeuvre: that is, the indefinability of the relationship between autobiography and fiction, 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.

At the same time, as we have seen, the use of 'le regard de l'autre' contributes to the ongoing incest narrative in Angot's work. In *Interview*, the journalist's questions move the story on, even if we don't get to hear the answers and gaps remain; in *Sujet Angot*, Claude's privileged perspective likewise throws further light on the story and corroborates some of what has gone before, while ultimately maintaining its uncertainty; in *Quitter la ville*, a *textual* and thus possibly fictional Philippe Sollers comments on the controversy of its status as and in a literary work.

One could argue – though I think it would be reductive to do so – that all Angot's texts ultimately tell the same (incest) story. I prefer to suggest instead that each one offers different ways of inscribing it, confronting us with the complex and disturbing realities of father-daughter incest – that it can be consensual, for example – and thus raising, in Mary Hamer's words, 'questions about pleasure even while [they ask] that we also bear in mind trauma and damage' (10). And the tension between disclosure and concealment that I have identified here in Angot's work conveys the difficulties and necessities of writing what Laura Frost terms in another context this 'narrative of extremity' (p.221). However, although this tension, together with the fragmented nature of the incest narrative, may be a commonly identified feature of traumatic memory (as defined by Van der Kolken and van der Hart), this is not to assert that Angot's writing is in the order of autobiographical testimony or confession, even with the veneer of protective fiction that Suzette Henke identifies in so much contemporary women's life writing. In appropriating the perspectives of others to tell – and yet to keep us guessing about – Christine's story, Angot's unclassifiable work draws as much on theatrical performance as it does on fiction, experimental autobiography and performance art. As Christine says in *Quitter la ville*: 'C'est un

acte quand on parle. Quand on parle, c'est un acte. [...] C'est un acte. C'est vraiment un acte.' (p.13): a performative and a political *act*.

One of the roles of contemporary art and literature is to disturb, and this is where Angot's work really comes into its own as literature. Yet this is not a question of a gratuitous transgression of taboos; rather, it is the way her texts push at the very boundaries of what constitutes literature. Angot's writing disturbs, on the one hand, because it disrupts the boundaries of literary genre so effectively, leaving us with no 'points de repère' except to interrogate constantly the status of her narrative. On the other hand, Angot's texts disturb because she implicates her readers as well as herself in her tales and acts of transgression. As we have seen, 'le regard de l'autre' has an important role to play here, in what is the very textuality of Angot's writing, as it works to confront readers with their own curiosity, judgements, prejudices and interpretations, to remind them (us) that the transgression of social taboos such as incest are, in reality, an intrinsic part of 'la comédie humaine', or, in Angot's much more apt words, given the context, 'le drap social', in which we are *all* implicated.

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