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**Limits and boundaries in women's life writing:
the politics of reading Christine Angot**

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Life writing in contemporary France highlights the issue of limits and boundaries. Testimonies, confessions and autobiographical writing of varying kinds all work at the threshold – on the borders – of the personal and the public, the intimate and the published. Such works present particular challenges to the reader. Where is our place here? How should we negotiate the borderlands between bearing witness to testimony and reading a text as text? Christine Angot is a case in point – a particularly interesting case, in my view. Limits and boundaries lie at the heart of Angot's oeuvre. She works both *at* and *on* literary and social borders, transgressing boundaries, challenging norms, provoking her readers. Since her first novel was published in 1990, she has become a prolific mainstay of the French literary scene, but her work continues to be controversial and elicits starkly opposing – and sometimes quite violent – responses from scholars and media critics alike. This polarity was epitomised, in the media, by *Lire* magazine, which published two different reviews of her novel *Rendez-Vous* (2006): 'for' and 'against'. Angot *aficionados* may consider her work to be a fine engagement with the boundaries between text and life, with the borders between writing and lived reality, but others are irritated by what they see as simply narcissistic verbal diarrhoea. In short, the jury is still out.

Boundaries are, ultimately, about inclusion and exclusion, and the transgression of boundaries and the setting of limits in texts thus have implications for the way we read them. They establish – or disrupt – a range of reading expectations and pacts, by delimiting the way we are included or excluded as readers. In examining the dynamics of the border – the relation between boundary-crossings and the setting of limits – my paper aims to offer some insights into the way Angot's work *works* and works on us, the readers, in an analysis of the politics of reading Angot.

Of course, reading is ultimately a singular activity – the individual reader interacts with the text s/he is reading in a variety of indeterminable ways. But reading theorists over the last 20 years or so have emphasised the ways in which reading operates within a system of power relations. Lynne Pearce, for example, posits a dialogic model of reading, wherein reading is, on the one hand, a reciprocal exchange and, on the other, a negotiation, with and against the text. Ross Chambers, for his part, develops the notion of power relations in reading into a dynamic of seduction and alienation. For Chambers, texts need to seduce their readers, but readers may be either complicit with, or resist, the text's seduction. Moreover, seduction and resistance or alienation may co-exist in the reading process, producing a dynamic of inclusion and exclusion, a dynamic that I argue is particularly pertinent to reading Angot.

The ways in which Angot's writing crosses boundaries are well known: (i) generic boundaries; Angot's 'quasi-autofictional' work includes a high degree of performance and continually oscillates between the autobiographical, the fictional and the performative; (ii) by means of that oscillation, Angot works at, in, and on the borderlands between text and life; (iii) boundaries between the private and the public are crossed, and thus her work chimes with the times and the performance of identity and of the self in blogs, web pages, video diaries, reality TV, social networking sites,

etc., so prevalent in contemporary popular culture; (iv) the father-daughter incest story that runs through Angot's oeuvre transgresses the ultimate boundaries, for incest is the taboo on which society is founded.

However, even when crossing the kinds of boundaries I have outlined here, most creative artists and writers work within sets of limits – limits that are imposed on them and/or limits that they themselves impose. A number of factors may be involved, including: technique (i.e. style or aesthetics, which either impose limits or get around them); the constraints of the society within which the author is working; a fascination or obsession with certain themes or effects; an Oulipianesque setting of rules and structures; or simply a framework that demarcates the writer's originality. In Angot's case, the framework that delimits her oeuvre is a writing of the self – herself and/or a self (Christine) – a writing of the self that includes father-daughter incest. Angot's writing has the immediacy of a monologue, and includes both the banality and the extraordinary of the everyday: from the daily routine of looking after a baby in *Léonore, toujours*, to the ups and downs of love relationships in *L'Inceste*, *Pourquoi le Brésil?* and *Rendez-vous*; from the difficulties involved in securing a flat in Paris in *Pourquoi le Brésil?*, to the struggle with the process of writing in many texts; from interviews with journalists, as in *Interview*, to the fears and fantasies that go through the mind, as a mother, as a daughter, as a wife, as a lover, as a writer; from the *train-train* of everyday life to the *angoisse* of the human condition.

Power relations – relations with the other – are a key element in Angot's work, and that includes relations with the reader. Now, if, in *autofiction*, the Lejeunian autobiographical pact is disrupted or dismantled, this does not mean there is no reading contract. Indeed, as Marie Darrieussecq suggests, in the context of her academic work on Hervé Guibert, it is uncertainty – as to the truth-value or degree of

fictionality of the text – that becomes the pact and thus a key element in the politics of reading *autofiction*. According to Serge Doubrovsky, inventor of the term, reading and writing *autofiction* are especially agonistic practices. Here, Doubrovsky suggests that the reader of *autofiction* has more power than the reader of straight autobiography, since the seduction of the autobiographical pact is weakened; thus the author is impelled to try to regain control, and, according to Doubrovsky, to implicate the reader in the text.

One of the ways in which Angot attempts to do this is to make the very uncertainty of *autofiction* work for her. I have shown elsewhere how uncertainty in Angot's work is cleverly maintained to a fine degree by a number of different rhetorical and literary devices, such as the use of narrative voice, tropes, double-endings, contradictions and play with chronology, which contribute to wrong-foot the reader. The last words of *Rendez-Vous*, 'Tout ça est faux' (p.380), offer a simple example; it is unclear exactly what this 'ça' refers to and thus the conclusion of the text potentially calls into question all that has gone before it.

Let us now look in more detail at the limits that Angot sets and their effects. As Doubrovsky comments in a recent TV programme on *autofiction*, the nature of the genre means that the author is always already implicated in his or her texts, whatever the degree of fictionality. For Dubrovsky, this is a courageous act. In Angot's case, the riskiness of this self-implication is high, partly because of the element of performance and partly because the texts inscribe 'Christine' (the narrator-writer within the text) into a variety of what might be called compromising situations: for example, she admits complicity as well as victimhood in the incestuous relationship with her father, which lasted from her teenage years through to adulthood and even into her marriage; she is similarly complicit with, yet victim of, the abuses of the

media, who can make or break Angot-the-writer in real life; Christine is also a mother who fantasises about, and around, her baby daughter's future sexuality, something that many readers have found problematical; and so on, and on...

So are any limits set on this self-implication by the author, on this self-induced vulnerability, and if so, what and how? Shirley Jordan, in an article on Angot's *Rendez-vous*, which is the account of a love affair – or rather a love-affair-*manqué* – draws attention to a point in the text where the reader is suddenly made to stop being a witness to the narrative and become a reader. Towards the end of the text, Christine says she could have done better as a writer – she could have written a better scene – and this serves to bring the reader up short, as Shirley puts it. The reader, seduced by the narrative, despite him- or herself, despite the autofictional pact of uncertainty, is suddenly confronted with reality, the only reality we can be certain about – that is, the textuality of the text.

At first sight, this practice might seem to *exclude* the reader from the text rather than to *include* him or her (and thus differ from Doubrovsky's agonistic need to implicate the reader). But, these moments which wrong-foot the reader – and this example is one of many in Angot's oeuvre – work, rather, to draw the reader into the very process of textuality. These textual markers suddenly render the boundaries between text and life visible. Life (in the text) becomes simply text – fiction or performance; the reader is excluded from his/her role of (*passive*) witness (to the narrative of life) in order to become an *active* participant in the textuality of the text.

But this is not all. The reader is also actually constructed within the text. While we, as Angot's readers, are made party to the writing process, we also have to contend with the parallel construction of the reader – of ourselves as readers of the text – and this may be both including and excluding. Indeed, Angot's – or rather the

textual Christine's – attitude to her readers is extremely ambivalent. In *Quitter la ville*, for example, Christine sarcastically describes letters she has received from readers, ending with the comment: 'C'est tous des cons, et ils sont plus nuls les uns que les autres' (125). Christine's – and Angot's – point here is that such readers are imposing their own interpretations on her texts and then criticising her for not meeting their own parameters. In the discussion time after a public reading, she relates, again in *Quitter la ville*, how readers reply *for* her, even in her presence. While these are quite reasonable points, and reveal to us the potential violence of reading, and the *agon* of writing, of author/reader relations, intradiegetic readers are always to some extent figured as alter egos of the extra-textual reader (us), and we can't help but feel insulted, violated, or guilty.

In a parallel move, Angot (via Christine) also sets limits on our own readings and interpretations of the work. Throughout the Angot oeuvre, Christine parries and contradicts attempted categorisations of her writing, as in the frequently quoted 'ce n'est pas une merde de témoignage comme on dit' (*Quitter la ville*, 13), and 'l'autofiction n'est pas possible' (169). Yet, in *Pourquoi le Brésil?*, Christine brands as censorship exactly this sort of disempowering exercise when she is on the receiving end: 'C'est la nouvelle forme de censure, on prévoit d'avance vos réactions, comme ça vous ne pouvez plus en avoir' (59). The text plays havoc with our identifications here. Whom do we identify with? The narrator/writer who is being violated by the reader, or the reader who is being aggressed, controlled, wrong-footed by the narrator/writer?

Now, the effects of Angot's writing style itself should not be left out of a discussion of limits and the politics of reading. In *Pourquoi le Brésil?*, as elsewhere, many passages are expressed as short phrases and sentences, with large numbers of

commas and full stops [see quote 6 on handout]. These short phrases are then combined with extended sentences – even up to a page long – and extremely long paragraphs – one extending over 17 pages. This combination contributes to what has been called Angot's 'force lyrique'. The overall effect is forceful and provocative. The reader is caught up in the text, by means of the style and pace of the writing, exhausted yet driven along by the tirade of Christine's dramatic monologue, included and excluded at the same time, seduced by the love story that drives the narrative, yet unsettled, violated even, by the narrator's insults and treatment of others.

Finally, the incest narrative in Angot's work, while transgressing boundaries, is also intrinsically involved in the setting of limits. On one level, it is a limiting factor of her writing; it almost always comes in somewhere. But, more importantly, the incest narrative works on a number of other levels. As the narrator of Angot's first novel *Vu du ciel* puts it, Christine is 'presque consentante' with her abuse, and the tension between seduction, resistance, coercion and complicity in the power relations of incest pervade her texts to such an extent that incest functions as a trope for the complexity of power relations in other contexts. In this way, Angot's work constitutes a fine literary exploration of such power relations – an exploration which, moreover, embroils the reader in the same dynamics. An example of what I mean here is to be found in *Interview* (1995). In this text, Christine is interviewed by a journalist, who, rather than treating her writing as literature, only wants to know about her autobiographical experiences of incest. By eliding Christine's responses, the journalist's questioning is presented as relentless and invasive – penetrating – and the interview is itself an example of a relationship of force and abuse. [ref to quote 7 on handout for those that don't know the text]. This kind of interrogation goes on for pages, and this very mode of presentation serves to situate the journalist in a bad light.

However, in the last section of the text, Christine finally writes about the incestuous relationship with her father. That section is prefaced thus:

Voilà ce que je propose. Pour les curieux, dix pages suivent, très autobiographiques. Pour ceux que ça gêne, déchirez-les, je les en remercie. Et à la fois... ces pages j'en suis plutôt fière. (129)

Here, then, the reader is cast as just as curious as the journalist, whose curiosity has already been established as intrusive and reductive. You can see here how the reader is thus entangled in the power relations represented by the interview. However, Angot knows her readers will neither relish being identified with the discredited journalist – though they may well be just as curious – nor tear out the pages of the book. The narrator's statement that she is 'plutôt fière' of these pages is ultimately to insinuate that the reader must find a way of reading between these two poles – the poles of curiosity or voyeurism and rejection or refusal.

In conclusion, then, through this brief analysis of the dynamics of boundaries and limits in Angot's writing, we can see that the power relations at work within the text (in the incestuous relationship, in relations with the media, and between the writer and her readers) are also those that characterise the power dynamics of the reading process as theorised by contemporary reading theorists – seduction and resistance, coercion and complicity, exclusion and inclusion. Moreover, the extent to which Angot's texts themselves involve the reader in the very kinds of power relations that they explore means that these dynamics are intensified. As Shirley Jordan puts it so insightfully (again), incest is 'absolutely foundational' and 'all-contaminating' in Angot's work. Reading then becomes a trope of the incest narrative, as much as the incest narrative

also becomes a trope of reading. The mirror of society and the self that Angot's work holds up for our reflection thus makes for uncomfortable reading. The reading subject, like Christine, is cast as both aggressive and vulnerable, victim and perpetrator.

Angot's readers are actively confronted with their own aggression and vulnerability, voyeurism or naivety, and with their own emotional involvement with, or exclusion from the text (as in the example from *Rendez-vous*), and, as we saw in the case of *Interview*, they are required to take responsibility for those very reading positions.

Thus Angot's writing seems to me to demand a new model of reading.

Ultimately, reading Angot is less like a Pearcean dialogue than what Eva Domeneghini refers to as a 'confrontation': 'l'écriture de Christine Angot demande au lecteur de tomber le masque et de se confronter au texte, la confrontation est violente et provoque souvent une admiration soudaine, ou au contraire un rejet définitif'.

Angot plays a risky game here. For many are the readers who feel excluded, who do not stay the course, who become irritated, angry, bored even and give up, or who actively reject the work. However, for others, despite the provocations – or perhaps precisely because of them, because of their challenges – the overwhelming effect is to turn us back on ourselves, to provoke us to recognise our own implication and role in power relations of all kinds (not just reading) – and I think there is an implicit comment here on the way audiences are implicated in the insidious power relations of popular cultural forms like reality TV shows, pop star competitions etc. that Nothomb's *Acide sulfurique* also critiques. Here, in Angot, this also relates to the aggression that reading can be – the aggression of reductive readings.... reductive readings of narratives of incest, and of literature itself.